Intercultural Voices In Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha Of Suburbia*

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Abstract

The contemporary world can no longer be seen as culturally homogeneous. In the nineteenth and even the beginning of the twentieth centuries, national homogeneity, if only illusory, has given way to a multicultural context in which the problem of the conflict between cultures and the issue of intercultural communication turn out to be of paramount importance. Under the circumstances, even the notions of "mainstream" and "national" previously used to characterise fiction seem to be no longer fully valid. The contemporary novel becomes sensitive to the various cultural voices at work in the contemporary society, trying to see beyond the cultural stereotype and do away with prejudice. By drawing on the contemporary British context, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* looks into the various problems generated by the cultural difference and attempts to offer a solution to the crisis of intercultural communication characteristic of the contemporary world.

Keywords: contemporary fiction, intercultural communication, cultural difference, artistic identity

The contemporary world can no longer "be spoken of and understood in terms of homogeneity and monoculture"[1]. Contemporary British society has witnessed in the past few decades a process of both cultural condensation and diversification. Nineteenth and early twentieth century national homogeneity, if only illusory, has given way to a multicultural context in which the problem of the cultural conflict and the issue of intercultural communication turn out to be of paramount importance. The nineteenth-century explosion of the British Empire gave way to an opposite, yet equally powerful implosion, as contemporary British society was confronted with and affected by the pressure the periphery exercises on the centre. Consequently, fiction previously designated as "mainstream" and "national"[2] gave way to novels that draw their energy from expressing the various cultural voices at work in contemporary society. Moreover, contemporary fiction attempts to suggest solutions to the problem of cultural conflict, i.e. to turn itself into a form of intercultural communication.

By drawing on the contemporary British context, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* looks into the different problems generated by the cultural difference, rethinking at the same time the status of literature in the contemporary world. Fiction is deemed able to see and move beyond cultural stereotypes and do away with prejudice, thus constituting itself into a possible solution to the crisis of intercultural communication.

[1] Lars Ole Sauerberg, *Intercultural Voices in Contemporary British Fiction. The Implosion of Empire* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 5.
[2] See Sauerberg, 2.

Kureishi's novel brings to the fore aspects related to the contemporary world, focusing on the condition of the modern individual in a multicultural context. The premise from which the novel starts is that the essentialist view of culture, in force in the nineteenth and even the first decades of the twentieth century, gives or should give way to a non-essentialist view according to which culture represents "a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations."[3] The heterogeneity of the contemporary society, a constant source of cultural conflict, implies identifying ways, artistic included, to deconstruct the cultural stereotypes and to give up the clichés associated with them, which in most cases contribute to the blocking of intercultural communication.

Kureishi's novel focuses on otherness and cultural difference, trying to make marginal voices audible, yet not obtrusive. The novel plays on the margin-centre relationship, the conflict between the two apparently irreconcilable opposites being potentially solved by a plunge into the essentials of human nature with a view to revealing general aspects related to identity and identity representation. Consequently, Kureishi's novel, like most contemporary fiction, attempts to strike an artistic balance between modernism and postmodernism, between the modernist belief in the meaningfulness of the self and the postmodernist refusal of final meanings.

The archetypal figure of the contemporary society that Kureishi's fictional world mirrors is the migrant, the individual intent on crossing frontiers, both visible and invisible. "The migrant [the man without frontiers], severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community, is forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation; but many migrants, faced with the sheer existential difficulty of making such changes, and also, often, with the sheer alienness and defensive hostility of the peoples amongst whom they find themselves, retreat from such questions behind the walls of the old culture they have brought along and left behind."[4] Kureishi's characters, much like the contemporary migrant, either learn to manage difference, to cross the invisible frontiers and adapt to the new cultural environment that they sometimes experience as hostile[5] or, on the contrary, tend to put up even thicker walls behind which they feel protected against the threat of the new culture.

Karim Amir, the protagonist of Kureishi's novel, displays many of the features of the contemporary migrant. Born to an Indian father and an English mother, he has lived his Indian-English life in the South London suburbs, which makes him perceived, just like his father, as the embodiment of the commuting suburbanite whose main ambitions revolve around migrating from margin to centre. Karim defines himself as a cultural product, his identity being nothing but the nodal point of various cultural influences. He oscillates between his inherited, traditional, cultural identity, full of stereotypes and

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[3] Adrian, Holliday, Martin Hyde, John Kullman, *Intercultural Communication. An Advanced Resource Book* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

[4] Salman Rushdie, "Step Across This Line" in *Step Across This Line. Collected Non-fiction 1992-2002*. (London: Vintage, 2002), 415.

[5] See Riall W. Nolan, *Communicating and Adapting Across Cultures. Living and Working in the Global Village* (Connecticut, London: Bergin & Garvin Westport, 1999), viii.

clichés, and his new creative cultural identity, mainly defined by cultural change.[6] Karim's experiences contribute furthermore to his realizing that all individuals, far from being unitary, represent the locus of cultural tensions. 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.

> 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 of London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (Kureishi 3)

What Karim, his father or people of their kind seek is to recover a sense of belonging, of coming to terms with their marginal status and thus be part of the society they live in rather than be accepted as outsiders. What Karim finally manages to do is to translate himself into the new culture, by forgetting about being either here or there. For Kureishi's characters, and especially for Karim, the most important thing is to recover the sense of belonging both here and there, of no longer being outsiders. "We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all the bitterness and resentment, too" (Kureishi 212).

For Karim to bring together his tormented cultural selves and to define his identity, it becomes imperative that he should learn to reconcile past and present, to accept that his past is a compulsory ingredient of his identity. Yet, as the case is, if he has no past to rely on, since he had never been to India, Karim has to invent and recreate his past to be able to revisit it.

"But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures – 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. […] So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it" (Kureishi 212-3).

Karim Amir's journey from the suburbs to the centre of London, from the periphery to the core of the British Empire, whose shadow is still identifiable in the disintegrating Victorian houses, represents the beginning of Karim's initiation process. The trip to central London symbolically stands for Karim's journey into his yet unknown self and the essentials of human nature, on the one hand, into the contemporary society, on the other.

By moving from the suburbs to London, Karim becomes aware of the fact that the encounter with the Other is always marred by prejudice and that the tendency to otherize, i.e. "to over-generalize, stereotype and reduce the people we communicate with to something different or less than what they are"[7], is neither a characteristic of the centre nor of the margin, but rather intrinsic to human nature. Therefore, Karim understands that

[6] Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 19.
[7] Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, xv.

the communication with the Other should necessarily imply the art of negotiating one's own discourse and feelings of culture.

Apart from the identity related issues Kureishi's novel deals with, *The Buddha of Suburbia* might lure readers into believing that it has a highly politicized content as it approaches many of the much discussed problems of the past few decades – class, sex, racial or religious conflicts. It also seems to comment on the emerging radical movements, such as vociferous feminism, sexism, racism or terrorism, and their inevitable negative consequences.

Jamila, Karim's friend, is inflamed by and fully supports Angela Davis' ideas, which justifies her preparing for "the guerrilla war she knew would be necessary when the whites finally turned on the blacks and Asians and tried to force us into gas chambers or push us into leaky boats" (Kureishi 56).

Karim's father is also a victim of prejudice. Although he had earned his living by working for the British Government as a Civil Service clerk since he first came to Britain in 1950, Haroon cannot be talked out of believing that " 'The whites will never promote us,'[…] 'Not an Indian while there is a white man left on earth. […] they still think they have an Empire when they don't have two pennies to rub together'" (Kureishi 27). Instead of freeing himself of bitterness and resentment, Haroon himself makes the mistake of otherizing the whites by considering himself "superior to the British: this was the legacy of his Indian childhood – political anger turning into scorn and contempt" (Kureishi 250).

Yet *The Buddha of Suburbia*, like much of the contemporary British and American fiction, definitely "moves beyond the politics of 'race'. In its treatment of racism it is witty and dismissive, deploying weapons of ridicule and derision."[8] The politically incorrect terms, such as 'Paki', or 'blackies', or 'nigs', or 'wogs', are turned into and treated like clichés to go with equally "laughable stereotypes, a racist imaginary existing nowhere but in the minds of bigots."[9]

Cultural clichés and stereotypes are also associated with England and America, Kureishi demonstrating thus that stereotyping, prejudice, and otherizing are inextricably linked and they are more often than not to be held responsible for the blocking of communication between cultures. For Charlie, the son of Haroon's mistress, the 'rock star' seeking his fortune and fame in America, Britain is nothing but "a fucking swamp of prejudice, class confusion." He even advises Karim, "born and bred an Englishman, almost", to behave less English, less "[…] shocked, […] self-righteous and moral, […] loveless and incapable of dancing" (Kureishi 254). Charlie either uses already existing stereotypes or creates new ones. However, if Charlie cannot get the fame he sought as a rock star in America, he at least can make some money by selling his most abhorrent property, his Englishness.

> I walked down the street, laughing, amused that here in America, Charlie had acquired the cockney accent when my first memory of him at school was that he'd cried after being mocked by the stinking gypsy kids for talking so posh. […] Now he was going in for cockney rhyming slang, too.

[8] Morrison, 183.
[9] Morrison, 184.

> […]He was selling Englishness, and getting a lot of money for it" (Kureishi 247).

The same tendency can be identified with Haroon and his friend Anwar who, under the pressure of the cultural environment that they perceive as hostile, react by closing ranks and exaggerating aspects of their inherited cultural identity[10]. They withdraw furthermore behind the thick walls of stereotypes. "Maybe there were similarities between what was happening to Dad, with his discovery of Eastern philosophy, and Anwar's last stand [behaving like a Muslim]. Perhaps it was the immigrant condition living itself out through them. For years they were both happy to live like Englishmen. [….] Now, as they aged and seemed settled there, Anwar and Dad appeared to be returning internally to India, or at least to be resisting the English here" (Kureishi 64).

The insignificant Haroon Amir, the hardly noticeable Civil Service clerk, commuting day in, day out from the suburbs to London, discovers the key to social success by selling his Indianness to English exactly as Charlie was selling his Englishness to the Americans. Haroon draws on his Indian past and represents himself in the clichés currently circulated in the British society to conform to and reinforce stereotypical English images of the Orient. "He was speaking slowly, in a deeper voice than usual, as if he were addressing a crowd. He was hissing his s's and exaggerating his Indian accent. He'd spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, and now he was putting it back in spadeloads. Why?" (Kureishi 21). Haroon's public persona reveals too little of who he is, but would presumably help him gain social acceptance. Playing on his exoticism, Karim's father is likely to obtain acceptance and come to the fore, yet not become an insider.

Although Kureishi resorts constantly to the imperialist language of 'race', his ironic discourse aims to undermine the already existing stereotypes. His "writing […] strenuously seeks to avoid ghettoisation."[11] The text starts from the idea that "what is commonly circulated by [culture] is not 'truth' but representations."[12] The stereotypes related to the Orient have been reinforced furthermore in the postmodern world, media having played a significant role in spreading these inaccurate representations of the Other by exploiting people's ignorance and their susceptibility to the exotic and the sensational.

Karim's encounter with Shadwell and Pyke is revealing in this respect. Karim is given Mowgli's role in a staged version of *The Jungle Book* as he is considered to be the best choice, the one that best fits the white audience's expectations and stereotypical images of the exotic Oriental. "In fact, you are Mowgli. You're dark-skinned, you're small and wiry, and you'll be sweet but wholesome in the costume. Not too pornographic, I think" (Kureishi 143). It is his friends' commentaries to his performance that help him go beyond racial prejudice and define his real self, even if this happens through an artistically assumed mask.

Jamila's harsh commentaries on Karim accepting and acting Mowgli's role in *The Jungle Book* make Karim consider his standpoint and become aware of his position to the

[10] See Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 11.
[11] Morrison, 182.
[12] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 31.

theatre society he had been associated to for some time, but also to the British society at large.

> '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?'
> 'I am, actually.' (Kureishi 157)

When Tracey, his black friend, comments on his staging and acting Anwar's life, Karim realizes further more that he has been victim to prejudice, inclined to over-generalize and exaggerate his inherited identity. By presenting Anwar as irrational, fanatic and violent, "[y]our picture is what white people already think of us. That we're funny, with strange habits and weird customs. To the white man we're already people without humanity and then you go and have Anwar madly waving his stick at the white boys. […] You show us as unorganized aggressors." Tracey's question "Why do you hate yourself and all black people so much, Karim? (Kureishi 180) helps Karim awaken to a new consciousness. Karim understands that his survival fully depends on his being willing to leave aside all bitterness and resentment, to find a way out of the entangling web of stereotypes he and people of his kind are entrapped in.

Gene's life and death, his failure and ultimate suicide make Karim realize that survival, both physical and artistic, in the contemporary context, is strictly associated with and dependent on one's ability to adapt across cultures, to be able to cross the visible and invisible frontiers that keep people apart. Gene would not act exotic, he would not conform to the stereotype of the Oriental. Yet his anger and resentment prevented him from adapting and he remained to the end an outsider.

> "Gene was a young West Indian actor. He was very talented and sensitive […]. […] But he never got the work he deserved. He emptied bed-pans in hospital programmes. He played criminals and taxi-drivers. He never played Chekhov or Ibsen or Shakespeare, and he deserved to. He was better than a lot of people. So he was very angry about a lot of things. […] He lived in a bad world in nice old England. One day when he didn't go into one of the bigger theatre companies, he couldn't take any more. He took an overdose." (Kureishi 201)

Unlike Gene, Karim strives to acquire a voice and an identity of his own. His London and theatre experience will help him learn to consider the Other for what they are, rather than for what they are expected to be. In the process of adapting to a new cultural environment, individuals have to understand that belonging does not mean being part of, but mainly being inside culture. They have to learn the language of the new culture and this can be done only by "overcom[ing] the stigma of […] marginality."[13] The solution Karim himself envisages to the crisis of identity as well as to that of intercultural communication is his art, the process of creation. The theatre finally gives him the chance to be himself by being someone else successfully.

[13] Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 123.

> I saw that creation was an accretive process which couldn't be hurried, and which involved patience and, primarily, love. I felt more solid myself, and not as if my mind were just a kind of cinema for myriad impressions and emotions to flicker through. This was worth doing, this had meaning, this added up elements of my life." (Kureishi 217)

In his 1996 essay "The Rainbow Sun", Hanif Kureishi introduced and theorized upon some of the issues he had fictionally addressed in *The Buddha of Suburbia* six years before. The writer's views about the contemporary world are likely to contribute to the readers' more appropriate understanding of the fictional world, but they will also give proper justification to approaching the novel from the perspective of intercultural communication . "[…] a society that is racist is a society that cannot accept itself, that hates part of itself so deeply that it cannot see, does not want to see – because of its spiritual and political nullity and inanition – how much people have in common with each other."[14] Contemporary writers, Kureishi being no exception, have decided to make fiction leave both the ivory tower of modernism and the quick sands of postmodernism and to artistically suggest possible solutions to the crisis of communication the contemporary world confronts itself with.

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[14] Quoted in Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 182.