Painting Race in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of the Suburbia*

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Abstract

The multicultural context generated cultural diversity but also cultural conflicts. Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia *deals with problems generated by the cultural difference, focusing on the condition of individuals in a multicultural context. Racial hybridity is a prominent theme in Hanif Kureishi's novel,* The Buddha of Suburbia*, as it explores the complex identities of its characters in a multicultural society. Set in the suburbs of London during the 1970s, the novel follows the journey of its mixed-race protagonist, Karim Amir, and his challenges of cultural assimilation and self-discovery. Through Karim's experiences, Kureishi skilfully analyses the concept of racial hybridity and its implications in a society that is increasingly diverse. This paper focuses on the representation of race, identity and home in postcolonial literature, mainly in Hanif Kureishi's* The Buddha of the Suburbia.

Keywords: *race, racism, identity, mimicry, home, hybridity, third space, postcolonialism.*

Introduction

Postcolonial writers bring the migrants, the marginalized people to the centre of their literary works. "The migrant [the man without frontiers], severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community, is forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation […]." (Rushdie, 2002, p. 4) Karim's racial background, for example, serves as a central point of conflict within the novel. His father, Haroon, is an Indian immigrant, while his mother, Margaret, is British. This intercultural marriage sets the stage for Karim's own exploration of his racial identity and the complexities that arise from it. Karim's dual heritage places him at an intersection between two distinct cultures, rendering him both an insider and an outsider in different contexts. He doesn't quite fit in either world, feeling in-between.

Analysing the postcolonial lexicon in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia,* there are several key words and concepts that I chose and analysed from

the point of view of meaning: white, black, racist, home. The reason I chose precisely these words is their presence as structuring metaphors in colonial writings, which suggests the existence of reasons for a conscious association of colour, home and race.

White is the colour of light, of superiority, it symbolizes the colonizer, the supremacy of the dominant culture, the rich and educated people, the superiority of the white race, while *black* is the colour of inferiority, the symbol of the colonized people, uneducated, inferior as race, poor. The binarism of white/non-white asserts a relation of dominance. In *The Buddha of Suburbia,* the word *white* appears under several associations: w*hite painting* on all the walls of their house, the *white man*, when referring to an Englishman; *white faces, white supremacy*; the *white truth*; *white England.* Black father, white mother – children try to renegotiate their mixed identities.

Identity, hybridity, mimicry, and the Third Space

The idea of "hybridisation", which, taking up from Eduard Said's work, describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Similarly, to Bhabha's concept of hybridity, mimicry is a metonymy of presence. In his essay, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, Bhabha (1984, p. 131) is quoting Jacques Lacan about lack in being:

> *The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled — exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.* (Lacan, 1998, p. 99)

Having Soja's (1996) theory as a starting point, "Third spaces are the in-between, or hybrid, spaces, where the first and second spaces work together to generate a new third space" (Oxford references). The characters in Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* are all hybrids in one way or another. They are of mixed race, mixed nationality, or mixed religion. They are also all searching for their own identities.

Racism and identity

Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* is a novel that explores the issue of racism in British society. The novel centers on the experiences of a young, mixed-race man named Karim Amir who is growing up in the London suburb of Willesden in the 1970s. Kureishi challenges traditional ideas about race and identity in a number of ways. Firstly, by having a mixed-race protagonist, the

novel challenges the idea that race is a stable and fixed category. Secondly, the novel challenges the idea that people of different racial groups should be physically segregated from each other. Finally, the novel challenges the idea that there is a hierarchy of races, with some being considered superior to others.

The novel confronts the racism that Karim faces daily, both from his white peers and from his own family. The first generation of immigrants taught their children (the second generation) to believe in the uniqueness of their cultural beliefs and practices, as part of their cultural heritage which they felt threatened.

> *The threat did not come just from racism. It also arose from the fact of migration and settlement in a society very different from the one in which one had roots – in which, for example, religion played a very different role in structuring collective identities. Yet the anti-racisms of both the earlier and the later periods ignored these issues, and with them the significance of Asian ethnicities.* (Modood, 1997, p. 158)

Regarded as black by Pyke, another white theatre director, and yellowish by Changez, he points out to the reader that he is more beige than anything:

> *There were six actors in Pyke's group, three men and three women. Two of us were officially "black" (though truly I was more beige than anything).* (Kureishi, 2009, p. 11)

Beige is in fact an important signifier of biracial identity for Kureishi, as Gilbert Adair observes when he notes the "beige-y spectrum" of Buddha (Kaleta, 1998, p. 36).

The "civilized white" ideology still carries its colonial mission in light of which immigrants are the "absolute other". Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness. As Gilroy argues:

> *The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations. At present, they remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked out by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic – black and white.* (Gilroy, 2007, p. 139)

This transformation led to the feeling of in-betweenness. "In the same manner, Karim is trapped between Indianness and Englishness" (Kara, 2020, p. 190). Karim, caught in-between two cultural selves, finally accepts that, in order to create a self-identity, he has to accept his roots, to reconcile past with present:

> *But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures – the Indians – that in some way these were my people, and that I'd spent my life denying or avoiding that fact. I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd*

> *been colluding with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them. […] So, if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it.* (Kureishi, 2009)

Furthermore, Kureishi addresses the complex relationship between race and culture. Karim, belonging to the second generation of migrants, finds himself trapped between his Indian roots and the culture of the metropolis. The result is a dualistic identity and an identity crisis. Only the moment he accepts his origins he can begin his process of assimilation of the new culture he lives in, finding his Self a sense of belongingness:

> *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, 2009, p. 1)

Home and Identity

In the transnational context, it is very challenging to conceptualize "home". Thereby, "it is not surprising that the literature on transnationalism is sprinkled with spatial metaphors" (Voigt-Graf, 2004, p. 25). Another researcher observes that home can be conceptualized in several ways: home as shelter, home as familiar space/family, home as social relations, home as identity, home as freedom, home as symbolic, idealized place (Garrett, 2011, p. 47).

Home and identity are closely connected in the postcolonial literature, as immigrants are struggling to find their identity in the new culture they are trying to fit in. The novel *Buddha of Suburbia* reveals the character's struggle for identity in a multi-ethnic and multicultural British society. The colonized people could try to copy and assimilate the colonisers' values, but never totally succeed, confirming, and maintaining the superiority of the colonisers.

The colonised people will never manage to escape from the confinement of their skin or from the stigma of the immigrant, the outsider. Rejecting and refusing to fully embrace the colonizer's ethnic and cultural identity, Karim creates a hybrid identity also called the Third Space or hybrid identity.

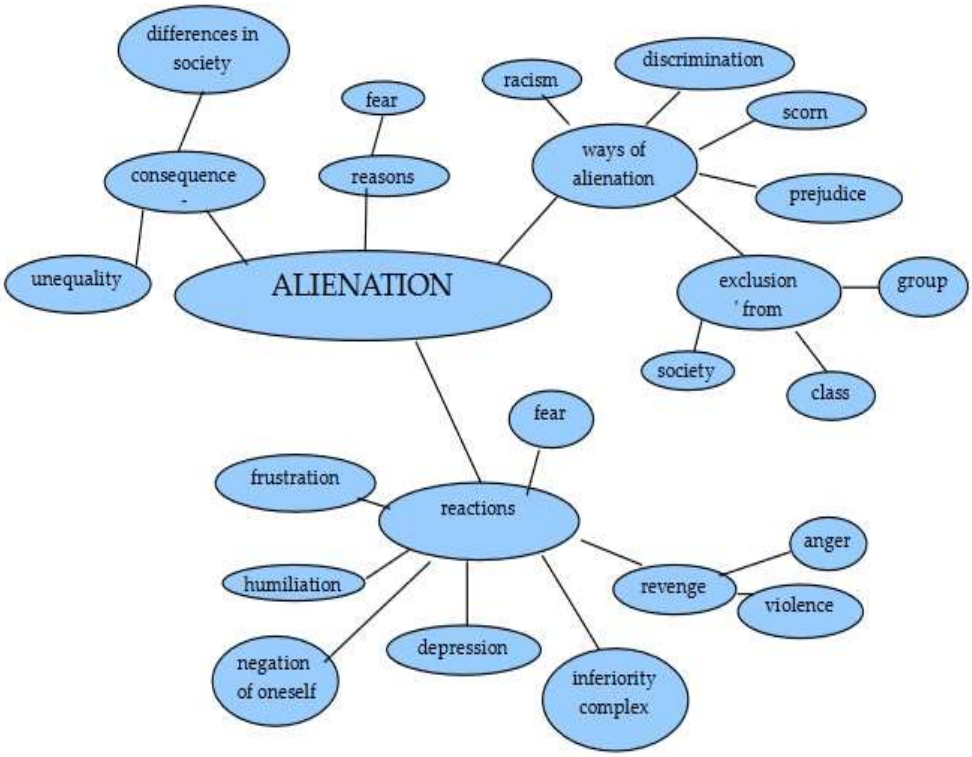
The Indian English scholar and critical theorist Homi Bhabha describes the hybrid identity in terms of a challenge between the colonised and the colonizer's own cultural identity:

> *Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the "pure" and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays*

> *the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination.* (Bhabha, 2004, p. 159)

The hybrid identity helps Kureishi's characters to live and survive in the hybrid homes they try to fit in. Homi Bhabha claims there is a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 4). Karim feels that he is very disorientated. At Anwar's funeral ceremony he felt "ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd been colluding with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 212).

Figure 1.
Frame of alienation



Source: Marita Larsson, Alienation, Belonging and Englishness in Hanif Kureishi´s The Buddha of Suburbia, 2010, p. 6.

By the end of the novel, Karim has reached the awareness of the meaning of life and of belonging to the English home:

> *I could think about the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is. Perhaps in the future I would live more deeply. And so, I sat in the centre of this old city that I loved, which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn't always be that way.* (Kureishi, 2009)

Home, for the postcolonial characters, is made of a new language, new memories, new values and traditions and new friends. Karim's presence in the novel as a narrator and immigrant allows him to build a persuasive picture of immigrants of mixed ethnicity. The colonized people's longing to regain lost home often culminates in the creation of a different version of home, a hybrid home.

Conclusions

Kureishi poses crucial questions about home and belonging, while suggesting, paradoxically, the sheer normally of mixed-race status as an emblem of contemporary Britishness. As Jonathan Sell argues in his book *Metaphor and diaspora in contemporary writing*,

> *Biracial British Asian writers, particularly Kureishi, often react to the traditionally pathologizing attitudes of Western societies towards interracial relationships and, in particular, people of mixed race (...) Kureishi has recalled the paternalistic, inherently racist terms which characterized his postwar British childhood: "caught between two cultures", "Britain's children without a home".* (Sell, 2012, p. 81)

In his novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi highlights an important division between the old and the new generation. Our study of the occurrence of words has foregrounded the definition of this division in terms of colours. The white and black opposition between metropolitan citizens and old immigrants yields to a mix of colours symbolical of the in-between identity assumed by the younger generation of immigrants. In opposition to the first generation of immigrants, who reject the culture of the colonizer and remain strongly attached to their homeland and traditions, the second-generation of immigrants are more willing to integrate themselves into the new society, despite the stigma of immigrants and the racism they feel and encounter around them.

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