

THEATER OF IDENTITY: *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA*

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ABSTRACT

This essay studies the issues of subjectivity and identity in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the debut novel by the British Asian writer Hanif Kureishi. The categories of subjectivity and identity are analyzed as power effects of the predominant discourses of ethnicity, race, class and gender. The analysis is primarily focused on the novel's main character Karim Amir, whose life trajectory it traces and demonstrates how Karim's self-perception is shaped by forces outside the grasp of his will, yet malleable by his extraordinary skill of mimicry, which he practices consciously as a way of finding his place in the white English mainstream society, and unconsciously as a political gesture against the forces of colonialism, neocolonialism and capitalism. Theoretical standpoints from the work of Homi K. Bhabha and Judith Butler are used to reveal Karim and other members of his family as hybrid characters who challenge Cartesian notions of identity and subjectivity.

KEYWORDS

hybridity; migrancy; performance; subjectivity; identity; Hanif Kureishi; British Asian writers; postcolonialism

Many contemporary critics and theorists have taken to task the simplistic assumption that *migrancy* refers to the relocation of a person or a group of people from one socio-political environment to another, or the conditions and experience resulting from it. In the globalized world the term migrancy produces a much wider array of meanings, some of which reach as high as the ontological plane of human existence. Andrew Smith wrote in 2004 that "migrancy becomes the name for the condition of human beings as such, a name for how we exist and understand ourselves."¹ Hanif Kureishi's debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (further referred to as *The Buddha*) tackles this migrant condition of the post-colonial world in a tone of light-hearted matter-of-factness and unrestrained humor. The novel was first published in 1990 but addresses issues of British social, cultural, and political life of the 1970s. What makes the novel a particularly valuable read is the satirical edge with which Kureishi, a child of lower-middle-class Indian-Pakistani migrants, cuts into the ambivalent experience of Britain's South Asian community. On the one hand, Andrew Smith's words from the quote above are strikingly apt for a novel whose main themes are rootlessness and a lack of essence of any kind. On the other hand, it would be very hard to find a single passage in

1. Andrew Smith, "Migrancy, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Literary Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 247.

The Buddha in which its characters really understand themselves. It is as if migrancy, seen as a metaphysical condition of life, obscures and dislocates the very self that is supposed to be the subject of understanding. Kureishi's debut novel thus offers surprising perspectives on the self and raises disquieting questions about identity in the post-colonial world.

The Buddha's narrator and main protagonist, Karim Amir, takes us on a riveting journey through the reality of 1970s Britain as reflected by his confused teenage mind. This reality is teeming with both comic and tragic characters, and the fact that the whole story, or rather, the multiplicity of stories that is *The Buddha*, is focalized through Karim, encourages the reader not only to identify with Karim's picaresque adventures, but also to accept his role as a mirror of the world. That this particular mirror is a "funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories,"² makes *The Buddha* an essential text for anyone with a serious interest in hybridity and its relation to the issues of identity and the self.

Karim begins to tell his story as a 17-year-old boy, bored with his life in a South London suburb, eagerly awaiting a fresh gust of wind that would bring him closer to central London and out of the deadlock of his lower-middle class family, consisting of his Indian father Haroon, English mother Margaret, and younger brother Allie. From the very beginning, Karim does not seem to be particularly interested in his own hybrid heritage, but shows a strong desire to escape the shabbiness of the suburbs, where "people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness" (*BS*, 8). Hanif Kureishi has said in an interview that his characters always try to expand their sense of self, "struggling against an original sense of class that they're trying to throw off."³ In Karim, the struggle against the constraints of his lower-middle-class existence in the dull suburb manifests itself mostly in his restlessness, which pushes him on almost to madness. Karim is always on the move through the city, which, as Stefano Manferlotti puts it, resembles "a whole body that now rests and now runs, now flourishes and now decays, smiles and bleeds."⁴ As a narrator, though, Karim occasionally succeeds in surpassing his teenage unrest and mirror-like superficiality, as in Chapter Two, where he briefly relates his father's history, adding some of his own bitter observations. Karim's father Haroon grew up in a rich upper-middle-class family in Bombay and came to Britain shortly after World War II to study law. He never fulfilled this ambition, though, partly because of the shock of seeing Britain for real, a shock he never quite recovered from. A. Robert Lee describes the Britain that Haroon and his friend Anwar arrived in as "shot through with provincialism, righteous yet out for a sex-and-drugs romp, civil yet edging into a latest racist

2. Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 3. Hereafter cited in text as *BS*.

3. Bradley Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 112.

4. Stefano Manferlotti, "Writers from Elsewhere," in *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996), 193.

and punk violence, and above all, given to exoticising its citizenry of 'colour' even as it fears them and wishes them gone."⁵ In a much-quoted passage from *The Buddha*, Kureishi lets his young narrator state the following:

London, the Old Kent Road, was a freezing shock to both of them. It was wet and foggy; people called you 'Sunny Jim'; there was never enough to eat. . . . [R]ationing was still on. . . . Dad was amazed and heartened by the sight of the British in England, though. He'd never seen the English in poverty, as roadsweepers, dustmen, shopkeepers and barmen. . . . [N]o one had told him that the English didn't wash regularly because the water was so cold—if they had water at all. And when Dad tried to discuss Byron in local pubs no one warned him that not every Englishman could read or that they didn't necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman. (*BS*, 24–25)

Salman Rushdie once said of the England that the immigrants' children were growing up in that "this isn't the England of fair play, tolerance, decency and equality—maybe that place never existed anyway, except in fairy-tales."⁶ Haroon expresses a similar sentiment in *The Buddha* when he deprecates the British for thinking that "they still . . . have an Empire when they don't have two pennies to rub together" (*BS*, 27). Yet somehow, perhaps in compensation for his professional failure in Britain, where he ended up as an underpaid clerk instead of a distinguished lawyer, Haroon still cherishes the preposterous hope that his son Karim will become a doctor. Karim's reply to his father's ambition is an account of the daily reality of the school he attends, where violence and racism rule supreme: "What world was he living in? Every day I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury" (*BS*, 63). Banal as Karim's words may sound, they actually reflect a now well-researched social fact of life of Britain's South Asian youth, namely that "Asian parents' ambitions for their children are generally unrealistic."⁷

Yet ambition becomes one of the key concepts of *The Buddha* after the character of Eva Key, a self-reliant woman from the suburbs, enters the tale. Her powerful presence is soon felt by everyone who falls into the orbit of her influence, including Haroon, who falls in love with her. It is she who comes up with the idea of Haroon impersonating an Indian mystic and who finally manages to snatch him away from his devastated wife. Even though her original goal was to "get all of us to London" (*BS*, 30), she achieves a lot more in the novel, making it into the cream of North London society. She is also the driving force behind Karim's gradual progress from a jobless good-for-nothing to a famous actor. Karim, who never stops feeling ambivalent about Eva's seduction of Haroon and the ensuing break-up of his parents' marriage, is nevertheless very fond of Eva, and feels

5. A. Robert Lee, "Changing the Script: Sex, Lies and Videotapes in Hanif Kureishi, David Dabydeen and Mike Phillips," in *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction*, ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 77.

6. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 134.

7. Muhammad Anwar, *Between Cultures: Continuity and Change in the Lives of Young Asians* (London: Routledge, 1998), 55.

that she is spiring him up from passivity and lethargy to action and self-empowerment. The fictional Eva appears to embody the *Zeitgeist* as her attitudes and confidence are paralleled in real life by the rising star of British politics, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. Exactly to what extent Kureishi himself is complicit with Thatcherite philosophy has been the subject of some critical attention, but given the satirical and picaresque nature of his work, a clear-cut answer is not attainable. A lot, though, can be inferred from the peculiar way the narrator enters this new era of self-reliance and initiative—by way of accepting a lucrative contract for an acting role in a TV soap opera. Though praised by his family for such a major step into fame, Karim is not entirely convinced by his younger brother Allie's admiring comment: "A soap opera, eh? That's class" (*BS*, 268). Karim cannot wholeheartedly identify with Allie's conviction that "we can't pretend we're some kind of shitted-on oppressed people. [So] let's just make the best of ourselves" (*BS*, 268), knowing this to be a very ambiguous and politically complex statement. Making the best of oneself will surely mean different things for people from different social and ethnic backgrounds. There is an ongoing debate in Britain today as to whether the years of Thatcherism helped the working and lower-middle classes realize their potential and repaint the shabby colors of their lives, or whether the political philosophy of independence and self-reliance actually condemned these people to even more misery and dullness. Nowhere has this debate been more heated than in the households of the South Asian migrants, whose position in British society has always been full of contradictions and ambiguities. One way of bettering their lot would be for them to become more visible in the mainstream society, but only on acceptable terms, e.g., by means of appearing in a TV soap opera. At the same time, their participation in the cultural forms and political life of the mainstream society would mean collaboration with a hegemonic system that constantly fails them and does nothing to remove or at least alleviate the hardships they have to face, e.g., racism, prejudice, and violence. That is why not everyone would agree with Allie's statement that "we can't pretend we're some kind of shitted-on oppressed people" (*BS*, 268). Allie feels that his self-understanding as a migrant, albeit a second-generation one, ties him down to a shabby world of inefficiency and self-pity—the main enemies of the Thatcherite political philosophy—and would prefer to become a first-class British citizen, even at the expense of his hybrid ethnic heritage. Karim is instinctively aware of the ambivalence of his brother's conviction, but chooses to ignore such doubts in the pursuit of a better life and fame. For the role in the soap opera, he will be asked to enact the most rigid clichés about Indian identity and sell them convincingly to the consumers.

Not that it would be the first time in the novel that Karim is prepared to sacrifice the complexity of issues related to identity for the sake of the clear-cut cultural stereotypes demanded and perpetrated by the culture industry. By the time we reach the ending of *The Buddha*, Karim will have been an actor impersonating the most stereotypical version of Kipling's *Mowgli*, as

well as his tragicomic relative Changez. Karim's impersonation of Changez as a rather dumb, naïve, and economically irresponsible Asian is both hilarious and cruel, as Changez has actually felt the racist violence of the South London streets. This is what Karim learns from his cousin Jamila about the racist attack on her husband Changez:

Changez had been attacked under a railway bridge. . . . It was a typical South London winter evening—silent, dark, cold, foggy, damp—when this gang jumped out on Changez and called him a Paki, not realizing he was Indian. They planted their feet all over him and started to carve the initials of the National Front into his stomach with a razor blade. . . . The police, who were getting sick of Changez, had suggested that he'd laid down under the railway bridge and inflicted the wound on himself. . . . The National Front were parading through a nearby Asian district. There would be a fascist rally in the Town Hall; Asian shops would be attacked and lives threatened. Local people were scared. We couldn't stop it: we could only march and make our voices heard. (*BS*, 224–25)

When the time comes, Karim does not turn up at the anti-fascist demonstration as instructed by Jamila, choosing his acting career and his white middle-class friends from the theater over his fellow South Asians and their concerns. Yet it does not follow that his loyalties are now firmly defined and fixed on his new, well-to-do companions. His main loyalty lies with acting, which turns out to be the central metaphor of *The Buddha*.

The key role of acting in *The Buddha* becomes apparent in those sections of the novel where Karim partly sets aside his commercial ambitions to make room for a strong experience of Indianness that would help him round up the fragments of his de-centered self into a unified whole. Just as actors put on new personalities and selves, so does Karim realize that “if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it” (*BS*, 213). At the funeral of his uncle Anwar, Karim makes a surprising emotional discovery:

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 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. (*BS*, 212)

Apparently, Karim comes to the conclusion that his sense of incompleteness, the feeling “as if half of me were missing,” is due to the denial of his Indianness. The funeral marks a turning point in Karim's life—he feels that adopting an Indian identity will result in the solidification of his sense of self. But as we read on, two contradictions come to the foreground. Firstly, Karim appropriates his newly acquired sense of Indianness only for his acting career, which basically means yet more “colluding with enemies.” As the critic Bart Moore-Gilbert puts it: “The racial ‘Other’ in Kureishi's novels is often represented as one more niche object of consumption by the liberal centre.”⁸ Karim is more than ready to prostitute himself in order to satisfy the demands of the liberal center, however humiliating that may be for audiences with an

8. Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 138.

Indian background, as is the case with Karim's father, or his cousin Jamila, who both slight him after his *Mowgli* performance: "[I]t was disgusting, the accent and the shit you had smeared over you. You were just pandering to prejudices . . . [a]nd clichés about Indians. And the accent—my God, how could you do it?" (*BS*, 157). Secondly, ethnic identity is by no means represented in *The Buddha* as an essentialist concept. Particularly for British Indians of Karim's generation, that is, of the generation already born in Britain, any essentialist account of Englishness or Indianness does not really make sense.

The question therefore arises: are Karim's *Mowgli* performance and his soap opera contract really indicative of cultural prostitution in the name of Thatcherite opportunism and profiteering? Or is Karim cunningly setting into play something far more complex and unsettling? Critics of Kureishi's work are far from unequivocal in answering these questions. Sometimes they directly contradict each other. Moore-Gilbert contends that Kureishi's novels represent the Other as an object of consumption of the center (see above). Berthold Schoene is convinced of the opposite and reads Kureishi's characters as "a radically deconstructive presence in a world obsessed with clear-cut definitions."⁹ The moral dilemma for Karim is of the same nature as the divide between the two critical voices with a defiant paradox sitting in the very center of it: to sort out his chaotic life and create a more stable sense of self, Karim must embark on an acting career that is engaged with a multiplicity of fluid, imaginary selves. Moreover, in order to succeed and attract audiences, he must impersonate and sell essentialist stereotypes of cultural and ethnic identity that he knows to be partly a construct and product of colonialist discourse, and partly performance. The ultimate problem for the reader is to decide whether *The Buddha* is complicit with colonialist discourse or whether it undermines it.

In *The Location of Culture*, the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha writes:

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.¹⁰

As we can see, for Bhabha, neither colonial discourse nor otherness, let alone the self that internalizes this discourse, are essentialistic, "pure and holistic" categories. Hence, Karim's depthless condition makes him the best possible agent for subversive activity in the postcolonial world, because in Bhabha's opinion, agency "requires a grounding, but it does not require a totalization of these grounds; it requires movement and maneuver but it does not require a temporality of continuity or accumulation; it requires

9. Berthold Schoene, "Herald of Hybridity: The Emancipation of Difference in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1 (April 1998): 117.

10. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 162.

direction and contingent closure but no teleology and holism.”¹¹ That Karim’s subversive activity is undefined and completely unsystematic is a fact that may not be the best ground for anti-colonial politics and resistance, but is (at least according to Bhabha) fully legitimate in a postcolonial world where any kind of subversive activity must necessarily dismiss all essentials as illusions, and utilize instead its own fragmentation, ambivalence, and indeterminism. With acting being the central metaphor of *The Buddha*, it is difficult not to make use of Homi Bhabha’s theory of *mimicry* as well. Bhabha writes:

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. . . . The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing.¹²

Bhabha is convinced that Indians imitating Englishness, whether out of the need to survive or in pursuit of profit, operate in an “area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double.”¹³ In the case of *The Buddha*, we are confronted with a character who is not only well aware of his hybrid ethnic identity (though not very keen on it), but who pushes the boundaries of mimicry one step further, to the point when a paradoxical reversal of perspectives occurs. Were we really to consider Karim as a fictional counterpart of Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, it should immediately strike us that his on-stage impersonations of the most stereotyped forms of Indianness do not mean selling himself or colluding with the enemy, but simply returning the colonial gaze by way of a complete mockery of these colonial clichés. His on-stage excesses hold up a mirror to the downright stupidity of the colonial discourse. To act out Eurocentric stereotypes on stage, as Karim does, would, on Bhabha’s reading, mean to undermine these stereotypes to the point where they simply fall apart. The question whether Karim does so consciously or whether his subversive activity is a by-product of his apparent “colluding with enemies” is irrelevant to Bhabha. When Shadwell, the director of the theatrical adaptation of *The Jungle Book*, in which Karim plays *Mowgli*, commands the reluctant Karim to put on an Indian accent, justifying this order with: “Karim, you have been cast for authenticity” (BS, 147), the reader of *The Buddha* is not surprised at Karim’s taking this authenticity way too far.

Of the same quality is the transformation—brought about by Eva Key—of Karim’s father from a secular British-Indian Muslim into a suburban mystic, lecturing on Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen to middle-class London audiences:

The room was still and silent. Dad went into a silence too, looking straight ahead of him. At first it was a little silence. But on and on it went, becoming a big silence: nothing

11. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 185.

12. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86. Bhabha’s italics.

13. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.

was followed by nothing, which was followed quite soon by more nothing as he sat there, his eyes fixed but full of care. My head started to sweat. Bubbles of laughter rose in my throat. I wondered if he were going to con them and sit there for an hour in silence . . . before putting his car coat on and tramping off back to his wife, having brought the Chislehurst bourgeoisie to an exquisite understanding of their inner emptiness. Would he dare? (*BS*, 35)

The amused tone of the passage, reflecting Karim's awareness of the deep irony of the situation in which his father, an Indian migrant of no social consequence, holds the utmost and devoted attention of London's advertising executives, speaks of exactly the same kind of conscious and coldly calculated dealing in stereotypes that would probably please the theorist Homi Bhabha. Both Karim and his father Haroon utilize different forms of Orientalist stereotypes and serve them to the British public in exchange for cash. Though perhaps primarily motivated by financial gains or visions of fame, they put into a subversive play the whole history of British colonialism, which is what the critic Graham Huggan describes in the following statement:

Minorities are encouraged, in some cases obliged, to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural other. Yet as Kureishi makes clear, such stagings can be seen on one level as parodies of white expectations and, on another, as demonstrations of the performative basis of all identity formation.¹⁴

In performing the most rigid conceptions of the Other to the complacent, unsuspecting audiences, Karim and Haroon reveal these conceptions as performative in nature, with the added value of holding their audiences up to politically potent ridicule.

Judith Butler's influential study *Gender Trouble* provides some interesting insights into the problems of the puzzling relationship between identity and performance. For Butler, Karim's selfless mental state throughout the novel would carry the same politically subversive potential as for Bhabha. Karim's mockery of all kinds of essentials directly anticipates Butler's conviction that "the ontology of substances . . . is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous."¹⁵ The fact that for the most part of *The Buddha* Karim has neither a coherent political program nor a stable sense of self is, on a Butlerian reading, no hindrance to the subversive efficacy of his on-stage antics:

The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a "doer behind the deed," but that the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed.¹⁶

A Butlerian reading of *The Buddha* would also help to give an understanding of Karim's growing sense of self as the novel evolves. Taking up Butler's

14. Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 95.

15. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 34.

16. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 194–95.

argument, we could see that Karim's new self is constructed through a variety of performances and is therefore just another performative category, alongside race and—Butler's chief concern—gender. Karim's ambiguous sexuality also turns this reading into an efficient weapon of destruction of all kinds of clear-cut categories and essentials. Certain passages of *The Buddha* concerned with Karim's sexual desires make it quite clear that Karim actually understands his sexuality as a mutable constellation of groundless performances. Karim does not hesitate to make explicit references to the superficial, free-floating world of pop culture when reflecting on his sexual preferences:

It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls. I liked strong bodies and the backs of boys' necks. I liked being handled by men, their fists pulling me; and I liked objects—the ends of brushes, pens, fingers—up my arse. But I liked cunts and breasts, all of women's softness, long smooth legs and the way women dressed. I felt it would be heart-breaking to have to choose one or the other, like having to decide between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. (BS, 55)

Karim's bisexual excesses are in perfect accordance with Butler's conviction that "if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured."¹⁷ From a Butlerian scrutiny, *The Buddha* will indeed emerge as a novel stressing the performative character of gender and ethnicity—categories that we traditionally consider substantial and immutable.

Nevertheless, it is social class, a category that lies at the foundations of British society and has remained one of the firmest principles of self-identification in Britain, that complicates the reading of all the novel's categories as performative. Class awareness is one of the central issues of *The Buddha* and serves as the common ground for all those readings of the novel that appreciate its contribution to the long-standing tradition of British realist fiction. The critic Susie Thomas, for instance, compares *The Buddha* to Charles Dickens' classic *Great Expectations*, arguing that "[both are] novels of upward mobility and the aspirations of the young narrators provide a critique of social values."¹⁸ Indeed, to focus purely on the performative aspects of Kureishi's novel would be to downplay its socially critical potential. As Susie Thomas writes:

In all Kureishi's work there is an emphasis on how race can affect class and vice versa. Migrants lose status on arrival in England, like Jeeta, a princess, who is seen as just another 'Paki' in a corner shop and looked down on by white Londoners. But Kureishi also shows that upper-class Indians, like Changez, can feel little solidarity with poor immigrants from India, whom they despise for failing to speak English.¹⁹

17. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 192.

18. Susie Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 74.

19. Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi*, 74.

Other critics have noticed different nuances of the novel's treatment of class identity. Unlike Thomas, who aligns *The Buddha* with the Dickensian thread of social criticism, Bart Moore-Gilbert links the novel to post-war British working-class literature:

The Buddha owes something to writers like John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, David Storey and Keith Waterhouse who emerged in the 1950s to explore the shifting contours of class identity within a society which was being reconfigured radically in the aftermath of World War Two. . . . Like many such works, *The Buddha* celebrates the determination of protagonists from various kinds of margins to better themselves socially. Thus, Karim talks ambitiously of "going somewhere" and later celebrates his "social rise." The ambivalence which he sometimes feels, both about the world he is leaving and the one he is entering, recalls similar conflicts in characters like Joe Lampton in Braine's *Room at the Top*.²⁰

The third critical voice worth introducing in connection with *The Buddha's* treatment of class is that of Rita Felski, who has provided by far the most rigorous account of the significance of class in Kureishi's novels. Felski is convinced that class divisions are depicted by Kureishi in *The Buddha* as an undeniable fact of British social reality, but she also notices how Kureishi presents the class divisions as liable to transgressions and permutations brought into play by the cosmopolitanism of postwar British city life:

The Buddha of Suburbia is a story about the permeability of class divisions and the new possibilities of social mobility in postwar Britain. Karim eventually becomes a successful actor, escaping his suburban origins for a bohemian metropolitan world of artists and upper-middle-class intellectuals. But the novel also traces the tenacity and continuing power of class distinctions, as Kureishi's hero is constantly confronted with the differences between his background and that of his friends.²¹

It should be stressed again at this point that Karim's class origins lie in the lower-middle-class suburbs rather than in the working-class ones. Neither Karim nor Rita Felski can see the revolutionary ethos normally associated with the British working class in the unbearable dullness and boredom of the lower-middle-class environment:

Karim and his suburban friends are desperate to escape to London, lured by the fantasy of a glamorous, bohemian metropolitan world. The intellectuals and artists who inhabit that culture have their own fantasy, of an authentic, gritty, working-class existence. But the lower middle class is no one's fantasy and no one's desire; it has no exchange value in the cultural marketplace.²²

This clearly explains Karim's ambition to leave suburban London for the cosmopolitan world of posh artists and intellectuals of central London at all costs, even if it should require the prostitution of his ethnic identity.

All these different views of the problem of class in *The Buddha* point to the lack of agreement among Kureishi's critics on the real significance of

20. Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 111.

21. Rita Felski, "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class," *PMLA* 115, no. 1 (2000): 37.

22. Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 38.

social class in his work. The Butlerian reading of Kureishi's treatment of nearly all essential categories as performative, insightful and productive as it may be, is not without problems, either, because in its defiance of any kind of self-assured, uniform reading, *The Buddha* immediately presents us with a problem following from the theory of the performative. The critic Ruvani Ranasinha has observed that Butler's theory might not, after all, be so smoothly applicable to *The Buddha*:

Butler's performative gender is not synonymous with 'performance' or 'theatre', both of which would assume an actor who initiates its gendered acts. . . . Butler's concept contrasts with Kureishi's representations of the conscious performance of ethnicity, wherein a notion of a residual sense of self behind the performance, however elusive, remains.²³

To put it bluntly, Ranasinha does not see *The Buddha*'s characters as selfless enough to fully embody Butler's theory of the performative, let alone carry out its political potential. Also, in her view, the novel's different characters display varying degrees of subjectivity:

In Kureishi's representation of Haroon's performance there remains, however imaginary and indefinable, a notion of a residual sense of self. In contrast, Karim reveals a more fraught, unstable subjectivity. His fractured, divided, and contradictory sense of self stems from the opposition between societal conceptions of his identity and his self-perception.²⁴

Karim's growing sense of self towards the end of the novel corresponds not only with his acceptance of a role in a TV soap opera (thus potentially turning himself into a pop commodity) but also with the election of Margaret Thatcher as the new Prime Minister. Although Karim's awareness of postcolonial politics is on the increase as well, the survival of his political cutting edge is in question, and Ranasinha is justified in her conclusion that "while the text emphasizes that identities are, to an extent, culturally and politically constructed by stressing the role of performance, it is sceptical of questions of identity being 'resolved' in performance and maps its limitations."²⁵

Nowhere is this point better illustrated than in the very self-centered, self-reliant, and politically committed character of Karim's cousin Jamila. A strong, stubborn woman, hers is an anti-colonial policy of open confrontation, the examples of which Karim serves us on many occasions in *The Buddha*: "Jamila had a PhD in physical retribution. Once a greaser rode past us on an old bicycle and said, as if asking the time, 'Eat shit, Pakis.' Jammie sprinted through the traffic before throwing the bastard off his bike and tugging out some of his hair, like someone weeding an overgrown garden" (*BS*, 53). It is Jamila who rebukes Karim for his *Mowgli* performance and who cannot forgive him his absence from the anti-racist demonstration, where she threw herself into the front line. As a character she is far divorced from the

23. Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002), 69.

24. Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, 71.

25. Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, 63.

novel's concern with the performativity of all essentials, which paradoxically places her at the ethical center of the novel. With her radical politics and clearly defined enemy, her sense of self is much more grounded and coherent than Karim's. All through the novel Karim holds her in high esteem for the efficiency of her anti-racist attitudes and strategies. Yet, Jamila's stable subjectivity notwithstanding, we can clearly see that her solid sense of self is also partly constructed through a repetition of a series of (radical, anti-racist) performances. Jamila thus epitomizes the central (and insoluble) conflict of *The Buddha*—the conflict between the politics of the self and the politics of the lack of thereof. Karim Amir, for his own part, is resolved by the end of the novel “to live more deeply” (BS, 284).

The critic Stella Tillyard contends that in a larger part of *The Buddha*, Kureishi “celebrates the liberation and loss of self that he discovers in the maelstrom of a decayed physical and moral universe.”²⁶ Karim lives during the punk era, when young people are piercing their skin with corroded studs, violence in the streets is an everyday occurrence, and sexual intercourse does not require love or respect. Karim is happily free-floating on the surface of this “decayed universe,” free of all ties or responsibility. However, the ending of *The Buddha*, in which Karim is thinking “about the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is” (BS, 283–84), points in a slightly different direction. Karim's epiphany at the banquet celebrating his contract with the soap opera producers reveals to him that building a more stable sense of self might be beneficial in the pursuit of personal happiness. It is also telling that the novel finishes at this very moment, as the confused, incoherent and de-centered Karim decides to finally ground himself. On the political level, the novel could also not end at a more appropriate moment, which is shortly after Karim's intimation that “[w]e had a small party, and by the end of it everyone in the place seemed to have been told I was going to be on television, and who was going to be the next Prime Minister. It was the latter which made them especially ecstatic” (BS, 282). The small party concludes the novel and launches the era of Margaret Thatcher, during which individual and personal initiative (based on a very strong notion of the self) will be hailed as the supreme value. There will be no more room for Karim's passive mirroring. As the vigorous Eva Key puts it: “We have to empower ourselves. Look at those people who live on sordid housing estates. They expect others—the Government—to do everything for them. They are only half human, because only half active” (BS, 263). Thus the novel, whose characters, according to Ruvani Ravasinha, “remain spectral and specular figures with no strong sense of self,”²⁷ must finish at the dawn of an era that will celebrate and promote a firmly grounded and clearly defined subjectivity over anything else.

26. Stella Tillyard, “A Vision of the Prophet Hanif,” *Times*, March 2, 1995: 39.

27. Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, 18.

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