

# ***The Buddha of Suburbia***

**(1990)**

# Setting

- 1970s: influence of 1960s music, TV, theatre, just before Thatcherism
- Unrestrained and grotesque London: “an inferno of pleasure and madness”.
- Multicultural Britain as in the 1990s – London as microcosm (South London, Bromley and Central London). Cf. Handouts (p. 121, 126-127)

- Suburbs as in-between space (city-country, public-private lives): liminal and Janus-faced space just like Karim (sexual and racial confusion) and Haroon (Indian accepting self-commodification as a Buddhist guru to attract white suburbanites)
- Suburbia as place of banalities (to escape from) yet also transgression (Eva & Charlie)
- Lower middle-class getting into contact with working-class and upper-class

# Main characters

- Heterogeneous gallery: individual idiosyncracies vs static ethnic groups
- Karim Amir: 17-year-old half-Indian, half-English; on the whole selfish and solipsistic
  - ❖ Enjoying traditional features of English life (tea, dog racing and football)
  - ❖ Apparently complying with the white characters' preconceived notion of his identity as "foreigner" but then turning the table on them by subverting expectations (use of Cockney in playing Mowgli)

## ❖ Re-negotiating identity through experience

“[...] I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now – the Indians – that in some way these were my people, and that I’d spent my life denying or avoiding that fact. I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing. [...] Partly I blamed Dad for this. [...] He wasn’t proud of his past, but he wasn’t unproud of it either; it just existed, and there wasn’t any point in fetishizing it, as some liberals and Asian radicals liked to do. So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it” (pp. 212-213)

- ❖ Identity as inherited but also as social construction: Spivak's "strategic essentialism" – performing ethnicity to achieve his own ends (like his father's performance of the guru or like Charlie "selling Englishness" in New York)
- ❖ Identity as "some sort of alliance between the way you see yourself and the way other people in the world see you" (Kureishi)

- ❖ Self and other: Karim plays roles but gets self-knowledge by relating to other people, often “discovering [himself] through what [he] rejected” (= Charlie; p. 255)
- ❖ Sexual possession as means of finding a position in the colonizer’s domination (Charlie and Eleonor = quintessential Englishness) – eventually need to move beyond to regain his Indianness and reach hybridity

- Haroon – the Buddha of South London
  - ❖ He “liked to stand out like a juggler at a funeral” (p. 42) VS Margaret’s shyness
  - ❖ Desiring escape like Karim: from his cleric job and from suburbia (“we’re growing up together”, p. 22) – both escape through acting and self-performance (real self? Trope of acting “not-me”, in fact a version of what I am – self as fabricated image)



- ❖ Accepting and fostering (exploiting?) his “otherness” and the English construction of Orientalism but never denying his roots (“I will never be anything but an Indian”, p. 263)
- ❖ Parody of the narrative of empire as an evangelising project and reversal of power relations in colonial discourse: Haroon proselytises the native British (who equate the East with spirituality)
- ❖ “You couldn’t let the ex-colonialists see you on your knees [...]. They were exhausted now; their Empire was gone; their day was done and it was our turn now” (p. 250)

- Auntie Jean and Uncle Ted: conservative English middle-class
  - Anwar and Jeeta: traditional working-class Indian parents till Anwar's death and the crumbling of his patriarchal ideology
  - ❖ Critique of the “old ways” (fixed identity) first-generation immigrants try to import to England
- “We old Indians come to like this England less and less and we return to an imagined India” (Haroon, p. 74) – hence his hunger strike. Cf. Handout p. 64.

- Jamila: vs stereotype of Oriental woman
  - ❖ Rebellious even with Anwar still alive (defending her mother against abuse)
  - ❖ Flexible stance: accepting her father's choice but only as “a rebellion against rebellion, creative novelty itself” (p. 82)
  - ❖ Politicised and feminist: representative of 1970s anti-racism campaigns launched by Black women's movements, Asian youth and community groups. Cf. Handouts (pp. 52-55)

- Changez
  - ❖ Initial attempt to assert himself as a traditional Muslim husband
  - ❖ Gradual “change”, opening to new roles and identities (“the innocent fool”)
  - ❖ Climax: surrogate father to Jamila’s child by Simon
  - ❖ Embodiment of flexible identity: like Uncle Ted (more and more tolerant) and Eva (from oppressed housewife to influential London socialite)

- Pyke

- ❖ Interpersonal relations and identity as “performance” (p. 199)
- ❖ His theory of acting: “to be someone else successfully you must be yourself!” (p. 220) – Cf. Charlie’s working-class Englishness in NY
- ❖ Manipulative personality proving how deviating power may be (Cf. when he reads their stories in NY)

# What kind of novel?

- *Bildungsroman* (“rites of passage” fiction): Karim’s life journey from adolescence to adulthood (trope of migrancy)
- “Coming of age” novel like J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)
- Traditional narration as in traditional realist novels: rare prolepsis and analepsis

# An English novel?

- “Karim’s story will prove to be most English in its heritage” (A. Carter): picaresque and comic tradition (Karim = flawed but lovable rogue and social climber)
- “Condition of England” genre: play within the novel describing it – “It was about this country [...] It blew away the self-myth of tolerant, decent England” (p. 228)

- English literature intertexts - Rudyard Kipling
  - ❖ Satirical representation of stage version of *The Jungle Book* – cf. Jamila and Haroon's reaction: to discredit not so much Kipling but the director's use of it and choice that Karim mock the Indian accent and go onstage looking “like a Black and White Minstrel” (p. 157)
  - ❖ London – a jungle: full of dangers yet of possibilities too



- ❖ Karim-Mowgli: torn between natural instincts and conformity to moral law
- ❖ Karim – Kim: inbetween cultures and heroes of a *Bildungsroman*
- Postcolonial feature: orality (stories Karim and Changez tell Jamila and Karim's interjections such as "I didn't say that")

# Main themes and motifs

- Alternative and unconventional families
  - ❖ Deconstruction of hackneyed misconceived images of British Asian families
  - ❖ Breakdown of Karim's parents' marriage
  - ❖ Jamila's overturning of traditional marriage
  - ❖ Commune in Peckham (a “rainbow coalition” vs conventional married life)

- No myth of harmonious “Englishness”

❖ Vs Thatcher’s myth of the unified English nation

❖ Kureishi about British society: “I wasn’t a misfit [...]. It was the others, they wanted misfits; they wanted you to embody within yourself their ambivalence”.

- ❖ Satire of bored Britons living in suburbia, repeating the same conventional routine (“a steady life in my bedroom with my radio”, p. 94)
- ❖ “It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn’t what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements”.

## ❖ Fake politics of anti-racism

- Helen, Eva vs Hairy Back, Aunt Jean but their veneration of eastern cultures is unhealthy
- Stereotyped exoticism (Eva about Karim: “So exotic, so original!”, p. 9, while Margaret is too English)
- New sexual experience (what Karim is for Helen)
- Ethnic products (like the furniture in Eva’s new house)

- “Hybridity” and ambiguity
  - ❖ Sexuality: feminized Changez, masculinized Jamila, Karim’s mixed ethnicity and bisexuality (Cf. Handout p. 55)
  - ❖ London: multicultural, both free and affected by racism and domestic colonialism
  - ❖ Politics: left-wing yet critique of short-sighted or extreme ideologies (e.g. Terry’s ideas)

❖ Music – like a soundtrack, as in *A Clockwork Orange* (1963)

- Pop's evolution through the 60s and 70s (synonymous of liberating energies): references to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, hippy music, psychedelia, and punk
- Classical music: references to Verdi, Wagner and Bach

- Desire and liberation
  - ❖ Haroon through fake Buddhism
  - ❖ Eva through Haroon's exoticism
  - ❖ Karim through bisexuality, theatricality and interpersonal relations of all sorts
  - ❖ London and pop culture (e.g. punk music, narcotic revolution)
  - ❖ Jamila's rebellion and anarchism
  - ❖ Orgy or commune vs marriage