Humour as a Technique of Racial Subversion in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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Samikshya Das

For the stock critic, with that suburban insight of his, cannot understand that a serious man may be humorous, still less than a humorous man is always serious.
— Israel Zangwill, Preface, 6th ed. Of *The Bachelor's Club* (xii)

Humour through narratives can provide catharsis or relief to inter-racial tensions. They can serve resistance to everyday racism, both in literature and in real-life scenarios. Most of the time it has been used as a tool of reprimand, ridicule, reproach and disempowerment. In counter-spaces, humour does not propagate from the perpetrator's point of view, but is instead aimed at them, discouraging their offences. However, humour has also been used in an uplifting way. Its affirmative use has been done through works of literature that have a racial undertone. This is a relatively new method adopted by authors, such as Teju Cole and Salman Rushdie, who want to showcase the racism faced by coloured people all over, using it as a mode of subversion. Hence, such authors flip the coin on the other side, so that equity can be maintained.

Humour can empower and liberate a person from racial oppression. It is an effective foil against the latter. In such a way, many racial microaggressions can be managed and subsided. Microaggressions are indirect jabs of racism against the innocent and they arise from both personal and institutional levels. Without resistance, racism would grow unfettered.

Bowers defines humour as having effects such as (i) forming an ethnic glue (ii) a glorification of survival, and (iii) a catharsis of interracial and intercultural tensions (247). Bowers reads the racial prejudices against the Native Americans in the above lines, which can further be extended to the racial milieu in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. They can also be read as coping mechanisms that aim at making light of the rigidity of racialism. Humour also ameliorates the peruser's experience of reading and reacting to the shock of racism. Sometimes humour is ambivalent. Humour does not automatically necessitate laughter or applause. It can have a more subtle response. Hanif Kureishi was directly influenced by the comic nature of fiction such as *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis and early Evelyn Waugh more than any postcolonial and serious authors.

The novel does not have explicit political connotations, unlike many other postcolonial novels that have subversive tendencies. Nor is the political critique completely annulled. It mostly draws upon the bildungsroman genre, charting one Indian Muslim boy's heartfelt and comical story of weird circumstances, and hilarious characters and tropes.

Karim is an idiosyncratic storyteller, in the sense that his narration leaves a memorable impact on the readers. He is at once paradoxical. The opening lines of the novel designate him so:

> 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 – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. 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. (3)

He is purposive and haphazard, cynical and hopeful, selfish and careful, all simultaneously. Although he is written as a self-absorbed teenager, there is a characteristic depth to him. The writing is ruthlessly honest, biting and sagacious. The comedy is not refined, but pungent.

Karim is a flamboyant character who does not adhere to the normal conventions of society. Karim is in a perpetual state of confusion and in-betweenness owing to his mixed heritage. He is not rageful but still contains the rebellion of teenage years. He is sharp and offers incisive comments on the various characters in the novel. Although the rhetoric may sometimes be vulgar, with slangs of sexual and perverse nature being used, such crassness is required to highlight the crudeness of hierarchical society.

Bakhtin's idea of "grotesque realism" in Rabelais employs degradation or "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" (19). This emphasises the mocking tone of the sentences, that is, how they demean the grandiose or grand narratives. The language evokes a response of hilarity. Karim is the embodiment of the Bakhtinian carnival, containing the edge, irritability and confined freedom of fragrant youth.

Karim's father spent the majority of his British life in the South London suburbs. The bourgeois influence of the suburbs fell on their family, causing them to be restrained in a culturally modern way. The setting is in the 1970s Anglosphere when the entertainment industry ran haywire. It is through these tumultuous times that Karim makes his way up.

One day, Karim's father came back home from work in a high and gay mood, which was very unlike him. His sudden and abrupt expression of love for his family through coercive hugs shocks his elder son Karim. It was because he was invited to the yoga Olympics for which he began preparing almost immediately. His mannerisms and physicality are vociferously Indian. He also has

a hairy chest and back adding to the thoroughness of his Indian race. In this novel, stereotypes are used as tools not to typecast a particular character, but to elevate them to a broad level of acceptance. Often, Kureishi introduces comic angles to those stereotypes that bring lightness to dense situations. So far, the theme, subject and plot are not too heavy to begin with. They only serve as anecdotes of the lived experience of Karim, who experiences the coming of age, from a frighty teen to a well-established adult.

Karim's promiscuity at every turn charges the atmosphere with raw and vibrant energy. His father had taught him that charm and flamboyant grace came first in this impressionable world.

He is widely licentious, and openly bisexual. Expletives and uncouth language operate freely and playfully that concern the culture of the London cosmopolis. Each part of London constitutes a peculiar group of personalities. The southern part contains the conservative bourgeoisie while the northern part consists of the pretentious elites being vacantly vocal about social issues and modern art. The latter were pretentious in the way that they seemed to care about the underprivileged but could not bring themselves to do anything about it. Britain itself was undergoing multiple transformations at the same time, and so were its cultural cohabitants. Like a transforming Britain, is the new and changing multi-ethnic Karim. We see the upcoming punk-rock scenes with debauchery, infidelity and loose morale at the core of the popular culture.

Allie, who is Karim's younger brother, likes fashion and it is assumed that he has a queer propensity. Thus, we can see how a brown man can also defy his tradition and accept his own selfhood. This showcases the multi-huedness of the Indian diaspora in the beginning stages.

Haroon himself being *Eastern* and *Oriental*, commodifies its essential, palatable ingredients and presents it to the white well-to-dos on a platter. He takes on the garb of a Guru or a figurative Buddha of sorts, and spouts out Chinese philosophy that appeases the minds of the fetishizers. Hence, Kureishi was deft enough in writing this aspect of complicated humour that makes the

oppressed the confident observer of racialism. The latter does not withdraw from its trauma, but instead partakes in this careful act of play that renders him an opponent of racial bias. This is because all the characters are highly unserious, and this narrative is a jovial one, which by demeaning the racial elements, downplays it into absurdity. "As well as lashing out at the restrictions and stupidities of English society in the 1970s, Kureishi's comedy is, at least potentially, an anarchical force of liberation" (Holmes 648).

Eva was "pumping out a plume of oriental aroma" when she was first introduced in the novel (9). Every character is imperfect and is on an irredeemable hedonistic journey. Such unmeasured pleasures are woven into every crevice of the story. Almost every conclusion in a sentence evokes a response of laughter owing to the suddenness of innuendos and witticisms.

Karim's fancy for Charlie Kay, Eva's son, evaded all his other pursuits. He not only lusted after him, but also emulated him and wanted his charming armour transferred to him.

Eva insists on educating the unrefined taste of Karim by telling him what books to read and what music to listen to. Karim cuts right through the pretensions around him and sees the raw truth that everybody conceals. He is a good observer and smart retorter. His fascination with Charlie Kay ends after he engages in sado-masochism with a dominatrix and defiles himself. It was then that Karim realised how empty and foolish his love interest was. The novel is precisely philistine in its conjectures and sexual occupations.

Kureishi efficiently uses Karim's wit to criticise racism and mainstream ideology. The use of the word "exotic" in the novel many times in the novel indicates the fetishization and palatable otherness that went on during the early era in Britain when coloured diaspora were just beginning to settle in (9, 13, 109).

Haroon, was considered zen-like because of his meditative preachiness about "oriental" philosophy. He had a calm demeanour, and because people flocked to him to resolve their internal issues, Karim called him "God" (86). Truly, he was the supreme figure of calmness and serenity when it came to offering wise advice to his white fans who wanted a philosophical solution to their troubles.

While the West was associated with materialism, the East came to be known for its rich heritage and ancient philosophy. Haroon was stimulated to spend his time in this activity because he was very much interested in the inner nature of human beings, the mind and consciousness. He bought Chinese books on philosophy and preached about his beliefs, only to end up committing infidelity with Eva. Such is the duplicity of the characters. No one is earnest and everybody seeks only their own pleasure. Haroon is called a "renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist" (16). So, he is neither this nor that, occupying a middle space of the in-between, sandwiched between many cultures.

The following are racist remarks when Haroon entered Eva's first gathering where he was going to lecture:

> The man said in a loud whisper to his friend, 'Why has our Eva brought this brown Indian here? Aren't we going to get pissed?'
> 'He's going to give us a demonstration of the mystic arts!'
> 'No, he came on a magic carpet.'
> 'Cyril Lord or Debenhams?' (12)

Karim answered back by physically attacking the man making those comments. The white folks homogenised the diverse eastern culture, and debarred the authenticity of any non-white majoritarian country. They frequently mixed up Japanese and Indian elements. To them, the east was all the same, and at the same time different from them. They had the imperial notion of clubbing together diverse and individual factors into the narrow bandwidth of acceptance.

Karim wanted a world of excitement and possibility, not the monotony and drudgery of reality. He wanted to leave the stasis of the suburbs and migrate into the vibrant world. There was no excitement in the suburbs, and the youth did not flock to those places where nothing happened. Karim wanted to be around smart people, he wanted multiple sexual partners at the same time, he wanted pop and rock music blasting the neighbourhoods' peace.

Haroon was appealing to his white audience's presumption about Indians and their heavy accents. He deliberately accentuated stereotypically Indian pronunciations while acting as a guru and tried to hide his accent from other people who were not his audience before to remain inconspicuous.

Unlike many unprivileged Indians who migrated to England due to lack of opportunity in their homeland, Haroon was quite privileged. Karim found the former to be the "swarms of Indian peasants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s" (25). When Haroon came to England, he had a mighty idea of it. He thought that everybody there was rich with no place for poverty. He faced the hard-hitting reality of racism first when he had tried to discuss Byron at a pub one night. He was looked down upon as a mere Indian who was describing the "poetry of a pervert and a madman" to them (25). His fate and money dwindled when he became an unimportant civil servant working for the government of England. Only because of his passion for Chinese philosophy did he become the Buddha of Chislehurst. He refused to take anything seriously, "as if life did not matter" (25). He was both disillusioned after many misfortunes and enlightened after his religious reads. He became carefree and relaxed as he grew older. He is characterised in an innocent and vulnerable way that made him more attractive to women who wanted to nurture him. Drawing a character sketch of the titular Buddha or Haroon is significant to understand the backbone of the narrative. Karim is his lineage, and whatever disobedience and non-conformity he has learnt, he has gathered from his father.

Anwar is Haroon's childhood friend who is also settled in London. When he asks Haroon to try for promotion, the latter replies stoically:

> 'The whites will never promote us,' Dad said. 'Not an Indian while there is a white man left on earth. You don't have to deal with them – they still think they have an Empire when they don't have two pennies to rub together.'

> 'They don't promote you because you are lazy, Haroon. Barnacles are growing in your balls. You think of some China-thing and not the Queen!'
> 'To hell with the Queen! Look, Anwar, don't you ever feel you want to know yourself? That you are an enigma to yourself completely?' (27-28)

Here, the readers come to know that Haroon is as aware as he proposes. He is worldly wise too, and recognises the ill-treatment of coloured people at the hands of the white supremacists. Thus, he turns his attention to the internal after being beaten by external circumstances. He, like any other diasporic entity, is on a self-searching journey, but Kureishi's humour stretches it too far and makes him a spiritual guru.

Carl and Marianne are two of Eva's friends who are also punctual visitors to India. They are enamoured by its exoticness. They absolutely love the eastern flavour the country provides. In short, they fetishize the Indian aesthetic experience. They came to Eva's house to visit Haroon, who looked like a magician and could offer them the magical potency of Indianness that they so relished for. These are the remarks of the young and sharp narrator, Karim, who himself uses the term "exotic" while describing his father (31).

Jean and Ted are Haroon's racist in-laws, who are in bad terms with the Amir family, because of Haroon and his wife's intermarriage. Ted once disowned his own sister because she had married a Muslim. Ted and Jean call Haroon by his anglicised name "Harry", who in turn calls them "Gin and Tonic". This is a prime example of subversion by humour, in which the racialised attempt to withdraw the furore of racism by turning the tables by answering back in their own terms.

Karim calls Helen's father a "hairy back" as a retort to his racist outburst when he tried to be romantic with her (40). Karim's dehumanisation and reduction to the level of a dog as Helen's dog has sexual intercourse with his leg is repugnant. This is the ugliness of grotesque humour used by Kureishi who probably wanted the readers to sympathise with Karim's debasement. Sexual slangs are

poised with the decorum of evocative and concise language that create the effect of liberation from the ills and conforms of society.

Changez is the Indian prototype that Karim adopts to recreate on stage with Matthew Pyke. He handles the drama deftly. Changez is Jamila's husband who is also an imbecile and good-for-nothing, according to Anwar, his father-in-law. He serves the character of a typical gullible immigrant who has come to the big city to live a luxurious life. He is fat, pot-bellied and bald, and does not have an intellectual quotient is what the readers fathom. He is contrasted heavily with his wife, Jamila, who is a modern feminist with a vast knowledge of feminist critical theories. She was married forcefully to him as her father had emotionally blackmailed her to do so. After Anwar's accidental death at the hands of Changez, the odd couple decided to part. The irony is that they ended up living together in a place meant for communists and revolutionaries, with Changez having to care for Jamila's baby whose father is not him. These turns of interesting circumstances compel Karim to take up Changez's character. Pyke was particularly interested in the concept of the new and dumb immigrants whose hopes are dashed because they themselves are of a peculiar type. What Pyke thinks is hilarious, is the reality of many unfortunates.

During this short stint, Karim fell in love with his co-actress, Eleanor. Her past boyfriend, named Gene, had died by suicide after falling prey to racist attacks as he was black. Karim would have undergone the same trauma and depression had he not been strong mentally, and smart enough for a comeback. Both Gene and Karim must have had the same fate aligned for them as both were coloured people working in an exploitative entertainment industry. The merit of this story is that Kureishi played around with the lack of graveness that is normally associated with suicide. He created a strong lead that could stand the rigours of exploitation and thwart the system on its head.

Karim's induction to his calling in theatre came when Eva made him meet Shadwell, an unknowing racist, who truly believes that all Indians are a coagulation of the characters of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*. He does not believe that he discriminates yet he chooses Karim to play the role of Mowgli and paints his face and

body in brown, that is, he 'brownwashes' him. He advises him to act more Indian by accentuating his Indian accent, although knowing that Karim has been born and brought up in the London suburbs. Karim's desperation for a job and belonging to the elite circles of North London gives way to him fulfilling the role. This role-playing landed him in the acquaintance of Matthew Pyke, who is perverse, has little morale and is opportunistic. When Karim can no longer bear the toxicity of his forbearance, he leaves his company and goes to settle in London after being offered an acting role in a soap opera. Thus, Karim's self-searching after a long exile comes to a momentary end.

This novel's subversion of racist issues lies at the forefront of a lack of seriousness. Nothing is taken too sensitively or literally by the characters. Everyone has their fair share of misery and everybody moves on from their past. Some achieve glory and some are forgotten. Yet no one remains unhappy, as the revolving theme of the narrative is hilarity. This humorous approach to a serious topic desensitises the readers of their preconceived notion or reaction of shock, despair and gloom to the sensitive theme of racism. Instead, it makes them aware of the incongruity, irrationality and demureness of it.

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