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"I am an Englishman born and bred, almost": Karim Amir's (lack of) search for identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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"If people were not writing books about people like me, I'd write one myself,"¹ Hanif Kureishi explains how he came to write his novel in a recent interview. Kureishi emphasises that one of his reasons for writing the novel was that his identity was not represented in art. He corrects this lack of representation through his biracial protagonist in *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). Karim, an artistic "lad" with an English mother and an Indian father, is constantly reminded of his racial background despite his efforts to live his life independently of his multi-ethnic status. Both his private and public lives are affected by racism, prejudice, and stereotypes on a daily basis. Kureishi's teenage protagonist, through whom he discusses the issue of identity formation within an Indian diasporic community living in London, barely reflects on his encounters with racial prejudice. This essay focuses on the moments in which Karim is forced to confront his identity and discusses how his ethnic identity affects his own sense of individuality, worthiness, and belonging. It argues that for Karim, his ethnic identity does not become his self-defining feature as he seems to mostly reject his Indian side because of the relentless racist attacks. The essay begins by discussing Karim's private life in

1. Hanif Kureishi, "There were no books about people like me": Hanif Kureishi on writing *The Buddha of Suburbia*," *The Guardian*, April 25, 2020, <https://amp.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/25/there-were-no-books-about-people-like-me-so-i-wrote-one-myself-hanif-kureishi-on-the-buddha-of-suburbia>, accessed 20 Jan 2022.

terms of his racial identity and then moves on to examine his public life as an actor and the way his background affects his career.

The Buddha of Suburbia, set in the 1970s in the suburbs of London and later in central London, focuses on the struggles of a mixed-race teenager, Karim. He comes from a family of four – his mother Margaret is a white British woman, and his father Haroon is an Indian Muslim man. Be it racial stereotypes, a dysfunctional family, discovering his sexuality or his artistic ambitions, the coming-of-age novel follows Karim as he navigates the uneasy path to adulthood. When his father, supported by Eva, his mistress, becomes a local teacher of yoga and a "spiritual guide" nicknamed "the buddha of suburbia," Karim's family falls apart. As his parents divorce, the teenager moves to London where he tries to follow his dream of becoming a professional actor. Karim encounters different friends on his journey to self-discovery: Jamila, an active mixed-race teenager, Charlie, Eva's son and Karim's muse, friend and occasional lover, and Eleanor, his attractive upper-class girlfriend. Each encounter, as well as the prejudice he faces in his theatrical career and everyday

life, shapes him in a unique way.

“My name is Karim Amir, and I am an English man born and bred, almost.”² The first sentence of *The Buddha of Suburbia* firmly establishes the problem of identity as one of the main themes of the novel. The first-person narrative opens with the protagonist introducing himself using the common English phrase “born and bred,” which comes with the presupposition grounded in racism of what an “Englishman born and bred” may be. Therefore, the novel writes against the stereotypical white Christian man from the very first sentence. The concluding “almost” seems to contradict this notion; it comes as an afterthought – as if Karim only belatedly realises that he is not actually a born and bred Englishman since he does not look like the stereotype and so he feels the need to qualify the statement. The opening sentence thus gives us great insight into how Karim deals with the issue of his hybrid identity. Unlike his friend Jamila, an outspoken anti-racism activist, Karim does not seem to be particularly interested in his heritage unless he is forced to take it into consideration by outside forces. His ethnic identity is but an afterthought to him and yet, it fundamentally affects how the rest of the world sees him.

Karim was born in England, and he has never visited south Asia; nevertheless, he tends to be seen as a foreigner in his own country. He is almost always judged based on the colour of his skin. Even Eva, his father's partner, and Karim's future stepmother, commenting on his outfit, tells him: “Karim Amir, you are so exotic, so original! It's such a contribution! It's so you!”³ Karim enjoys dressing up extravagantly and Eva's words might be taken as a compliment. However, the word “exotic” suggests that she is commenting on Karim's

roots rather than his fashion sense. Eva's friends, too, see Karim and Haroon purely as stereotypes:

‘Why has Eva brought her brown Indian here? Aren't we going to get pissed?’

‘He's going to give us a demonstration of the mystic arts!’

‘And has he got his camel parked outside?’

‘No, he came on a magic carpet.’⁴

Even before Eva's friends get to know that Haroon is there to lead a spiritual lesson on yoga/Buddhism, they already see him as an intruder and a mixture of stereotypes rather than a person. Karim, too, experiences racism regularly by being shouted at: “Get back in yer rickshaw.”⁵ These remarks show how ignorant the English people, who Karim encounters, are towards different cultures: Karim is associated with anything ranging from the Middle to the Far East.

Stuart Hall discusses the merging of diverse cultures and histories when it comes to the migrant experience in England:

[t]he term ‘black’ was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain [...] ‘The Black experience’, as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities, became ‘hegemonic’ over other ethnic/racial identities.⁶

Such homogenising of ethnic/racial identities explains why Karim is sometimes associated with camels and sometimes with rickshaws. He comments on it himself at the beginning of rehearsals for a play he is in: “Two of us were officially ‘black’ (though truly I was more beige than any-

4. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 12.

5. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 67.

6. Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” *ICA 7: Black Film, British Cinema* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1989), 223.

2. Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

3. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 9.

thing).⁷ Even though Karim does not identify as Black, he is aware that politically speaking, he is considered to be Black in Hall's sense of the term. In fact, right before moving to London, Karim notes that "there [in London] were thousands of black people everywhere, so I wouldn't feel exposed."⁸ Karim does not reflect on these subjects, as if his own rejection of his racial background could help the issue of being constantly reduced to it by others, but he is aware of them and notes them.

Even though Karim is aware of falling into the 'Black' category because of his mixed heritage, it does not help him to establish his identity. 'Black' is how the white English population sees him. However, as Hall notes: "What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'."⁹ Karim faces this issue when Pyke, a theatre director who casts him in a play about class, instructs him to find someone 'Black' to base his portrayal of a Black person on. Karim struggles: "I didn't know anyone black, though I'd been at school with a Nigerian."¹⁰ Obviously, Karim knows people who would, for Pyke, fall under the term 'Black,' for example his own family. However, he himself does not consider them to be Black. The irony in this is striking: Karim is assigned a background which is absolutely alien to him and can only relate it to a Nigerian classmate he vaguely remembers. As Hall explains, the term 'Black' encompasses so many different diasporic identities, histories, and ethnicities, that it is rendered but a political category without a base in real people. Therefore, Karim can identify with the category externally – he understands that it is how white English people see him – but not internally – it is not how he defines himself. In fact, Karim would prefer to avoid defining himself and to focus on building an individual, artis-

tic identity.

Karim seems to be only identified as an Englishman when abroad. Tigan explains: Karim is "feeling Indian because of his skin colour, but on the inside he feels like an Englishman."¹¹ When Karim is in New York, he is automatically identified as an Englishman by Americans: "These English are animals."¹² Charlie, who has been living in New York for a while, even accuses Karim of being too English:

'You're not in Beckenham now.'

'I know that.'

'Well then, can't you stop standing there and looking so English?'

'What d'you mean, English?'

'So shocked, so self-righteous and moral, so loveless and incapable of dancing. They are narrow, the English. It is a Kingdom and Prejudice over there. Don't be like that!'¹³

Despite his skin colour and being constantly excluded from the image of "born and bred Englishmen" whilst in England, Karim is accused by Charlie, a white Englishman, of being too English character-wise. The moment Karim leaves England, he becomes English. Nevertheless, when he returns, his Englishness is immediately questioned by a man who is not even English himself: "As the dentist's nurse led me to the dentist's chair and I nodded at him in greeting, he said, in a South African accent, 'Does he speak English?'"¹⁴ This time, the irony is not lost on Karim, who sarcasti-

7. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 167.

8. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 121.

9. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 225.

10. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 170.

11. Adela Daniela Tigan, "The Loss of Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*," *Editura Universitatii din Oradea* 1 (2018): 4, <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=752636>.

12. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 245.

13. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 254.

14. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 258.

question me."²³ However, he feels unable or unwilling to challenge Shadwell and so does not react when his director tells him: "you *are* Mowgli."²⁴

Another issue Karim encounters during the production is Shadwell's insistence on an insulting costume and an 'Indian' accent. When Karim refuses to do the 'Indian' accent, Shadwell tells him: "Karim, you have been cast for authenticity and not for experience."²⁵ Effectively, Shadwell admits that the only reason he cast Karim was because he looked like he imagined Mowgli to look like. Karim is therefore reduced to his looks. The accent issue is the only time in the entire novel when Karim consistently stands by his opinion. He even says that the accent "is a political matter to me."²⁶ As usual, Karim does not reflect on why exactly the accent is a political matter to him, but he makes it clear that he is very uncomfortable with it. However, in the end, he succumbs and does the fake Indian accent.

The reception of the play differs depending on the side of Karim's family. His English mother loves the play. She says that "it was really professional!"²⁷ His mother is completely oblivious to any political connotations because as a white Englishwoman, she can choose to ignore them:

'But you're not an Indian. You've never been to India. You'd get diarrhoea the minute you stepped off that plane [...]'

[...] 'Aren't I part Indian?'

[...] 'Who gave birth to you? You're an Englishman, I'm glad to say.'

'I don't care,' I said. 'I am an actor. It's a job.'

'Don't say that,' she said. 'Be what you are.'²⁸

Karim's mother sees Karim as an Englishman and

23. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 142.

24. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 142, emphasis added.

25. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 147.

26. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 147.

27. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 156.

28. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 232.

even goes as far as to extend English stereotypes to him – she suggests that Karim's stomach would not be able to digest Indian spicy food, a stereotype often associated with white people. She denies his hybrid identity in favour of his English side. However, she is oblivious to the external judgement that Karim faces each day and therefore, she is incapable of understanding why it is not so easy for Karim to 'be what he is.'

Karim's Indian father, on the other hand, disapproves of the play. Haroon says: "An awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White Minstrel!"²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Jamila detests the play as well. She calls it neo-fascist and says: "and it was disgusting, the accent and the shit you had smeared over you. You were just pandering to prejudices. [...] And clichés about Indians. And the accent – my God, how could you do it? I expect you're ashamed."³⁰ Indeed, Karim admits to being ashamed which means he is fully aware of the political implications of his Mowgli. However, the play is the first time when Karim gains recognition and admits that he enjoys the idea of being a pampered actor: "despite the yellow scarf strangling my balls, the brown make-up, and even the accent, I relished being the pivot of the production."³¹ Karim is well-aware of what he is sacrificing, but he is also gaining a lot of privileges.

Perhaps the most telling moment comes when Karim becomes a part of Pyke's production, and he chooses Anwar as a character to represent on stage. Pyke, a famous theatre director, asks his actors to choose a person they know to represent on stage. Karim chooses Anwar, Jamila's father and Haroon's friend who is very religious, marries Jamila off in an arranged marriage,

29. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 157.

30. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 157.

31. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 150.

and wishes to return to his roots. The issue of Karim's portrayal of Anwar seems to be a metaphor for Karim's struggle with identity throughout the book. During Anwar's funeral Karim has a small epiphany that he might be an Indian after all: "But I did feel – looking at these strange creatures now – the Indians – that in some way these were my people, and that I'd spent my life denying or avoiding the fact."³² Yet, Karim despises his father's uselessness when it comes to practical life and his exploitation of women which he associates with his father's background: "I despised him for it now. [...] I no longer wanted to be like him."³³ Karim's rejection of his Indian identity might be partially affected by Karim's association of this identity with his father for whom Karim gradually loses respect as the novel progresses. Nevertheless, this issue seems marginal in comparison to the judgement from society that Karim faces each day.

Therefore, when Karim is told that he should not portray Anwar because it perpetuates white people's superstitions and stereotypes about black people, he stands strongly against this idea – he argues that his portrayal depicts one old Indian man and obviously does not represent all 'black' people. Tracey, his fellow actor, accuses Karim of perpetuating the 'white truth' and Karim is forced to change his character as his argument that "Truth has a higher value"³⁴ falls on deaf ears. It is an incredibly emotional scene because in a way, both Tracey and Karim are right – Anwar's character does reinforce bad racial stereotypes. However, the character of Anwar was not created by a white person – in fact, Anwar is a real person who is being interpreted by another non-white person. Is it Tracey who is in fact perpetuating the 'white truth' as she refuses to accept the authentic pieces of 'her' culture in order for that culture to appear acceptable to white people? Or is Karim the one trying to exploit

his own culture because despite portraying Anwar accurately, he has chosen him for comedic value when he could have chosen an inspirational person such as Jamila? This incident aptly portrays the complexity of the issue of representation and Karim's uneasy search for identity.

Karim, a second-generation migrant in London, comes of age in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and as he leaves his teenage years behind, he sets out on a journey of self-discovery. His mixed-race origins make his search for identity much more complicated – everywhere he goes, people already have an idea of who he is because of the colour of his skin. Karim loves art – music, fashion, cinema, theatre, and parties. In a way, Karim is the perfect actor: slightly self-centred, self-indulgent, hedonistic, and artistic. Karim's search for identity is characterised by the lack of it. Karim never really tries to define himself – perhaps that is why he becomes an actor – a profession that enables him to become someone else, if only for a while. Unlike Jamila, Karim never makes his ethnicity the focus of his life. However, others might do it for him as the roles he is getting are always connected to his ethnicity. The racism that Karim faces and how that interacts with his own sense of self – both as an actor and a private person, and the constant insistence on race can have two outcomes, i.e. Jamila's activism and Karim's rejection of his Indian side – unless for his own benefit. By the end of the book, Karim has not reached the maturity levels needed for the necessary self-reflection of what this might mean. Karim's identity might always be diasporic, caught somewhere in between two old histories.

32. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 212.

33. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 194.

34. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 181.

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