The Buddha of Suburbia by Hanif Kureishi

Study Notes

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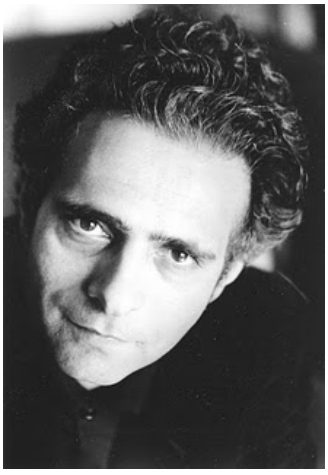


Preamble: The novel The Buddha of Suburbia by Hanif Kureishi is currently part of the syllabus of the courses English Literature 2 and English Literature and Culture 2. These study notes are intended as support material for the students that attend these courses.

1. Hanif Kureishi: brief bio-bibliography

Hanif Kureishi is a very multi-faceted author; playwright, screenwriter, novelist and filmmaker, he was born in Bromley, UK, in 1954, the son of a Pakistani father and an English mother. He read philosophy at King's College, London. He began his career in the theatre, with his first play, *Soaking the Heat*, being performed at The Royal Theatre in 1976, followed by *The Mother Country* (1980) and *Outskirts* (1981). His first screenplay, for the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985, dir. by Stephen Frears), was nominated for an Oscar. Still in the 1980s he wrote the screenplay for *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). He was awarded the Thames TV Playwright Award in 1981, for *The Mother Country* and the George Devine Award in 1982, for the play *Outskirts/ Borderline*. In 1982 he became Writer in Residence at the Royal Court Theatre. The 1990s saw his debut as a novelist, with the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), for which he won the Whitbread first novel Award, followed by the novel *The Black Album* (1995). Throughout the 1990s he maintained his activity as a playwright, directed the film *London Kills Me* (which he also scripted) and wrote the screenplay for *My Son the Fanatic* (1997), a film based on his short story with the same title, published in the collection *Love in a Blue Time* (1997). He also wrote two short stories collections, published in 1997 (*Love in a Blue Time*) and in 1999 (*Midnight All Day*). His recent work includes the novel, *Something to Tell You* (2008), the screenplay for the film *The Black Album* (adapted from his own play with the same title, 2009) and the film *Le Week-End* (2013). In 2007 he was awarded a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) by the Queen.

The list of his published work, and his biography, can be consulted, at the following internet sites, among others:

- Sharma, Surbhi, "Kureishi, Hanif", *Postcolonial Studies @ Emory*, at <http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/hanif-kureishi/>; last updated July 2012; last consulted: 5/12/2013.

- *British Council/ Arts*: available at http://literature.britishcouncil.org/hanif-kureishi (last consulted on 9/1/2013).

- His books have mostly been published by Faber & Faber, as you can see on the site of this publishing house: http://www.faber.co.uk/catalog/author/hanif-kureishi;

- For a list of films he has directed and written, please consult the IMdb: The Internet Movie Database at: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0475659/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1>.

You can look up at the end the annexes with the bibliography on and by Hanif Kureishi which you can find at the libraries of the University of Minho.

2. The Novel: Characters and Setting

The Buddha of Suburbia, first published in 1990, is Hanif Kureishi's first novel and won him the Whitbread prize, after he had gained success in the theatre and in film – with the screenplays for *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rose Get Laid* (1987). As Kureishi has himself admitted, this is chiefly an auto-biographical novel, in the sense that it tries to describe his own situation as an English person who was struggling to find out his own identity "[a]s the son of an Indian father and English mother" (Kureishi, 2011b: 136)[1]. In an essay titled "The Rainbow Sign" (Kureishi, 2011: 2-34)[2], Hanif Kureishi talks about his own coming of age in England, where he was born, and about the discrimination he felt when he was a teenager. He starts the essay, by invoking his Indian/ Pakistani origin, in the following terms:

> I was born in London, of an English mother and Pakistani father. My father, who lives in London, came to England from Bombay in 1947 to be educated by the old colonial power. He married here and never went back to India. The rest of his larger family, his brothers, their wives, his sisters, moved from Bombay to Karachi, in Pakistan, after partition. (Kureishi, 2011a: 3).

In another essay, referring to his own compulsion to write as a teenager, he argues that he "wrote for [his] life" (Kureishi, 2011b: 137):

> Writing would be a message to the world outside my family, and outside the suburbs. I would inform people what was going on, what life in the new Britain – a Britain unknowingly transforming itself for ever – was like for us. (*Idem*: *Ibidem*)

[1] In relation to this cf. also "Hanif Kureishi in Conversation with Kenan Malik – part 1"; available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDqJAlCQONU;
[2] This essay was "first published with the screenplay of *My Beautiful Laundrette* in 1986" (Kureishi, 2011: 3).

This is precisely what occurs in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, as well as in much of Kureishi's writing, especially, in his initial writing. The novel, which has been described as belonging to many different traditions (namely, the English social realist novel, the picaresque, the *Bildungsroman*, among others), is set in 1970s London, England, with brief forays into New York city, which serves as a counterpoint to the leitmotiv of 'Englishness' in the novel. In that sense, *The Buddha* can also be inscribed in the historical novel tradition, for it looks back to a specific time of recent English history, establishing as background the London pop scene.

a) Pop music in 1970s London: the 'musical' background of the novel

The reference to the pop music of the time is permanent. From Syd Barrett and Kevin Ayers (p. 8) to The Beatles (with the reference to "Come Together" on page 9), from The Rolling Stones (p. 10) to Pink Floyd (p. 14) the initial pages contain a musical background to the 1970s, which is kept up in several parts of the novel. Worried about his life and the breaking apart of his family, Karim wears away his nights, listening to tuneless music: "King Crimson, Soft Machine, Captain Beefheart, Frank Zappa and Wild Man Fisher" (p. 62). And moving into the 1970s we watch the replacement of the rock and hippy culture of the 1960s by the much harsher and aggressive atmosphere of punk. In chapter nine, Karim and Charlie go to a bar, where they see for the first time the emergence of this new urban tribe:

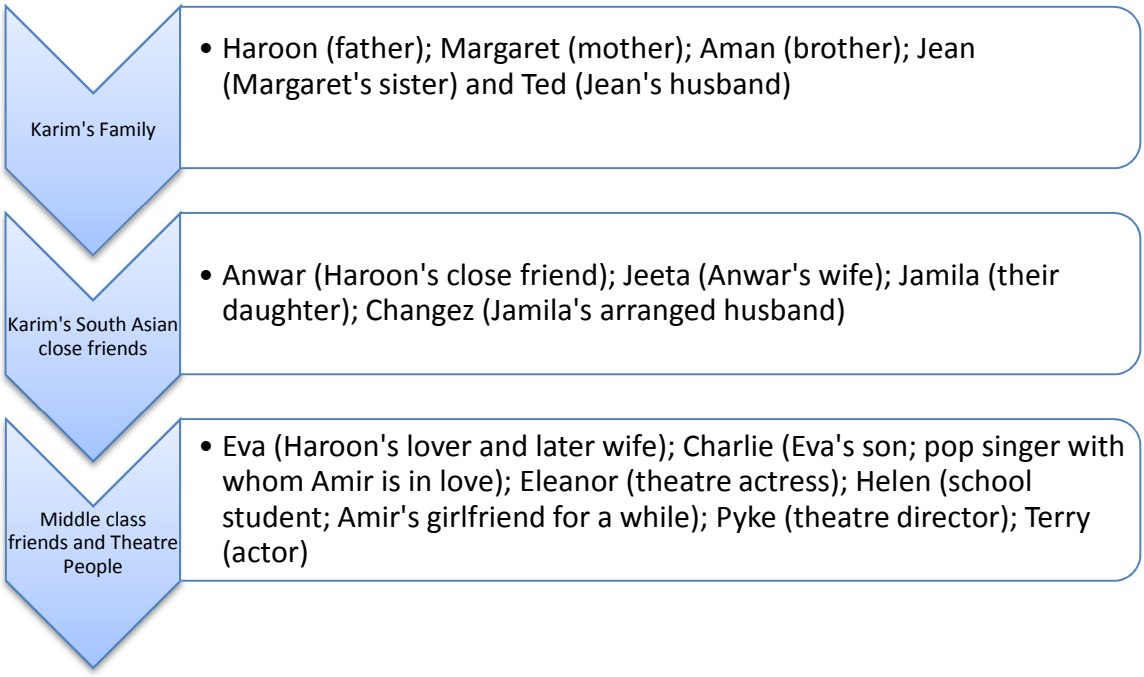
> But at the front of the place, near the stage, there were about thirty kids in ripped black clothes. And the clothes were full of safety-pins. Their hair was uniformly black, and cut short, seriously short, or if long it was spiky and rigid, sticking up and out and sideways, like a handful of needles, rather than hanging down. (...) The girls were in rubber and leather and wore skin-tight skirts and holed black stockings, with white face-slap and bright-red lipstick. They snarled and bit people. (...) (Kureishi, 1990: 129)

The music played by the band is "more aggressive than anything [they] had heard since early Who" (idem: 130). It is through the pop music that the transformations in the fabric of society are signalled to us. These new urban tribes are very far from the "peace and love" period of the former epoch: "Not a squeeze of anything 'progressive' or 'experimental' came from these pallid, vicious little council estate kids with hedgehog hair, howling about anarchy and hatred" (p. 130). And, as Charlie would remark later on, on their way home: "The sixties have been given notice tonight" (p. 131) and he would follow the new pop wave that agitated London. While in New York, Karim and

Charlie listen to "Nick Lowe, Ian Dury and especially Elvis Costello". A whole decade of pop marks the passing of time in the novel.

b) Main characters in the novel

The Buddha of Suburbia presents us with Karim Amir, who is both the protagonist and the narrator. This is, thus, what Gérard Genette calls an autodiegetic narrative, that is, one that is told from the point of view of a narrator that recounts his own experiences. Congregated around Karim Amir, we have a number of characters who are his family (uncles, aunts, cousins) or the friends he interacts with. His family circle comprises both the people that are part of the South-Asian community living in England (not strictly speaking family) and the part of the English family, namely, his mother's sister and husband. In what follows you will find a list of some of the most important characters in the novel:



All the characters contribute to display a wide-ranging picture of the English society. The Amir family is shown as disrupting possible common stereotypical conceptions of the Indian/ Pakistan community in England. By their very constitution, they are a culturally heterogeneous family, and they seem to have adapted easily to the country they live in, despite the ingrained ethnic prejudice on the part of many of the white English people that are shown in the novel. The Anwar family, on the other hand, seem to act as a

counterpoint to the liberal Amir family, by acting out all the common stereotypes associated to the South-Asian Muslim families; as is mentioned by Susie Thomas, they seem to "conform to the stereotype of authoritarian patriarch, the unhappy arranged marriage and the submissive woman" (Thomas, 2005: 73). Yet, this idea is clearly disrupted, for example, by the actions of Jamila, who, though having gone through her arranged marriage, is very far from any idea of a submissive girl; indeed, her actions are illustrative of a very radical disruption of submissiveness and traditional behaviour.

3. *The Buddha of Suburbia* as Representation of Multiethnic and Multicultural British Society

In "The Rainbow Sign", Kureishi presents a view of the type of racial discrimination he had to undergo at a time, the mid-1960s, when being Pakistani was viewed "as a risible subject in England, derided on television and exploited by politicians" (Kureishi, 2011a: 3); and states that, although by 1986 (when this essay was first published) a more inclusive society was on the making in England, it was still a racist society. In relation to "the evil of racism", he comments in the same essay:

> The evil of racism is that it is a violation not only of another's dignity, but also of one's own person or soul; the failure of connection with others is a failure to understand or feel what it is one's own humanity consists in, what it is to be alive, and what it is to see both oneself and others as being ends not means, and as having souls. However much anodyne talk there is of 'one's kind', a society that is racist is a society that cannot accept itself, that hates parts of itself so deeply that it cannot see, does not want to see – because of its spiritual and political nullity and inanition – how much people have in common with each other. (*Idem*: 27)

He also writes about having gone to Pakistan and meeting his family, the sense of place and displacement he felt both in Pakistan and in England and the cultural interconnectedness of the two societies, sharing a common and difficult past of colonizer and colonized people. At the end of "The Rainbow Sign", Kureishi comments on this aspect of British society of the 1980s, in the following terms:

> The two countries, Britain and Pakistan, have been part of each other for years, usually to the advantage of Britain. They cannot now be wrenched apart, even if that were desirable. Their futures will be intermixed. What that intermix means, its moral quality, whether it is violently resisted by ignorant whites and characterised by inequality and injustice, or understood, accepted and humanised, is for all of us to decide. (*Idem*: 34)

He mentions that because Great Britain is hardly going to stop being a multi-ethnic society, it is the "white British" that will have to adapt to this change, if any form of social peace is to be achieved:

> It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British is not what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So, there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time. (*Idem*: *Ibid.*)

It is a fact that the city of London, like most western metropolises, is a site of global mixture of race and culture. As far back as 1995 London was described by Robert Young (in his theorization of hybridity) as a place "inalienably mixed, suffused with the pulse of difference" (Young, 1995: 2). He describes the Greenwich meridian, the place where East and West meet, in the following terms:

> With each passing decade London has been ever more successful in living up to its officially proclaimed heterogeneous identity, so that now (...) you could scarcely imagine a more varied mingling of peoples, whose ancestors hark back to the Caribbean and Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Tibet, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Balkans, mixed and merged with others whose predecessors turned up in the British Isles as Angles, Celts, Danes, Dutch, Irish, Jews, Normans, Norsemen, Saxon, Vikings... The cleavage of East and West in that bronze strip on the hill has gradually been subsumed into a city that, with the potent attraction of economic power exerting the magnetic field of force of the North over the South, has drawn the far-off peripheries into the centre. And with that historic movement of intussusceptions, the Prime Meridian, the Longitude Zero, the centre of the world, has become inalienably mixed, suffused with the pulse of difference (Young, 1995: 1-2).

Whether we tend to hail multiculturalism as a positive element in contemporary cosmopolitan societies, which helps to give cohesion to a cauldron of mixed communities, conjoining different races and cultures and celebrating the idea of hybridity and solidarity[3], or whether we tend to deride

[3] See for such positive vision, Paul Gilroy's introduction to his *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004)

it as governmental propaganda that helps to perpetuate the inherent racism of western societies[4], it is an evidence today that many western societies are essentially mixed, multicultural and transnational.

After the collapse of the Empire – which we can trace back to 1947, when the newly created states of India and Pakistan gained independence from the British Crown –, there was a flux of immigration that arrived in England, since the end of the Second World War. Thus, if, as the centre of the Empire, a city like London has been for a long time one of the world's global capitals, today it is more evidently than ever a transnational space. "With over two million non-white residents in the year 2000", as is stated by John Clement Ball (4), London is indeed the *locus* where a myriad of different nations, cultural identities and ethnicities meet. To quote from John Clement Ball (2006):

> London came to include and represent 'the world' in another way during the postwar decades of formal decolonization. In the half-century from 1947 (India) to 1997 (Hong Kong), as England gradually withdrew its Imperial tentacles, hundreds of thousands of former subjects went along for the ride, beginning with the arrival of 492 Caribbean immigrants on the *SS Windrush* in 1948. Over the following decades, the international citizenry of Empire converged in London in a phenomenon sometimes called the reinvention of the centre or, in the words of Jamaican poet Louise Bennett, 'Colonization in reverse'. (Ball, 2006: 4)

In a society that is so profoundly crossed by so many different peoples, the site of a cosmopolitan explosion of race, ethnicity, language, culture, it is not surprising that we can find a widespread cultural production coming from people of so many different ethnic backgrounds, who are currently writing, painting, making films or music in England.

From the 1950s onwards, there is a number of texts that have focused on this "colonization in reverse", as is referred to in the poem by Louise Bennett with that title (cf. Procter, 2000: 16). The book edited by James Procter, *Writing Black Britain: 1948-1998* (2000) gives a good account of the great number of writers (either poets or novelists) that are part of this somewhat "new" tradition of English literature. Novels like *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) by Sam Selvon, those by Salman Rushdie or V. S. Naipaul (among the best known), but also Buchi Emecheta, Caryl Philips, or by

[4] See, for example, Rajeev Balasubramanyam's criticism of Tony Blair's former British government, in what he sees the use of the multicultural rhetoric as a form of propaganda; in a rather incisive assertion, he states: "The word multiculturalism describes a form of propaganda used to define the corporate identity of Great Britain" (Balasubramanyam, 2008: 33). He further argues that the word multiculturalism is used to disguise the inherent racism of the British society and to condone a form of social injustice that is masked by the multiculturalist brand name.

younger writers like, Zadie Smith – whose first novel *White Teeth* (2000) became an immediate international success – or Monica Ali are among some of the best examples of novels that, from the 1950s onwards, have focused on the inevitability of the relations between Imperial and Post-Imperial England from this new post-colonial perspective. As Bart Moore-Gilbert states, "if publishing had not been ready for Kureishi's teenage novels (...), by the late 1980s the 'Great Immigrant Novel' was one of the industry's grails" (Moore-Gilbert, 2001: 108).

However popular "The Great Immigrant Novel" was (and to a large extent still is) in Britain's publishing industry, it needs reminding that the particular immigration that this label refers to is one strongly connected to the British Empire. As Bronwyn T. Williams puts it:

> The postcolonial diaspora is not simply immigration into Britain from other places, as for example immigration into the United States or even Turkish "guest workers" in Germany," but is instead a continual reminder that "we are here because you were there" (7). Of course, there are many reasons for the timing of this movement of diaspora into the seat of empire; yet there is an unspoken sense within the dominant culture that it is the impotence of the nation/state, stripped of its empire, that is no longer able to keep the Other comfortably across the sea. The idea of immigration itself, then, violates Britain's sense of its secure national borders. This perceived threat to national cohesion, in turn, challenges the cultural identity of the White Englishman as being homogenous and unitary. The response of the dominant culture to post-colonial immigration has been what Stuart Hall calls a "defensive exclusivism. . .an embattled defensiveness of a narrow, national definition of Englishness, of cultural identity" ("The Local" 177). (Williams, 1999: 2)

We have only to give a cursory glance at the site of the British Council's Literature Internet to have a fairly good idea of the ethnic and cultural variety of literature being published in England today; perhaps this is a good sign that the British did learn that, as Hanif Kureishi envisaged in 1986, "being British is not what it was".

The Buddha of Suburbia is such a novel, one that does more than just unbalance a sense of homogeneity in the way a nation may view itself; it proposes a new form of looking at culture as the location of hybridity in a global world, at the same time addressing the question of race and multiple ethnic identity of contemporary British society. Something that not only the British, but all the Europeans must integrate in their idea of "Europeaness", as Paul Gilroy argues in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004):

> [i]t is [...] necessary to affirm that the peculiar synonymy of "European" and "white" cannot continue. And yet, against a wealth of detailed historical and cultural evidence taken from all across Europe, identity, belonging, and, consequently, the imperilled integrity of national states are being communicated through the language and symbols of absolute ethnicity and *racialized* difference" (Gilroy, 2004: 155).

This is precisely a question that is raised by the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which starts by stressing the racialized difference of its narrator and central character in the following terms:

> My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it. (Kureishi, 1990: 3)

By beginning the novel with an assertion of his Englishness the texts draws an intertextual connection with an eighteenth-century impassioned verse pamphlet by Daniel Defoe, with the title The True-Born Englishman (1700), where the writer defends King William from attacks on his foreign birth. In it, Defoe states that England is a mongrel nation and that the "'true-born' Englishman is formed of diverse elements:

> A True-Born Englishman's a contradiction,
> In speech an irony, in fact a fiction.
> A banter made to be a test of fools,
> Which those that use it justly ridicules. (apud. Parrinder, 2006: 67)

And ridiculed it is from beginning to end of The Buddha of Suburbia. The novel is told in the first person and it is a *Buildungsroman* of sorts (of this more will be stated at another point), in the sense that it recounts the growth of the central character and narrator through his adolescence into adult age. Being the product of and, simultaneously, telling the story of a second generation immigrant, the novel lives in that space in-between which is mentioned by Homi Babbha in *Nation and Narration* (1990), where he states that there is no such thing as a unified or unitary national culture:

> The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/ inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the

> political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces (Bhabha, 1990: 4).

As becomes evident from the start, the novel raises questions of racial identity, but always associates these to the question of class. In this respect, one of the most prominent aspects of the novel is the way it depicts the English society of the 1970s (focusing on the city of London) from an inside perspective, demonstrating a familiarity with both the geography of the city and the western culture that perhaps could not be possible for a first-generation immigrant arriving in London in the post-war era. In fact, in the narrative, the differences between the first and second generations are made manifest through the opposition between Karim and his father, Haroon, who, in spite of having lived in England for more than twenty years, did not know his way around the place where he had lived for a good part of his life, as becomes evident in the following passage of the novel:

> It wasn't far (...) to the Kays', but Dad would never have got there without me. I knew all the streets and every bus route.
>
> Dad had been in Britain since 1950 – over twenty years – and for fifteen of those years he'd lived in the South London suburbs. Yet still he stumbled around the place like an Indian off the boat, and asked questions like, 'Is Dover in Kent?' (...) (Kureishi, 1990: 7)

In another passage, the narrator shows the traces of the colonial world, where both Haroon and Anwar had been raised, having been born in India before the independence. Coming from a middle class family (Haroon's father is a doctor), when faced with the English at home (on the metropolis) they are shocked with how distant their idealization of the great British Empire is from the crude reality of everyday life in post-war London, riddled by poverty and hunger:

> London, the Old Kent Road, was a freezing shock to both of them. It was wet and foggy; people called you 'Sunny Jim'; there was never enough to eat, and Dad never took to dripping on toast. 'Nose drippings more like,' he'd say, pushing away the staple diet of the working class. 'I thought it would be roast beef and Yorkshire pudding all the way.' But rationing was still on, and the area was derelict after being bombed to rubble during the war. Dad was amazed and heartened by the sight of the British in England, though. He'd never seen the English in poverty, as roadsweepers, dustmen, shopkeepers and barmen. He'd never seen an Englishman stuffing bread into his mouth with his fingers, and no one had told him the English didn't wash regularly because the water was so cold – if they had water at all. And when Dad tried to discuss Byron in local pubs no one warned him that not every Englishman

> could read or that they didn't necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman (Kureishi, 1990: 24-5).

Despite the comic tone of the novel, it is clear that for Haroon, the shock of displacement is also associated to his going down the social ladder, for in England he was viewed not as a middle-class Indian, but rather as a black immigrant ("people called you 'Sunny Jim'") and, as such, viewed as a second-hand citizen, probably, much lower in the social ranks than the poor, working class white English citizens he finally meets on the metropolis ("He'd never seen the English in poverty, as roadsweepers, dustmen, shopkeepers and barmen").

As stated in the beginning of the novel, the position of the narrator is different, for, unlike his father, he is an "Englishman born and bred", though "a funny kind of Englishman". Thus, the differences between first and second generation immigrants are made very visible in the text of the novel, as can be assessed by the two previous quotations, which focus on the displacement problems felt by the first generation of immigrants. Haroon and Anwar, the close friends that arrived in England from India, had an idea of Great Britain as the Empire; they look up to England as the centre of the Empire, which it was on the verge of losing. For Karim the questions are different, because he does not feel he is an outsider, not in the same way, at least, as the first generation does; there is not a sense of displacement that is felt by the older generation, but rather a sense of being perceived as an outsider, no matter what; as is stated at a certain point in the text: "The thing was, we were supposed to be English, but to the English we were always wogs and nigs and Pakis and the rest of it" (Kureishi, 1990: 53).

For this second generation the tensions have not waned; in fact, they have become more acute, in the sense that, being part of England themselves they feel ever so slightly not completely English. In another passage of the novel, the narrator, thinking about his first lover, Eleanor, and of another former lover of hers, a black man, is reminded of the extent to which people from other ethnic origins may still feel the displacement of not entirely belonging to the same nation, in the same terms:

> Sweet Gene, her black lover, London's best mime, who emptied bed-pans in hospital soaps, killed himself because every day, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they thought him a nigger, a slave, a lower being. And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and its self-rearguard – into the eye of Hairy Back, into the eye of the Great Fucking Dane. We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free

> we had to free ourselves of all bitterness and resentment, too. How was this possible when bitterness and resentment were generated afresh ever day? (Kureishi, 1990: 227)

And although the tone of the novel is transversally ironical, we do not clearly find the irony, or the encompassing humour of the narrator's voice, in this bitter remark. Being made to feel outsiders is transversal to most of the immigrants in the novel and not only to Sweet Gene. Another example: Karim's Aunt Jean and Uncle Ted never call Haroon by his name, but always refer to him as "Harry": "It was bad enough his being an Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too" (Kureishi, 1990: 33).

The novel exploits the idea of the exotic other or, rather, satirically exploits the way the other is constructed as exotic, both through the figure of Haroon Amir, the "Buddha of suburbia" from the title, and through Karim. Haroon reinvents himself as the exotic other, representing for a group of white middle-class people the role of an Indian religious guru. The deep irony of the exoticism is displayed in the fact that for the group of white middle-class people this Indian, who in fact is a Muslim, performs their own expectations of what 'indianness' is, which is connected to a certain form of spiritualization that reaches the West (also via the path of pop culture) in the 1960s. In fact, Haroon's fake spirituality, which he so easily performs, had only been acquired through books that he had bought in England, as is stressed, in a rather satirical tone, by the narrator: "I ran and fetched Dad's preferred yoga book (...) from among his other books on Buddhism, Sufism, Confucianism and Zen which he had bought at the Oriental bookshop in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road" (Kureishi, 1990: 5). In another passage of the novel, the ever present ironic look of the narrator on the way his father "exoticizes" himself, takes the following stance:

> It was indeed his fault, for under his car coat my father was wearing what looked like a large pair of pyjamas. On top was a long silk shirt embroidered around the neck with dragons. This fell over his chest and flew out at his stomach for a couple of miles before dropping down to his knees. Under this he had on baggy trousers and sandals. But the real crime, the reason for concealment under the hairy car coat, was the crimson waistcoat with gold and silver patterns that he wore over the shirt. If Mum had caught him going out like that she would have called the police. After all, God was a Civil Servant, he had a briefcase and umbrella, he shouldn't be walking around looking like a midget toreador (Kureishi, 1990: 29).

It is through his own reinvention as the other, though, that he manages to move out of the suburbs his son so despises to lead a more upper-middle class life. In the same way, Karim manages to survive his

adolescence and move away from the suburbs, paving his way into fame through a theatre role where he impersonates an Indian as the token black person in the play. When the roles are being assigned the director asks Karim to play "someone from your own background", that is, "someone black" (p. 170); and although Karim thinks to himself that he "didn't know anyone black, though [he]'d been at school with a Nigerian" (p. 170) he acquiesces to the role. Eventually, he manages to perform the role of an Indian person, someone closer to his background; yet, given the fact that he had never been to India, he chooses to impersonate Changez, Jamila's arranged husband, who had recently arrived in England. In the end, his role is reviewed by the critics as "hilarious and honest" (Kureishi, 1990: 228).). Both Haroon and his son Karim undermine the idea of representing otherness, by posing as what Graham Huggan would label the "postcolonial exotic", which he describes as "the global commodification of cultural difference" (Huggan, 2001: xvii). But as far as impersonation goes, they are not really the only ones, for we see Charlie impersonating the aggressive rebel punk pop star and being very successful at it. Taking all these impersonations into account, James Procter states that "in *The Buddha of Suburbia* the city is above all a *theatrical* space, a locus of performance, display and spectatorship." (Procter, 2003: 135)

4. *The Buddha of Suburbia* as "coming of age novel" – the *Bildungsroman*

The novel raises other identity issues, which have to do with the fact that its main character is an adolescent trying to find his way around; so, identity issues concerned with sexuality, youth culture and class are also central to the story. In that sense, apart from being a transnational novel, or, as other authors prefer to call the genre, a novel of immigration, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, is also very pointedly a *Bildungsroman*, that is, a novel that "charts the protagonist's actual or metaphorical journey from youth to maturity" (Rau, 2002: 1).

The term *Bildungsroman,* which designates a "novel of personal development or education" (Rau, 2002: 1), originated in Germany in the eighteenth century. Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1795/6) is usually given as one of the first paradigmatic instances of this genre. There is a long tradition of the genre in

the English novel of the nineteenth century, if we think of novels by Charles Dickens like *David Copperfield* (1949/50), *Great Expectations* (1861) and, to a lesser degree, even *Oliver Twist* (1838/9). *Jane Eyre* (1848) is probably one of the most paradigmatic 19th century *Bildungsroman* novels focusing on female experience. The number of examples of novels with *Bildungsroman* elements is wide and far-ranging, be it in the English tradition or in other national literatures, be it in the nineteenth or in the twentieth century – think, for example, of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, we see the young protagonist's journey of self-development as one of coming to terms with his own identity. Central to this is, in this case, the issue of ethnicity, as we have already seen, but also that of sexuality and class. All these elements are referred to, in some sense, in the much-quoted introductory paragraph of the novel. Indeed, just after he refers to his "odd mixture of continents and blood", introducing the reader to the problems he is facing with his ethnic identity, Karim Amir mentions that perhaps the cause for his boredom is living in the suburbs.

As a youngster, Karim Amir struggles in the dark to make sense of his life, of what he wants to do, of who he wants to be. The elders have aspirations in relation to him: his father wants him to be a doctor, his mother wants him "into the navy" (p. 23). Yet, at school he is expected to have a safe career as a placid low civil servant, something that is ironically presented as some sort of expectation of the English society toward the immigrant: "At school the careers officer said that I should go into Customs and Excise – obviously he thought I had a natural talent for scrutinizing suitcases" (p. 23). All the expectations that are addressed to him are in clear contrast with his own adolescent expectations of fame and adventure. Confronted with what he perceives as a glamorous life of "mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs" (p. 15) at the Kays, he understands that this is the kind of life he wants for himself – "I'd glimpsed a world of excitement and possibility which I wanted to hold in my mind and expand as a template for the future" (p. 15). Again, the clarity of his vision comes in ironical harsh contrast with the vagueness of his life project.

This project includes getting out of the suburbs into a life of glamour in London, something that is finally achieved when his father leaves his mother and moves in with Eva. Moving into London clearly represents a movement from the margins to the centre (to cite an expression present in

post-colonial criticism)[5], both in a literal and in a metaphorical way. In a way, as is invoked in the text, this feels like re-possessing the Empire:

> So this was London at last, and nothing gave me more pleasure than strolling around my new possession all day. London seemed like a house with five thousand rooms, all different; the kick was to work out how they connected, and eventually to walk through all of them. (...) This part of West London seemed like the country to me, with none of the disadvantages, no cows or farmers. (Kureishi, 1990: 126)

But, as Nahem Yousaf notes, "[r]ather than an immigrant enclave, Karim's London is more reliant on popular cultural images of the 1960s that persist into the 1970s: music, TV, theatre" (Yousaf, 2011: 37). For Karim, London, as Yousaf further argues, "epitomizes the best of all possible worlds in which to take his faltering but exciting steps from adolescence to adulthood" (*Ibidem*). In contrast, the suburbs Karim wants to get away from stand for the place of bourgeois complacency and boredom. James Procter (quoting Robert Fishman) states that "suburbia represents a kind of urban unconscious, 'a testimony to bourgeois anxieties, to deeply buried fears that translate into contempt and hatred for the 'others' that inhabit the city'" (Procter, 2003: 126). In many senses, Suburbia is here put on display not so much as the place where a specific immigrant community lives (or indeed not at all as that place), but as the paradigm of English lower-middle-class contentment which Karim so despises and wants to transcend. And yet, as has been pointed out by some critics, notably James Procter (2003: 149) and Bart Moore-Gilbert (2001: 126), although he repudiates suburbia in order to embrace bohemian life, either in London or in New York, Karim remains strongly attached to it and the novel "is contaminated by the suburban culture it would appear to repudiate" (Procter, 2003: 149).

Class-consciousness along with the question of ethnicity is also part of the identity problems that afflict the protagonist, but he is also afflicted by a troubling sexual ambiguity that makes him wonder whether he was "a pervert and needed to have treatment, hormones, or electric shocks through [his] brain" (p. 55), for it turns out that he cannot decide whether he prefers to sleep with boys or girls.

In his journey to maturity, Karim goes a long way to expose issues of ethnicity in the English society of the 1970s, but at the same time he displays a sense of English culture, which is made to disrupt homogenous ideas of ethnic representations in the novel. Thus, what comes across at the end of the novel is indeed a protagonist that is more than anything "an

[5] Cf., for example, Julien and Mercer (1996) essay "De margin and de centre".

Englishman born and bred". So, in the end he sits "in the centre of this old city" that he loves, surrounded by the ethnic multiplicity of the people that he loves, hoping that things will eventually get better in the future.

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Other sources:

"Hanif Kureishi in Conversation with Kenan Malik – part 1"; available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDqJAlCQONU; Accessed on: 9/12/2013.

Annex 1:

Books by Hanif Kureishi and on Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* you can find in the libraries of the University of Minho (November 2013):

In the libraries of our university you can find several books by and about Hanif Kureishi, some of which are:

a) Books by Hanif Kureishi in our libraries:

Kureishi, Hanif, *Collected Short Stories*, London: Faber & Faber, 2010. (BGUM)

__, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London: Faber & Faber, 1990. (BGUM)

__, *The Black Album*, London: Faber & Faber, 2003. (BGUM)

__, *Collected Screenplays: My Beautiful Laundrette; Sammy and Rosie Get Laid; London Kills Me; My Son the Fanatic*, London: Faber & Faber, 2002. (CEHUM)

b) Books on Hanif Kureishi:

Acheson, James and Ross, Sarah (eds), *The Contemporary British Novel*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. (BGUM)

Moore-Gilbert, B. J., *Hanif Kureishi*, Contemporary World Writers, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007 [esp. ch. 4]. (CEHUM)

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Yousaf, Nahem, *Hanif Kureishi's the Buddha of Suburbia: A Reader's Guide*, New York: Continuum, 2002. (CEHUM)