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# “A Funny Kind of Englishman” Racism and New Identities in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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## **Abstract**

*The Buddha of Suburbia* was Hanif Kureishi's ground-breaking debut novel. Soon after its publication during the 1990s it became a successful prize winning novel that deals with topics such as the immigrant condition within Britain, class and racism. The novel's originality was based on the representation of a series of hybrid characters that were widely unrepresented in British literature at the time, and its untroubled approach towards racism and sex made it very popular. This dissertation will first of all analyze how *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows racism at different degrees within the context of 1970s Britain. At a second level it will analyze how through the representation of new forms of British identity the novel challenges hegemonic discourse. To achieve this, the paper will focus on the evolution of the main character and narrator, Karim, and on a second level, his best friend, Jamila, second generation characters of Asian descent. The novel is acknowledged to be partially autobiographical and the dissertation will also identify how *The Buddha of Suburbia* is influenced by the author's own experiences.

**Keywords:** *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Hanif Kureishi, new identities, new ethnicities, hybridity.

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## Introduction

Representation of British Asian within British culture has gradually increased since the 1980s producing a positive shift in attitudes towards this community. According to Rajinder films like *East is East* (1999) or TV sitcoms like *God Gracious Me* (1996-1998) have attracted a reasonable amount of white British viewers on BBC1. This was a notable fact taking into account that, historically, Asians had been excluded from British cultural representations, and their culture stereotyped as backward and fixed in the colonial past (2011, 60). Hanif Kureishi, who is an English born novelist and play-writer of mixed descent, his mother English, and his father Pakistani, was one of the first writers to represent characters with Asian origins for mainstream audiences in Britain. In doing so, Kureishi included cultural and ethnical hybridity as a characteristic of contemporary British society. Moreover, his work confronted homogeneous perceptions of nationhood and challenged negative stereotypes that the British Asian community are subject to. For Thomas “novels or plays or films change the way people feel or think about others” (2007, 4), and that is exactly what Kureishi achieves giving voice to character types that were clearly underrepresented in British literature at the time. Zadie Smith, in the introduction to the 2015 edition of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, expresses how she perceived the representation of the novel’s protagonist as an exciting novelty in which she could identify herself:

I knew him; I recognized the way class worked in his family, the complex mix of working- and lower-middle-class realities, and all the strange gradations that can exist between these two states. And of course he was one of the ‘new-breed’, like me, like so many kids in our school, although only other mentions of us I’d ever come across before were all of the ‘tragic mulatto’ variety. (2015, VI)

As few other authors of the diaspora, Kureishi’s work, represented an important mirror in which many black youths could recognize themselves, and paved the way for future writers like Zadie Smith. It is of key importance for this dissertation to clarify the political use and meaning of the word “black” and in the novel. Its significance lies in the fact that it is a term used politically to encompass peoples of African, Asian, and Afro-Caribbean origin. Hall believes that the ability of the black diasporas to include very different communities under a same black identity was a defensive reaction against politics of racism implemented by state apparatuses (1997, 52). The term was largely used within anti-racist movements during the 1970s and emerged as a political alliance against different forms of discrimination.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is the title of Hanif Kureishi's ground-breaking and successful prize winning debut novel that deals with topics such as the immigrant condition, class and racism in Britain. The novel's originality and popularity was based on the representation of a series of hybrid characters and its untroubled approach to racism and sex. Due to its success, in 1993, the novel was made into a four episode TV series, for BBC2. The soundtrack was performed by David Bowie. The action is narrated in first person under the main protagonist perspective, the teenager Karim Amir, who like Kureishi is son of a mixed race couple. The novel develops around his life, and that of his family and friends. His Muslim father's interest in Chinese Buddhism and subsequent performances as spiritual leader gives name to the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The novel pictures the maturing or coming-of-age of the protagonist and narrator, therefore, it can be labeled under the genre of the Bildungsroman. Although ethnicity and racism are central to the novel, Karim's main motivation is to move upwardly in the class system, he longs to escape the suburbs, seeing the city centre as a place for social and cultural advancement. Therefore, the novel is divided in two parts that delimit the important transition from "In the Suburbs" to "In the City."

Kureishi wrote *The Buddha of Suburbia* during the late 1980s, a decade considered politically turbulent, among other things, because of the institutionalised discrimination displayed by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. Therefore, the novel can be read as a counter cultural product that resisted "exclusionary Thatcherite assumptions about 'Englishness'" (Daniel and A. Baker 1997, 155) through the representation of a hybrid set of characters. Karim's adventures take place during the 1970s, a time where according to Hall: "the politics of racism really emerged" (1997, 52). This dissertation will first of all analyze how *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows racism at different degrees within the context of 1970s Britain. The novel is acknowledged to be partially autobiographical and the dissertation will also identify how the novel is influenced by the author's own experiences. At a second level it will analyze how through the representation of new forms of British identity the novel challenges hegemonic discourse. This second analysis will be organized at the levels of identity, family and sex. To achieve this, the paper will focus on the evolution of the main character and narrator, Karim, and on a second level, his best friend, Jamila, second generation characters of Asian descent. The analysis will be done following the insights of Stuart Hall and Kureishi himself. The novel was chosen because of its fresh representation of British society as multicultural and hybrid, for its role as a reference for the "new breed", for its denouncement of racism and its importance as a counter cultural product within the black cultural movement.

## **Racism in Britain in the context of the 1970s**

During the nineteenth century, Britain controlled a huge Empire overseas imposing British customs and culture over millions of people. The influence of the British colonial enterprise not only changed the lives of those it colonized, it also changed the lives of those living in Britain. Control over the colonies was not only exerted through force, there was a psychological process attached to it that taught the colonized subject to be inferior to the colonizer, furthermore, it presented their cultural values as uncivilized. Some of these negative representations about the “Other” still survive in the British popular consciousness, and are a source of trauma for those who are ethnically different and are discriminated because of them. Kureishi claims “that colonialism hasn’t come to an end...We’re still thinking about it. Colonialism has entered all our heads, it’s part of our minds. And we have to think about it when we think about what country we want to live in” (MacCabe 2004, 45). The aftermath of World War II produced different waves of immigration that created a considerable racist reaction within British society. Daniel and A. Baker claim that although most Britons did not have the experience of having any contact at all with black British citizens until way after World War II. Their presence could be found in its fiction, through negative stereotypes, since the 1850s (1997, 151). The author’s own experiences with racism, as a son of a Pakistani immigrant, are extensively illustrated through Karim’s eyes. These experiences were something that Kureishi wanted the world to be aware of: “I wanted to tell people about racism. In my teens and early twenties I was very aware of that” (Thomas 2017, 4). Kureishi uses *The Buddha of Suburbia* as a platform to denounce the existing racism within British society during the 70s.

Through his early work, Kureishi’s intention was to expose a heightened awareness of the problem of racism and police compliance towards such attitudes: “I wanted to bring people’s attention to the fact that...you were being chased down the streets by skinheads. And the police would abuse you” (MacCabe 2004, 50). *The Buddha of Suburbia* portrays police as indifferent towards racist attitudes, for example, when they throw a pig’s head through Jamila’s shop window they treat it as “a rival thing” (*BS*, 171) between shops. On another occasion, when Changez, Jamila’s husband, is beaten by a gang related to the National Front, police suggest that the wounds he presented were self-inflicted. Moreover, Karim lets us know that the same National Front is permitted to parade the streets “protected by the police” (*BS*, 56) while threatening local people and Asian businesses. Kuresishi knew well the fear of racist violence: “I lived quite close to where Stephen Lawrence was killed” (MacCabe 2004,

50). The 1993 Stephen Lawrence murder case represented a significant change in the public's perception about racism. Moreover, police misconduct in this case led to substantive change when investigating hate crimes. Through the novel, Kureishi criticises the complicity of the police with racism together with the constant threat of violence it produced.

The representation of the racism which characterized British society in the 1970s, is a crucial aspect in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Throughout the novel Kureishi contests racist stereotypes and shows the violence the black community is subjected to. Karim's first racist experiences start at school, where the environment for a boy or girl who is ethnically different proves to be tough (Salmon 1993, 115). He explains: "I was sick too of being affectionately called Shitface and Curryface...Every day I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury" (*BS*, 63). Kureishi himself describes going through similar racist experiences as a youngster: "I would be gobbled on and beaten up and so on" (MacCabe 2004, 50) and how the prevailing racist rhetoric during the late 1960s, especially against Pakistanis, affected him: "I was desperately embarrassed and afraid of being identified with these loathed aliens. I found it almost impossible to answer questions about where I came from. The word 'Pakistani' had been made into an insult" (Kuresishi 1986, 7). These words illustrate to what extent racism can cause a negative psychological impact upon those who suffer it and end up internalizing the ideology. *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows racism, but it is mainly satirized and treated in a comical fashion. It is not painfully described, and Karim, unlike Kureishi, seems unaffected by it. Karim's indifference could be interpreted as Kureishi's own desire to have displayed a similar indifferent attitude towards racism.

However, *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows that nobody whose ethnicity is different from the white normative, in the 1970s British racist society, is free from suffering racial discrimination, not even Karim, who tries to avoid and ignore it. But there is one situation in particular that affects him. One day when visiting a friend called Helen, Karim is verbally abused by her father, whom he comically refers to as "Hairy Back." When he sees Karim hanging around his house he shouts at him: "We don't want you blackies coming to the house...However many niggers there are, we don't like it. We're with Enoch. If you put one of your black 'ands near my daughter I'll smash it with a 'ammer!" (*BS*, 40), immediately thereafter he lets a big Great Dane on him. A final action, that would have scared anybody, but is comically turned upside down, as the dog seems to like Karim and tries to make love to him, to finally ejaculate over the back of his jacket. It can be argued that the dog's final ejaculation symbolizes the ultimate sense of humiliation that someone in Karim's position suffers after becoming the target of such racist abuse. Furthermore, this shame is expressed by

Karim further on in the novel when he casually spots Hairy Back on the street: “How could he stand there so innocently when he’d abused me? I suddenly felt nauseous with anger and humiliation” (*BS*, 101).

On the other hand, Hairy Back mentions Enoch Powell, a Conservative MP, known for his racist discourse: “Powell’s 1968 ‘River of Blood’ speech...took for granted that being English and being black were fundamentally incompatible” (Daniel and A. Baker 1997, 149). In his discourse Powell represented ethnic minorities as being alien to British identity because of the colour of their skin. Daniel and A. Baker suggest that this racially biased discourse was partially incorporated by the next Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (1997, 149). In the *Rainbow Sign*, Kureishi, mentions how Powell’s discourse fuelled racism against minorities and how he experienced it himself: “Racism gained confidence. People insulted me in the street. Someone in a cafe refused to eat at the same table with me. The parents of a girl I was in love with told her she’d get a bad reputation by going out with darkies” (1986, 6). Hairy Black’s assertion “We’re with Enoch” testifies to what extent official racist discourse is responsible for everyday acts of verbal or physical violence against minorities. The novel shows how Hairy Black displays an indiscriminate racist rhetoric against Karim because he feels legitimized by Powell’s discourse.

Karim is aware of the racism that exists around him, he lets us know, but as with other aspects of life, seems untroubled about it and will mainly avoid thinking too much about it. Moreover, he will not mind performing humiliating roles at the theatre in order to make a career for himself. For Karim, exposing his exoticism as a product to sell to the audience does not pose a problem nor is it shameful. Karim’s acceptance to perform the stereotyped roles he is given at the theatre is a perfect example of his ambivalence towards racist attitudes. For him, his performances will be a necessary step in his quest to leave the suburbs. Because of his looks Karim is chosen to perform the role of Mowgly in an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894). Nowadays, Kipling’s views are questioned because of his imperialist views. His famous poem “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) suggested that white men were morally obliged to rule over the indigenous people of the colonies because they could not do it themselves. Mullen describes him as a “symbol of the racist defence of imperialism” (Mullen 2012, 63). Kureishi’s choice of Kipling’s novel is not accidental: the role of Karim as Mowgly is used to exemplify how people from the Indian subcontinent were identified through stereotypes constructed by colonial discourse, and which still formed part of the 1970s British collective imaginary. This is attested by the director’s words when revealing the role to Karim: “Everyone looks at you, I’m sure, and thinks: an Indian boy, how

exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we'll hear now from him" (*BS*, 141). This comment recalls an episode Kureishi suffered at school, where a teacher "placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud" (Kureishi 1986, 1) and told the rest of the class that he came from India, despite being half Pakistani and having wealthy relatives back in Pakistan. The teacher, just like the director in the novel, ignores Kureishi's real self and stereotypes him like a "little Mowgli" (Kureishi 1986, 1) because of his ethnicity. These types of racist episodes had negative consequences for Kureishi who explained that "from the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed" (Kureishi 1986, 1).

The next deceit Karim has, representing his role as Mowgly, is when it comes to wear his costume. The director considers he must apply a product which will darken his skin tone, to which Karim refers as: "a jar of shit-brown cream" (*BS*, 146). Karim feels uncomfortable about it, but his progress on stage makes him carry on with the play without much thought. This episode recalls blackface minstrelsy, popular in the early 1900s, which was a type of show that was "performed by a troupe of white men blacked up to resemble caricatures of black men" (Mullen 2012, 63). This type of entertainment was based on racist stereotyping. But, his shame is not to end with his costume, as the director, at one point, asks him to perform an Indian accent, which he cannot because his father has not taught him to speak his native language. Yu-cheng argues that the director believes that for Karim to be authentic on stage he must perform the stereotyped representation that is expected from him (1996, 5). Karim resists "It's a political matter to me" (*BS*, 147), but, despite the prejudice, abuse, anger and indifference of the rest of his colleague actors, Karim decides to go on with the show. Karim chooses to ignore the moral implications of performing as Mowgly, but that does not make him exempt from his family and friend's criticism after they attend the show's premiere. His father describes the show as: "an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White Minstrel!" (*BS*, 157). While Jamila, displays her disapproval more crudely: "'no doubt about it, the play is completely neo-fascist'... '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, aren't you?'" (*BS*, 157). It is important to examine the space where this racist abuse takes place, the theatre, "traditionally left-wing and very liberal" (Wheeler 2011, 5), a space which one would think to be free from such representations. Therefore, the novel, through Karim's performance at the theatre, shows up to what extent racism was still systemic in Britain during the 1970s.

In contrast to Karim's indifference towards racism, Jamila, will not hesitate to use all available means, including "physical retribution" (*BS*, 53) if necessary, to defend what she believes to be right. An example of their different reactions towards racism is illustrated by Karim at the beginning of the novel: "If people spat at me I practically thanked them for not making me chew the moss between the paving stones" (*BS*, 53), but Jamila was different. One day someone riding a bike passed them by and said: "'Eat shit, Pakis.' Jammie sprinted through the traffic before throwing the bastard off his bike and tugging out some of his hair" (*BS*, 53). On the other hand, Jamila's family, as owners of a shop in a disadvantaged area of the suburbs are scared. Karim describes how their lives "were pervaded by fear of violence" (*BS*, 56) because of racist harassment. However strong Jamila is, racism does have negative effects on her family, and more specifically on her father's already bad health. After the pig's head incident Anwar starts patrolling the streets: "shouting at white boys, 'Beat me, white boy, if you want to!'" (*BS*, 171). This shows to what extent racism affects those who suffer it, but Jamila is not intimidated, she does not give up, what is more: "She was preparing for the guerrilla war she knew would be necessary when the whites finally turned on the black and Asians" (*BS* 56), Glabazna defines Jamila as "a strong, stubborn woman, hers is an anti-colonial policy of open confrontation" (2010, 75). Following this same idea Rafailovna and Olegnova describe Jamila as "a young furious revolutionary, a kind of fighter for justice" (2015, 424). Jamila, not only confronts racism, she also supports her local community and at one point starts to "work at a Black Women's Centre nearby, where she was researching into racial attacks on women" (*BS*, 182). Therefore, despite continuous racist abuse in her neighbourhood, Jamila, represents resistance against racism. No other character in *The Buddha of Suburbia* displays such strength and commitment against social injustices.

*Buddha of Suburbia* shows us how racism was deeply rooted in post-war British society. Different levels of racism are exposed throughout the novel, one of them is naming, which is considered a first step in colonial discourse. Karim's white uncles refuse to call his father by his Indian name and instead they call him Harry. This is an experience that Kureishi suffered himself as one of the teachers at school refused to call him by his name (Kureishi 1986, 2). Although Karim's uncles cannot be considered to be racist, they do display racist attitudes that are socially learnt and inherited from colonial discourse. On the other hand, we have his little brother, who changes his name from Amar to Allie "to avoid racial trouble" (*BS*, 19), Allie's character represents a case of extreme acculturation as he tries to erase the Pakistani half from his identity. At another level, the novel offers a glance at to what extent racism can psychologically affects those who suffer it through the tragic story of Gene, a

West Indian actor ex-boyfriend of Eleanor, that committed suicide due to the discrimination that surrounded him: “every day, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they thought him a nigger, a slave, a lower being” (BS, 227). Through the exposure of discrimination at different levels, Kureishi, gives awareness of the racism that black communities are subject to and creates a counter cultural product that challenges official racist discourse.

### **New identities: contesting through difference**

As a consequence of racism and discrimination the black diasporas politically organized themselves under the term black as a way to construct new identity politics and as “a site of strategic confrontation” (Hall 1993, 108). *The Buddha of Suburbia* follows such trends, therefore, the power of the novel lies in its representation of the new forms of British identity and how it engages in difference as a valid way to define identity, family or sex within a heterogeneous conception of Britain. The idea of the empowerment of new forms of identity “which engages rather than suppresses difference” (Hall 1996, 466), as a valid option of belonging within British national identity is undoubtedly linked to the work of the Jamaican theorist Stuart Hall. According to Hall we have to break the boundaries between those who belong and those who do not (1997, 48). It is also important to point out that the recognition of the new identities that emerged from the black diaspora as a valid way of perceiving Englishness is inevitable associated with Bhabha’s hybridity concept, which helped “overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favor of the recognition of an empowering hybridity” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000, 108). *The Buddha of Suburbia* gives voice to these new ethnicities embodied by Karim and Jamila. The text depicts these identities as complex and in constant evolution and gives them the agency to claim new spaces of representation that were earlier denied to them.

From the initial moment *The Buddha of Suburbia* connects to Karim’s identity doubts, the reader gets an instant insight into the world of ambivalence and ambiguity teenagers like Karim face during their adolescence. Karim’s hybridity is not static, it is constantly evolving throughout the novel, not only that, it occurs at different levels and is not only delimited by the condition of his mixed race. Hall argues “that identity should not be thought as an already accomplished fact, but as a ‘production,’ which is never complete and always in process” (1994, 222), and that is how Karim’s quest for self symbolizes the perception of identity as being “always in process.” For de Cacqueray “Karim represents a third possibility of being”

(1999, 176), not English, not Indian, but being both at the same time, placed in an in-between position as the outcome of a mixture of two old histories that gives birth to a new ethnicity. Karim is born and raised English, but perceived as an outsider by a racist society that discriminates him because of his ethnicity.

Karim, as stated above, is the protagonist and narrator. Everything is seen under his adolescent point of view, and because of that, the novel constantly deals with his ambivalent feelings towards his mixed identity. This extract, that opens the novel, has been chosen because it is particularly important as nowhere else in the text is this ambivalence clearer. The quotation gives a powerful insight into Karim's troublesome relation in regards to his own self:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost . I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. (BS, 3)

Karim's name gives the first clue to his hybridity, he is English but has a name of Arab origin. Next, he uses irony to define his nationhood, first of all he declares himself to be an Englishman. Declaration which is reinforced with the idiom "born and bred," which means, in Karim's case, born and raised in England, fact that has shaped his identity. Karim is English by birth and has been raised as an Englishman, but, nevertheless, his ambivalence towards his self identification as English is opposed by the final remark "almost," this denotes a certain alienation towards his feelings as an English individual. Next, Karim goes on to describe how others see him: "a funny kind of Englishman," English he is, but considered different from the normative, somebody that can cause laughter as the adjective "funny" implies something to be comical or humorous. On the other hand, he is also seen as a "new breed" constructed from the contact of two old countries, one Britain, the other India; both countries with a colonial past between them. Karim's disaffection arises from the fact that despite being "born and bred" in Britain, he is "not proud of it" because he is identified as an outsider on the grounds of his ethnic heritage (O'Reilly 2009). Three important observations can be made using the above analysis as a reference. First of all, Karim is ambivalent about his feelings as an English individual, second, he identifies himself to belong to a new ethnicity that differs from a homogenized definition of Englishness, and third, he is not proud of it and does not care about what others may think.

The value of *The Buddha of Suburbia* relies on the diversity of its characters and more specifically of its hero and narrator. Karim Amir is an English born teenager, son of an Indian

father and an English mother. In many aspects, his life equals that of his teenage white peers: “I wanted to live always...intensely: mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs” (*BS*, 15), he listens to the same music, eats the same food, takes the same drugs and has a suburban accent when he speaks, but his life is lived differently from that of his white peers because of his Indian roots. The ambivalence that he feels because of his hybridity will not be an impediment for him, what is more, Karim will with no doubt exploit his exoticism to his own profit. Smith argues that “nothing is agonizing to Karim – not race, class or sex – it’s all interesting” (2015, XI). His novelty as a character comes not only from his hybrid heritage, but from his fresh way of approaching life, his untroubled relation to sex, and most of all, that he does not fit with the positive image of the good working immigrant. According to Kureishi “if there is to be a serious attempt to understand present-day Britain with its mix of races and colours...then writing about it has to be complex” (Hall 1997, 60). Therefore, Kureishi’s identity politics transgress homogeneous discourses about identity through the representation of a complex set of characters.

While Karim is the most appealing character because of his untroubled approach to life, Jamila, Karim’s best friend, is without doubt the strongest character of all, therefore, she does not conform to the stereotypical image of Asian woman as passive. Although Jamila is not ethnically hybrid like Karim, she is culturally hybrid. Born from Indian parents in Britain, she challenges the same identity doubts as Karim. Throughout the novel she confronts patriarchy within her family and shows a combative attitude towards racism and abuse from state apparatuses. The encouragement of Miss Cutmore, the librarian next to Jamila’s shop, who “told her she was brilliant” (*BS*, 52) and encouraged her to read authors like “Angela Davis, Baldwin, Malcolm X, Greer, Millet” (*BS*, 95) stimulated the construction of Jamila’s strong sense of self. Therefore, her character symbolizes empowerment through the acquisition of cultural capital. Jamila has a well defined self-conception and lacks the ambivalence other characters of Asian descent suffer because of their hybrid identity. Even though the reader does not have the same insights into Jamila’s character, because the whole story is seen under Karim’s perspective, her strength and determination as an independent woman is sensed throughout Karim’s remarks: “She was forceful and enthusiastic, Jamila. She always seemed to be leaning forward, arguing, persuading” (*BS*, 51). She occupies, in some aspects, an antagonistic position in relation to Karim, because of her balanced sense of self, her strong moral values and her political activism. Through her character Kureishi confronts hegemonic discourse that stereotypes Asian woman as submissive.

The increasingly common representations of characters like that of Karim, that writers like Kureishi started to represent during the 80s, ushered the way into a change of perception of what it meant to be British. Fixed and narrow perceptions about British identity gave place to the acceptance of a more heterogeneous and inclusive “new way of being British” (Kureishi 1986, 50). At the time the novel is set, the interracial marriage of Karim’s parents was uncommon and challenging for its members, “some people didn’t like her marrying a coloured” (*BS*, 44), this is something that Kureishi recalls himself: “My mother was a rather brave woman; she married a Pakistani in the 1950s in a neighbourhood that was white” (Thomas 2007, 13). Karim’s family is at all degrees different, Haroon, the father is a non practising Indian Muslim interested in being a Buddhist spiritual leader, Margaret, the mother is a white British middle-class married to an Indian, and their two sons, Karim and Allie, are as different from one another as they can be. Allie, Karim’s younger brother stays with his mother after his parent’s separation and despises his father for it. On the other hand, there is Karim, who is rather selfish, and chooses to live with his father, despite having abandoned his mother, because he senses his life will be more interesting. According to Hall identity politics have to be thought through new ways of exploring difference within British identity (1997, 48). Karim’s family, with all their differences and gradations, symbolize a new form of hybrid family that represents the new multicultural reality within 1970s Britain.

Whereas Karim’s family does not conform to stereotypes, Jamila’s family does stand for certain clichés associated to Asian families. Her parents are hard-working and are organized around the patriarchal figure that Anwar represents, where the husband is the authority and the wife has a submissive role. Nevertheless, through her parent’s long working shifts at the grocery store Jamila achieves her independence and probably enjoys more freedom than most of other girls of her age. Karim lets us know that: “mainly because of Anwar’s indifference, Jamila got away with things” (*BS*, 64). The problems between Jamila and her parents appear when Jamila’s father, Anwar, arranges her marriage without her consent. It is usual that girls with origins in the Indian subcontinent are arranged, if not forced, to marry a man that they, in many cases, do not know and is usually much older than them. But, nowadays, younger generations of British born and raised Asians, rebel against these traditions (Uddin, 2006). In the novel, for instance, this problem is criticized in a comic tone as Anwar starts a hunger strike in order to persuade her daughter to marry a highly recommended candidate from Bombay, therefore, we can consider that Jamila’s marriage is forced as it is made using emotional blackmail. Kureishi satirizes the situation through the ridicule of Anwar’s intransigent position. “Our way is firm. She must do as I say or I will die.

She will kill me” (*BS*, 60). This obstinate behaviour is sensed to be fuelled by Anwar’s approach to a more conservative view of traditions. Therefore, he expects his daughter to obey his demands on top of her own will because it is what tradition dictates. Kureishi, himself, openly criticizes Islam since he considers its traditions incompatible with life in Britain (MacCabe 2004, 51). The failure of the marriage will suppose a turning point in the evolution of Anwar’s character. After his pathetic hunger strike performance, which ends with Jamila reluctantly marrying Changez, his family will turn their back on him and this will lead him to misery and unhappiness. Anwar’s tragic outcome, due to his obsession of living under strict tradition, can be read in opposition to Karim’s father philosophy: “Only do what you love” (*BS*, 49), which will gradually earn him a happy life. Through Jamila’s parents, and more specifically his father, Anwar, Kureishi criticizes patriarchal authority and the institution of marriage within the Asian community.

Through the protagonists sexuality *The Buddha of Suburbia* gives a further twist to Karim and Jamila’s identity as hybrid. Kureishi, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, challenges hetero sexual practice as the only natural expression for sex. For Sen, Kureishi “threatens the normative heterosexuality that is common to both Pakistanis and the British working class” (2000, 68). Karim and Jamila, in regards to their sexuality, occupy an in-between position, therefore, challenging heteronormative discourse. They are neither heterosexual nor homosexual and shift freely from having sexual relationships with both, men or women, indistinctly. Karim’s ambivalence, towards his sexual preferences, is expressed from the beginning of the novel as something that has come natural to him since he was young: “dad taught me to flirt with everyone I met, girls and boys alike” (*BS*, 7), the reader learns for Karim’s attraction for both sexes: “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...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” (*BS*, 55). Yousaf claims that *The Buddha of Suburbia* “seeks to illustrate the diverse forms of membership of any community” (1996, 15). Karim’s interests match those of any teenager of his age “I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement, action and sexual interest I could find” (*BS*, 3), to satisfy his sexual appetite, Karim puts into play his exoticism, rather than a disadvantage, it serves him to attract possible sexual partners, “men and women want to sleep with him because of his exotic hybridity” (Wheeler 2011, 2). In the social and artistic circles of the sexually liberated 70s that Karim frequents, neither his ethnicity, nor his bisexuality, seem to pose a problem for him. Kureishi is uninterested in representing normative characters, his aim is to represent a

mixture of characters as varied as possible, all different from each other. In doing so, the author, sets into question fixed notions about ethnicity and sexuality.

The performance of a woman as the most powerful and balanced character in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is not surprising, as Kureishi himself considers feminism to be one of the most important social movements after WWII because of its role as one of the main catalysts for change in the West (Thomas 2007, 7). In *The Buddha of Suburbia* what we know about Jamila is given through Karim's perception, it is from Karim that we learn that she sleeps with other women. She is defined by Karim as sexually liberated. According to Karim, as a teen, Jamila "got this thing about wanting to be Simone de Beauvoir, which is when she and I started having sex" (BS, 52), both Jamila and Karim enjoyed random sex freely, without complications or any type of commitment. Jamila's character is so strong that Karim feels intimidated by her self-confidence: "I was beginning to see how scared I was of her, of her 'sexuality', as they called fucking these days; of the power of her feelings and the strength of her opinions" (BS, 195). She is very sure of herself, and unlike Karim, knows exactly who she is and what she wants in life, "her sense of self is much more grounded and coherent than Karim's" (Glabazna 2010, 76). In *The Buddha of Suburbia* the role of an Asian obedient wife, that commonly possesses the less authority, is turned upside down. When Jamila's character is mentioned by Karim, it is always to remind us about her mental or physical strength "She was so powerful, Jammie, so in control and certain what to do about everything" (BS, 55). Jamila's character represents resistance against the hegemonic discourse that has historically placed certain identities over others in Western societies. *The Buddha of Suburbia* challenges the privileged dichotomies of men over woman, white over non-white and heteronormative over non-heteronormative, stands up to traditions and patriarchy within the Asian community, challenges the stereotype of the passive Asian woman and explores new forms of British Asian identity through the empowerment of Jamila's character.

The last scene of the *Buddha of Suburbia*, which is a family reunion at a restaurant to celebrate Karim's new job in a sitcom, symbolizes Kureishi's view of Britain and more specifically London as inherently multicultural. The scene embodies Karim's final self-acceptance as a hybrid individual blended from "two old histories" (BS, 1). According to Dobrinescu "Karim's maturity has a clear cultural dimension as he comes closer to discovering his real self by learning to negotiate and reconcile his two identities" (2009, 3). All of Karim's relatives and friends, with all their diversity and gradations, conform different versions of what it means to be British, all of them, valid within Kureishi's imagined multicultural and hybrid vision of Britain (Fielding 2011, 210), and answers the question

posed by himself, at the beginning of the dissertation, of “what country we want to live in?” (MacCabe 2004, 45). Karim moves from the margins to the centre, from the suburbs to the centre of London, from ambivalence to acceptance of his difference, and becomes a representative of the new ethnicities that engage in difference to define their identity.

## **Conclusion**

Research has proven that *The Buddha of Suburbia* is aligned with the black identity politics that emerged during the 1970s as a way to resist discrimination in Britain. Racism deeply affected Kureishi as a young man, as a consequence he was determined that he wanted to expose awareness about it, therefore, the novel can be considered a platform from which he showed discrimination towards the black community. Its main heroes, Karim and Jamila, do not let racism to be a destabilizing element in their lives. Karim is a character that does not fit categorizations; he is a representative, as Kureishi himself, of the new ethnicities that emerged after WWII. On the other hand, Jamila, symbolizes the struggle of the anti-racist and woman’s liberation movements, and more specifically resistance against patriarchy within the Asian community. Kureishi’s set of complex characters explore new forms of British identity while simultaneously challenging racist stereotypes and fixed conceptions about identity.

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