

# PARADIGMS OF DIVERSITY IN HANIF KUREISHI'S THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we put to the test a model for assessing cultural exchange and cultural identity in the post-modern and post-colonial world. The model is suggested by Arjun Appadurai in the article 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' and it consists of five paradigms or terms coined on the nucleus '-scape': ethnoscape, finanscape, technoscape, mediascape and ideoscape. This model recognises the importance of new social groupings caused by mobility and hence new identities based on how people now see themselves. The modern world is an interactive system in which centuries-old cultural transactions between social groups have been intensified, speeded up or modified through technological developments affecting power economies, transportation and information. The model has been applied to a fictitious world contained in a 1990s novel of cultural identities, set in the London of the 1970s and 1980s: Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

## 1. INTRODUCTORY

In view of the dangers of elimination of differences resulting from the over-generalisation of a term like 'Post-Colonialism',<sup>1</sup> the model for assessing cultural exchange and cultural identity in the post-modern and post-colonial world suggested by Arjun Appadurai in his article 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy'<sup>2</sup> may be a step in the right direction in working in the field of acculturation. I would like to put this model to the test in a fictional world contained in a 1990s novel of cultural identities. Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*<sup>3</sup> has been called 'One of the best

comic novels of growing up, and one of the sharpest satires on race relations in this country' (*Independent on Sunday* quoted on dust jacket). The BBC is about to transmit it in the form of a drama series. While it is a satire, or perhaps *because* it is a satire, it points to the truth in some areas of contact between cultural communities where the truth has often been avoided in the past. In the words of Salman Rushdie, the novel is 'utterly irreverent and wildly improper' (and he should be able to judge!), but it is also 'genuinely touching and truthful' (again quoted on the dust jacket). The advantage of using a literary text is that in its artificiality, it presents a limited and therefore manageable little world, while at the same time metonymically suggesting the real worlds.

## 2. PROBLEMS WITH POSITIONING

While Appadurai's model opens the way to the annotation of mind-boggling panoramas of diversity, especially through its association with chaos theory, it does try to simplify in its re-classification of areas of interchange. Appadurai begins his article by stressing that the modern world is an interactive system in which the centuries-old cultural transactions between social groups have been intensified and speeded up through technological developments affecting power economies, transportation and information, the consequences of what Benedict Anderson has called 'print capitalism.'<sup>4</sup> Appadurai's model recognises the importance of new social groupings caused by mobility and hence new identities based on how people now see themselves. Appadurai says: 'The world we live in today is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together: the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense; and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*), as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations (in Williams & Chisman, 327). Hence *the imagination as a social practice* is a factor to be taken into account in the building up of cultural identity. An individual in the modern world may be the amalgam of many factors. Hanif Kureishi's protagonist Karim Amir, 'an Englishman born and bred, almost' (p. 3) is 'a new breed', being the son of a (white) English mother and an Indian father, but first and foremost a south Londoner growing up in the 60s and 70s.

Stuart Hall, in his article 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'<sup>5</sup> lists some of these factors and suggests that together they position the individual in time and space:

(...) cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something*- not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories - and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. (p. 395)

Certainly there is a positioning, which may or may not be stable, but it can only be found by the individual in *retrospect*, as we see through Karim Amir. Also Appadurai shows that the historico-ethnic factor is only one of the factors which help to determine the individual in the modern world. There are other factors, and these cannot be mapped onto the ethnic one with any coincidence of boundaries.

### 3. APPADURAI'S PARADIGMS

Appadurai sums up his model as follows:

The deliberations of the arguments that I have made so far constitute the bare bones of an approach to a general theory of global cultural processes. Focusing on disjunctures, I have employed a set of five terms (ethnoscape, finanscape, technoscape, mediascape and ideoscape) to stress different streams or flows along which cultural material may be seen to be moving across national boundaries. I have also sought to exemplify the ways in which these various flows (or landscapes, from the stabilizing perspectives of any given imagined world) are in fundamental disjuncture with respect to one another. What further steps can we take towards a general theory of global cultural processes, based on these proposals?

The first is to note that our very models of cultural shape will have to alter, as configurations of people, place and heritage lose all semblance of isomorphism. Recent work in anthropology has done much to free us of the shackles of highly localized, boundary-oriented, holistic, primordialist images of cultural form and substance. (26) (...) What I would like to propose is that we begin to think of the configuration of cultural forms in today's world as fundamentally fractal, that is, as possessing no Euclidian boundaries, structures or regularities. Second, I would suggest that these cultural forms, which we should strive to represent as fully fractal, are also overlapping, in ways that have been discussed only in pure mathematics (in set theory for example) and in biology (in the language of polythetic classifications). Thus we need to combine a fractal metaphor for the shape of cultures (in the plural) with a polythetic account of their overlaps and resemblances. (pp. 336-7)

### 4. APPADURAI'S PARADIGM APPLIED TO THE NOVEL

In order to put this theory to the test, we can subject the text to an examination using an approach based upon the new '-scapes'. We can analyse the characters created to represent the different ethnic groups and trace the patterns in which they interrelate. We can examine ways in which their ideological stances, if they have them, are conditioned by their ethnic backgrounds or their Western education. We can study how far the power of the media dominates in youth and the adult population alike in the shaping of desired self-images and images of others (and Others). We can look for signs which point to the economic structures evoked in relation to the characters, and hand-in-hand with these, signs of the technological advance which individuals may harness or even initiate or which carries them along or leaves them

stranded. Finally, we can look at overlaps and see if any generalisations can be made about cultures in contact, and because we are applying this paradigm to literature, we can see in what ways a writer of fictional narrative can exploit the sutures for different purposes.

#### 4.1 POSITIONING OF THE NARRATOR-PROTAGONIST IN *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA*

By opening his novel as if in the mode of the nineteenth-century pseudoautobiography, Kureishi invokes classics such as *Great Expectations* or *Jane Eyre*. Stability is given by the linear narrative and the matured narrator looking back to adolescence. But this discourse is subverted in the very first paragraph with the startling revelation of the seventeen year old protagonist's motivation: 'I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement, action or sexual interest I could find' (p. 3). The first 'scene' is of his father returning home from work and immediately standing on his head so that 'His balls and prick fell forward in his pants.' (p. 4) We have a protagonist eloquent in the English language and who does not mince words; he is therefore likely to set up a particularly intimate relationship with the imagined readers he is addressing. The novel ends 'I could think about the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is' (pp. 283-4). The book is therefore the account of an individual trying to locate himself in what he calls 'a mess' (p. 284). An initial problem for Karim is that he has no stable positioning to start with, he is torn between two distinct cultures, his father's and his mother's, with their respective religions. Although he does not overtly seek stability, indeed, he says he wants movement, in retrospect, he feels he needs movement from a given point, and that is not always easy to identify. As Appadurai asserts:

What is new is that this is a world in which both points of departure and arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference, as critical life-choices are made, can be very difficult. It is in this atmosphere that the invention of tradition (and of ethnicity, kinship and other identity-markers) can become slippery, as the search for certainties is regularly frustrated by the fluidities of transnational communication. As group pasts become increasingly parts of museums, exhibits and collections, both in national and transnational spectacles, culture becomes less what Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation, the latter often to multiple, and spatially dislocated audiences. (p. 335)

Karim's father turns to Oriental mysticism in his middle life for dubious reasons, but he refuses to fetishize the past, he unhelpfully tells his son that 'if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it' (p. 213). Kureishi is well aware of the slipperiness of cultural identity and of the fact that identity is created, not inherited. This suits his purpose of having Karim narrate his young life in a Western linear mode. It fits in also with Lakoff and Johnson's discoveries about the way we conceive of life metaphorically.<sup>6</sup> Their metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY illustrates our viewing of birth as a setting off towards an unknown destination which is death. Karim's day-to-day life is ruled by desires directed at something other, and he is in a state of becoming. There may be new starts, as with leaving

home, and temporary senses of having arrived, but at many stages along the way conscious choices are required of Karim, all the more complicated by the slipperiness of his positioning. A cultural identity, like that of a fictional character, is a becoming, as Stuart Hall has outlined:

We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side - the ruptures and discontinuities (...) Cultural identity, (...) is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (p. 394)

#### 4.2 ETHNOSCAPE

History, culture and power are contained in Appadurai's five 'landscapes', but the first one, the ethnoscape, is perhaps the most comprehensive. As we have said, in *The Buddha of Suburbia* two major cultures are in contact, one of them, the Indian, extraterritorially, but the landscape is not so simple as two discrete, contiguous isomorphic configurations. The novel is the peripatetic adventures, told in the first person, of Karim Amir, who as well as being half-Indian, half-English, is a south Londoner, which means he theoretically encapsulates three life styles, for south London is only part of England so although the latter geographically encompasses the former, they are not isomorphic culturally. Karim starts his story in the early 70s, when he is seventeen, and stops on the eve of Thatcherism, quite literally, the night of the Election Day in 1979 when the Labour Party was defeated and the age of Thatcher began. Through Karim, Hanif Kureishi gives us a picture of the cultural life of the lower middle class, touching on the working class at one end and the upper middle class at the other in a multi-cultural setting in the decade of the 70s. But he extends the panorama backwards to the war, through the reminiscences of his mother, and to his childhood in the 50s and 60s, his father Haroon and friend Anwar having arrived from Bombay in 1950, just after Independence. The most detailed picture is that of life in the poorer London suburbs, but as Karim moves from periphery to centre, we also have a view of upper middle class cultural life in London, in Part 2. At the end of the novel, through his friend and future half-brother Charlie, who becomes a successful pop singer and performs in New York, all this is contrasted with a brief glimpse of American life and values. So we have three bounded physical landscapes, the London suburbs, London proper, and New York, as the centre shifts, and a bounded time period, and in these varied racial configurations.

By choosing a poorer London suburb as the setting, Kureishi opens up the possibility of portraying characters from virtually every ethnic grouping. Within 'ethnoscape' we distinguish not only racial groupings or the racial background of individuals, but also the gender, sexual attractiveness, class and age group of the individuals in terms of race. For an Indian woman does not accrue the same myth or enjoy the same aspirations as a white woman, and a beautiful white woman is not the same as an ugly white woman; an Indian who is upper class in Bombay may be reduced, as here, to dropping on the social scale in Britain, with a subsequent change in

life style, while a second or third generation Indian in Britain may have adapted more, find culture shock less traumatic, and will have different aspirations and expectations from his/her parents or grandparents.

We'll look in turn at the characters Kureishi has created.

#### 4.2.1 The Indian ethnic group

*Haroon Amir.* The father, 'Harry' to the English relatives, in England for over 20 years, referred to by Karim as 'Daddio,' 'God,' and when he takes up Eastern religion, 'a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist.' (p. 16) Haroon is sexually attractive, he has the elegant and exotic attraction of the Other: 'beside him most Englishmen looked like clumsy giraffes.' (p. 14) He is stereotyped by his English -in-laws as the native whose desire has as its object the white woman. Since Haroon has 'firm ideas about the division of labour between men and women,' (p. 19) through his marriage he not only acquires a symbol of Western sovereignty, but also a slave who brings in an income and does all the domestic work of the house. The irony of his life is that after years of trying to become assimilated into Britain and appear more British, he suddenly tries to appear more Indian. In his job as a poorly-paid Civil Service clerk he comes to the conclusion that 'the whites will never promote us,' (p. 27) and so sets out on a path with a mixture of sincerity and opportunism, of real wisdom and charlatanism, to become 'the guru from Chislehurst' (although he is not from Chislehurst). With age and security, he and his friend Anwar seemed to be 'returning internally to India' through rejecting it externally; as Karim speculates: 'Perhaps it was the immigrant condition living itself out through them' (p. 64). Yet it is not an 'authentic' India they dream of, but one of their imagination: 'We old Indians come to like this England less and less and we return to an imagined India' (p. 74).

*Anwar.* Haroon's best friend, less immersed in British life since he brought his Indian wife 'Princess Jeeta' with him. Having accidentally won some money in a betting shop, he sets up a grocery store. He enacts Muslim absolutism and fatalism, exercising 'tyranny' over his wife and daughter. He beats his wife until his daughter is old and strong enough to resist him. Anwar decides to follow the Indian tradition of choosing a husband for his daughter and has one sent from Bombay. Kureishi exploits the irony of the gap between his designs and the result, and the clash of the two cultures over this 'rite of passage' for dramatic and comic purposes. Anwar stages his 'last stand' (comedy of the juxtaposition of Indian culture with discourse from a cowboy film), a Gandhi-inspired hunger strike, to exert moral blackmail on his daughter when she refuses and rejects the tradition. Karim tells Anwar that arranged marriages are 'old-fashioned', but Anwar wants to exercise the little power he has and eventually educate his grandchildren in the Indian way (which means a British education in any case), but he does not know his own daughter: there is a generational and gender gap as well as an ethnic one. He tragically ends his life wandering the neighbourhood with a walking-stick hitting out at white youths in racist gangs.

*Jeeta.* In spite of her husband's mistreatment of her, she would never leave him 'Indian wives weren't like that,' (p. 72) but she finds her own domestic way of avenging herself. As a woman, Jeeta is expected to serve as a boundary-marker of her ethnic and religious collectivity. She wears Indian clothes and has 'permanent big pans' of Indian food on the cooker. What prevents her from emerging as a fully-fledged citizen in even the Indian community of her suburb (which does not seem to exist anyway, as the Indians are not portrayed collectively), is not so much this racial onus as the feminine onus

of woman in the modern world: whether white or brown or black, many women have to do a paid job (Jeeta in the shop) and all the household work. Because she cannot supervise her only daughter's education, she cannot prevent this from being exclusively Western intellectual in the narrowest most neo-colonial sense. She forfeits the perpetuation of her identity to economic and patriarchal pressure.

#### 4.2.2 The English group

*Margaret.* Karim's mother is a 'pretty working-class girl from the suburbs' (p. 25) whom Haroon met at a dance. Crushed by work because of the uncooperative attitude of her husband and two sons, after working in a shoe shop all day and doing all the housework, she collapses before the TV with a Walnut Whip. This ritual is what identifies her. Karim, her elder son, criticises her for being irritated and self-pitying, and blames her for her apparent inertia before her husband's infidelity: 'Why couldn't she be stronger? Why wouldn't she fight back?' (p. 19) But Margaret cannot compete economically and does not want to compete sexually with her rival Eva Kay. Eva appears freed from work by her money and is able to make work a joy, also she is a predator on the opposite sex as Margaret is not: 'She said she'd never liked men because men were torturers.' (p. 20) There is an aura of silence around Margaret which indicates the repression of woman as wife and mother; she is marginalised and disempowered, in spite of being a white woman on her own territory in an otherwise alien racial community. She should be central, but is relegated to the periphery. When her husband invites her to attend his guru sessions where to be Indian has become central, he teases her: 'I know you're only English, but you could wear a sari.' (p. 5) Discriminated against racially and sexually, she is also isolated generationally in that her sons make little attempt to communicate with her. In Karim's new classificatory polarities there are beautiful, sexy people and ugly people, and there are challenging, interesting people and nice but boring people. He classifies his mother as belonging to the second of each of these binary paradigms: 'Mum was a plump and unphysical woman with a pale round face and kind brown eyes. I imagined that she considered her body to be an inconvenient object surrounding her, as if she were stranded on an unexplored desert island. Mostly she was a timid and compliant person.' (p. 4). Karim the actor-writer appears to be satisfied with his desert-island simile, but as he matures through the novel, he admits to not having known his mother or even attempting to know her.

*Auntie Jean and Uncle Ted.* Auntie Jean, Margaret's 'elegant' sister, is the baddie of the piece, and meets a just end by falling down the stairs while drunk. She is patronising about her sister's marrying a 'coloured'. Like all the characters in the novel, she is not what she seems, they almost all have a double life, and she has a secret sex-life, an affair with an upper-class Tory councillor. At the beginning, Jean and Ted are 'two normal unhappy alcoholics', 'normal' being foregrounded by its juxtaposition to 'unhappy' and 'alcoholic'—typical of Britain; also typical in that they have acquired wealth through Britain's climate, by running a central heating business. Uncle Ted is saved in Karim's eyes by his childlike innocence. He has not grown up, and there is the implication that many English males are overgrown schoolboys. He initiated Karim into English working-class life in its boyish aspects— fishing, air-rifles, dog- and pigeon-racing, all the things his upper-class Indian father knew nothing of. For Ted, and for society, this not having grown up has its dangerous side, he is a secret soccer hooligan, as Karim witnesses his smashing up a football train. This violence, by implication, could easily find

a racial target. Ted is 'freed' by Haroon, saved from 'an untrue life,' (p. 265) as he joins the other middle-aged whites sitting cross-legged on the floor lapping up the 'Buddha of Suburbia's' mysticism and transforming his life, though maybe in fact only changing one materialism for another.

*Eva Kay* Haroon's (Jewish?) mistress is the stereotype of the seductress. A mythical figure, a travesty of woman, having only one breast, she has no patience with the ugly, and is busy constructing an artistic persona for herself through which she hopes to rise on the social scale. But the other side of the coin is that she has suffered –an unhappy marriage as well as cancer– and this has made her more human and understanding. Instead of succumbing and wallowing in self-pity like Karim's mother, she has fought back, found life fascinating, and she is who makes Karim interested in 'life', so he is closer to her than to his mother.

#### 4.2.3 The new generation

Half-castes (Karim and his brother Allie), Indians (Jamila and her husband Changez) and whites (Charlie) are more united by the new values of the Western world (whether they support them or fight them) than they are divided by their race or gender.

*Karim Amir* Karim is studying at a south London school for A Levels in History, English and Politics, but he decides he can profit more from learning about these in the outside world and becomes a drop-out. He has to find himself racially and sexually, as he likes both girls and boys: 'I felt it would be heart-breaking to have to choose one or the other, like having to decide between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.' (p. 55) This mixture of discourses is comic and also reveals his dominating passion: pop music. His father, albeit a *renegade* Muslim, cannot bear the idea that his son might be gay. Karim suffers from –or has the advantage– depending on how you look at it, of 'belonging and not.' (p. 3) He does not realise that he has a south London lower-middle-class voice, but he does know that he will not be happy until he moves from the periphery to the centre, from the 'wrong' suburbs to London city. In an encounter with 'Hairy Back', the father of Helen, a white girlfriend, he is called wog, nigger, coon and blackie. His first employer, the theatre manager Shadwell, says that his destiny is 'to be a half-caste in England,' (p. 141) and Karim does seem to find this destiny inescapable, becoming a creative actor, but always in Indian or half-caste roles. Ironically, he gets his break because he belongs to an ethnic minority, thus repeating the pattern of his father's success. Since Karim fancies himself as a writer, through him, Kureishi exploits the interstices between the Indian and white communities to give us a very comic picture of racist victimisation at school, like a parody of Tom Brown's Schooldays:

I was sick too of being affectionately called Shitface and Curryface, and of coming home covered in spit and snot and chalk and wood-shavings. We did a lot of woodwork at our school, and the other kids liked to lock me and my friends in the storeroom and have us chant 'Manchester United, Manchester United, we are the boot boys' as they held chisels to our throats and cut off our shoelaces. We did a lot of woodwork at the school because they didn't think we could deal with books. One day the woodwork teacher had a heart attack right in front of our eyes as one of the lads put another kid's prick in a vice and started to turn the handle. Fuck you, Charles Dickens, nothing's changed. One



kid tried to brand my arm with a red-hot lump of metal. Someone else pissed over my shoes, and all my Dad thought about was me becoming a doctor. What world was he living in? Every day I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury. So after all this I felt I was ready to retire. (p. 68)

The truth of pictures like this is brought into question by Tracy, the black actress, and by his own brother Allie.

*Amar Amir* Amar is at first represented solely from Karim's point of view, and the latter rather deprecatingly says that his younger brother 'called himself Allie to avoid racial trouble.' (p. 19) Allie appears to opt for his mother's world, though in his aesthetic sense he is probably more like his father, and in terms of gender seems as unsure as his brother, wanting to be a ballet-dancer. In the end he is allowed to speak for himself, to Karim's surprise, another member of the family he does not really know. Allie has found a niche for himself in which he need not belong to either world, yet is where he wants to be. In the interstice he has created or found his own elegant island and is able to say 'We can't pretend we're some kind of shitted-on oppressed people', and also 'We should be just as grateful we haven't got white skin either' (p. 268). He perpetuates the myth of tolerant, decent England, because he had come into contact with enough people, like his mother, to make the passage easy. These people exist and substantiate the myth, but we tend to believe Karim, that there are many racist people around also. Since the end of the novel in 1979 and its publication in 1990, we have, unfortunately, had the Brixton Riots.

*Jamila*. 'She's her own person,' (p. 135) says Karim of the girl he grew up with, the 'forceful' daughter of Anwar and Jeeta. Jamila was educated less by her school and parents than by a certain Miss Cutmore, who took a special interest in her and, perhaps trying to overcompensate for Britain's colonial past, inadvertently 'colonized her' again, setting her on a path to left-wing militancy. With her Afro 'natural' hairstyle, Angela Davis glasses and the layered loose clothes currently fashionable, she is sexually attractive in an intellectual way. Jamila married Changez, the husband selected for her by her father, as 'a rebellion against rebellion, creative novelty itself.' (p. 82). Sex roles are changed as this karate and judo enthusiast goes to work researching into racial attacks on women and making her husband—who is that in name only—do the domestic work. She finds happiness living on a commune, having a baby with a left-wing intellectual who wanders off, leaving her in a lesbian relationship and with her legal husband changing role to 'uncle' to the baby that should have been his.

*Changez*. From a well-to-do Bombay family, Changez has preconceived ideas about England, one of which is expecting to have a normal (read authoritarian) sexual relationship there with his Indian wife. Unfortunately, according to Karim's paradigm of beautiful/ugly, Changez, with his mutilated arm, bald head and pot-belly (anything but the stereotype of the dashing bridegroom in any culture), is classified in the latter category, and although he adores her, Jamila will not allow him to touch her with any sexual intention.

*Charlie*. Eva Kay's son is a white male who is highly attractive to both sexes in all the racial communities he enters: 'Men and boys got erections just being in the same room as him' (p. 9) says the partial Karim. Although he is the centre of attraction for most youngsters, he feels he is on the periphery and must move, which he does, to become Charlie Hero, the newest pop-star on the London scene and then on to fame in America. But he is a fraud, he follows rather than leads the fashion of the moment,

his music is mediocre and he is hollow, selfish and cruel. The feminist Jamila is naturally hostile to his charms: 'Jamila saw right through old Charlie: she said there was iron ambition under the crushed-velvet idealism which was still the style of the age.' (p. 75) That in a world of real suffering he should seek gratuitous pain (in a masochism session Karim is invited to witness in New York) is the factor which makes Karim realise that his goal is not to be like Charlie any more, or to be loved by Charlie, this person who only loves himself: 'I'd moved beyond him, discovering myself through what I rejected.' (p. 255)

#### 4.2.4 The secondary characters

##### 1. *White women*

*Helen.* Karim's friend Helen suffers the racial hostility of her father and is also the butt of anti-white hostility from Anwar's friends: 'Pork, pork, pork, VD, VD, white woman, white woman,' (p. 85) comic and sad at the same time.

*Eleanor.* As her name indicates, Eleanor is from an upper-middle-class family. Having class, culture and money, she takes them for granted and is indifferent to all, assuming an 'unforced bohemia'. She betrays Karim, and as with Charlie, he comes to see that he has lost nothing worthwhile.

##### 2. *White men*

*Shadwell.* Another character with a shaky identity, the theatre director wears homosexuality as 'a ruse, a pose, a way of self-presentation.' (p. 35) Intellectuals are really bores, decides Karim.

*Matthew Pyke* Pyke is the hypocritical liberal humanist, the real neo-colonial. He gives £ 500 to the Communist Party, but sends his son, against his will, to one of the best public schools in London. He knows that education and power go hand in hand. He exploits racial and class differences in his creative theatre—even the actors have to create their own characters—and he, with his superior aesthetic sense, gives the seal of approval. He is also a sexual predator on both sexes and the classes and races that attract him. His wife Marlene is as rapacious as him, a female version of Pyke.

*Terry.* Karim finds this Trotskyite actor very sympathetic. He tries to be open-minded, but his 'inbred bourgeois morality' makes him reject Karim's sexual advances. He rejects America as 'a fascist, imperialist, racist shithole,' (p. 240) and although there may be some sour grapes to this opinion, we tend to accept it, (as we do Karim's exaggerated views).

*Heater.* Scots Heater, Eleanor's 'guardian', like his name, is not human, he is a symbol of the bestialised working class.

##### 3. *Non-white women*

There are examples from several racially 'marked' groups.

*Shinko.* Changez's ageing Japanese prostitute. Kureishi upturns the stereotypical animosity between legal wife and whore by making Jamila and Shinko become friends.

*Tracy.* The black actress in Matthew Pyke's group wants to 'censure' Karim's portrayal of Anwar and his hunger-strike. Like Allie, she wishes to avoid or deflate racial tension. Distortion of the facts is in the interests of racial integrity and harmony: 'We have to protect our culture at this time.' (p. 181) She accuses Karim of holding a Western Enlightenment idealism, with his insistence on 'the truth.' She denies that the West has a monopoly of the truth: 'Truth. Who defines it?,' (p. 181) and suggests to Karim that he should be on his guard against falsification of the truth and against failing to protect a misrepresentation when this is contingent.

#### 4. *Non-white men*

*Gene.* The West Indian boyfriend of Eleanor had become a quite well-known actor, but gave up trying to be accepted in Britain and committed suicide. His symbolic presence is felt, as racial difference is exploited for dramatic purposes in the narrative. Eleanor in a way avenges upon the substitute Karim her suffering over Gene.

*The Haitian dancers.* Watching these perform at a New York party, Karim notes 'It made me feel like a colonial watching the natives perform.' (p. 244)

In this tabling of Kureishi's characters, we appreciate the simultaneity of discourse apparent in the novel. The author gives us perspectives of race, gender, class and age group, and indicates their manifold interrelationships through kin, education, work and leisure. Much of the dramatic and comic force of the narrative emerges from the interface of these different blocks.

#### 4.3 IDEOSCAPE

In presenting the characters, their inherent ideologies have been suggested. But individuals and even groups in sites of cultural contact undergo changes. Karim, although he is supposed to be studying Politics, makes no reference to the government of the day until the end, and his father makes no reference to India as newly independent. This is because the youngsters in the circles in which he moves see politics in terms of fashions and reactions in pop music. As exemplified by music, the speed of the modern world can bring rapid change. With Karim, in just three years, we go through the phases of the hippies, the punkies and the incipient Thatcher youth. In the pub there were even ageing Teddy Boys, Rockers and skin heads. It is a world of secularism and materialism, even rebellion for its own sake. The girls at Karim's new college are middle-class but reject their families and are into drugs, abortion, prostitution. The spirit of the age is 'general drift and idleness.' (p. 94) Instability seems to indicate cultural decadence and freedom seems to be leading nowhere, as Karim notes: 'the kids' crusade was curdling.' (p. 71)

Karim equates happiness with a stable identity, identity for him encompassing racial, class, gender and professional aspects. He classifies people into three categories: 'those who knew what they wanted to do; those (the unhappiest) who never knew what their purpose in life was; and those who found out later on.' (p. 95) Karim's father takes a long time to find out what Britain is really like for an immigrant, and in his dilemma over leaving his wife, in the end weights the argument in favour of what he wants: 'Only unhappiness is gained by acting in accordance with duty, or obligation, or guilt, or the desire to please others.' (p. 76) Haroon, the failed law student, the upper-class Indian who becomes a socialist after realising how servants were treated, achieves self-understanding only through giving up trying to achieve the impossible: a British identity and please all his loved ones. He sees the greed of materialism and his new-found wisdom gives him a superiority he comes to believe in. As Partha Chatterjee<sup>7</sup> says of Indian nationalism, it 'located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it located itself superior to the West and hence undominated and sovereign.' But it is a hollow victory for Haroon, for he compromises his authentic life by making his mysticism sessions pay and living off Eva's new income from house redecoration. In any case Existentialists had been saying the same for some time, and other professional gurus, the psychologists, had a similar 'truth' to purvey: 'In Europe terrorist groups were bombing capitalist targets; in London psychologists

were saying that you had to live your own life in your own way, and not according to your family, or you'd go mad.' (p. 62)

This doctrine frees the individual without rejecting materialism and it seems to be the doctrine followed by most of the younger generation here, whether white, half-caste or brown. Jamila, however, on her commune, rejects the white materialist society. She has educated herself, with the help of the Miss Cutmore of the significant name, on 'Angela Davis, Baldwin, Malcolm X, Greer, Millett.' (p. 95) She is militant, Karim jokes that she has 'a PhD in physical retribution', and accuses Karim of being bourgeois: 'Families aren't sacred, especially to Indian men, who talk about nothing else and act otherwise.' (p. 55) The horrific intertextual references suggest Karim's exaggeration when he says of her: 'She was 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.' (p. 56) But there is a real fear of violence from a white racist group, and indeed, in the novel we have Changez attacked by a National Front group. Karim sadly has to agree with Jamila 'The thing was, we were supposed to be English, but to the English we were always wogs, and nigs and Pakis and the rest of it.' (p. 53) Jamila's commune, therefore, has a very ambitious and improbably idealistic design, and that is to overthrow 'the whole principle of power-over.' (p. 218) Karim, always a compromiser, finds authenticity in exploiting his half-caste destiny and in pretending to be others in his profession of actor.

#### 4.4 MEDIASCAPE

The power of the media in the West, whether they be newspapers, books, magazines, TV or radio, is shown by the way all the characters' aspirations are formed through their favourite medium, or by the fact that they exploit a certain medium to fulfill their objectives or to create an identity. Karim's parents read the *Daily Mirror*, while Eva takes (and perhaps does not read) *Vogue* and the *New Statesman*. His mother escapes the drudgery of her life through typically lower-class TV such as *Steptoe and Son* and *Candid Camera*. (p. 20) Even the most 'Indian' of the Indians prefer Western leisure activities: Anwar would rather go to Las Vegas with its glamorous gambling houses than go back to India. Changez has his life transformed by Harold Robbins. The hilarious episode of Changez 'the Dildo Killer' as he causes the death of his father-in-law with a sexual aid, is made possible through the contact of the Western and Eastern worlds and at the same time is an ironic reflection on the importance of the penis in both cultures.

The fast-moving consumerism and disposability of culture is most evident in the rise to fame of Karim and Charlie. Karim at seventeen studies the *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express* to keep up with the music of the seventies – the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd. His dreams at this stage are 'mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs.' (p. 15) He is in love with Charlie's image, but in an envious rather than a possessive way, he wanted to *be* him rather than be his lover. After at first finding the punkies 'an alien race', Charlie joins the New Wave because there is money and success there. His model is David Bowie, who is made to have gone to the same school as Charlie and Karim. Bowie's photograph becomes an icon as youths pray to become pop-stars instead of motor mechanics.

Karim's rise to fame exploits his Indian side. He starts out in popular, childrens' theatre as Mowgli in a production of *The Jungle Book*. He hates wearing brown make-

up, a loin-cloth and putting on an Indian accent. If he had known, he would also have hated the fact that he got the job not through his own talents, but through the influence of Eva Kay. But his success here does lead to a more ambitious part in a new experimental play. He is called upon to be creative and does a rendition of *Changez*, although he compromises his loyalty in doing so and is saved only because *Changez* does not recognise himself. In the *Changez* figure, Karim learns that one man's suffering becomes another man's entertainment. Pyke cynically puts it 'We have class, race, fucking and farce. What more could you want as an evening's entertainment?.' (p. 189) Hanif Kureishi in fact serves us up a dish with the same ingredients, which is a commentary on us the readers. As we see Karim evolve from subject to which the events happen, to ubiquitous observer, we imagine him becoming a creative writer as well as actor, and we can see how this postmodern novel 'writes' itself.

When Karim makes the break from theatre, a minority cult, to TV in a soap opera, it is again as an Indian: 'The rebellious student son of an Indian shopkeeper' - he is to portray a male version of Jamila. Sadly, money is made out of suffering, money and fame are hard to resist when you have grown up desiring them, and suffering in its morbidity creates a media cult of instant horror, on the TV every day: 'abortions and racist attacks (...) Millions watched those things. I would have a lot of money. I would be recognised all over the country. My life would change overnight.' (p. 259) Money buys time, so we imagine Karim the actor in his spare time writing up his life as a postmodern novel.

#### 4.5 FINANSCAPE

The desire for money and the material possessions or sexual gratification it can buy dominate the lives of most of the characters, whatever their background. Only Karim's father says: 'I don't care about money.' (p. 27) He accuses Anwar of being only interested in 'toilet rolls, sardine tins, sanitary pads and turnips' (p. 27) - Western commodities (chosen by Kureishi for comic effect), that bring him a living. Haroon's brother- and sister-in-law with their Tommy Steele culture 'measured people only in terms of power and money.' (p. 34) The signs of wealth of the Chislehurst set where Father sells his mysticism: 'velvet curtains, stereos, Martinis, electric lawnmowers, double-glazing' (p. 51) or 'trekking in India,' compare ironically and comically with the dowry the naive *Changez* asked of Jamila's parents: 'a warm winter overcoat from Moss Bros', a colour television and, inexplicably, an edition of the complete works of Conan Doyle. (p. 57) But central heating and TV rental businesses can bring more money, but not social mobility. The world of the upper-middle-classes remains closed to the new rich. Karim realises rather late that education and knowledge are 'invaluable and irreplaceable capital,' (p. 177) that 'hard words and sophisticated ideas' are 'the currency that bought you the best of what the world could offer.' (p. 178) The work ethic has not been entirely obliterated by the 'drift of the age,' as long as work is in a profession which pays well, and the new status is seen in 'the concrete display of earned cash.' (p. 75)

Eva sees money 'sloshing around' and astutely places herself where she can get some of it by selling an image and a life-style. Her son Charlie, because of his youth and sexual attraction is able to get money without education, though his manager, The Fish, has both money and education and directs him towards an anti-style as anti-star to where there is money amongst the marginated. Charlie's first punk record 'would be vilified and banned, guaranteeing credibility and financial success,' (p. 153) for

'Charlie Hero' 'appealed to the people who had the most disposable income, gays and young people, especially girls.' (p. 247) In America, he is selling a slightly different product, he is exploiting the suffering of England: 'But the menace was gone. The ferocity was already a travesty, and the music (...) had lost its drama and attack when transported from England with its unemployment, strikes and class antagonism (...) He was selling Englishness, and getting a lot of money for it.' (p. 247) Exploitative economic practices, which overvalue pop music and culture, are a form of neo-colonialism spread through the Western media.

#### 4.6 TECHNOSCAPE

The throw-away consumerism of the Western world rests upon an infrastructure of technological advance. This is not a novel with much explicit reference to technology, but its presence and importance are noted in the metonymic symbols which trace development, such as the pink Vauxhall Viva with quadrophonic speakers, to the latest in sophisticated equipment used in the pop industry. Technological advances change lives; Jeeta, for example, installs deep-freezers to modernise the store. Even Shinko, who makes a living out of other peoples' sexual needs, uses the latest in sexual aids acquired by the imaginative Changez.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This detailed study of one fictional portrayal of generally middle-class life in multiracial London, applying the paradigmatic approach of Arjun Appadurai, shows us how a post-modern and post-colonial writer can exploit the variety of discourses available to him/her for the purposes of drama and comedy. Through presenting culture-specific knowledges, parody and history as unstable discourse, a writer can at the same time make the new tendencies of colonialism transparent. By asking the reader to focus on global finance, technology and the role of the media, as well as the usual ethnic and ideological aspects of society, Appadurai helps us discover the way in which an author can write into his/her work the driving forces of the age. The real power centres become apparent as we follow the progress of the protagonists of *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Western technology allows hundreds of thousands of paperback copies of novels, hundreds of thousands of tapes or compact discs to be made or marketed or thrown away if not sold, and TV programmes to reach millions of homes, so instant fame and instant millionaire status are available to a writer, a pop-singer and an actor. This is the new homogenising force of the age. Kureishi shows us that 'post-colonial' is a false umbrella term which is neo-colonial: it depreciates the Karims and the Genes to simply equate them because they are not white, and the Jeetas and the Jamilas If we equate them because they are Indian women. Post-colonial writers, if Kureishi and Rushdie are to be taken as examples, must continue to work within the European episteme if they wish to have a voice, but it is to be hoped that they can make themselves heard from inside.

Similarly, 'post-modern' is a term we use for want of perspective. The continuing controversy over the relationship between the two 'posts', postmodernism and post-colonialism<sup>8</sup> will not be resolved until we cease to make impossible generalisations about heterogeneous cultural phenomena, and until the fact of the multiple view-

point of society in the new multiracial world comes to be accepted. To entertain visions of seamlessness, continuity and homogeneity with regard to ethnic communities is a neocolonialism to be avoided, and the only way non-Western writers can resist the hegemony of the West and this false vision is to continue to be *chamchas*, in Rushdie's words,<sup>9</sup> and to harness the power of the new 'voice to the world' becoming available to them, fraught with danger as this option is.

## Notes

1. See, for example, the article by Anne McClintock (1992) "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-colonialism'", *Social Text*, Spring, pp. 115, reprinted in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Eds.) (1993) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
2. From (1990) *Public Culture*, 2:2, Spring, pp. 1-11, 15-24, reprinted in Williams and Chrisman (Eds.) pp. 324-339.
3. Hanif Kureishi (1990) *The Buddha of Suburbia*. London: Faber & Faber. All references are from this edition.
4. Benedict Anderson, (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
5. From J Rutherford (Ed.) (1990) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 222-37, reprinted in Williams and Chrisman (Eds.), pp. 392-403.
6. George Lakoff / Mark Johnson (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
7. From (1989) "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question," in Sangari and Vaid *Recasting Woman: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Woman, reprinted in Williams & Chrisman (Eds.), p. 322.
8. Discussed in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (1989) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge. And Ian Adam & Helen Tiffin (Eds.) (1991) *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-colonialism and Post-modernism*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
9. Someone who 'sucks up to powerful people', Salman Rushdie, (1980) "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance," *The Times*, 3 July p. 8.