



Essentialized Ethnicity - A Tool of Anti-Assimilationist Politics? A Probe into the Veracity of Cultural Hybridity through the Exploration of Hanif Kureishi's 'The Buddha of Suburbia' and M.G.Vassanji's 'The Gunny Sack'

Purbali Sengupta, International School of Hospitality Management.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7079-9204>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5918665

Abstract

Those embroiled in favour of Multiculturalism often face a sharp critique: Isn't Multiculturalism under constructed categories like cultural diversity and integrity, a fiction that cleverly masks socio-eco-pol inequalities faced by migrants with a history of Colonization? This paper explores immigrant experience in rapidly changing multi-ethnic societies with two specific texts under the radar: Hanif Kureishi's 'The Buddha of Suburbia' (1990) and M.G. Vassanji's 'The Gunny Sack' (1989). It attempts to designate 'Buddha' and the 'Gunny sack' as signifiers (sites/spaces) of cultural hybridity and heterogeneity that can counter/refute any fetishized idea of a pure and monolithic cultural identity. The paper challenges the clichéd opposition between Nativism and Assimilation that is often played out through the trope of a generational feud in diasporic societies. It also raises an unsettling focus on Sexism, underpinning hybrid societies; and evaluates Double Colonization and Gender issues that are often side-tracked in the context of such immigrant experience.

Keywords: Hanif Kureishi, M.G. Vassanji, Multiculturalism, Heterogeneity, Sexism.

Introduction

The contemporary debate between Nation and Post-Nation as viable political spaces, has often drawn flak from both sides of the divide; some voicing concerns over the parochial nature of Nationalism to instead promulgate a more fluid entity like Post-Nation, while other critics sticking to the traditional concept of sovereign Nation States as autonomous units. Though an old, feudalistic world order of empires/monarchies is now 'a thing of the past'; present day Post-Colonies operating as autonomous Nation States have often indulged in aggressive radicalisation of their subjects in a Nationalistic fervour to create pockets of exclusivity, where the 'Other' is often perceived as the enemy 'within', marginalised by either birth, ethnicity and/or race. Interior Colonialities have been justifiably contested by the likes of Homi Bhabha, Bruce Robbins or PhengChea in favour of more transcultural and cosmopolitan subjecthood. Assuming that cultures are not insular entities, in a multicultural setting, one is bound to experience a latent hierarchy of cultures; a dominant variety exercising a prevalence over the dominated ones; something often perceived as Culture Wars.



Homi Bhabha has often emphasised on the pivotal role minority cultures play in challenging existing cultural hegemonies and how these peripheral discourses can subvert the grand myths of Nations. Drawing up on the contemporary post-modernist debates on the constructed/fragmented nature of subjectivity, the present concern is indeed on the positionality of a social subject. It is undoubtedly true that a social subject is a site of a variety of differences and divergences.

Dennis Dworkin, while talking about Paul Gilroy's critique of post 1950's multiracial British society engulfed in a narcissistic melancholia about a 'lost Englishness', validates Gilroy's argument that late 20 th century British Racism was founded on discourses of cultural difference which was central to new right-wing ideology and equally infiltrated left-wing perspectives in the Cultural Studies tradition. Dworkin reiterates Gilroy's emphasis on a specific historicity of British society, a turn of the century pessimism that indulged in an acute nostalgia for the loss of Empire and the changing English landscape caused by an accelerated migration from the ex-colonies of the Empire (Dworkin 522). It is this specific temporal space that Hanif Kureishi explores in 'The Buddha of Suburbia', a semi-autobiographical, bildungsroman about a bisexual, mixed race youth adapting to a culturally voluptuous and virulently racist English society. Born to a Pakistani father and English mother, Kureishi, in an interview to Gulf News (2017), while recalling his growing up in the changing Britain of his youth, articulates his utter dismay at the overwhelming racism that is breeding in contemporary Britain:

Not just disappointed: angry at the lack of acknowledgement of the role post-colonial immigrant countries have played, 'That Britain's wealth came out of the empire, and we all came here, to Bradford, to the NHS, to the transport system, and how the commonwealth and the ex-empire created the wealth of this country. And I feel very bitter about the hatred that is directed against us on a racial basis, when in fact we have served this country'....The country he thought of as a place of tolerance has now, he fears, provided a space for an 'utterly misconceived and misplaced and vile' form of racism, the demonization of the Other, the positioning of Muslims as 'backward, misogynist, racist and anti-gay' the like of which he says we haven't seen since the 1930's. (Clark)

'The Buddha of Suburbia' which depicts the escapades of Karim in 1970s Britain, is rife with political and economic discontent of a hybrid population of social aspirants living in the suburbs and fringes of London, waiting to explore a brave new world devoid of racism and exploitation. The novel ends symbolically around 1979 with the results of UK's General Elections, the defeat of Labour Government of James Callaghan, ousted by Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher who becomes the next Prime Minister of Britain. In 'The Buddha of Suburbia', the protagonist's father Haroon internalizes a specific cultural definition of 'Indian-ness' as 'pure' and 'unadulterated', any deviation from which deemed as culturally 'Un-Indian'. Emigrating into Britain in the 1950s with friend Anwar, Haroon marries a white woman but eventually abandons her after meeting Eva, with whom he starts seducing a



segment of English high society (upper middle class) with the ideas of Eastern philosophy. His gig as a Buddhist, is a magnificent conning of Eastern mysticism, the performance of which lures unsuspecting Westerners to believe that a Muslim can act the 'ways of the Buddha'.

Thus, Haroon devises a stratagem; 'Buddha' is rediscovered as a cultural document, a trope for identity construction to assert his cultural difference/uniqueness to combat the temptations of assimilation. 'Buddha' serves as a cultural referent - a site of cross-pollination of cultures, hybrid identities and a confluence of diverse philosophies, almost a microcosm of the multi-ethnic British society that the story has as its backdrop. In a parallel frame of reference, M.G. Vassanji's 'The Gunny Sack' recounts the 'stream of consciousness' like trajectory of narrator-protagonist SalimJuma (nicknamed Kala) who born and bred in Africa eventually migrates to Canada and receives a 'gunny sack' as a gift from his great aunt JiBai. The Gunny Sack is not just an extended metaphor for the collective memory of displaced people, but alternately a cultural signifier of heterogeneous diasporic experiences and an intersectional site of diverse histories and myths of both Asians, Africans and Europeans. A deep-seated sexism is also evident, embedded in both these texts; as most nationalistic cultures are androcentric, any over determinism of essentialized identities are exclusively male.

The female characters in the examined texts are petty stereotypes, trapped either as distraught observers in their assigned roles in Patriarchy or objectified as sex mannequins. Engaging with cultural products that are off-shoots of hybrid, motley societies, is a daunting task for any cultural critic. As Cornel West points out; "Distinctive features of the new cultural politics of difference are to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; and to historicize, contextualize, and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing" (West 257).

The Paraphernalia of Culture: 'Racial Cross-Dressing' and 'Masquerading' as Performative Plays to Re-Define a Post-Colonial Space? Exploring the Challenge of Hybridity in a Pluralistic Society in 'The Buddha of Suburbia':

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care - English I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the old mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (Kureishi 3)

Rachel Foss traces the historical trajectory of this coming-of-age narrative:

The action unfolds against the backdrop of the social and political currents of 1970's Britain...The novel chronicles the tail end of the hippie era, and moves through the social upheavals of the 1970's with the rage of punk to the pervasive materialism of



the 1980's, signified by the demise of the left and the 1979 General Election which heralded the era of Thatcherism, where culture and identity itself become commodities to be bought and sold like any other (Foss).

The complex narrative which is abundantly sprinkled with the performances of different characters living double lives in the fashion of a stage production (Haroon as Buddha, Mum playing a dutiful but betrayed wife, Eva a pretentious social climber, Jamila a confounded teenager); is also a bizarre mix of striking juxtapositions: Eastern mysticism/Western materialism, Tradition/Modernity, Nativism/Assimilation, High/Low Culture and more fundamentally as the structural pattern suggests; the suburbs and the city. Karim's quest for a pure and unadulterated environment, free of racism and regressive mind-sets, unified identity and homogeneous culture never prospers, and much to his abhorrence, he discovers a multi-layered society where the suburbs and the city do not operate as binaries but as integral parts of the same entity. When a flummoxed Karim finally frequented the echelons of high London society during his stint in theatre, he encountered (with bitter disappointment) the same racial stereotypes that he had experienced as a suburbanite, drawing on which theatre directors Shadwell and Pyke, to satisfy their oriental fantasy (in the novel), insisted on Karim playing only native characters speaking Indianized English for complete authentication. So, if, "the Suburbs are an incubator for politicisation and social radicalism", on the other hand, "the sophistication of the London elite is punctured by the exposure of a crude racial prejudice" (Foss).

Therefore, "Far from being homogeneous, the suburbs embody subtle gradations of social status, affluence and cultural sophistication" (Foss). The multicultural English society that our wronged hero Karim finds himself hobnobbing with, is fundamentally a disquieting hotchpotch of culturally hybrid races. Thus, this cultural heterogeneity, visible in a pattern of conflation in the 1970's English society and its mixed character of politics and sexual identity defined a post-immigrant and multi-racial new age Englishness. Strikingly, hybridity did not just encapsulate Karim's mixed ethnicity, but also his turn-of-the-century sexual preferences, he was a bisexual by choice who seemed to revel in his sexual promiscuity;

It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls...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. (Kureishi 55)

Devising a comparative case study of the Canadian and American societies, Ceri Peach outlines the polarity that Assimilation and Multiculturalism signifies; "The ultimate aim of policies of assimilation is that minorities should become diffused throughout the structure of the charter population until their socio-economic profiles become indistinguishable" (Peach 3). In other words, the melting pot model for an assimilationist society is more prone to stagnate into a homogeneous one where heterogeneous cultures are expected to merge/melt into a unified whole; a common accusation thrown by proponents of Multiculturalism. To chime with this ideological vantage point of cultural confluence, Haroon (father of protagonist Karim, in the novel), recalibrates his cultural identity with spell binding



paraphernalia; as introduced by Eva (Haroon's white mistress), before the 'demonstration of his mystic arts'; "My good and deep friend Haroon here, he will show us the Way. The Path" (Kureishi 13).

As if the conundrum of a cultural crucible can be resolved by an integration program comprising of tacky yoga postures and Eastern philosophy! In Karim's words, as he furtively engages in voyeurism, observing Haroon and Eva's sexual act, "Oh God, oh my God. Was I conceived like this, I wondered in the Suburban night air, to the wailing of Christian curses from the mouth of a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist?" (Kureishi 16). Karim's observation is the leit motif of not just the narrative but of English society as well, with 'Buddha' functioning as a cultural signifier (Site) of melange for people of different ethnicities and classes - Haroon, a Muslim immigrant in England with an English wife and a white mistress, racially cross-dressed as a Buddhist, engaged in a pedantic mission to bring the West to conflate with the East, in a bizarre mix of diversity. However, against a backdrop of multiplicity, Haroon's desperate attempt at inventing an authentic 'Indian-ness' in the form of a cultural stereotype (Buddha) as an anti-assimilationist tool, gets miserably defeated in a flux of pluralism. As HomiBhabha puts it; "Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other" (Bhabha 52), and that "The problem of cultural interaction emerges only at the signifiatory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis) - read or signs are misappropriated" (Bhabha 50).

Bhabha further elucidates; "Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (Bhabha 3). Haroon masquerading as Buddha is transpired as a site of cultural contestation: a liminal and interstitial space that is a meeting point of multiplicities. Reconfiguring the position of women in diasporic communities is often a contentious issue, one ripple effect of essentializing cultural identities to buttress minority position in a hybrid ethos, is Ostracization of Women. Examining Asian American immigrant experience, Lisa Lowe vocalizes:

The essentializing of Asian American identity also reproduces oppositions that subsume other non-dominant terms in the same way that Asians and other groups are disenfranchised by the dominant culture: to the degree that the discourse generalizes Asian American identity as male, women are rendered invisible, or to the extent that Chinese are presumed to be exemplary of all Asians, the importance of other Asian groups are ignored. In this sense, a politics based on ethnic identity facilitates the displacement of inter community differences - between men and women, or between workers and managers - into a false opposition of 'nationalism' and 'assimilation'. We have an example of this in recent debates where Asian American feminists who



challenge Asian American sexism are cast as 'assimilation-ist', as betraying Asian American 'nationalism'. (Lowe 1037)

The sexism inherent in diasporic cultures is strongly highlighted through the generational discord played out by Anwar and Jamila (as corroborative of Haroon-Karim's feud) in 'The Buddha of Suburbia'. On the other hand, Haroon playing Pater Familias decides the fate of his English wife and his White mistress almost in the fashion of an Oriental despot, Margaret (Karim's mother called 'Mum' in the text) is abandoned for Eva who is consecrated like an exotic Sex-Goddess, fetishized as a symbol of eroticism. Anwar's setting up a match for Jamila with the obvious desire for expansion of family through procreation (quite in keeping with the Indian tradition of Patriarchy), is documented in laconic terms; "Anwar had told Jamila what he'd decided: she was to marry the Indian and he would come over, slip on his overcoat and wife and live happily ever after in her muscly arms. Then Anwar would rent a flat nearby for the newlyweds. 'Big enough for two children', he said, to a startled Jamila. He took her hand and added, 'Soon you'll be very happy'" (Kureishi 57). Though Karim's insight is thoughtful, "Even happiness, that frequent pivot of decision, was irrelevant here - Jamila's happiness, I mean. Like her I wanted to express myself physically in some way. It seemed to be all that was left to us" (Kureishi 60), Jamila's deduction is prophetic, "Families aren't sacred, especially to Indian men, who talk about nothing else and act otherwise" (Kureishi 55).

Mythical Reconstruction of Memory and Resuscitation of Native History as Cultural Ruses to Combat Acculturation in a Multicultural Ethos? Examining the Challenge of Heterogeneity for Dislocated People/s in 'The Gunny Sack':

Memory, JiBai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more. Stroking the sagging brown shape with affection, she would drag it closer, to sit at her feet like a favourite child. In would plunge her hand through the gaping hole of a mouth, and she would rummage inside...Out would come from the dusty depths some knick knack of yesteryear: a bead necklace shorn of its polish; a rolled-up torn photograph; a cowrie shell; a brass incense holder; a swahili cap so softened by age that it folded neatly into a small square; a broken rosary tied up crudely to save the remaining beads; a blood-stained muslin shirt; a little book. (Vassanji Part 1, Jibai, Shehrbanoo)

M.G. Vassanji's 'The Gunny Sack' begins with the death and funeral of JiBai, and the inheritance of her gunny sack by narrator-protagonist SalimJuma as he catapults a 'stream of consciousness' trip into the past and abyss of family history. He describes the gunny sack as a "seductive companion spinning out yarns, telling tales that have no beginning or end". The gunny sack operates as an archive for cumulative memory which unravels a multi-generational saga of Asians in East Africa (Tanzania). Functioning as a narrative device, the gunny sack not only explores the Asian African migrancy but also transports myriad events of history within the same spatio temporal framework of the novel. The diasporic experience is lived through different displacements and quests, some forced and some by choice,



commencing with Dhanji Govindji's (a member of the Shamsi community) pioneering journey to Tanzania from Junapur in Gujarat. Tracing the genesis of the Shamsi community, Maryam Sikander points out, "The Shamsis were originally hindukhatris, converted to Islam by Hazrat Shamsuddin Sabzwari, a Sufi missionary often confused with his glamorous namesake. According to one legend, they were one of the 64 families of various punjabi Muslim trader castes who migrated from Sargodha in Punjab to Delhi in the 17 th century during the time of Shah Jahan.

Other scholars maintain that they migrated in the 18 th century, during the reign of Shah Alam II, when the Mughal Empire was tottering" (Sikander). One of the family histories that the gunny sack discloses is that of the unique hindu-muslim sect: the Shamsi community that Dhanji Govindji belonged to and which was torn apart by conflicts between the Shia, Sunni, Sufi and Vedanti factions over funds which eventually led to the assassination of Dhanji Govindji in Matamu, Tanzania. Dhanji's attempt at exhorting his cultural identity as an Asian (A Shamsi) to subvert absorption into the deluge of a multi-ethnic African society fails miserably as he is overpowered by his cultural distinctiveness; he ends up in a space of in-betweenness, murdered for embezzlement of the funds of his own community. The vignettes of memory forced out of the gunny sack further reveal how Dhanji Govindji had exhausted his resources for the quest to find his half African son Hussein (born of an African Slave Bibi Taratibu). Therefore, his desire to escape an accultured state, ironically pits him deeper into a cultural conflation, the racial status of his half caste son, seemed to revert the very idea of cultural purity. The gunny sack, thus, serves as an exhibit displaying the interconnectedness of different life histories and heterogeneous entities: Dhanji Govindji's life and legacy is as hybrid as is the Shamsi community, the ultimate manifestation of which is; his funeral, led by the Shamsi, Bhatia and Swahili communities. Similarly, as Salim Juma takes up the thread of narration from his mother Kulsum, there is another layer of vigorous documentation of diverse histories (including his lady love Amina's story) through the deployment of memory and its anecdotal excesses released from the mystical sack. Reviewing 'The Gunny Sack', Tarun J. Tejpal comments, "Without creative chroniclers, both great civilizations and the smaller movements of immigrants sink with scarcely a ripple, either reduced to abraded artefacts under the clinical analysis of dusty archaeologists, or to dry statistical footnotes in other people's histories" (Tejpal).

Conclusion

This paper explores the inescapable double bind that diaspora imposes on immigrants: imbibing an incandescent spirit of Nationalism alive in the form of allegiance to mother country and (or?) repositioning one's cultural identity in order to integrate in the host society. Both the texts under survey abundantly testify, how in a clash of cultures, flaunting any essentialist notion of a pure, holistic culture is usually fictitious and non-existent; the symbol "Buddha" in 'The Buddha of Suburbia' and the "Gunny sack" in 'The Gunny Sack' operate as sites of cultural confluence, heterogeneity and the myriad of people (s).



References

- [1] Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Special Indian Edition (2019). Routledge. 1994.
- [2] Clark, Alex. "Britain is more racist now than ever". *Gulf News*, 3 May, 2017, gulfnews.com/entertainment/books/britain-is-more-racist-now-than-ever-1.2021422 Accessed 20 July, 2021.
- [3] Dworkin, Dennis. "Paul Gilroy and the cultural politics of decline". *Rethinking History, The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Vol 13, 2009, Issue 4, pp. 521-539, doi.org/10.1080/13642520903293128
- [4] Foss, Rachel. "An Introduction to The Buddha of Suburbia". *The British Library*, 25 May, 2016, www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-the-buddha-of-suburbia Accessed 20 July 2021.
- [5] Kureishi, Hanif. *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Faber and Faber limited, 1990.
- [6] Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Second Edition (2004), Blackwell Publishing, 1998, pp. 1031-1050.
- [7] Peach, Ceri. "The mosaic versus the melting pot: Canada and the USA." *Scottish Geographical Journal*, Vol 121, 2005, Issue 1, pp. 3-27, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00369220518737218 Accessed 21 July 2021.
- [8] Sikander, Maryam. "Naming and Belonging a Personal History of a North Indian Muslim Clan". *The India Forum*, 6 Mar, 2020, www.google.com/amp/s/www.theindiaforum.in/amp/article/naming-and-belonging Accessed 20 July 2021.
- [9] Tejpal, J. Tarun. "Book Review: M.G. Vassanji's 'The Gunny Sack'." *India Today*, 28 Feb, 1991, www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/books/story/19910228-book-review-m.g.-vassanjis-the-gunny-sack-814098-1991-02-28 Accessed 21 July 2021
- [10] Vassanji, M.G. *The Gunny Sack*. Anchor Canada, 1989. (E Pub Version)
- [11] West, Cornel. "The New Cultural Politics of Difference". *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, Routledge, 1993, pp. 256-267.

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.