

Reading Hanif Kureishi's Representation of the London Suburbs in *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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Abstract This article reads the representation of the London suburbs in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* against the tradition of English critical and literary engagement with suburbia. It argues that Kureishi gets beyond the stereotypes of the English suburb by representing it as a complex and meaningful cultural zone. He also highlights the suburb's performative nature to demonstrate identity as an anti-essentialist concept. The article concludes by suggesting that, by endowing the London suburbs with more complexity and possibilities, Kureishi's work contributes to the creation of new meanings and significations of the English suburb and participates in the reconfiguring of the English landscape.

Key words *The Buddha of Suburbia*; London suburbs; stereotype; performance; ethnic identity

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Despite its physical marginality, suburbs are in no way marginal places in modern societies. Having been established as a popular form of mass metropolitan living for a century and a half,¹ suburbia is now a constant fact of human geography and becoming more central in the explanation of contemporary experience.² However, despite its sociological and cultural significance, suburbia has been, until recently, little examined and remained more or less invisible in most accounts of modernity. Suburbia, just as Roger Webster reveals, "has no history, its archives are empty"

(2).

In England, where the first modern suburbs developed and the majority of its population is suburbanized,³ suburbia has been previously overlooked in literary circles. Ged Pope, in his recent survey of the English literature, points out that it is “difficult to find serious and direct mention of the suburb in fiction: quite often they are usually glimpsed in writing that is primarily focused elsewhere” (*Reading London's Suburbs* 9). The absence of suburbia from English literary canon is vividly shown in the reaction of such post-war immigrant writers as George Lamming and V. S. Naipaul upon their first arrival in the London suburbs. In *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Naipaul states that while he came to a place that he knew very well, that is, from literary works, he actually “found a city that was strange and unknown” (qtd. in Pope, *Reading London's Suburbs* 143).⁴ This “familiar unfamiliarity” as termed by Pope, exposes the fact that the suburbs “have not featured in much London writing” (143).

Therefore, as one of the few English novels that use suburbia as both a setting and a serious subject, the significance of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is self-evident. A semi-autobiographical coming-of-age novel set in the 1970s, the novel explores the growing experience of a mixed race child in south London suburbs. Now canonical in surveys of recent English fiction, it has garnered much critical attention, among which the suburban theme is the most frequently discussed.

However, pervasive among critics is the belief that the novel follows the English literary tradition that has more or less presented suburbia in a stereotypical manner.⁵ The interpretation sounds reasonable since Kureishi's depiction of the south London suburbs evokes a series of familiar stereotypes about suburbia, the novel's bipartite narrative structure also seems to reinforce the negative idea that suburbia is the place to be escaped from. However, it is also over simplistic in that it ignores the fact that a more subtle and complicated picture actually exists underneath the surface. Through a close reading of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the article attempts to challenge such a view and argues that the novel gives a much more complex representation of the English suburb, which emerges as meaningful cultural zone that provides new possibilities for constructing ethnic identity.

Suburbia in the English Literary Tradition

The noticeable lack of concern about suburbia is one prominent phenomenon pointed out in several recent critical works on the English suburb. The primary reason of its absence, according to Webster, is that the English literary and literary-

critical discourses have been dominated by the country/city dichotomy, and that, while highly valuing the urban, they rarely bestow on the suburb an equally important status (4). The belief that “we must turn to the city in order to examine the distinctive conditions of contemporary life” has persisted through the English literary and critical tradition (Brook 209). Suburbia came to assume a position of other, an empty sign, and a space devoid of cultural importance.

Another reason, as put forward by Pope, is the concern that the ordinary experience of the suburb may not be proper literary material (*Reading London's Suburbs* 9). Created to satisfy the demand for the private and the domestic, the English suburbs are very often the home of the lower-middle class, the experience of this social group — the everyday family concerns and trivial routines, is considered “not the kind of experience that literature deals with” (9).

There is also the conventional opposition between the city and the suburb that always privileges the former. Pervasive in the English public consciousness is the perception of the city as a place of freedom, excitement, heterogeneity and boundless possibilities. While the suburb has always been viewed as the other of the city and defined by its difference from the city. It functions in the minds of most English people a pejorative space: ugly-looking, mundane, inert, consumerist, and above all, a monotonous and boring place where nothing much happens. Pope quotes Walter Crane, a popular Victorian historian, as saying, “The life of the suburb is one without any society; no social gatherings or institutions; as dull a life as any man imagined” (*Reading London's Suburbs* 2). Another fixed connotation of suburbia is homogeneity. The suburb is, in the words of mid-twentieth-century urban theorist Lewis Mumford, “a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable house... inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group” (qtd. in Pope 1-2).

The assumed monotony and homogeneity provided rich satire for the writers who wrote about the suburb, and in return, their representations contributed to the more stereotypical construction of the suburb. In his recent survey, Dominic Head points out that British novelists “have played their part in establishing suburbia as an object of ridicule” (*The Cambridge Introduction* 213), and post-war British fictional engagement with suburbia consists of stereotypical representations of suburban life that depict it as “deadening, unimaginative, representative of a low or restricted common denominator” (218). Pope holds a similar view in his essay on south London suburbs by arguing that English fictional representations have “mocked, despised, scapegoated and stereotyped” suburbia, depicting it as “remote, unknowable, philistine, standardized and insignificant” (n. p.).

Charles Pooter, the fictional character in George and Weedon Grossmith's comic novel *The Diary of a Nobody* (1889) who is always engaged in trivial domestic tasks, has been an enduring illustration of suburban banality and a figure of satire throughout the 20th century. A more recent example is George Orwell's *Coming up for Air* (1939), in which he deploys the most established icons for representing suburbia as "a line of semi-detached torture chambers where the poor little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver" (qtd. in Webster 1). The tendency to connect the uniform and mock architectural design of the suburb houses with loss of individuality and moral corruption of its inhabitants can be found in many English fictional treatments of suburbia.

The Suburb: Beyond Stereotype and Dichotomy

The Buddha of Suburbia is divided into two sections entitled "In the Suburbs" and "In the City." It is so structured as to stage the escape from the suburbs to the metropolitan center, and simultaneously the development from adolescence to adulthood of Karim Amir, the protagonist and narrator of the story. From the very beginning, Karim expresses his desire to flee the suburbs for the city, "where life would be bottomless in its temptations" (Kureishi 8). For Karim, the inner city represents freedom, excitement, opportunity, adventure and sexual exploration. In contrast, Bromley, the south London suburb where he grew up is "a leaving place" (117), which he loathes and cannot wait to get away from.

In Kureishi's depictions, Bromley conforms to the most stereotyped image of the English suburb. His description of the place as a dreary world with "gloomy, echoing streets [...] neat gardens and scores of front rooms containing familiar strangers and televisions shining like dying lights" (74) is no different from that of Orwell's. Without exception, its life style is conformist, passive and boring as "most of the neighborhood went to bed at ten thirty" and "people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness. It was all familiarity and endurance: security and safety were the reward of dullness" (62).

As Raymond Williams claims: "there are no suburbs: there are only ways of seeing places as suburbs" (qtd. in Brook 212). The stereotypical way to see an area of a city/town as suburban in England is to classify it as lower-middle class. In this story, Karim's family is a typical lower-middle-class family. His father, Haroon, lives the typical life of a suburban father, commuting to a civil servant job in London and fleeing the city as quickly as he can after work. He is the epitome of lower-middle class man: home-oriented, trivial and frustrated. While Karim's mother, Margaret, is a typical suburban housewife, bored, depressed and neglected

who is always engaged in household chores in the kitchen. They are unhappily married but divorce is out of the question because “divorce wasn’t something that would occur to them” (8). The mother is marked by her extreme conservatism. Obviously, the suburb is characterized by the routine and mind-set of the lower-middle-class.

The more obvious way in which Kureishi conforms to traditional depictions of suburbia is by underlining the centrality of consumption and materialism. Bromley has been turned into a carnival of consumerism as Karim observes a crowd of shoppers, “They were fanatic shoppers in our suburbs. Shopping was to them what the rumba and singing is to Brazilians. Saturday afternoons, when the streets were solid with white faces, was a carnival of consumerism as goods were ripped from shelves” (65). He also mocks the materialistic attitude of the suburbanites by saying “when people drowned they saw not their lives but their double-glazing flashing before them” (23).

In this sense, the novel fits into the long-time English literary tradition that represents the suburb stereotypically as homogeneous, boring and culturally empty. However, a careful analysis of the novel reveals its depictions of suburbia are far more subtle and complex. In fact, underneath the surface, there is a submerged representation that proves the suburbia a place that contains more complexity.

Although Karim complains about the suburb’s homogeneity, it turns out to be anything but a homogeneous mass of semis. The various south London suburbs that are used as the setting appear far more distinctive than they are usually expected. The description given by Karim in the first section of the novel — “neat gardens and scores of front rooms containing familiar strangers and televisions shining like dying lights” (74) seems to prove suburbia’s homogeneity, but the passage also shows its diversity as he moves on to introduce some of the inhabitants in detail:

Here lived Mr. Whitman, the policeman, and his young wife, Noleen; next door were a retired couple, Mr. and Mrs. Holub. They were socialists in exile from Czechoslovakia [...] Opposite them were another retired couple, a teacher and his wife, the Gothards. An East End family of birdseed dealers, the Lovelaces, were next to them [...] Further up the street lived a Fleet Street reporter, Mr. Nokes, his wife and their overweight kids, with the Scoffields – Mrs. Scoffield was an architect, next door to them. (74)

This description reveals a tremendous amount of variety even among the residents of a single street, who are of different ages, different occupations and different

political backgrounds, a picture just opposite to the impression given by Lewis Mumford. Pope even argues that there is actually nothing banal about Kureishi's south London suburbs as they are packed with people with unique characteristics (*Reading London's Suburbs* 159).

Indeed Kureishi's suburb does not remain stultifying for long. Karim's self-confession soon discloses the secret places that have been transformed as "playgrounds and sexual schools" (74), where young people enjoy music, games, drugs and sexual experimentations. As the youth's disruption of the parentally-controlled space, it adds a sense of freedom and excitement to the place and shows the potential of the suburb to "adapt itself to different circumstances" (Pope, *Reading London's Suburbs* 4). Clearly, the suburb presented here contradicts Karim's complaints about it being predictable and boring.

Even the most gloomy domestic space of the suburban home is endowed with the possibilities of sexual exploration and identity reinvention. The crucial episode in showing the suburb's transformational possibilities is in the opening scene where Haroon transforms himself from a civil servant commuter into an Eastern mystic. By using his Indian ethnicity and knowledge gained from the books on yoga and Eastern mysticism, Haroon deviates from the role of a mundane suburban man and performs as a spiritual leader to a roomful of suburbanites, and thus successfully reinvents himself as a spiritual advisor titled "Buddha."

The suburb is portrayed not only as a place of variety and possibilities, but as a zone of culture. In describing several suburban households, Kureishi emphasizes the highbrow tastes of their inhabitants, for instance, the house hosting Haroon's performance that is full of books and records, and Eva's house that has great attraction to Karim because of "the talk of music and books, of names like Dvorak, Krishnamurti and Eclectic" (12). Much as they care about appearance and show-off, people in the suburbs still have a keen interest in the spiritual as evidenced by the popularity of Haroon's teaching.

Unlike Margaret who spends every evening watching TV, most of the suburban characters are industriously involved in cultural accumulation. Both Haroon and Eva are avid readers and even join a creative writing course. Charlie is enthusiastic about rock and roll and active in practicing singing. Karim's younger brother, Allie, is preoccupied with fashion. With a PhD degree, Jamila proves to be the most educated among them. Already an avid reader at the age of thirteen, Jamila reads widely from Baudelaire to Simone de Beauvoir. Even the working-class drinkers in the pub in Beckenham are so cultured by talking about music artists like Syd Barret that Karim feels ignorant in comparison and decides to "study

the *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express* to keep up” (8).

Clearly, the suburbs are not without cultural pursuits. Webster points out that the growth and changing identity of suburbia have made it not only the major consumer of culture, but also “an increasingly significant producer of culture” (5). Indeed, it is a richly productive site that produces various forms of culture, especially the subculture of pop music. As a form of culture originated in suburbia, English pop music is, to some extent, account of the suburban experience and aspirations. It is this same desire to escape and change, and the same longing for the city that are relevant to the suburban youth.

Right after the party at Eva’s house Karim has an epiphany regarding how he wants to live in the future, “I wanted to live always this intensely: mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs” (15), without realizing he has already obtained the kind of life envisioned by him. On the contrary, he mistakenly believes that it is only available in the city, a place that has been imagined superior in every aspect. It is not until he makes his adventure in the city that he begins to realize the gap between this utopian imagination of the city and its sobering realities.

Racism is one of the experiences that inform the suburban lives of the immigrants during 1970s. In Penge where Anwar’s family live, the sporadic outbreaks of racist violence always leave their lives miserable. In Karim’s imagination, London should be more multi-racial where “there were thousands of black people everywhere, so I wouldn’t feel exposed” (121), and people there should be more tolerant. But he finds that the racism he has encountered in the suburbs is also pervasive in the so-called liberal middle and upper-middle circles in London, even though in a more subtle way. As he reflects on the suicide of Eleanor’s black lover, Gene, he attributes the reason to racism, “[he] killed himself because every day, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they him a nigger, a slave, a lower being” (227), he then realizes that he is in the same position as Gene because of the exact same racist treatment that he has received in London.

Karim’s experience also proves the belief that London is awash with new possibilities for self-creation a fantasy. Making his fame as an actor in a theatre in London, Karim finds himself trapped in a fixed role of lower-middle class Asian or Black that the white people expect him to play: ridiculous and funny with strange habits and weird customs, a popular stereotype held by most white people. O’Reilly contends that the presence of the white elites like Shadwell and Pyke “creates an environment that is more homogenous and less culturally diverse than suburbia”

(n. p.), and these upper-class people in the city can be just as narrow-minded, consumerist and snobbish as the lower-middle class of the suburbs.

Here we can see both the suburb and the city are unstable locales. The suburb appears much more diverse, exciting and culturally sophisticated than it is traditionally considered, while the privileged city that seems to promise many freedoms turns out to be mono-cultural, prejudiced and even repressive. As the rest of the story unfolds, we come to see the distinctions between the suburb and the city are becoming more blurred. Therefore, the binary opposition between them which the novel seems to rely on tends to break down. In this sense, the bipartite structure of the novel can be seen as a deliberate narrative device used by the author to question and deconstruct the traditional urban-suburb dichotomy.

In fact, Karim's move from the suburb to the city is not a one-way journey. Throughout the second part, Karim repeatedly returns to and continues his observation of the suburb, which constitutes "an undercurrent which runs counter to the theme of escape" (Head, "Poisoned Minds" 82). Therefore, Sebastian Groes deems the novel an anti-Bildungsroman in that it records Karim's failure to "transcend his rather childish tantrum against suburbia" (211). Therefore, the novel can be seen as Kureishi's "confession of youthful misperception" that he is trying to correct.

The Suburb as a Place of Identity Performance

The collapse of the binary opposition between the city and the suburb undermines the former as a privileged site for Karim's negotiation of identity. It is worth pointing out that it is exactly in the cosmopolitan city that Karim and Charlie are found to be stuck in an assumed role. More precisely, the city is the place where Karim fully realizes the performative nature of identity. His experience with acting and witnessing of Charlie's putting on various cultural persona lead him to the full realization that identity is constructed through imitation and performance.

In fact, Kureishi hints at the performative nature of identity from the very beginning by depicting the suburb as a place of appearance and display. Karim points to the prevalent practice of house makeover in the suburb by saying that all of the houses have been decorated or modified, "one had a new porch, another double-glazing, 'Georgian' windows or a new door with brass fittings. Kitchens had been extended, lofts converted, walls removed, garages inserted" (74-75). But this proves important since the game of display enables one suburban house differentiate from the other. The differences between the suburbs are also illustrated by the difference of appearance, with the garden as the showcase. The more affluent

Chislehurst, for example, has gardens with “greenhouses, grand oaks and sprinklers on the lawn” (29) while in the poorer suburbs like Brixton, the gardens are “full of rusting junk and sodden overcoats; lines of washing crisscrossed over the debris” (43).

As Susan Brook argues, the aesthetic of display proves the suburb the perfect location for “the display and performance of personal identities” (214). Here everyone is refashioning him/herself by trying on roles or disguises. Haroon, for instance, after years of trying to be more of an Englishman, turns himself into a fashionable Indian guru by exaggerating his Indian accent, and putting on exotic costumes and an Eastern mysticism. Eva, through decoration, marketing and accumulation of culture, becomes an interior designer and makes her way to London’s upper-class circles. As can be seen, makeover is the key to identity construction. Actually, Karim associates the sense of self with appearance in his first encounter with Charlie. He confesses that he wants to be him, “I coveted his talents, face, style. I wanted to wake up with them all transferred to me” (15). Here, the change of the self is connected with the change of appearance.

The novel’s emphasis on surface over depth in its exploration of identity construction can be seen as Kureishi’s challenge to and deconstruction of the essentialist nature of identity. In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall puts forward two different ways of thinking about identity. One position defines identity “with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning,” while the other views identity as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being,’” which is subject to constant transformation (392-99). Obviously, it is the latter position that Kureishi subscribes to. In the essay on the arduous process of his identity formation, “The Rainbow Sign,” Kureishi castigates the essentialist notion of British identity and calls for “a fresh way of seeing Britain” and “a new way of being British” (101-02).

In the novel, Kureishi shows his anti-essentialist position through the different treatments of two camps of characters, those who adopt flexible and changing identities and those who locate their sense of identity in a fixed position. Bart Moore-Gilbert argues that the former set of characters are portrayed sympathetically, while the latter are treated with antagonism and portrayed with a tragic ending because of the rigid identities that they confine themselves to. One extreme example is Anwar, whose total reliance on Islam “for his sense of identity ironically throws him into a crisis of identity that leads to self-defeat” (qtd. in Finney 126). Stuart Hall argues that identity should be thought of “as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process” (392). This way of looking at identity

is fully shown in Karim. His identity is under constant transformations as the story proceeds and will “undergo further transformations” (O'Reiley) as the story ends with an uncertainty of his future.

Pope points out two prominent features of the contemporary British suburban space. One is its rapid and ever-accelerating development. Pope argues that the “ubiquity of the suburban landscape” is the fundamental characteristic that has transformed Britain's metropolitan space over the last several decades (*Reading London's Suburbs* 162). The suburban space has become ever unstable and its boundary has been ever shifting. The traditional dichotomy of suburb and city can no longer be applied. Another feature is that it is becoming increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural (162). Since the 1980s, it is populated by more and more immigrants born outside Britain.⁶ The immigrants' settlement in the suburbs has increased Britain's heterogeneity.

In view of the above, Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, with its new perspective that transcends the conventional binary and its complex portrayal of the English suburb, deserves the critical acclaim as “the most incisive suburban fiction of recent times” (Frith 271). Adopting a realistic style, the novel depicts an emerging multicultural Britain and articulates the experience of the first and second generation immigrants as well as their loves and hates of the suburbs. Thus, another significance of the novel lies in its status as one of the forerunners of a type of writing that both describes the experience of diaspora and participates in the reconstruction of the English landscape.

Notes

1. For more information on the origin and early history of the modern suburbs, see Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: the Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1987) 18-38; Richard Harris and Peter J. Larkham, *Changing Suburbs: Foundation, Form and Function* (London: E & FN Spon, 1999) 1-20.
2. “Suburb”, according to the definition given by *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), is a district, especially a residential area, lying immediately outside or within the boundaries of a town or city; while “suburbia” refers to the behavior, opinions and way of living typical of the people who live in the suburbs.
3. For more detail, see Mark Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Postwar England* (Oxford: Oberg, 2003) 2.
4. Here entails an important notion of the city as both material and imaginary. In *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004), McLeod argues that London

“emerges at the intersection of the concrete and the noumenal, between the material conditions of metropolitan life and the imaginative representation made of it” (7).

5. See Susan Brook, “Hegemony? Suburban Space in *The Buddha of Suburbia*,” *British Fiction of the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 214-216.

6. For more detail, see Sophie Watson & Anamik Saha, “Suburban Drifts: Mundane Multiculturalism in Outer London,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36.12 (2013): 2016-2034.

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