"Self" Through Language in Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* (1990)

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Abstract

Hanif Kureishi once claimed that everything that he writes is soaked in Englishness. This claim, however, does not necessarily preclude his awareness of the "other". This article will explore the way this "Englishness" gets redefined in the works of this post-colonial writer. It will concentrate on the otherness of the other in an identifiable Englishness of the author, illustrating the characteristic "otherness" of the other as a member of the dominated out-group, whose identity is considered lacking and who is subjected to discrimination by the in-group. Hybridity of Kureishi's vision generates his stories and propels his characters to reinvent their identities, individually as well as nationally. The notion that the old days are over and that Britain isn't racist anymore is proved wrong by many characters who get victimized in today's multi-cultural England. Kureishi's perspective on violence, racism and prejudice based on color and creed is essentially Anglo-Asian. The exclusivity of this post-colonial condition reflects Kureishi's concern with the fable of transposed identities of the immigrants from former colonies. The dynamism of his story-telling redefines the ambiguities of identities shaped by color, culture immigration and/or exile - themes central to Kureishi's storytelling.

Keywords: multiculturalism, redefining Englishness, hybridity, literature of diaspora.

> 'Even if it communicates nothing, discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the obvious, it affirms that speech constitutes truth; even if it is destined to deceive, it relies on faith in testimony' (*Ecrits* 209).

The Buddha of Suburbia (1990) is written in an autobiographical mode in that it begins with Karim Amir narrating the story of his life in a self-conscious manner: "My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered...a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed... having emerged from two histories... I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs... going somewhere" *(Buddha* 3*)*.

However, to consider the narrative as an autobiography alone would be too simplistic. The hybridity of the narrator-protagonist along with an immigrant, Indian father from an ex-colony (India) ultimately entangle the hero with displacement, diaspora experiences, identity crises, and liminality; leading to psychoanalysis and postcolonial discourse. The autobiographical mode enables Karim to reconstruct/re-arrange the story of his life through a process of introspection and memoriography. Nonetheless since Kureishi more pronouncedly focuses on characters that belong to the immigrant community of the Asians/Anglo-Asians subjected to the worst kind of racism, prevalent in England during the 60's and 70's, the narrative as Karim's case study in particular, becomes an agent of healing through psychoanalysis whereas narration/speech becomes a medium of healing.

Psychoanalysis, to borrow a Lacanian phrase, is a "Promethean discovery" (*Ecrits*

201*)* by Freud which lays great emphasis on (the patient's) speech. It is an extremely dialectical experience relying solely on words. Freud, through psychoanalysis, meant to show us that there are illnesses that speak. Looking at Karim and many other characters in the novel under consideration, in the psychoanalytical framework, we can not only see their illnesses speaking but are made to hear the truth of what they say. Introspection, as an important tool in the discourse (of psychoanalysis) helps slip Karim's mind all the important things that he had been repressing up till now. The animated and pompous style with which he starts the story of his life could well be termed as "free association" in the Freudian sense. For example:

> Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless, and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it. Anyway, why search the inner room when it's enough to say that I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement, action and sexual interest I could find, because things were so gloomy, so slow and heavy, in our family, I don't know why. Quite frankly, it was all getting me down and I was ready for anything *(Buddha* 3*)*.

The method of free association requires the curtailment of the mind's tendency to judge, evaluate, and criticize, whereby the natural flow of association is likely to be blocked. The above quotation, though rather long, shows how Karim, through free association, subjects his own "Self" to the dialectic of analysis which serves as a "working through…the triad: frustration, aggressiveness and regression;" *(Ecrits* 207*)* the malaise

engendered by his hybridity and suburban existence in a class-conscious, essentialist society. Dialectic is integral to the discourse in that while narrating the story of his life in broad strokes of sincerity (throwing his stays and defenses to the wind) Karim becomes involved in an ever greater dispossession of his "Self". The effort involved in reconstructing his life (story) for another, fundamentally alienates him from himself so as to enable him to reconstruct himself objectively like an "other"/ an object displayed before a mirror. The image thus reconstructed, no matter how perfect in resemblance to the "Self' shall remain the "other's jouissance that he would have gotten recognized there" *(Ecrits* 208*)*. In such a (re)construct even a simple slip of the tongue attains the status of a complex statement, adding a distinct meaning to the narrative.

As an autobiography *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) focuses on the various stages of individual development vis-à-vis Karim by searching for particular events of his (personal) history. For example, the day everything changed in Karim's life is revisited in detail. He was seventeen. His father had returned from work in a rather *high* mood which he demonstrated by kissing his little brother Allie, his mother and Karim with enthusiasm, "as if we'd recently been rescued from an earthquake" *(Buddha* 3*)*. The word *earthquake* even if a slip of tongue, determines the traumatic value attached to that particular day in Karim's life. Throughout the narrative events are revisited not only for historicizing the facts chronologically but more often for their traumatic significance. Such historicizing of the facts helps teach Karim to recognize his unconscious in his story as the events thus revisited have already been determined, unconsciously, as historical turning points in his life.

The day Karim visited Eva's house with Dad is lingered upon for voyeuristic pleasure: "Eva hugged Dad and kissed him all over his face, including his lips. This was the first time I'd seen him kissed with interest" followed by more details pertaining to the conscious realization of his own self as other, "she turned to me…pumping out a plume of Oriental aroma…she kissed me on the lips too… holding me at arm's length… she looked me all over and said, 'Karim Amir, you are so exotic, so original! It is such a contribution! It's so you!'" *(Buddha* 9*)*.

Karim's remembering of his past becomes hypnotic at this juncture in that it reproduces his story in the form of spoken representation/verbalization (It is pertinent to notice Eva's remarks that Kureishi puts within quotation marks). This type of hypnotic remembering always involves the material called drama due to an inherently conflicting form and internal dispute which finds an outlet in psychoanalysis. Thus his remembering marks the convergence of material that vacillates between the imaginary and the real, unconsciously bringing the reader/analyst to the reality of what is neither true nor based, totally, upon lies. The means employed for the revelation of truth about various characters is their speech which confers meaning upon their actions/functions vis-à-vis Karim's reality and its (speech's) "operations are those of history, insofar as history constitutes the emergence of truth in reality [reel]" *(Ecrits* 214*)*. Words like "exotic" and "original" become metaphors for Karim's reality (Otherness) in relation to his English host namely Eva, whereas dropping of hints like "full-length, multi-colored kaftan", "Oriental aroma", eyes darkened with "kohl" (*Buddha* 8-9) and bare feet in the description of Eva's characteristic personality, lets "the grain of truth hidden within"

(Ecrits 221*)* regarding her fascination for the exotic/Orient/Other manage to escape.

Kureishi, in his essay titled "Telling Stories" writes: "The mystery of the human subject, and its elusiveness, are common to both psychoanalysis and literature" (348). In another of his essays titled "Loose Tongues" Kureishi explains that human beings leak the truth of their desire in "their dreams, fantasies and drunkenness, in their jokes and mistakes, as well as in delirium, religious ecstasy, in babble and in saying the opposite of what they mean" (343). Keeping in mind Kureishi's views on means regarding the revelation of truth, Karim's epiphany in the Kays' bathroom can well be analyzed with the help of words/phrases that are used to describe it: "framed theater posters for Genet plays…bamboo and parchment scrolls with tubby Orientals copulating on them" *(Buddha* 15*)*. The experience is apocalyptic insofar as it gives Karim's "going somewhere" *(Buddha* 3*)* a direction. "Posters for Genet plays" and "tubby Orientals copulating" become signifiers of his desire for future happiness through artistic involvement, mysticism and sexual promise. "Posters" signify his unconscious desire for fame "plays" hint at his latent desire for a chance to exchange his role/identity (reality) with something more acceptable on a continuous basis. Likewise "Orientals copulating" signify his unconscious desire for happiness and fulfillment through oneness with the Orient which in turn is a metaphor for mysticism and the exotic / Other.

Interpretation of Karim's epiphany, as it were, involves the skill and expertise required for practicing oneiric discourse. The novel as a whole is replete with examples where through syntactical displacements; metaphors, catachresis, metonymy and antonomasia readers are allowed glimpses into the unconscious (minds) of the

characters. The very title: *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a perfect example of antonomasia. Karim uses "Buddha" for his Dad; Haroon Amir sometimes jokingly and sometimes sarcastically due to his (Dad's) masquerade as a Buddhist despite the fact that, by birth, he is a Muslim. "Buddha" a title, which at first appears to be a random selection needs to be looked into for the subjective efficacy of associations that it gives rise to. "The combinatory power that orders its equivocations" *(Ecrits* 223*)* helps the reader to recognize the very mainspring of Karim's unconscious in the choice of words. Buddha, prior to becoming the Lord of the Buddhists (followers of Buddhism) was a prince named Siddhartha, married and with children. However at a later stage in his life he left his wife, children and the luxuries of a princely existence in pursuit of "Nirvana" in other words enlightenment/ "spiritual fulfillment". Since then Buddha has become a metaphor for enlightenment and a philosophy of life which originated in the East and is associated with the Orient. Karim unconsciously sees the similarities that exist between Prince Siddhartha and Haroon Amir. Moreover, we are also made to see, obliquely, Haroon's helplessness in having to masquerade as a Buddhist as a defense mechanism in an ethnocentric society which exhibits more acceptance for the Buddhists as compared to the Muslims. Haroon often verbalizes his concern over the prejudice and injustice of the British due to which he is never promoted at his work place: "The white will never promote us…Not an Indian while there is a white man left on the earth…they still think they have an Empire when they don't have two pennies to rub together" *(Buddha* 27*)*.

Due to the prejudice and racism perpetrated by the British against the Indians in general and the "Pakis" in particular, Karim's Dad transforms himself "from being

an Indian in the Civil Service who was always cleaning his teeth with Monkey Brand black toothpowder manufactured by Nogi & Co. of Bombay, into a wise adviser he now appeared to be. Sexy Sadie! Now he was the center of the room" *(Buddha* 31*)*. The new persona brings for Dad, acceptance from the British besides fulfilling his desire for internal advancement through learning and self- discipline. It boosts his self-esteem by providing him an opportunity for public speaking and socializing which ultimately help him cure his loneliness resulting from marginalization.

While comparing Buddhism with most Western religions, Kureishi describes it as benign and morally less stringent in *My Ear at His Heart*. He further writes in the same book that it sits well with "the increasingly frenzied capitalism of the West" (60) because it is capable of "creating a calm 'spiritual' space in the midst of social fragmentation and technological progress" (60). Dad, who is often forced to take a different route to avoid "ice-pops full of piss lobbed at him by the schoolboys from the secondary modern" *(Buddha* 28*)*, delves into the realm of the esoteric because the practices, considered to be the hallmark of this realm, are more or less similar to those structured by psychoanalysis. Deep-breathing (inhaling and exhaling at regular intervals), work-outs and meditation along with Zen practices and a policy of non- violence against aggression keep Dad braced as a normalized individual in an ethnocentric society. These practices also help him cope with disillusionment, suffering and stasis. Moreover, his aggression gets manifested in sulking, "the formidable silences" *(Buddha* 76*)* and staring at people in the privacy of his house. Public speaking at Eva's place provides a long-awaited opportunity to get repressed aggression out of his system in a non-violent

manner against the targeted audience i.e. the English: "In our offices and places of work we love to tell others what to do. We denigrate them. We compare their work unfavorably with our own. We are always in competition. We show off and gossip. Our dream is of being well treated and we dream of treating others badly…" *(Buddha* 35*)*. Here Haroon's speech serves two distinct functions. One: it reveals the truth about his real "Self"/character. Two, by giving vent to his internal conflict, it becomes his "talking cure" *(Ecrits* 211*)*. Moreover, through the dialectic of the binary between us and them/ we and others, he is able to make the listeners i.e. the English see his problem from the vantage point of the other.

Nuclear holocaust during World War II, resulting from science and technological advancement in the Victorian era, gave rise to agnosticism, apostasy and social fragmentation in the West. The laissez faire policy of the capitalistic Western society added fuel to fire by replacing spirituality with materialism. Haroon, with his origin firmly rooted in the East, needs to come to terms with his ever-changing reality/living conditions: "We live in an age of doubt and uncertainty. The old religions under which people lived for ninety-nine point nine per cent of human history have decayed…We have replaced our spiritual values and wisdom with materialism…everyone is wandering around asking how to live" *(Buddha* 76*)*. Haroon's moral dilemma, at the moment, is whether he should pursue his own happiness at the expense of others (his wife and children) or whether he should learn to live with the unhappiness gained out of "acting in accordance with duty, or obligation, or guilt, or the desire to please others" *(Buddha* 76*)*. Haroon's public speaking at Eva's house in Beckenham is a means through which

his unconscious thoughts slide past the censors to become part of his conscious (mind) as deep- seated notions/ideology.

Unconscious, according to Lacan, is a chapter in a person's (subject's) history that is marked either by "a blank or occupied by a lie" *(Ecrits* 215*)*. He even calls it "the censored chapter". However, Lacan believes that truth can be had by looking elsewhere, i.e. monuments which in the case of personal history would be the body of the subject. Karim's "small and wiry" body which is "dark-skinned" is seen as a monument of his (personal) history which is an "odd mixture of continents and blood" *(Buddha* 3*)*. That is why Shadwell is so keen on casting him as Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* by Kipling. Shadwell's response to this "monument" is quite in keeping with the norms of an essentialist society committed to the commodification of "cultural practices and regimes of representation" *(Yu-cheng* 1*)*.

The truth regarding Shadwell's hysterical symptoms easily gets slipped past the censors of his consciousness during his interaction with Karim, the moment it (consciousness) is found off-guard by the unconscious. Consequently his body becomes a monument of racist aggression and hysteria expressed through language such as:

> 'What a breed of people two hundred years of imperialism has given birth to. If the pioneers from the East India Company could see you what puzzlement there'd be, everyone looks at you, I'm sure, and thinks: an Indian boy, how exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we'd hear now from him. And you are from Orpington…a half-cast in England…belonging nowhere, wanted nowhere' *(Buddha* 141*)*.

Karim, though devastated by Shadwell's racist bombardment, is unable to react in the same aggressive manner because the muscles in his face seem to have gone rigid with embarrassment. Yet the "suppression of a previous intention to say something" being an "indispensable condition for the occurrence of a slip of the tongue", *(Reason* 610*)* Karim's aggression, so far, repressed in the unconscious is manifested from time to time through slips of tongue and/or catachresis such as "snooty bastard…fucking cunt bastard shithead" *(Buddha* 140*)* "Shitvolumes" "Shadshit" and "Shitbolt" *(Buddha* 165*)* especially when Karim dwells on the incident in retrospect.

Karim's resolve to speak like Eleanor, after she mentions to him: "You've got a street voice, Karim. You are from South London" *(Buddha* 178*)*, is a conscious attempt on his part to undo history just like Eva who "wanted to scour that suburban stigma right off her body" *(Buddha* 134*)* by throwing parties at her Kensington flat and inviting every person from the theater and film that mattered, by talking about the new Dylan album and what was going on at Riverside Studios. However, having attained maturity through real-life experiences and a trip to the U.S. Karim thinks about all this in retrospect and realizes the innate futility of all such attempts: "She didn't realize it was in the blood and not on the skin; she didn't see there could be nothing more suburban than suburbanites repudiating themselves" *(Buddha* 134*)*.

Another source to look for truth, for purposes of historicity, is the archival documents which in the case of a subject (person) is his/her "childhood memories, just as impenetrable as such documents are" *(Ecrits* 215*)* when their provenance is not known. With this in view, Karim rationalizes the break-up between his Mum and Dad

in retrospect. Looking at his memories with the hindsight that maturity has brought, Karim remembers his Dad complaining: "Your mother upsets me…She doesn't join in things. It's only my damn effort keeping this whole family together. No wonder I need to keep my mind blank in constant effortless meditation" *(Buddha* 8*)*. He remembers how his mother never used to show any interest in her personal appearance as long as she remained married to Haroon: "The plump and unphysical woman with a pale round face" *(Buddha* 4*)* "never used to have more than one bath a week" *(Buddha* 270*)*. When Karim's family first moved into their house in South London suburbs, in late-1950s, "there wasn't even a bathroom. Dad used to sit with his knees up in a tin tub in the front room, and Allie and I ran to and fro with jugs of water heated on the stove" *(Buddha* 270*)*. Dad was also very particular about his personal appearance. He carefully chose the color of his shirts to be worn during the week, such as pink, blue and lilac etc. He had at least a hundred ties and he selected his cufflinks with great care; "Dad polished his shoes, about ten pairs, with patience and care, every Sunday morning" *(Buddha* 47*)*.

In order to understand the difference between Mum's and Eva's personalities and life styles, Karim revisits his memory of what he noticed in Eva's bathroom, the first time he went there. Eva's bathroom was large and situated in the center of the room. The candles, rows of lipsticks and blushers, eye-make-up removers, cleansers, moisturizers, hairsprays, creamy soaps for soft skin, sensitive skin and normal skin; soaps in exotic wrappings and pretty boxes; sweet-peas in a jam-jar and an egg-cup, rose-petals in Wedge-wood saucers; bottles of perfume, cotton wool, conditioners, hairbands, hair-slides and shampoos all bespeak of "self-attention…a world of sensuality, of smell

and touch, of indulgence and feeling, which aroused me like an unexpected caress as I undressed, lit the candles and got into the bath in this room of Eva's" *(Buddha* 92*)*.

Dad had wanted Mum to accompany him to Eva's place on his first performance: "Come on, sweetie. Let's go out together and enjoy ourselves, eh?" *(Buddha* 5*)*. Mum refused on the pretext that Eva didn't want to see her. And that she ignored her because she wasn't Indian enough. Mum didn't even like Dad's suggestion that she could wear a *sari*, insisting: "I'm only English" *(Buddha* 5*)*.

Later that night when Karim catches Dad red-handed in Eva's garden he is extremely angry with him for having betrayed his Mum. However, he does not absolve her of the responsibility of making things turn the way they do in her life. When she asks Karim as to why he has brought him home (drunk) like that, Karim looks at her standing there in her dressing- gown, touching the floor "making her look square…she reminded me of the real world. I wanted to shout at her. Take that world away" *(Buddha* 18*)*. He is angered by the way she punishes herself. He wants her to be stronger, more capable of fighting back and resolves to be strong himself.

Kureishi, in *Something to Tell You* writes: "…psychoanalysis came to interest me more, being closer to human" (202). That is probably why psychological realism is the hallmark of Kureishi's art of characterization especially where characters reveal the truth about themselves through language. Practice in psychoanalysis has shown that semantic evolution, with regard to the subject (person), is an authentic source of knowing truth about the real "Self" of the subject. Semantic evolution corresponds to the stock of words, in other words, an individual's particular vocabulary, generally dependent on

that individual's life style and character.

Karim's hybridity results in a liminal existence replete with examples that highlight the overlapping of both (Indian and English) cultures' influence on his so-called English life style. Dad's supper consisting of "a packet of kebabs and chapatis so greasy their paper wrapper had disintegrated" *(Buddha* 3*)* is a regular feature of his life. He is quite used to "lassi and hot Indian nibbles" *(Buddha* 31*)* being served during Dad's performances at Eva's place. The train that takes Ted and Karim and their sandwiches "up through the suburbs and into London" *(Buddha* 43*)* is the same by which Dad goes to his work place in London and comes back home in South London suburbs every evening "bringing keema and roti and pea curry wrapped in greasy paper in his briefcase" *(Buddha* 43*)*. Karim loves to visit Princess Jeeta and her daughter; Jamila especially when tension between his Mum and Dad has him thinking of running away. Princess Jeeta feeds him "dozens of the hot kebabs I loved, which I coated with mango chutney and wrapped in chapatti" *(Buddha* 52*)*. Karim is lovingly called "Fire Eater" *(Buddha* 52*)* in Jeeta's house because of his penchant for spicy Indian food. He also loves to take a bath at Jeeta's place despite the fact that her bathroom is rotten with its plaster crumbling off the walls, because sitting next to the bath Jeeta would "massage my head with olive oil, jamming her nifty fingers into every crevice of my skull until my body was molten" *(Buddha* 52*)*. In return Karim is instructed to walk on Jeeta's back, treading up and down, pressing his toes into her neck which becomes stiff (as if made of iron) with working in Paradise Stores day and night. Anwar often blackmails Karim with "samosas" and "sherbet fountains and the opportunity not to

work – for an extended ear-bashing" *(Buddha* 79*)*. Memories of "a steaming delicious feast of keema and aloo…rice, chapatis and nan…and lassi to drink", *(Buddha* 80*)* the first time Changez visits Anwar's flat to meet Jamila, are still fresh in Karim's mind. As far as Karim's memory goes, "Dad never touched the pig" *(Buddha* 64*)*, not so much due to any religious scruple, but mainly due to the conditioning he received during his childhood. Once when Karim offered him a smoky bacon crisp, which Dad started crunching greedily into, he said: "I didn't know you liked smoky bacon" *(Buddha* 64*)*. On hearing this Dad "sprinted into the bathroom and washed out his mouth with soap, screaming from his frothing lips that he would burn in hell" *(Buddha* 64*)*.

Karim's hybridity constantly brings him on the threshold of an existence that results in confusion with regard to his identity. The need for discovering the real "Self" becomes more pressing as he grows up. It is given impetus by the ethnocentric ideology of the racist English. Having been born to and brought up by an English mother, he is naturally imbued with the English culture. He loves drinking tea and he loves cycling too. On his cycle he goes to the tea shop in the High Street in search of his favorite blends. His bedroom contains boxes and boxes of tea, and he is "happy to have new brews with which to concoct more original combos in my teapot" *(Buddha* 62*)*. He carries several tins wherever he goes "in case my host had only Typhoo" *(Buddha* 182*)*. He needs his own resources especially at Changez's place because "he made tea by boiling milk, water, sugar, teabag and cardamom all together for fifteen minutes" *(Buddha* 182*)*. The day he leaves his house in the suburbs of London to join his Dad, Eva and Charlie, first in her house at Beckenham and later in Kensington flat, he takes

along "about twenty records, ten packets of tea, Tropic of Cancer and On the Road, and plays of Tennessee Williams" *(Buddha* 92*)*. Listening to Radio Caroline and Pink Floyd is his favorite pass time. He chooses Eleanor to fall in love with and this further steeps him in the British culture. He, who was "never one for education and vegetables, having been inoculated against both at school" *(Buddha* 174*)* is extremely pleased with Eleanor cooking for him "cabbage or broccoli or Brussels sprouts, steaming and dunking them in frying butter and garlic for a few seconds…red snapper, which tasted a little tough, like shark, in puff pastry with sour cream and parsley" *(Buddha* 175*)*. They often have a bottle of Chablis too. Karim had experienced none of this before. The mosque that he visits occasionally with Anwar some time before his (Anwar's) death is no more than "a dilapidated terraced house nearby which smelled of bhunagost" *(Buddha* 172*)*. He is depressed by the "absolutism" that Islam, according to him, has inevitably given rise to. "Anwar thought he was right about everything. No doubt on any subject ever entered his head" *(Buddha* 172*)*. The "Muslim fatalism" of Uncle Anwar that "Allah was responsible for everything" *(Buddha* 172*)* is equally depressing for Karim. He is glad to be able to get away from it all, being "an Englishman born and bred, almost" *(Buddha* 3*)*. His reaction is in accordance with the western culture that reposed little, if any, confidence in mysticism and flying carpets. In fact the West conceived of human progress in terms of "secular institutions based on reason, not revelation or scripture; the idea that there were no final solutions to human problems; and… that the health and vigor of a society was bound up with its ability to tolerate and express a plurality of views on all issues" *(The Rainbow Sign* 23-4*)*.

In his memoir, *My Ear at His Heart*, dedicated to his father, Kureishi writes: "It had occurred to me that which made me who I was, was unavailable to my consciousness. I might be confused, restless and even unhappy, but I had no Idea why" (137). Philosophy, in Kureishi's opinion, pertains to another kind of concentration and theories serve as means of creating more categories of apprehension. Philosophy, he writes, is also a discipline where you find better questions rather than answers. So, in an attempt to excavate the deepest things that are hidden about one's life, Kureishi asks:

> 'How did you get into the locked box of this inner world? Through myths, symbols, poetry? Certainly... I needed another angle, more tools…other viewpoint. I needed to believe… that knowing certain things about the self was curative. Knowledge, as Plato liked to think, made people feel better. "Who are we?" and, therefore, "How should we live?" were philosophy's central questions. It was at the heart of all our lives, and culture was entirely concerned with it.
>
> So philosophy, like literature and psychoanalysis, seemed to be a particular kind of attention to what was going on and this attention was called, by both Plato and Freud, Eros' (137-8).

If unconscious, according to the discourse of psychoanalysis, is the blank or even censored chapter of Karim's life then the truth about his history can be traced by looking at the traditions that shape and influence his life style. The dictionary meaning of "tradition" is opinion or belief or customs handed down by ancestors to posterity. Analysts include in it (tradition) the legends that "in a heroicized form" *(Ecrits* 215*)*

convey the history of the subject as a reliable source. "Children hear scores of stories, in numerous forms, before they can read them. But at the center of their education is their induction into an ongoing story. This is the family legend or tradition, various versions of which their parents and family are keen to impress on them" *(My Ear at His Heart* 7*)*.

Before moving on to the case study of the subject; Karim, in Freudian terms "as a mixture of literature, speculation and theory" *(Something to Tell You* 115*)* it is pertinent to clarify the function of symbolic identification vis-à-vis the primitive man. The primitive man believed that he was the reincarnation of an ancestor with the same name, and a recognizable recurrence of similar characteristics as well. "It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of the law" *(Ecrits* 230*)*. Analysts such as Freud and Lacan opine that "the unconscious effects of this function from narcissistic relations, or even real relations, that the subject has with the image and actions of the person who embodies this function" can be distinguished clearly during psychoanalysis.

Karim has grown up listening to stories about his father's aristocratic background which Mum refers to as his "aristocratic uselessness" *(Buddha* 24*)*. But amongst her acquaintances she is glad to boast about how proud she is of his family. "They're higher than the Churchills" and "He went to school on a horse – drawn carriage." *(Buddha* 24*)*. Unlike the swarms of immigrants who came to England during the 50s and 60s in pursuit of dreams such as money, prosperity, and success, "Dad was sent to England by his family to be educated. His mother knitted him and Anwar several itchy woolen vests

and waved them off from Bombay, making them promise never to be pork – eaters" *(Buddha* 24*)*. Dad was expected to return to India as a qualified and polished English gentleman lawyer like Gandhi and Jinnah had already done before him. Both Gandhi and Jinnah commanded tremendous respect from the Indians as well as the British in the 50s and 60s because of their legendary roles in the Sub-Continent's struggle for independence from the British Rule in 1947.

Contrary to all expectations, the wet and foggy weather of London and the rationing still on (during those days) as a result of World War II, made his dream-city look extremely derelict and took Dad completely by surprise. He, who had never seen or heard of the English in poverty, was shocked to see them as road-sweepers, dustmen, shopkeepers and barmen stuffing bread into their mouths with their fingers and not washing regularly for the water was so cold, provided there was water at all. Dad was also surprised to find out that "not every Englishman could read" *(Buddha* 24*)*.

While talking about the British Raj in India, Kureishi refers to his uncle Omar's memoir in *My Ear at His Heart* according to which the Raj was "'founded on the certainty of a racial and moral superiority to the natives'…According to Omar, the British, ordinary enough in their own country, change as they pass through the Suez Canal. 'Eastwards of Port Said they became empire-builders.'…leaving home enabled them to become different, more powerful, people" (31-2). In the same book Kureishi writes about his grand-father – Colonel Murad who belonged to the elite Indian Medical Service and considered himself a *sahib* whereas in reality he was from the "emerging middle class of professionals as opposed to the comic aristocracy of the ruling princes

and the landed gentry" (32). It is mostly believed that Dad has a lot of resemblance to Kureishi's own father, who was trained not to lose his cool no matter what. The English public school that he attended in India had taught him to take "nothing or anybody seriously" (51). He always considered himself better than the others.

Dad and Anwar, next door neighbors and best friends from the age of five, were from Bombay. "Dad's father, the doctor, had built a lovely low wooden house on Juhu beach for himself, his wife and his twelve children. Dad and Anwar would sleep on the veranda and at dawn run down to the sea and swim. They went to school in a horse-drawn rickshaw" *(Buddha* 23*)*. Dad used to play tennis on the family court, with his servants serving as ball-boys whereas the weekends were spent in playing cricket matches "often against the British, and you had to let them win" *(Buddha* 23*)*. Since the Indian film industry was also housed in Bombay and one of Dad's elder brothers used to edit a movie magazine, Dad and Anwar, both, often went to parties where they met film-stars. "Dad and Anwar loved to show off about all the film- stars they knew and the actresses they'd kissed. Once, when I was seven or eight, Dad told me he thought I should become an actor; it was a good life, he said, and the proportion of work to money was high" *(Buddha* 23*)*. From what he had heard of Dad's adventures with Anwar, Karim was convinced that Dad's childhood was idyllic. However, he often wondered why Dad had condemned his own son to the dreary little house, "a two-up-two-down semi-detached in South London" *(Buddha* 26*)*. Dad's adventure stories become etched in Karim's memory, simultaneously securing a permanent niche in his unconscious as his own unfulfilled desires.

Dad's love for clothes soon overwhelmed him, making him spend his allowance from India on buying bow-ties, bottle-green waistcoats and tartan socks from Bond Street. Dad's lack of seriousness with regard to his studies rendered him incapable of concentrating on them. Consequently he couldn't become a lawyer like Gandhi or Jinnah. He ended up working as a clerk in the Civil Service for 3 pounds a week. Dad met his working-class wife (Margaret) in a bar first and married her to become part of her regulated-by-the-clock uninteresting life. "His life, once a cool river of balmy distractions, of beaches and cricket, of mocking the British… was now a cage of umbrellas and steely regularity" *(Buddha* 26*)*. To keep the frustration and boredom away Dad started delving into the realm of the esoteric by turning to "Lieh Tzu, Lao and Chuang Tzu" *(Buddha* 26*)*. A library copy of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* became his all-time companion wherever he went. When Anwar scolded Dad for wasting his time by reading rubbish rather than making money, he calmly told his childhood friend Anwar: "I don't care about money. There's always money. I must understand these secret things" *(Buddha* 27*)*.

Whereas Haroon's "Oriental discoveries" *(Buddha* 27*),* estranged his lower-middle class wife, Margaret and his friend Anwar, Eva, with her love of the exotic, became close to him precisely because of his Orientalism since it "gives him a positive identity, a way to affirm his felt difference to the British and feel superior to them at the same time" *(Desirable London, Deplorable England* 81*)*. Moreover, Eva was someone Dad could talk to. Both of them, according to Haroon (Dad), had the same interests. Dad shamelessly told Karim: "…I'm experiencing things I've never felt before… potent,

overwhelming things…All the time I am not with Eva I miss her. When I talk to myself in my mind, it is always her I talk to. She understands many things. I feel that if I am not with her I will be missing a great opportunity" *(Buddha* 66*)*. Haroon's love for Eva is spoken of in terms of "a painful organic sensation" that "wedges open the gap between his individual being and his essence" *(Ecrits* 232*)*. By talking about himself and Eva like that with Karim, Haroon alienates himself from himself. He talks about himself almost like an "Other", razing the wall of language that had blocked speech so far between father and son, to the ground. Karim's prompters such as "How's Eva?" and "Dad, Dad, please tell me. Are you in love with her?" *(Buddha* 65*)* serve to free Haroon's speech by introducing him to "the language of his desire, that is, to the primary language in which – beyond what he tells us of himself - he is already speaking to us unbeknown to himself" *(Ecrits* 243*)*. Here language becomes a means of grabbing hold of desire. The moment desire is expressed through language it becomes humanized by gaining recognition.

As regards the opportunity that Dad is so afraid of missing, it is to re-enter the dominant culture of the upper-middle class, this time by using his cultural identity as a card. In fact he originally belonged to that class. So thinking within an essentialist pattern, he produces an identity for himself that clearly displays the signs of his Otherness. Apparently cognizant of the stalemate that too much clinging to the past is sure to bring, Dad decides to be with Eva, rationalizing his decision in this manner: "Our lives become stale, they become set. We are afraid of the new, of anything that might make us grow or change…But this is living death, not life" *(Buddha* 89*)*.

Human beings are speaking beings. Speaking, listening, knowing others and being known, any of these is possible through speech which is constituted of language. One of the various symbolizing functions of speech is that it aims at the transformation of the subject to whom it is addressed by means of the link that it establishes with the speaker. Karim's closeness to Dad immerses him into the Indian culture through legends and family traditions that are spoken of, forging his British-Indian identity as an "exotic/Other" despite the fact that physically he has never visited India nor does he speak Urdu or Punjabi. This new identity gets further authenticated when he realizes why every failure on his part bothers his father so much. "It was as if he saw us as having one life between us. I was the second half, an extension of him and instead of complementing him I'd thrown shit all over him" *(Buddha* 110*)*. No wonder when, after his performance as Mowgli in Kipling's *The Jungle Book,* Karim asks his Dad, "how did you enjoy yourself? Aren't you glad I didn't become a doctor?" *(Buddha* 156*)*. Dad almost erupts like a volcano: "Bloody half-cocked business…That bloody fucker Mr. Kipling pretending to whitey he knew something about India… an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White Minstrel!" *(Buddha* 157*)*. All his Indian friends along with his father are disgusted with "the accent and the shit" *(Buddha* 157*)* Karim had smeared all over his body. They think that he was simply pandering to prejudices. Dad's sudden outburst is "the legacy of his Indian childhood – political anger turning into scorn and contempt. For him in India the British were ridiculous, stiff, unconfident…" *(Buddha* 250*)*. Karim is told categorically never to let the ex- colonialists see him on his knees "for that was where they expected you to be"

(Buddha 250*)*.

Later, when Karim discusses racism with his little brother Allie, he talks about it from a different perspective. Being from the second generation of the immigrants in England, he tells Karim: "I hate people who go on all the time about being black, and o\r how persecuted they were at school, and how someone spat at them once. You know: self-pity" *(Buddha* 267*)*. When Karim asks him what should be done, he quips: "They should shut up and get on with their lives. At least the blacks have a history of slavery… There was reason for bitterness. But no one put people like you and me in camps, and no one will. We can't be lumped in with them, Thank God" *(Buddha* 267-8*)*.

All psychical phenomena in Karim's life are apparently related to a social relations function and the pathway that provides the most accurate access to it (his psychical phenomena) is his own account of these phenomena. In order to recognize a reality that is proper to Karim's psychical reactions, "we must not begin by choosing among them; we must begin by no longer choosing. In order to gauge their efficacy, we must respect their succession" *(Ecrits* 65*)*.

Apparently Karim tried considerably hard to give up his accent which alone was enough to place him as a South Londoner. He wore Levi's "very modest pink and purple" *(Buddha* 17*)* open-necked shirts, taking Charlie's advice a little too seriously. Still he failed to be accepted as an Englishman. Karim is both forced and unconsciously driven to follow into Dad's footsteps by producing an identity for himself that projects his cultural otherness as a commodification thereof. His identification with his Indian father paves his way for entry into the upper-middle- class culture as an exotic/Other,

wearing "turquoise flared trousers, a blue and white flower- patterned see-through shirt, blue suede boots with Cuban heels, and a scarlet Indian waistcoat with gold stitching around the edges" *(Buddha* 6*)*.

Hence Karim is offered yet another role of an Indian shopkeeper's student son in a soap opera towards the close of the novel. The character that he is to play is rebellious, getting entangled with contemporary issues such as abortions and racist attacks. These issues were lived through as everyday reality by the Asians and Anglo-Asians during the 60s and 70s still they never got on the television. Karim, by accepting the role, can get a lot of money, country- wide fame and a chance to change his life overnight. Moreover the role could become his "third space", a means for mediation between his reality and the oblivious world. Having known himself, he has become himself and the role offers him an opportunity to "speak" for himself. Dialogue involves renunciation of aggressiveness since Socrates' times and "philosophy has always placed its hope in dialogue to make reason triumph" *(Ecrits* 86*)*. This is how Freudian psychoanalysis in a most startlingly innovative manner, by placing human discourse at the center of understanding human crisis, has helped Karim live a normal life despite his "plural and partial" (Rushdie) identity.

Lacan writes in *Ecrits*: "Analysis can have as its goal only the advent of true speech and the subject's realization of his history in its relation to a future" (249). With the help of an autobiographic mode Karim, in The Buddha of Suburbia (1990) identifies himself through language, but only by losing himself in it as an object. What we realize in his history is "neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the

perfect as what has been" in what he is, "but the future anterior" *(Ecrits* 247*)* as what he will have been, given what he is in the process of becoming.

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