

Redefining the  
relationship between  
colonial margin and  
metropolitan center in  
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Societies are formed by a mixture of several cultures and people from different countries, as well as cultural backgrounds. But in some cases, the unity of society gives way to culturally hybrid societies that causes identity problem and creates ambivalence and in-betweenness in the inner and social life of individuals. This hybridity discusses the rising of new transcultural forms occurred by the impact of colonization and can even be associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who states that ambivalence gives a description of the complex structure of attraction and repulsion. Therefore, the relationship between colonizer and colonized is characterized by the concept of hybridity. Moreover, it is defined as ambivalent since the colonized subject can never completely resist to the colonizer.

As multiculturalism is not a new phenomenon in European history, neither are its literary and artistic manifestations, where the suburban and metropolitan novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi, lies in escaping the limitations of postcolonial ethnicity dictated by the immigrant condition. In this novel, ambivalence and in-betweenness of the hybrid identities in multicultural Britain is represented through the main character Karim where his cultural mixture in terms of social, ethnic and even national identity seems to be mistreated and even swallowed by his pride to find somewhere he can belong to. Thus, in what ways has Hanif Kureishi sought to redefine the relationship between the colonial margin and the metropolitan center?

Firstly, what makes the novel so valuable is Karim portrayed as a middle-class Indian-Pakistani boy who cuts into the ambivalent experience of Britain's South Asian community. From the beginning, Karim does not give

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the impression to be particularly interested in his own heritage, but shows a strong desire to escape the shabbiness of the suburbs, where “ people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness” (Kureishi 1999, p. 8) The novel is presented from a raced perspective through Karim’s consciousness, while being the son a British woman called Margaret and an Indian father called Haroon. He is not only together with his father’s Indian friends, Anwar, Jeeta and their daughter Jamila, Karim’s best friend and sexual partner but also with his unhappy and alcoholic British relatives Jean and Ted. In addition, it is important to mention that it is full of humorous depictions of racial identity confused or in some way multiple (Indians who want to be more English and English people who find satisfaction in the rejection of their ethno-centric British inheritance).

From the beginning of the novel we can depict Karim’s hybrid identity that causes ambivalence in his attitudes towards life and people, when he introduces himself at the very beginning of the novel: “ 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.” (p. 1) Through this statement he gives the first clue to the reader: his sense of incompleteness that escorts him through the whole story. Karim’s subversive actions are undefined and completely unsystematic. In fact, according to Glabazña (2010, p. 68), this is a fact that may not be the bet ground for anti-colonial politics and resistance, but is 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”.

Regarding his life in Britain, we can distinguish two opposite parts as center and margin: metropolitan and suburban together with multiple conceptions of England. Therefore, the image of the immigrant first trying to assimilate and fulfil the expectations of the host country and then rejecting this role to look for his origins is, according to Karim, the problem of “ The immigrant condition” (p. 64) and the creation of identity on the margins of society. As his world is full of class and racial tension, he is caught in a society that either patronizes or accepts the other, provided that the other responds to mainstream assumptions and to commercial notions of exoticism. For Karim the multicultural freedom offered by life in the city is based on the possibility of undoing stereotypes; however, it involves the humiliation of being labelled as “ ethnic” or the minority. Nevertheless, over the course of the novel Karim learns to suffer and tolerate any indignity that might help him succeed and escape suburbia. For instance, as an actor he states that he wanted the part, whatever part it was. (p. 139) On the contrary of what it may seem, Karim does not want to conform but to be different, because he craves adventure and cannot wait to be elsewhere.

When he left his suburban world, he became aware of the dangers of entering a strange territory, especially after meeting Eleanor, he decided to move up the social ladder by losing not his Indian accent, like his father did, but his suburban one. (Zas Rey 2004, p. 99) Lured by the fantasy of glamorous, bohemian metropolitan world, Karim – as well as his suburban friends – are desperate to escape to the city in search of the posh artists’ world of central London, at all costs.

As a matter of fact, he exhibited how difficult it is for a person of color to elude the prejudice imposed on himself, when Shadwell (the theater director) with his cultural racism sees Karim as the perfect actor to portray Mowgli in The Jungle Book theater production. As a consequence, Karim is appalled by the idea and tempted to come back to the suburbs where he belongs, yet the offensive implications of playing such undignified role disappeared soon. This role is a clear attempt for Karim to appear 'more Indian' on the stage with his accent and covered "in the brown muck" (p. 146) even asking him to hiss like the snake who saves Mowgli's life. In this way, Kureishi reflects the cultural racism of white society. The director himself claims that he has been casted for authenticity not for experience (p. 147). Both Shadwell's caricature of an Indian accent and his choice to stage such a product of colonialism as Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book, as well as the misconception of Asians as caricatured, "exploited immigrants constitute ordeals which Karim has to undergo in order to leave the suburbs and improve his career and life". (Zas Rey 2004, p. 100) But there is another interesting aspect behind this: Karim was the one who chose the artistic career to avoid the destiny of half-cast in England (Kureishi 1999, p. 141). Notwithstanding, it is quite ironic that Karim gains respect and a new identity through being an actor of Asian stereotypes in the metropolis.

Following Kureishi's line of thought where he plays with this notion of representation, Pyke (another theater director) asked the group of actors – which Karim belonged to – to "concentrate on the way [they] think [their] position in society has been fixed" (pp. 168-169) In this way, Pyke shows us

how he understands the world: divided into binary groups (oppressors-oppressed, master-slave, colonised-coloniser).

On the other hand, Karim and his father enjoy the benefits of being different, because Haroon managed to achieve success by selling exotic ideas of the spirituality and wisdom of the East to the “disenchanted British middle-class”. (Zas rey 2004, p. 74) Consequently, even Karim is surprised when Haroon hisses his s’s and exaggerated his Indian accent, that he tried to suppress for so long, “trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous” (Kureishi 1999, p. 21) In this way, Karim and his father utilize different forms of orientalist stereotypes and server them to the British public in exchange for cash, at first, but putting into a subversive play this whole history of British colonialism. Hence, Graham Huggan’s opinion regarding this issue becomes quite relevant: “Minorities are encouraged, in some cases obliged, to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural other” (Oğuz 2013, p. 1177)

Moreover, the novel is full of other examples where the characters play with this in-betweenness. To mention some: when Haroon suggested that his English wife should wear a sari to be less English and ‘more acceptable’; when Ted anglicized Haroon by naming him ‘Harry’; when Karim or ‘Creamy’ renamed Jean and Ted to ‘gin and tonic’ (the typical and well-known British colonial drink).

Briefly, as Kureishi makes clear, the characters decide to fraudulently – or not, in some cases – exploit the obsolete oriental colonial conceptions of the

East by adopting a false identity (as the Buddha of the suburbs), and these performances can be seen on one level as parodies of white expectations and, on another, as demonstrations of the performative basis of all identity formation and process.

Finally, when Karim decides to return from New York – where he experienced the true actor's life and fame, as well as a sense of belonging because of Manhattan's open space liberates the individual from his imposed artificial background – there is a very specific moment where he refers to his next role in a soap opera that “ would tangle the latest contemporary issues: [...] racist attacks, the stuff that people lived through but never got on TV” (p. 259) Thus, it is quite intriguing that even after he managed to become more famous and recognized by his previous roles as an actor, he still had to perform as an Indian shopkeeper that would go through these ‘ contemporary issues’.

After four years of questioning where he belongs, Karim manages to locate himself in relation to ‘ here’ and ‘ there’ by turning his own created ethnic identity to his advantage. His quest for self-identity manages to fuse the two sides (English and Indian, city and suburbs) which together constitute his essence. But the notions of whiteness as “ holly and blackness [as] satanic” (Oğuz 2013, p. 1282) is the pure result of hybrid identities – biologically and culturally – that turned out to show in this story the permeability of class divisions and the new possibilities of social mobility in postwar Britain.

Kureishi managed to redefine the relationship between the colonial margin and the metropolitan center in this novel because not only it traces the

tenacity and power of class distinctions, as the main character is constantly confronted with the differences between his roots; but also, it presents the possibility of undoing stereotypes – for instance, in New York – to conform an ambiguity which stresses the value of identity and location.

#### Sources

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