

Stereotypes in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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Hanif Kureishi's novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, presents numerous discrepancies existing between the English and the Indian culture, emphasizing the fact that stereotypes such as race, nationality, religious orientation are capable of turning the world upside-down and of presenting a perfect image of the society in the 1970's.

The first stereotype that appears in the book is closely related to the condition of the character and tackles with the problems of identity and prejudice. The main character in the book, Karim, belongs to an Indian father and a working-class English mother, which means he actually belongs to two distinct cultures, but at the same time to none of them completely. Thus, the character will always have the feeling of being different, of being treated like "the other", this situation bringing about mixed feelings such as grief, frustration and sadness. To illustrate this, we should think of the moment when Karim wants to be employed and get the acting job that he desires, he has to play a role, get dressed, speak and act like an Indian, but also prove to Mr. Shadwell, the director, that he has Indian culture. Surprisingly, he encounters difficulties in accomplishing these tasks and, consequently, he fails the test. Mr. Shadwell reveals a compassionate and ironic attitude towards Karim and decides that this one should act Mowgli, the character in *The Jungle Book*, noticing that Karim resembles Mowgli both physically and psychologically. This description illustrates the fact that the problem of race and racism is one important stereotype that appears in the book. Being judged for the fact of not being white, Karim suffers the mockery and the hypocrisy of the director.

Another significant aspect illustrated by Kureishi is the fact that the condition of the immigrant in the London suburbs reveals numerous discrepancies that exist between the Indian and the English culture. Life in India and life in England are presented as two completely different ways of living. When the protagonist is in India, he has servants, leads a wealthy life, plays cricket in the afternoon (cricket being a British game) with the British that he has to let win. Here comes another stereotype connected with race. It seems that if you are an Indian man, you are inferior to the British people. Presumably, this situation occurred because the Indians were colonised by the British, and even after the gain of their independence, they still had a mentality that demanded to still stick to the British rules, respect them, be submitted to them (let them win a common cricket game). Obviously, the shifts in mentality are difficult to be made, and mankind needs centuries in order to change and progress. "In Britain the loss of the colonies brought about a feeling of nostalgia for the good old time, following that many British feared the end of the nation. Thus, a reaction occurred against the immigrants who had settled in Britain, and whose existence was perceived as a threat against the purity and high-class of the British culture."¹ Even if the Indian people, as a colony, have to submit to British rules, they lead, however, a harmonious and peaceful life. The protagonist assumes the fact that while at home, he was just like a king, had servants, led a luxurious life. As for the counter- picture of England, especially the old Haroon has great expectations when he leaves his country. He believes that London will make him rich, offer him an even more luxurious life and bring about happiness. Conversely, his wishes do not come true when he realizes that London suburbs have nothing to do with wealth, splendour and prosperity, they do not reflect the power and the greatness of the old powerful British colonizer empire. In fact, London suburbs abound in poverty, unhappiness,

¹ Zoe Maria Ghiță, *Lucrare de doctorat, Multi- Cultural Aspects in the British Novel of the 1980s*, The Faculty of Letters, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, p. 52.

disease and present a gloomy atmosphere: “Dad had had an idyllic childhood, and as he told me of these adventures with Anwar I often wondered why he’d condemned his own son to a dreary suburb of London of which it was said that when people drowned they saw not their lives but their double-glazing flashing before them. It was only later, when he came to England, that Dad realized how complicated practical life could be. He’d never cooked before, never washed up, never cleaned his own shoes, or made a bed. Servants did that.”² The above-mentioned fragment illustrates the fact that the difference between the country he left and the country that “adopted” him is enormous and it does not meet his expectations.

The stereotype of race is reflected especially by the discussion that Karim has with Changez. In front of his friend, Karim never considers himself to be black, and the fact that he is judged by the others as being black touches his pride. When he meets this real Indian, he reacts in a weird manner and continues to behave like an Englishman, denying somehow his half-origins. In fact, after having spent some time in London, Karim feels that he actually belongs to two cultures. He resembles Changez by his inner desire to continually progress, push his limits. If Changez represents the type of the speculative man, the travelogue that wants to become rich no matter where he is, Karim wants to get rid of the English suburbs and move in the centre of the city, get the acting job that he desires, effectively evolve. However, because of his roots, Karim feels like an outsider, never succeeds in surmounting the barrier of race and become effectively an Englishman because he still has Indian influences (accent, mentality and way of thinking, religious beliefs). “The world Kureishi depicts in his novel is a multicultural microcosm. [...] The issue of racial differences, of passing or not passing is a very complex one, and requires a very attentive treatment. What is absolutely certain is the fact that “racial

² Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London, Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 23.

intolerance” does exist, especially in a multicultural society such as the English”³ This extract emphasizes the fact that racism is a stereotype whose presence is obvious in the book, a stereotype that disposes of a perfect medium to expand.

Except the presence of the stereotypes of identity, prejudice, race and the condition of the immigrant, the problems of acceptance and tolerance are Kureishi’s main issues in terms of the stereotypical construction of the book. Even if the character makes desperate efforts to be accepted by the others, he will never be fully integrated and he will never be a real Englishman. The society seems to punish each and every immigrant and always perceive him as “the other”, as a different “self”. When he wants to get the acting job that he desires, Karim finds out that he is searched only for the fact that he is half Indian, and his foreign nature could perhaps attract, in the director’s opinion, more people to his theatrical performances, which would mean he could gain greater amounts of money. These scenes reveal the fact that the character will never be able to be fully accepted by the society that adopted him, as people are rather intolerant than friendly and they seem to be skeptic when they encounter people belonging to other cultures, outsiders. Paradoxically, these outsiders can sometimes be much better than the natives and help to the development of the society that adopted them. For instance, Karim is smart, courageous and self-determined to succeed, willing to learn and become an educated man. He is shocked when he studies in the English school from the suburbs and realizes how uneducated and ignorant young English children are: “Most of the kids I grew up with left school at sixteen, and they’d be in insurance now, or working as car-mechanics, or managers (radio and TV debt) in department stores. [...] In the suburbs, education wasn’t considered a particular advantage, and certainly couldn’t be seen as worthwhile in itself. Getting onto business from a young age was more

³ Zoe Maria Ghiță, *Lucrare de doctorat, Multi- Cultural Aspects in the British Novel of the 1980s*, The Faculty of Letters, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, p. 162.

important. But now I was among people who wrote books as naturally as we played football. What infuriated me- what made me loathe both them and myself- was their confidence and knowledge. The easy talk of art, theatre, architecture, travel; the languages, the vocabulary, knowing the way round a whole culture- it was invaluable and irreplaceable capital.”⁴ This description of the English suburbs illustrates the conditions under which the character lived, the fact that he was judged by the society for not belonging to the English culture, even if, in fact, he was neither worse than the natives, nor much different of them. However, the years that Karim spent in this college made him finally become self- aware that education was essential in one’s life. Only after the school years, did he realize how confident and informed you become if you are educated.

As for the stereotype of nationality, we could think of Karim’s father, the Indian Haroon who tries to escape his condition and his etiquette of being an outsider and who becomes “the Buddha of suburbia”. In his attempt to avoid one stereotype, Haroon receives another, that of being a person who has mystic powers and who attracts several people from the suburbs seeking for truth in his group. Haroon, the image of the English immigrant, is also a source of exotic fun, as the high society sees in him a sort of Buddha or guru meant to amuse them. It seems that the character accepts his role hoping to accede to the high society and escape from the suburbs. His coming in London could be explained by his desire to move in a country that he glorified, that he imagined as powerful and wealthy. However, he is disappointed when he notices the poverty, illiteracy and the mess that governs and he realizes that he has to work hard to gain money.

In order to better understand the stereotypical construction of the book, the reader must find out information about the political background and the popular culture of the age, as well as the dominance of the postcolonialist literature in Britain, these aspects showing the atmosphere

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

that dominated England in the 70's. In a society in which Thatcherism encouraged greater independence of the individual from the state, insisting upon some aspects of the ethical appearance of the individual, including moral absolutism, popular culture represented by the sexual revolution, by the success of the progressive rock and by the drugs culture, Karim wants to find his own way and succeed in life, to get rid of the suburbs and that is why he always tries to act like an Englishman. During that time, the power of the working class was great. The Labour Party aimed at the transformation and development of the society by a quick improvement. "The historical process by means of which England defined and accorded a fixed meaning to the colonial identity is echoed in this novel; here, London and the periphery are a microcosm in which colonizer-colonised relations are re-enacted. Even if the British empire has collapsed, certain colonial attitudes, ways of defining identity and legitimizing narratives still prevail. It can be argued that most of the characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* strive at having their personal narratives legitimized by London which acts as the metaphorical centre of authority."⁵ Clearly, the above-mentioned fragment suggests that all the stereotypes that appear in the novel are caused by the desire of the characters to reestablish the connection that was made between colonisers and colonised and show that identity can be deconstructed due to the appearance of stereotypes that distort reality and make the individual look like a stranger, somebody he does not resemble at all. Thus, the historical and cultural representations of the identity aim at making the contemporary society understand that the individual has to submit in order to self- develop. As for the postcolonialist influences, Ato Quayson believes that "Like postmodernism and poststructuralism, postcolonialism designates critical practice that is highly eclectic and difficult to define."⁶ In fact, it seems that even if the postcolonialist influence is not

⁵ Adrian Radu, *Literature and Social Media*, British Cultural Studies MA Programme, The Faculty of Letters, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 27.

⁶ Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism. Theory, Practice or Process?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005, p. 1.

very easy to identify, the reader feels that the novel is to be cut into two parts that reveal the mentality of the colonizer and the mentality of the colonised.

Another stereotype that is gripping and is worth mentioning is the religious stereotype. While life in India is dominated by the Muslim faith, the patriarchal authority and the desire to discover the eastern tradition, life in England is a way of gaining greater independence and freedom. It is a land that the protagonists like, and that is why they want to get rid of the suburbs and get to know the real London, its centre, the beauty of the powerful empire. Curiously, from a geographical point of view, none of the characters in the book expresses his desire to see his origins again. However, from a psychological point of view, the characters would like to return internally to India. In contrast, London seems to be the place that offers numerous possibilities and that they would leave only for Florida or Las Vegas for gambling and their desire to find their luxurious lost paradise again. “It was certainly bizarre, Uncle Anwar behaving like a Muslim. I’d never known him believe in anything before, so it was an amazing novelty to find him literally staking his life on the principle of absolute patriarchal authority. Through her mother’s staunch and indulgent love (plus the fibbing extravagances of her wonderful imagination), but mainly because of Anwar’s indifference, Jamilla had got away with things some of her white counterparts wouldn’t dream of.[...] Maybe there were similarities between what was happening to Dad, with his discovery of Eastern philosophy, and Anwar’s last stand. Perhaps it was the immigrant condition living itself out through them.”⁷ This excerpt minutely describes the need of the middle-aged people to submit to their Muslim religion. Even if they live in London now, the characters still respect their religion and act accordingly. For instance, Anwar, who seems the most rigid and traditional character, forces his daughter Jamilla to marry Changez even if she does not love him. It seems that Anwar has much more to do with the Indian

⁷ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London, Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 64.

traits than with the English ones. He wants to be prosperous and is ready to do anything to achieve his goals. When he arrived in London, he opened a market, wanted to gain financial stability. He sticks to the Indian religion in such a way that he appeals to hunger strike in order to convince his daughter marry Changez. Obviously, this situation is humorous and paradoxical at the same time. Declaring himself a religious man, Anwar appeals to hunger strike (such a common excuse) in order to make himself be respected. In contrast to his way of being, Jamilla is much more addicted to the English way of living. She wants to be an educated woman, reads books, she wants to expand her knowledge. Conversely, Changez is the type of the Indian immigrant that does all sorts of business in order to become wealthy and he also has an extramarital relationship. All these characters reveal the fact that religious stereotypes manifest differently to each of them. While Karim, Haroon and Jamilla stick to a certain extent to their religion, do not eat pork, respect ceremonies, they rather prefer London for being a place that offers better possibilities for those who are young and want to have a successful career. As for Anwar, he sticks to Muslim rules and does not want to change his moral beliefs. Changez has extramarital relationships, Haroon becomes a “Buddha” meant to amuse those belonging to the high society, these situations bringing about the comic of the characters and offering a merry nuance to the book.

The acceptance of Karim’s condition in between two cultures and the gain of success in life, as well as the gain of a well-shaped identity are constructed and deconstructed by the stereotypes already mentioned. Having to surmount all the difficulties that appear throughout the unfolding of the book, Karim must accept his condition of being different and create his own identity. “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.”⁸ These first lines that appear in the novel reflect that the character is aware of the fact that he is different, ‘a funny kind of Englishman’, and he is ready to receive and assume the stereotypes that he encounters. The centre of Karim’s life succeeds in moving from the outer world to the inner world by the end of the book, the character regaining the respect and the acceptance of the values that he rejected at first (in the episode in which Karim moves from America to London, he moves from the place that had always been his centre and gets a new life in London because of the play that made him famous all over the country). Karim remains the main victim of his origins as he has to live all his life in between the two cultures. However, he finds his way in life and shows that a powerful man can surmount stereotypes of all kinds almost completely.

Even the language used in the novel reveals the character’s condition. The author uses many dialogues full of colloquialism, emphasizing the difference existing in the language of the suburbs (Karim, Haroon) and the language of the upper middle classes (Eleanor, Pyke- the strange theatre director). As a whole, the novel gives the impression of an oral discourse, the reader having the impression of realism. In terms of construction, the novel can be perceived as a Bildungsroman that follows Karim’s development and the steps he takes into becoming an actor. “Having tried his hand at theatre writing, Kureishi became a novelist famous for the sparkling dialogue and believable characters, at ease when shifting from one culture to another, observing the diverse national cultural heritage, questioning inherent assumptions and satirizing them. [...] *The Buddha of Suburbia*, his most popular novel, looks into teenage rebellion, the way children shock their parents, but also the way parents shock their children. Philip Tew says that Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a typical example of ‘shifting cultural identities’ as ‘it evokes and reconfigures a Dickensian dialectic dislocation, identity and English Bildungsroman’,

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

deconstructing these elements very much in the manner of J.D. Salinger's seminal and laconic novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) toward which Kureishi's opening gestures."⁹ Definitely, *The Buddha of Suburbia* belonging to Hanif Kureishi is a book that presents the stereotypes that are brought about when the individual is an immigrant, dealing with numerous issues: the condition of England, identity and loss of identity, moral beliefs, youth and popular culture, political background, immigration, race, religion, the suburbs.

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⁹ Zoe Maria Ghiță, *Lucrare de doctorat, Multi- Cultural Aspects in the British Novel of the 1980s*, The Faculty of Letters, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, p. 148.