

Hybrid Identities and the Idea of In-betweenness in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Abstract

Hanif Kureishi, in his novels, attempts to depict the hybridized positionalities of the immigrant subjectivities that inevitably experience an in-between perception of fragmented cultural identity as belonging to more than one culture simultaneously. Kureishi is attentive to the factors that effectuate a fast transformation of the traditional notions of identity as fixed, essential and strictly homogenized which aim at recognizing the migrant's experience of belonging and identification as shifting, fragmented and un-monolithic.

Keywords: Hybridity, In-Betweenness, Identity, Culture, Diaspora, Belongingness.

Introduction

Britain in the second half of the 20th Century has experienced an immense cultural transformation which involves the failure of an empire, large scale immigrations from former colonies and a resulting diverse multicultural society that gradually seeks to evolve a new reality of pluralistic cultural formation. 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. Karim Amir, the protagonist of Kureishi's debut novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, internalizes in himself this impulse of change and shifting identification which is always on the move as Stefano Manferlotti beautifully put it: "a whole body that now rests and now runs, now flourishes and now decays, smiles and bleeds" (193).

Aim of the Study

This paper proposes to explore the disparate ways in which Kureishi deliberates a notional presentment of identities, as provisional and free-floating, eternally celebrating the deconstructive presence of hybridity in an in-between space of cultural diversity that point out the essential multivocality of all existence in a tentative, transcultural situatedness, perfectly balancing the local with the global in the cartography of unframable belongingness.

The Main Text

Rather than representing identity in its essentialist denominations, Hanif Kureishi confronts the problematics of conveying identity as a complex thing and explores the countless ways of being "which is socially constructed and therefore always already provisional" in shifting relationships (Moore-Gilbert 128). His novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* celebrates hybridity and glorify it as a "radically deconstructive presence in a world obsessed with clear-cut definitions of cultural or ethnic identity" (Schoene "Herald of Hybridity" 117). Kureishi expressed in one of his interviews that his characters are keen to break the fetters of tradition and cultural fixedness "struggling against an original sense of class that they're trying to throw off in the process of expanding their sense of the self" (Buchanan 112). 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. Kureishi is a strong opponent of the fundamentalist ideologies of the Western culture that seeks to reduce identities and ethnicities to equivocal constants with changeless properties, in terms of

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cultural normativity, and stresses the fluidity of the subjective positions in relation to the cultural configuration that is never authentic or pure, subverting its apparent essentialist exclusivity.

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 centre 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. He must disguise and sell the essentializing stereotypes of cultural and ethnic identities which he believes to be a colonialist construct and which can be reconfigured by non-essentialist performative projections. As Bhabha cogently contends in *The Location of Culture*:

The subject of the discourse of cultural difference is dialogical or transferential in the style of psychoanalysis. It is constituted through the locus of the other which suggests both that the object of identification is ambivalent, and, more significantly, that the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement and projection. (162)

This temporal dislocation and double consciousness is representative of a postcolonial representation which seeks to bridge the gap between 'margin' and 'frontline' is central to Kureishi's migrant position that assumes symbolic reflection of a professional mutator, the "Everyman of the . . . century" (*The Buddha* 141) who carries with himself immense possibilities of transcultural formations as he doesn't accurately fit into any of the given cultural configurations.

Karim, in the novel is thus placed in a borderline culture whereby "cultural differences are not synthesized into a new 'third term' but continue to exist in a hybrid 'third space'" (Thomas 63) as he introduced himself in the very outset of the novel as "an Englishman born and bred, almost . . . a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories . . . it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not that makes me restless and easily bored"(3) Mark Stein argues that it is the impulse of being an "odd mixture", divided between "here and there" that allows him to be "an Englishman with qualification" (116). Karim is aware of his propensities towards Englishness despite his being of mixed origins which "emphasizes the condition of an ambivalent cultural attachment" that brings out the

real significance of "the insider who simultaneously knows the perspective of an outsider" (Stein xiii).

The central theme of Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* 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 theme of hybridization, in the novel, question the very idea of categorization and essentialist representation. Hybridity thus serves "as an assault on the 'Purities' claimed by either centre or margin" (Moore-Gilbert 196). Stuart Hall has argued that identity is not a stable entity and it ambivalently exists as a dialogic space between the self and the other in which identification is determined by the continuous exploration of oneself in relation to others:

The English are racist not because they hate the Blacks but because they don't know who they are without the Blacks. They have to know who they are. . . . They are not Black, they are not Black, they are Indian or Asian, but they are not Europeans and they are not Frogs either and on and on. . . . And there is no identity that is without the dialogic relationship to the other. The other is not outside, but also inside the self, the identity. So identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the other to oneself. ("Ethnicity" 345)

Kureishi, in this novel, celebrates the fluidity of boundaries and the free-floating idea of identity as imagined constructions. Both Bhabha and Hall seek to subvert the essentialist model of identity that is assumed to be produced socially and culturally. Hall resists the determinist reductionism of the essentialist cultural representation and claims that cultural identity is a question of 'becoming' as well as of 'being', in the process the individual subjectivities present themselves onto others. Stuart Hall in his paper "Who Needs Identity?" argues that: "Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (4).

The meaning of cultural identity for Kureishi lies in the interactive process of cultural translation – the multiple ways in which the displaced individuals strive to relocate 'home' in diasporic imagination. Rushdie's idea of cultural negotiation is similar to the concept of 'routes' rather than 'roots' that James Clifford emphasizes in the work *Routes* which proclaims the fluid notion of home and identity signaling the "multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries" (Brah 194). The notion of 'routes' or 'translation' allows for a plurality of perception and heterogeneity of identification because of its emphasis on multiple

locations and journeys. It involves a fluctuating contextualization that Rushdie calls "ambiguous and shifting ground" (*Imaginary Homelands* 15) or Homi Bhabha "liminal space" (*The Location* 5), which bring out the inevitable, non-essentialist conceptualization of diasporic space where cultural hybridity becomes the defining principle. Stuart Hall in his paper "Who Needs Identity" questions the cultural identity of the indisposed diasporas, combining the poststructuralist critical approaches with a philosophy of discursive identity formation which not only address the autonomy of the diasporic individual but also recognizes the possibility of a multicultural negotiative atmosphere where identity becomes a construct in relation to the temporal as well as timeless attachment of the subjective positions to a particular socio-cultural discourse:

I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point or suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as subjects of social discourses and on the other hand, the process which produces subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken': Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to subject positions that discursive practices construct for us. (5-6).

The amalgamated sense of identification often leaves the Diasporas with a feeling utter placelessness and triggers the creation of an in-between third space which is viewed as a productive condition for negotiation and articulation, a liminal space congenially appropriate for cultural translation. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* develops the model of this 'third space' as an act of pure enunciation of cultural fragmentation. He focuses on the spatio-temporal dimensions of cultural analysis which defy the logic of synchronous presentation assumed by the traditional method of cultural evaluation. The evolution of the 'third space' therefore, destroys the symmetrical configuration of cultural formation as fixed and static. It deconstructs the historical identity of cultural identification as homogenizing, unifying and absolute force. For this reason, Bhabha contends that the in-between third space occupied by the diasporic individual is stuffed with creative possibilities: "it is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence" (*The Location* 8). Thus diasporization challenges the territorial form of nation-state and questions the rubrics of nation, nationalism and cultural homogenization as Bhabha expounds in *Nation and Narration*:

The marginal of 'minority' is nor a space of a celebratory or utopian, self-marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity-progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past- that rationalize the authoritarian 'normalizing'

tendencies within culture in the name of national interest or the ethnic prerogative. (Introduction 4)

The diasporic subjects are continually confronted with the problem of recollecting, rewriting and restructuring the fragmented shadows of a dislocated reality which should pilot them into permanence in the narrativization of diasporic sensibilities. Thus attempts are made at reinventing the lost selves in a permeable politics of cultural transaction, in an alien ambience which, by linking the past with present, generates a new reality. The diasporic fiction in the borderline culture Bhabha writes:

. . . demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and the present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such act doesn't merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. (*The Location* 7)

Robert Young in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* claims this notion of hybridity to be an old concept generated in a number of socio-cultural debates in the 19th century which is tyrannously focused on colour as an obvious sign of racial difference only to disentangle the positive items of cultural fusion in an exclusionary dialectics of racism, associating this negatively with a supposed colonial desire, miscegenation and reduction of cultural essentialism:

Hybridity . . . works simultaneously in two ways: 'organically', hegemonizing, creating new spaces, structures, scenes, and 'intentionally' diasporizing, intervening as a form of subversion, translation, transformation . . . Hybridization as creolization involves fusion, the creation of new form, which can then be set against the old form, of which it is partly made up. Hybridity as 'race-less' chaos by contrast, produces no stable form but a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms. (148)

Robert Young regards this hybrid space as an influential weapon of discursivity to de-historicize temporal and territorial essentiality of colonial discourse. But Bhabha, like Fanon argues that hybridity is a necessary condition of coloniality. Cultural identity re-configures itself in this ambivalent space of enunciation in which there is no hierarchical systematization, and the colonial presence registers a permanent split between reality as authentic and authoritative, and textuality as repetition and difference. Neutralizing the claim of culture, Benhabib develops a complex model of dialogic culturality and subverting the strict internal homology of culture, she pleads for a "radical hybridity and polivocality of all culture" and regards them as "multilayered, decentred

and fractured systems of action and significations" (26). Enacting a permeable pattern of culturalism, hybridity then turns into a non-instrumental ground for inverting the exclusionary politics of essentialism:

. . . hybridity turns into a difference-erasing concept, negating the foreignness of the foreigner, the otherness of the other. Indeed, this capacity to 'normalize' cultural difference, and thereby to neutralize the political claims of culture, explains its appeal: it subverts any normatively compelling non-instrumental grounds for preserving cultural differences and rescuing endangered cultural resources. Thus for those political theorists whose skepticism towards the political claims of culture inclines them to frame those claims as requiring citizens of multicultural democracies to choose between their 'rights' and their culture . . . hybridity is the ideal conceptual tool for neutralizing those claims. (Kompridis 322)

Bhabha argues that cultures "are forms of representation" and therefore "have within them a kind of self-alienating limit" ("Interview" 210) which exposes the artificial arbitrariness of cultures as 'constructs' in which "the 'originary' is always open to translation, so it can never be said to have a totalized prior moment of being or meaning- an essence" ("Interview" 210). Bhabha with his model of hybridization demonstrates that the postcolonial immigrant subjectivities have no need to either assimilate completely into the Western culture or to remain outside it. Contrarily, translation allows them to assume an in-between position which rejects the homologous binary oppositions between contraries "in favour of a more conjoined, 'hybridized' explanation of identity in which, as it were, forever the twain shall meet" (Sandhu 142). In this differential mutability, identity is reborn from "the great history of the languages and landscapes of migration and diaspora" (Bhabha *The Location* 235). Bhabha views the border as a site eternally infested with a duality of disproportionate combinations creating in-between contrary identifications and belonging. This intermediate positionality proffers new, complex forms of narrativization disrupted by the possibility of cross-culturation:

. . . living at the border, at the edge, requires a new 'art of the present'. This depends upon embracing the contrary logic of the border and using it to rethink the dominant ways we represent things like, history, identity and community. Borders are important thresholds full of contradictions and ambivalence. They both separate and join different places. They are immediate locations where one contemplates moving beyond the barrier. (McLeod 217)

Karim, The narrator-protagonist of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, is placed in such a borderline culture in the novel in which "cultural differences are

not synthesized in to a new 'third term' but continue to exist in a hybrid 'third space.'" (Thomas 63). The in-between positionality of Karim is made explicit in the very first sentence of the novel which reveals the "inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas" (Gilroy Preface xi) that inform the identity of the diasporans torn between the two facets of cultural transformations.

The prejudiced perception of Karim nourished by the white people leads him to a realization of the multiple presentability of his hybridized self. Shadwell's suggesting of costuming brown cream over his skin implicates a tension that arises in the West to civilize the non-West by making them know themselves in a differential politics of 'otherness' and by preventing the 'other' to identify himself with a particular English identity. Kureishi's dialectics of 'in-betweenness' allows the emergence of a new space which is permeated with the permeable inter-connectedness of cultures through which Karim would maintain different discursive positionalities in the society. As powerfully observed by Berthold Schoene, it emanates "from *in between* the imperialist black vs. white rhetoric of racial segmentation, the unprecedented ambiguity of Karim's difference threatens to permeate the rigid structures of psychic and ideological Anglo-British territorialism" (qtd. in Romanow 88). Karim's performative enunciation of the identity reveals the discursive structure of culture which is constructed through racial signifiers. Karim's free-floating permeability with cultures is more a result of the fact that ethnicity to a large extent is a construct. As Schoene notes: "Karim is only ever true to his own propri-oceptive sense of authenticity. . . . Any prepackaged identity or definitive self-image are rejected as encumbrances obstructive to the free realization of his individuality. . . . The traditional concept of identity has become impractical to Karim" ("Herald of Hybridity" 120). Karim's rejection of a closed method of essentialist discourse inaugurates a new process of identity construction that supports a fluid notion of identity formation and cultural performativities. Karim later invents into himself another fictional character named Tariq which points out to the insignificance of English stereotypical assumptions and reflects the self-refashioning project of Karim who is successful in embracing any kind of cultural modifier that comes in his ways: "I became more energetic and alive as I brushed in new colours and shades. . . . I felt solid myself" (217). Karim knows well that identity like culture is a process and not a product which should be recognized and reinvented, investing new features into it as Karim remarks, "if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it" (212-13). James Procter argues in this connection that "his unstable, hybrid identity is not simply a product of ethnicity (of being Indian and English), but of locality. . . . Karim is a Chameleon . . . he reinvents and repositions himself as black or white, as Asian or Cockney as the situation suits him" (153). In a number of situations in the novel, Kureishi demonstrates the fluid nature of identity in which characters are represented as

'constructs' open to shifting territoriality and reinscription.

Brian Finney, in this context, claims that "the novel presents the pursuit of pleasure as it itself a way of freeing the self from the constraints of a racist, materialist and tradition-bound society" (*English Fiction* 125). His accomplishments and sexual involvements as described in the novel serve to a definitive end that of reconfiguring his sense of self-definition. Karim's interest in "mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs" (Kureishi 15) is essentially an echo of his desire to rebuild himself with the image of his friend Charlie whom he looks for inspiration as incarnating the spirit of a fashionable London life. Karim is not the immediate product of the cultural conflict of the age like his father Haroon who migrated to Britain shortly after the independence and the partition in the 1950s, but is influenced by the later cultural expression of the multiracial Britain in the seventies, the imperial centre of city life marked by multicultural realities and diversification. Brian Finney contends that "if Karim learns anything in the course of this novel it is that seeking to fix one's sense of identity in any one position, whether that is national ethnic, religious or political is self-defeating" (*English Fiction* 126) which leads him to the knowledge that identity is "something we stage" (*English Fiction* 132) and that "national identity is performed not inherent" (*English Fiction* 131). Karim's excessive fluctuation between internalising an exclusive form of Englishness and Indianness can be seen as reflecting this tension of mutable identification which makes him to choose things according to circumstances and selecting that only which suits best in a given context.

Karim, from the very outset is content with his in-between positionality even if he acknowledges his proclivities towards a certain kind of Englishness which he needs to make progress in his life. His nickname 'creamy' as Buchanan suggests, "enable him to pass for something other than a Pakistani" (45) and even in his daily habits Englishness is quite manifest and natural on his part when, on one occasion, he says, "I loved drinking tea and I loved cycling. I would bike to the tea shop in the High street and see what blends they had" (Kureishi 62). But when situation demands, he never hesitates to bring out his authenticated version of Indianness that he has so scrupulously internalised in himself from the second hand sources. During his hey days in the suburbs, he uses his Indianness to achieve things he wants like winning Charlie's love by impressing him with his oriental Indianness. But things change dramatically for him on his arrival in London and he begins to deny his Indianness to be like an Englishman, to accentuate his acceptability in the society. As Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, "For identification, identity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality" (73). Analogously, Karim believes that his identity is never original and that even if he sees himself as an Englishman he realizes that there is another piece of him which he must attend to. At the funeral of his

uncle Anwar a great emotional discovery dawns upon him and he feels that he betrayed an obvious urge of Indianness inside him by not acknowledging his Indian roots:

But I 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 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. Partly I blamed Dad for this. After all, like Anwar, for most of his life he'd never shown any interest in going back to India. . . . So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian part, I would have to create it. (Kureishi 212-213)

The realization of this 'lack' makes him a truly hybrid character. He is one step closer to meet the other missing part of his self: "a strong experience of Indianness that would help him round up the fragments of his de-centred self into a unified whole" (Glabažna 69). In this poignant epiphany, he discovers that he will completely be himself by embracing the hitherto neglected part of Indianness in him, even if he is aware that the gap between him and the Indian culture is indeed unbridgeable. He can never be a complete Englishman as his mother encourages him to be nor can he be a real Indian as Jamila and Changez want him to be. He learns to exist in suspension that is in the 'third space' which "is defined by its location in a unique spatial condition which constitutes it as different from either alternative" (Grossberg 359). "The hybrid", which summarizes Karim's condition, therefore, as Papastergiadis contends, "is not formed out of an excavation and transferral of foreignness into the familiar, but out of this awareness of the untranslatable bits that linger on in translation" (194). Karim, the protagonist of the novel, in a similar manner stands suspended between his notions of Englishness and Indianness. As Paul Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic*: "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 . . . - black and white" (1). The emergence of this newness in cultural identification challenges the traditional configuration of class identity to which Karim rivetingly seeks to belong. The novel thus deals with the in-between problematics of Karim's experience as he "sees himself as consisting of two halves, a conception he introduces in the opening Paragraph. This raises the question of how these two halves interact, how they feed upon each other, and in how far they remain irreconciled to each other" (Stein 121). According to Schoene, Karim, in the novel, rejects the notion of identity as "normative imposition" (121) and seeks to command "ethnic roles like masks" (Stein 142) embracing his hybrid identity which he understand as

“fluid, contingent, multiple and shifting” (McLeod 225) which makes him a true representative of the ‘Third Space’:

A willingness to descend into that alien territory . . . may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based on the exoticism and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting age of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalistic histories of the ‘people’. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves (38-39).

Karim’s chaotic movements throughout the novel can certainly be traced somewhere in between these polarities that challenge the stable notion of identity and “must necessarily dismiss all essentials as illusion” (Glabažna 7). He deliberately moves away from the constraints of categories and presents his identity in its most ambiguous and complex form. His freedom that results from his hybridity allows him ample scope to experiment with a variety of heterogeneous selves defying even the framework of freedom itself.

Conclusion

Hanif Kureishi, in his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, thus attempts to resituate the unbridled voice of the black British in a cosmopolitan context of transcultural representation in which diaspora identities “are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall “Cultural Identity” 276). As Kobena Mercer summatively puts it: “Within the British context, the hybridised accents of black British voices begin to unravel the heteroglossia, the many voicedness of British cultural identity as it is lived, against the centrifugal and centralizing monologism of traditional versions of national identity” (qtd. in Pascual 60). In this dichotomous fragmentation of the cultural space, “the immigrant” as Kureishi feels “is the Everyman of the twentieth century” (*The Buddha* 141) who is the true “representative of the movements and aspirations of millions of people” (Borderline 4) living in this densely diasporising world where hybridity is the rule rather than an explicative exception.

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