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***The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi (English, Paperback,)**

**Publisher: Faber and Faber, 1990. ISBN: 0-571-14274-5. Pages: 284**

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Kureishi's first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* deals with issues and problems of class, race and identity. Karim, the protagonist of the novel, is a youth of two cultures — half Indian and half English looking for identity and fulfillment in the 1970s London.

Kureishi's novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* is set in England which portray the individual's perceptions of cultural identity that is diasporic, heterogeneous and always in the making, informed by different cross-cultural connections. The second generation immigrants presented in the novel perceive their identities as a process of becoming rather than a state of being which undergo constant transformation in the formation of self-identification and belongingness.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* examines the immigrant condition and explores the multi-faceted theme of identity from cultural and social perspectives. The protagonist Karim, son of an Indian man and an English woman, embodies this trajectory. From the southern suburbs of London, where immigrants and underprivileged strata traditionally live, he not only works his way up to live in a more central neighborhood, he also achieves professional success as an actor. Naturally his progress can be read as an allegory of the second immigrant generation penetrating the centers of political and media power. Kureishi makes his hero rise continuously through stages clearly recognizable as rites of social and erotic initiation. How closely the formation of the subject and experience of the city are linked can be seen from the fact that at the end Karim returns to London from the even more prestigious city of New York.

While race is inescapably present in novels like Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, such texts often focus on telling the story of characters who are neither black nor white, but occupy a hybrid space of multiculturalism.

Through a textual analysis of Hanif Kureishi's 1990 novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*,<sup>6</sup> set in London and its suburbs, Langford explores the relationships between Kureishi's suburbs (ambiguous and hybrid), male protagonist (nonwhite and bisexual), and London (the elusive object of desire). Langford's reading not only destabilizes the urban/ suburban binary but also locates the suburbs at the heart of the city.

The novel opens with the father moving away from his stay-at-home wife into the circle of fashionable people who ask him to teach them the mystic arts. At last he moves in with Eva, a beautiful woman, while Karim develops a frustrated carnal relationship with her equally good-looking son Charlie. The point seems to be the illicitness of both these relationships from the point of view of that set of moral values that favor the stability of human relationships in the form of the family and marriage. The novel ends with no resolution either in these relationships or in those of other characters, such as the Indian man Changez and his wife Jamila. Jamila never allows her husband to have intercourse with her and even has a child by a boyfriend, because her husband had been chosen for her by her father in accordance with Indian tradition.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* by Kureishi is an exercise in this differential diasporic sensibilities which demonstrates both the impact of race and class relations on individual and how the colonial subjects are caught up in the ambivalence of colonial discourse and pushed into a new space, expressing themselves to be hybrid, ambivalent and in between souls in the Bhabhasque dialectics of relocation of culture. The moral dilemma the protagonist faces in the novel reflects a deconstructive presence of two critical voices in the systematic consumption of the center as pure and essential. Karim, the narrator/protagonist must thrive on an acting career that manifests itself on his engagements in a multiplicity of fluid, shifting and imaginary selves to augment his process of self-actualization.

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a multi-layered novel of place, race, and sexual exploration. The central theme of this novel is the question of identity and belonging. Karim's riveting journey into the postcolonial realities of Britain as a young man demonstrates the struggle for self-actualization and finding a place in the society who doesn't have any compatible pattern to fit properly into a specific model of cultural configuration.

The protagonist Karim, son of an Indian man and an English woman, embodies this trajectory. From the southern suburbs of London, where immigrants and underprivileged strata traditionally live, he not only works his way up to live in a more central neighborhood, he also

achieves professional success as an actor. Naturally his progress can be read as an allegory of the second immigrant generation penetrating the centers of political and media power. Kureishi makes his hero rise continuously through stages clearly recognizable as rites of social and erotic initiation. How closely the formation of the subject and experience of the city are linked can be seen from the fact that at the end Karim returns to London from the even more prestigious city of New York.

Because Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* depicts a specific society—late 1970s Britain—and the relationship an individual develops with this society as a means of understanding this society's social and moral values, it serves as an instructive example of a new novel of manners. Though the novel of manners has been characterized as a historically white, upper-class novel, Kureishi's deliberate changes to the novel of manners force readers and scholars to view manners as more than just fish forks and table etiquette, but as a system by which our behaviors reveal our values.

Further, Kureishi's adaptation of and revisions to the novel of manners helps explain the resurgence of a genre considered to be rigid and irrelevant—if the novel of manners can be adapted to accurately reflect literary and social trends, then it can also effectively critique a society that prioritizes appearance over actual values.

Yet Kureishi complicates the concept of “society” by portraying a hybridized society in his novel through his biracial protagonist, Karim. One of the biggest cultural shifts occurring in the late 1970s was the influx of immigrant families whose children came of age and identified as English in a formerly-white Britain. Such a cultural phenomenon led to tensions in society and an identity crisis for individuals. Because they lived in two worlds simultaneously, their manners would constantly shift and thus require at times a different set of values, depending on the domestic or public setting.

There are characters with hybrid qualities, identity crisis, racial problem, immigrant situation in the novel. They tend to use mimicry to find their identities and establish themselves in the cultures they live. In order to depict morality more fully through a novel of manners, Kureishi uses manners to explain social mores and how they become disguised as moral codes. While manners can be conveyed through table etiquette or polite gestures, Kureishi, as with other novelists of manners, expands the definition to include unspoken codes of conduct that convey a certain idea. He depicts manners as clothing choices or styles, thus conveying the values, identities, and class affiliations his characters espouse or adapt throughout the novel.

For Karim, bright, flamboyant, fashionable clothing marks his indeterminate sexuality and his desire to conform to the fashions of white English men and women at the forefront of the popular music scene. The right clothes yield happiness and satisfaction, whereas the wrong clothing conveys a sense of unbelonging and displacement from social norms.

The novel depicts the notion of hybridity. Karim is mixed race and can't relate wholly to Indian and also not accepted as white. In Kureishi's novel of manners, the character of Karim serves to examine the moral depravity that is occurring with the rise in consumer culture. Karim himself finds that with the increase in sexual freedoms, his own sense of morality and tradition is confused by conflicting customs and cultures. Such a confusion is highlighted through Jamila's marriage to Changez—it is pre-arranged by their parents, yet Jamila refuses to have sexual intercourse with her husband. She claims that their marriage is legal only.

The moral question embedded in this scenario involves whether defying tradition—which can provide personal fulfillment or happiness—is morally correct, or if adhering to tradition—while sometimes bringing personal unhappiness or lack of fulfillment—is the morally correct attitude. In cases of morality, manners reveal or conceal individual or societal values, thus hinting at tension if the individual's manners do not reflect his or her moral views.

Karim is a half English and half-Indian teenager struggling to find his place. Through the story of Karim and many Indian families in London during the 1970s the novel shows postmodern elements such as hybridity, identity crisis, race, immigrant problem etc. Hanif Kureishi himself is a mixed race man; he is born in the West to mixed race families. Kureishi's personal experiences reflect in the novel.

It shows identity struggle of Karim, he struggle to find a balance between these two cultures. Due to Karim's dual heritage and constant racism he encounters he constantly struggles to identify himself. Further, manners, as seen by clothing in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, convey class status and money. Those who dress smartly are seen as wealthy, but the wealthy appropriate ragged or rough clothing in order to seem rebellious or individualistic.

Kureishi points out such disparity through characters of different classes. He can neither continue his own culture nor become involved in the new culture. Just as manners reveal much about morality, Kureishi depicts a domestic setting in transition in order to show how morals and manners change the individual's behavior and identity in private. Because Karim's family has appropriated several domestic traditions in their family heritage, his identity is

confused by a multiplicity of domestic histories. His father, having come from India, is used to being served within his home and not worrying about the vagaries of everyday life.

The novel challenges the ways in which the contemporary race relations in Britain are perpetuated through cultural representation of different sorts and attempts a subversion of the same. This is why Karim is an odd mixture of continents of Europe and South Asia and blood of Indian and English. Karim mixture makes him a biological hybrid as well as a cultural one. So, Karim is both a biological and a cultural hybrid.

For the characters in the novel, migration is a never-ending process in which they live simultaneously between the past and the present. Because they have been subjected to many discrimination such as race, language, religion, color and have always been declared 'other' in society. Kureishi paints colorful and incisive portraits of the immigrant experience, the struggles of class, the clash of cultures, the elitism of art and the generation gap all on the canvas of 1970s' London with its kaleidoscopic landscape of fashion, music and politics.

Karim's external cultural identity is just a weighty obstructive legacy to him, something that is thrown in his face again and again, which detracts from his deeper personal identity. This he is forced to examine. He is always being reminded that he is different, that he is not looked upon by the English as being English. Karim's identity is characterised by his non-Englishness in spite of how English he feels; by what he is not and not by what he is. This is a source of building frustration throughout this novel.

Karim is one of the major characters who suffers from being stuck in between. Although he tries to pretend to be British by rejecting the culture of his father, who is Indian, he is never accepted by the racist society in which he lives and he stays in this liminal area without an identity.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* is a novel that shows the conflict of identities that emerges in societies where different cultures coincide. Karim is the narrator and the main character in the novel who presents his particular view of the society in which he lives. He is a seventeen years old mixed-race teenager from an English mother, Margaret, and an Indian father, Haroon. He has a little brother called Amar. His father decides to start to practice yoga exercises and meditation motivated by her British friend, Eva Key, who is interested in oriental philosophy.

One thing is the active differentiation based on race that Karim experiences throughout the novel. Another thing entirely is the latent and implicit generalisation and devaluation of his self that follows Karim, based solely on account of his appearance and what it connotes in the

minds of those he meets. A good example of the enduring effect this discrimination exerts on Karim even after a lifetime of habituation is when he returns to England after six months of anonymity in New York, of neither belonging nor not belonging.

This novel addresses issues of race, ethnicity and social class in postcolonial discourse. Karim's mother is a white British suburbanite like Kureishi's mother. Karim—depicted as an individual who is embarrassed by his ethnicity and social class and, as a result, becomes insensitive to his identity and environment—makes us feel the inevitable crises of multicultural societies.

Karim and Jamila are really close friends and sometimes they have sporadic sexual encounters. He explores sexuality with both sexes and with people from different cultures and he moreover acts in a theatre company looking for his place in the British society while he tries to construct his own identity and life.

From my point of view, the narrator and main character of the novel, Karim, does not feel completely or, at least, mainly Indian. Although he is inevitably in contact with the Indian culture due to his environment, his friends and family, he seems to regard it with the same kind of fascination a tourist can have when travelling to a foreign country.

In the novel, there are some other cultural and racial issues that need to be taken into consideration. It is well known that arranged marriages are a common practice in India. In the case of our novel, parents struggle to accept the hybrid life of their children, raised in between two cultures, but sometimes they try to impose one culture over the other, such as Anwar, who does it by arranging a marriage for his daughter Jamila.

Although the novel's conclusion is consistent with the open-ended approach in fiction found in much modernist literature, there is a central dilemma here. It appears that Kureishi condemns the lack of consensus of values that leads to chaos in relationships. There is an aspect of his mind which hankers for stability and a life shared with others. The narrator suffers much when his father leaves his mother, and Changez's suffering is all too apparent. It appears that if one is selfish and cruel, one can succeed as Charlie does. However, only the consequences of anarchic individualism are condemned; the philosophy itself is endorsed. Kureishi, like his narrator, also defends the freedom of the individual that has led to this barren wasteland.

In the novel, adolescent Karim Amir growing into manhood learns about himself and the world around him and discovers the current, operative rules of family, work, institutions,

society, and culture. The personal and social similarities between 'Cor' (Hanif Kureishi's familiar name) and Karim, however, result in a critical confusion between the author and the character- similarity being mistaken for identity- the novel being read as an autobiography. Reading it as an autobiography, in turn, leads to evaluations of Karim Amir-Hanif Kureishi as man in society, and inevitably negative judgements of both the man and his work.

Through *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi utilizes the novel of manners to help track social changes and critique the norms by which society governs the individual. The novel of manners reveals the kinds of tensions present in society, particularly when multiple cultures collide in the late twentieth century. Manners, as Kureishi points out, are less about good etiquette than they are about the appearance of certain social values which then become coded as moral values. In the late twentieth century, manners become a means by which we mark the superficiality of behavior and ideology vis-à-vis consumerism. Because this vision of morality can be acquired or purchased through goods or money to adapt to a certain set of manners, one need only appear to conform (as with the case of Eleanor and her wealthy friends) in order to be considered an upstanding person. Yet Kureishi reveals that such behaviors are shallow and conceal the hollowness of materialistic existence. He demonstrates that the novel of manners can track change to society and it can criticize the problems of identity and morality that have plagued individuals in a capitalist-oriented culture.

Kureishi thus presents the struggle of these immigrants living in an alien society who strive to resolve their crisis of otherness that is the result of being suspended between two positions – the native culture and the host culture. Karim's world is full of class and racial tension. The behavior of his white girlfriend's racist father indicates clear existence of racism in multicultural Britain. Against a backdrop of class and racial tension, Karim tries to discover who he is, and what he wants while also discovering the true meaning of home and family.

Whatever genre Kureishi might have had in mind while writing Karim's story, *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a novel about a 17 year old boy's struggle to establish his unique identity in the world of the white man. We read Karim Amir's story starting from his teenage years in the suburbs of London, then we cross the Atlantic with him to the U.S and follow him back to London when he is in his early twenties.

His debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) almost singlehandedly led to the advent of the contemporary generic strain of immigrant multiethnic literature that consists of such authors as Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. *The Buddha of Suburbia* almost holistically determines

Kureishi's narrative strategy which contains multiple points of access including the post nationalisation of post colonialism and a suspicion of 'identity' politics.

So, just like Karim, Jamila's love and sexuality are also in between, she is neither this nor that. She is sometimes a heterosexual, sometimes a lesbian. She feels comfortable with both. Karim's bisexuality, his going between making love and fantasizing men and women can also be seen as a significant sign of his hybridity. He cannot decide which part he likes the most. He is actually happy with either sex, as he is content with being half English half Indian. He opts for whatever suits him at a particular moment.

Karim is happy to be half Indian and half English as well as a bisexual, going between girls and boys. But, of course, it is not always easy to be an Indian in England. However, he does not completely belong to England. Only half of him can legitimately claim to be Indian. After he breaks up with Pyke's company in New York, he decides to stay with Charlie for a while, until he makes a decision about his life. Charlie tries to convince him to stay in New York. Karim cannot make up his mind. He is in between staying with Charlie and going back to England. Eventually after witnessing Charlie's 'evening of sadomasochist sexual experience'. Karim and Jamila are not only childhood friends but they are also lovers. They casually make love wherever suitable, even "in public toilets" (52) but only when Jamila initiates it. In sexual matters she is probably as liberated as a white English girl, i.e. Helen or Eleanor, if not more.

His father, who had originally migrated from India to Pakistan, had moved to Britain to study law, but instead married an English woman, and settled down into a disgruntled life. Kureishi, as a youth in an often racist Bromley, found it difficult to remain inconspicuous due to his multiethnic origins—often victimised, but also expected to interact in a native patois instead of his British accent, and distanced racially despite his birth status as a British subject.