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**Performative Identities: First Generation Immigrants Haroon and Anwar in Hanif  
Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia***

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*The Buddha of Suburbia* is composed of subplots, which proceed through Karim Amir's quest from childhood to adulthood. Revolving around a protagonist with an Indian father and a suburbanite English mother, the novel deals with the issues of race, ethnicity and social class in postcolonial discourse by mocking any fixed notion like nationhood and identity. In this particular social context, any established category is denied so it is impossible to see any stable identity. The novel takes place during the years Thatcher, a conservative Member of Parliament who insists on keeping the British race pure, is active and ends up being elected the Prime Minister; but Kureishi demonstrates how Thatcher's attempts to exclude the immigrants from the concept of Britishness is in vain. This paper will focus on the experiences of first generation immigrants Haroon and Anwar, who in addition to the adjustment problems, face lots of difficulties due to racial discrimination. Since their predicament is reinforced by discriminatory attitudes, they can neither feel attached to their roots nor become integrated into the British society. Thus, to survive, they create their own spaces, which leave them in liminality in Homi Bhabha's terms. Living in liminal spaces does not indicate that the settlers are outcasts but they mould their own hybrid identities. Liminality contributes to the "in-between" nature of colonial discourse and can be called an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" and this passage gives way to the emergence of hybridity, which celebrates difference without an imposed hierarchy (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 131). Liminality is crucial in explaining the role of "in-between" space in which the cultural transformation may occur. It is:

the transcultural space in which strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated, a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states. For instance, the colonized subject may dwell in the liminal space between colonial discourse and the assumption of a new 'non-colonial' identity.

But such identification is never simply a movement from one identity to another, it is a constant process of engagement, contestation and appropriation. (ibid.: 130)

Liminality disrupts the traditional binary oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized. Going beyond the dichotomies, liminality enables the postcolonial discourse to function by challenging the colonizer's authority; thus, arbitrary designations such as 'black' and 'white,' 'lower' and 'upper' classes are ceaselessly problematized. Proving Homi Bhabha's arguments Haroon and Anwar find an in-between space to continue their lives. This paper argues that the experiences of first generation immigrants Haroon and Anwar in England prove the impossibility to still the flux of identity formation process as they waver between the home and host cultures and experiment different ways of being in Britain which, in the end, shows that identity is not stable or pre-given but performative; thus, Thatcher's discriminatory politics cannot prevent the transformation of the concept of Britishness.

To discuss the arbitrary nature of British nationalism, we can remember Benedict Anderson's ideas on nation simply described as "an imagined community" (1992: 7). Referring to Gellner (1964), Anderson (1992: 6) underlines that "nationalism . . . invents nations where they do not exist." Since 'nationalism' is 'invented,' it implies that the definition of nation is always open to re-inventions. Homi Bhabha also takes "nations and cultures" as "narrative constructions that arise from the 'hybrid' interaction of contending national and cultural constituencies" (Perloff 1999: 109). *The Buddha of Suburbia* demonstrates, thanks to the power of postcolonial agency, how Britishness is re-narrated by Britain's citizens – both the migrants and the English – against the Thatcherite definition of it.

As a first generation immigrant, Haroon struggles to be accepted as an Englishman and through this struggle he contributes a lot to the redefinition of Britishness. Since he has aristocratic roots in India, he does not let himself feel inferior to the colonizer. As Margaret, Haroon's wife, expresses his family is higher than the Churchills (Kureishi 1990: 24). Karim also admires his father, particularly his outlook: "Like many Indians he was small, but dad was also elegant and handsome, with delicate hands and manners; beside him most Englishmen looked like clumsy giraffes" (Kureishi 1990: 4). Haroon experienced the colonial years in India and believed that the English was a superior sacred race. When he was sent to England for education, he was disappointed when he saw the British as ordinary citizens

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. He'd never seen an Englishman stuffing bread into his mouth with his fingers, and no one had told him 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 they didn't necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman. (Kureishi 1990: 24-25)

Through these details, Haroon's image of the holy British is shattered. These ordinary people are put side by side with the elite of their community. As Yousaf (2002) puts it, Kureishi does not intend to create a uniform group identity as either British or Asian. Instead, he illustrates various forms of membership of any community (51-2). Thus, Haroon's case is a challenge to the Thatcherite understanding of Britishness, which strongly claims that the concept of Britishness only includes people with British origin. He incarnates a hybrid identity as “the brown skinned Englishman” with his job as a civil servant who commutes from the suburbs into London with average English middle class expectations. On the one hand, he likes kebabs which shows his devotion to Indian dietary habits and “he love[s] it when people [come] and [go], the house full of talk and activity, as it would [be] in Bombay” (Kureishi 1990: 47). On the other hand, as if he were not Asian, Haroon advises his son to keep away from Asian girls since they bring a lot of trouble. Having one of the typical English jobs, every morning he reads the *Daily Mirror* before joining the other commuters on the train to the city. With his outlook, Haroon is more English than he is Indian; but with his dietary preferences, interest in yoga and tendency to deride the British, he never eradicates his Indian roots totally (Moore-Gilbert 2001:132). His daily routine seems to be a form of mimicry to avoid being racially visible.

Haroon begins to take a fancy to Eva and with her initiation he starts to impersonate a Buddhist and he becomes a “Muslim commodifying himself for white suburbanites searching for the ‘inner room’ as an Oriental-Hindu ‘Buddhist’ guru” (Yousaf 2002: 40). In fact, he was born as a Muslim and was never interested in Buddhism when he lived in India so he can relate himself to Buddhism only as much as any other Englishman. He learns Buddhism from the books published in England and to look more Buddha-like, he changes his English accent to sound more like an Indian. (Here, one cannot help remembering his previous persistent efforts to

speak English smoothly). In other words, Haroon, having mimicked the colonizer culture for years, shifts the direction of mimicry to Indianness. His son Karim is surprised to see this change in his father's choices:

[T]he thing that made me realize that 'God', as I now called Dad, was seriously scheming, was the queer sound I heard coming from his room as I was going up to bed. I put my ear against the white paintwork of the door. Yes, God was talking to himself, but not intimately. 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 1990: 21)

Imitating the British or the Indian implies the same thing when the function of mimicry is concerned. In his *The Location of Culture* Bhabha (2006) talks about what mimicry is and how it functions as a means of renunciation:

[M]imicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers. (122-3)

Mimicry has a profound and disturbing effect on colonial discourse, as Bhabha repeatedly puts it: "[t]he menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (ibid.: 126). In his appropriation of either Asian or British ways Haroon disrupts the mainstream understanding of identity. Thanks to his performance, he adopts different identities. Buhanan states:

[Karim] facetiously calls Haroon 'God', but beneath the smirk there is a serious point: Haroon has shown Karim the Godlike power to reinvent oneself in another's image. Thus Karim finds it merely peculiar, and by no means objectionable, that Haroon has suddenly

embraced Buddhism and is 'exaggerating his Indian accent' in order to appear more genuinely guru-like. (2007:44)

As Buhanan puts it, acting like God, Haroon recreates his identity through mimicry. His previous desire to become racially invisible is now replaced by a desire to be culturally visible and he becomes a new person. Performing the Buddha alters Haroon's life to a considerable extent. As Wohlsein puts it:

In becoming the 'Buddha of Suburbia' – which is an invented identity and therefore highly hybrid – Haroon achieves two goals at a time. On the one hand, he has finally found a profession that he loves and is truly interested in, and, on the other hand, he has found a way to be accepted by the white English. (2008:44)

Moreover, through Buddhist practices, Haroon prepares the ground for the British to reconfigure their own identities. Although the yoga practice does not make Eva totally a different person, she tries to look Eastern with a full-length multi-coloured kaftan and bare feet (Kureishi 1990: 8). The pretentious way of mimicking the Asian style clothing does not turn Eva into a person valuing spirituality but through imitation she performs a new way of being. Another instance of mocking the social categories is seen when Eva and Haroon are making love. Haroon was crying out "Oh God, oh my God" (ibid.: 16). Hearing this in a humorous way Karim makes his astonishment clear. He finds it weird to hear "Christian curses from the mouth of a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist" (ibid.: 16). So in their case identity is nothing but performance.

Like his friend Haroon, Anwar comes to England for education. He too creates his liminal space to survive in racist Thatcherite Britain. When they were living in India, Anwar and Haroon used to play cricket at the weekends and tennis after school. Their cricket matches were generally against the British (ibid.: 23). Originally, it is a western type of sport, which shows how they are exposed to the colonizer culture even before moving to England. Having led a wealthy life in India, the conditions in England for Haroon and Anwar were very challenging. However, they adapted to the harsh conditions by enjoying the freedom that the western ways of living offered them. While Haroon was called to pub every night, Anwar "loved the prostitutes who hung around Hyde Park" (ibid.: 25). When Haroon dated with Margaret, Anwar was dating

with one of Margaret's friends despite his marriage with Jeeta, a princess from India (ibid.: 26). Both Anwar and Haroon use the opportunities offered by England without considering their families' values and create a new site of living within which different positions emerge.

Anwar, who comes to England to study aeronautical engineering, wins a bet one day and buys a house. With his wife Jeeta's initiation, they open a shop called 'Paradise Stores'. Anwar's necessity to work fourteen hours a day cuts his chance to socialize with English people but his dietary preferences like eating "pork pies" which is forbidden in Islam "as long as Jeeta wasn't looking" (ibid.: 64) proves he is in touch with English habits. He does not react against western life style until he realizes that his daughter Jamila has become an emancipated woman. This is where his internal return to India or resistance to English culture starts.

Forgetting his earlier years in England throughout which Anwar adopted a western life style and disregarding how Jamila acts against racism, he only focuses on the fact that Jamila has lost her ties with the Muslim life style. He fears that his native culture will totally disappear (Wohlsein 2008: 38). Appropriating Islam is a form of return to his native culture for Anwar. However, he ignores the fact that there are no original or pure cultures. His identity combining both eastern and western elements is a proof for the impossibility of talking about pure cultures devoid of interaction with the others. To impose Islamic values on his daughter, he goes on a hunger strike to convince Jamila to marry Changez, a groom imported from India. Jamila finally agrees to this marriage which does not indicate her submissiveness but which can be taken as the starting point of her rebellion. This marriage strengthens the fact that expectations concerning nationhood are futile. Changez, in contrast to Anwar's hopes, is not wholeheartedly tied to Islam or Indian roots. He is more interested in discovering the uncertainties of England than creating a family to satisfy Anwar's expectations. Moreover, Jamila, who is forced into this marriage, never lets Changez touch her, making him realize that theirs is not a usual marriage. Changez, who is unwilling to help in Paradise Stores and who cannot give grandchildren to Anwar, turns out to be a big disappointment.

Jamila's case exemplifies religion's failure to put someone in boundaries: Anwar wants to exert his authority on his daughter Jamila by forcing her to marry a Muslim Indian. Thus, he believes, his daughter will not forget her roots and form an Indian family but he disregards the fact that despite being born into an Indian family, Jamila has been in England and exposed to the British ways of living all her life. Her daily practice is different from that of the Indians. Her

distance to Islam as a religion or to Indian customs does not demonstrate that she acts against her cultural background. On the contrary, she makes her race visible and fights against any discriminatory acts but not through the medium of religion. She achieves her individuality with the power of the books she has read and internalized.

In the end, Anwar also bitterly realizes that Changez's Indian background does not make him a devout Muslim or an ideal husband who is attached to his cultural roots. He sees the futility of blaming the English for being immoral and corrupt. His desperate situation is strengthened when he feels abandoned by Allah despite his regular prayers and refusal to womanize (Kureishi 1990: 172). With this feeling he wants to turn back to India, a plan which he can never put into practice. Although he states that he is an Indian at heart, he has lived in England for most of his life and his identity has been transformed as a result of the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized culture.

Anwar's abrupt adoption of Muslim rules is the outcome of the need to assert his existence or rather authority. When he fully realises that he cannot identify with the British identity, he feels in chaos; then, he tries to compensate for his lack of belonging by adopting Islamic rules. He has never been a devout believer before but he believes that if he wants to identify with Asian culture, he can do it only through religion. In other words, Anwar, unable to feel integrated into British society, finds relief in adopting the Indian values. However, the novel underlines that this is not a real spiritual attachment but a pretentious performative act to affirm his presence. Karim expresses how Anwar develops the habit of visiting the mosque and his tone signifies no spirituality about the mosque visit:

For a few weeks [Anwar]'d been visiting the mosque regularly, and now I occasionally went with him. The mosque was a dilapidated terraced house nearby which smelled of bhuna gost. The floor was sprinkled with onion skins, and Moulvi Qamar-Uddin sat behind his desk surrounded by leather-bound books on Islam and a red telephone stroking the beard which reached to his stomach. Anwar complained to the Moulvi that Allah had abandoned him despite regular prayers and a refusal to womanize. (ibid.: 171-2)

He does not go to the mosque because of his religious fervour but he performs the Islamic practices and follows its doctrines to be rewarded by Allah. His choice of Islam may be related to Anwar's weariness to live in the third space and his desire to stabilize his identity via Islam. He



is estranged from the English freedom which includes “the prostitutes who hung around in Hyde Park” (ibid.: 25). In other words, evoking Islam is a tool to have a “fixed” identity, which allows him to recover his connections with his Asian background (Yousaf 2002:44). However, revealing the evacuated nature of his Islamic practice, Kureishi deplores and satirizes Anwar’s plight. With the humorous depiction of the mosque and Anwar’s opportunistic perception of Islam, Kureishi once again attacks the medium of religion to form a fixed identity. As a religion of absolutisms, even Islam is not able to stabilize one’s identity. In the quest for an unwavering identity, Anwar’s adoption of Islam could not lead to fix either his life or his family members’ lives.

It might also be interesting to look at how Haroon and Anwar are perceived by the others. Karim thinks his father is a ‘charlatan’ (Kureishi 1990: 22), Jamila is sure that he is a ‘complete phoney’ (ibid.: 72). Interestingly, despite being recognized like this by Karim and Jamila, Haroon gains credibility as a wise man when his brother in law Ted turns to him for help. Ted was against Haroon’s Buddhist practices at first, but he asks for his help later on, another reference to the changing notions of identity markers (Thomas 2005: 67-8). Anwar’s case is not so different when his efforts to form a unified self against the background of Islam collapse. Instead of gaining recognition, he loses all his power in his family after forcing Jamila to marry Changez through hunger strike. He ends up in a desperate situation as Karim expresses:

Uncle Anwar didn’t sleep at all now. At night he sat on the edge of his chair, smoking and drinking un-Islamic drinks and thinking portentous thoughts, dreaming of other countries, lost houses, mothers, beaches. Anwar did no work in the shop, not even rewarding work like watching shoplifters and shirtlifters. Jamila often found him drunk on the floor, rancid with unhappiness, when she went by to see her mother in the morning before work. (Kureishi 1990: 208).

Seeing that adopting a Muslim identity cannot solve his problems, he transgresses religious teachings by drinking un-Islamic drinks. In both characters’ depiction, the reader sees that identity is not inherent but it floats.

All in all, the integration process of Haroon and Anwar reveals the constant interaction between the colonizer and the colonized cultures, which re-defines the concept of Britishness. Their quest for identity is interwoven with vacillation between creating a British identity or turning back to their original roots. Whichever they try, the fact that they do not own a pre-given

identity has to be accepted. In contrast, they build up their original 'selves' through experimentation. First, both mimic the British ways of living and perform a British-like identity; then, they turn back to eastern mysticism, which is Islam in Anwar's case and Buddhism in Haroon's case but neither Haroon nor Anwar wholeheartedly belongs to any spiritual form. However, they pretend to be belonging to those religious schools by only mimicking their practices. Thus, their efforts become no different from artistic performance.

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