

Among Devils, Buddhas, and Suburbia: Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* as Exercises in Identity Formation

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Abstract

The article argues that Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* delimit a path towards a non-essentialist identity formation. In respect of Rushdie, it is shown that identity may be aptly understood as a process of polyphonic meandering between trenchant categories of the West and the autochthonous. Referring to Kureishi, it becomes evident that he proposes to instigate the category of the postcolonial migrant as the dominant form of identity formation in the late twenty first century. Finally the two positions are shown to be mutually informative, as both novelists embrace the ideas of polyphony and the non-identical to describe their characters.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, postcolonialism, identity

Abstrakt

W niniejszym artykule analizie poddane są dwie powieści, *Szatańskie wersety* Salmana Rushdiego i *Buddha z przedmieścia* Hanifa Kureishiego w celu ukazania procesu formowania się nie-esencjalistycznej jaźni. W odniesieniu do Rushdiego, jaźń można pojąć jako proces polifonicznej negocjacji pomiędzy twardymi kategoriami Zachodu oraz autochtoniczności. Natomiast w powieści Kureishiego kategoria postkolonialnego migranta zostaje ustanowiona jako kluczowa formuła pojęcia późno-dwudziestowiecznej

jaźni. W konkluzji sugeruję, że obydwie te pozycje wzajemnie się uzupełniają, czyniąc idee polifoniczności oraz inności cechami definicyjnymi bohaterów.

Słowa klucze: Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, postkolonializm, tożsamość

There are as many approaches to postcolonialism as there are theoreticians of the idea. As with so many other “postisms,” the understanding of the postcolonial condition rests in large measure on the interpretive approach that is adopted to elucidate the term. However, there seems to exist a point wherein most interpretations of postcolonialism cross. This point is the idea of language as a vehicle for non-essentialist identity formation, inasmuch as it is the idiom of the colonizer that, as Frantz Fanon observed back in 1961, has come to irreversibly affect and distort the identities and mindsets of the peoples of former colonies. Even though the more politically-minded critics would sooner aver that, deleterious though the nature of this imposition is, linguistic tyranny is a concomitant of a larger process of cultural and social subjugation. The focus of this paper is on the postcolonial situation in England as depicted in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, since both establish the notion of secularised language, a perennial issue in framing the postcolonial identity.

In his 1832 address to the British Parliament, T. B. Macaulay said of the backward citizens of the then empire: “We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother tongue [...] The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate [...] the empire is the imperishable empire of *our* arts and *our* morals, *our* literature and *our* laws” (qtd. in Jussawalla 2005, 98 emphasis in original). These words testify to the English feeling of undaunted superiority over their colonized subjects who must primarily become conversant with the English tongue before they can even dream of imbibing the refined broadly-conceived English culture. One of the belated responses such a lofty viewpoint triggered is exemplified in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s 1964 novel *Weep Not, Child*, in which at one point, in a conversation with his girlfriend, Mwihaki, the protagonist of the novel, says:

“All this land belongs to the black people.”

“Y-e-e-s. I’ve heard father say so. He says that if people had had education, the white man would not have taken all the land. I wonder why our old folk, the dead old folk had no learning when the white man came?”

“There was nobody to teach them English” (1964, 37).

Taken anecdotally, the short dialogue still goes to show the extent to which, in this case Africans, are slowly taught to recognize the supremacy of the white man. Significantly enough, this ostensibly innocuous inculcation takes place mostly at the level of language. It is thus within the immediate remit of this article to discuss the process of a restitution of language with a view to establishing an idiom capable of capturing the contemporary postcolonial condition. Granted that the first battles over linguistic identity of the peoples of the former colonies were fought on the grounds of cultural theory and artistic production, the focus is here laid on two seminal postcolonial novels as perhaps the best means to conjuring up a feasible vernacular of the colonized.

The issue of finding a language proper to singing the postcolonial fate of the people polarised the theoretical debate within the clique of non-English theoreticians. On the one hand, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Fanon pressed that English as a postcolonial lingua franca be shed so that the process of decolonisation may be complete; on the other, Chinua Achebe stressed the need for cross-border communication of, in his case, all African writers, which could only be achieved through the medium of English: "There are not many countries in Africa today where you can abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication" (1976, 77). Regardless of the fact that both positions hold some appeal and are in many respects complementary, it is the latter that appears to have secured a wider support among the contemporary critics and thinkers. It is little wonder, since by remaining in touch with English or any other of the "colonial idioms" indigenous writers gain a chance to naturally straddle at least two traditions, their own and the one derived from the West. This special position opens for the aboriginal writers a space in which they can let voices of the thus-far oppressed be heard as well as formulate unprecedented visions of multicultural societies. Recalling Rushdie's foundational call of the 1982 London *Times* article, the empire was poised to "write back" and it came "with a vengeance" indeed.

In the literatures written in the remit set up by Achebe's suggestion, that is in a remoulded English, Stuart Hall distinguished two moments of representation. The first came with the newly-won independence of the former empire and sought to contest the negative image rife in the media with a positive depiction of the native (Procter 103). The second moment, while refusing the simple reversals that the first promoted, saw the postcolonial condition as offering, and at the same time demanding, to be seen through the lens of difference: on ethnic, generational and sexual grounds. The former element to this triad tried to subsume the divergent modes of being under one tag of African or Indian identity, while the latter emphasised the plethora of possible ways of being an individual self. Therefore this second moment "is characterised by a shift

from the notion of representation as mimetic, to a recognition that representation plays a formative, constitutive role” (Procter 2006, 103). The second wave of theoreticians have claimed that there is no such thing as an essence of aboriginality which needs to be captured and put forth in art; rather the notion of identity of the former empire citizens is created by the political situation in which they are plunged, be it in their own countries, even in England or in the US, for that matter.

It may be suggested that so far the postcolonial artists (however we understand the notion) have worked within that latter paradigm. In the following we proceed by examining two among the key texts of the second moment of representation, Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* which will then be set against Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Rushdie’s novel, just as the earlier *Midnight’s Children*, structurally emphasises its allegiance with Lyotard’s foundational criticism of grand narratives (1984). In *Midnight’s Children* events of international status such as Indira Ghandi’s prosecution for alleged electoral fraud and even more importantly the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 are woven into the text alongside the personal ruminations and discontinuous recollections of Salim Sinai’s childhood. Indeed, in *The Satanic Verses* the number of intertwining stories is still greater; the principal story of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha who are chosen to represent respectively good and evil (even though the categories are highly equivocal) is spangled with, among others, the apocryphal story of Mahound’s epiphany and the creation of *The Qur’an* (evoking Mahomet, hence the infamous hullabaloo of 1989), the story of the Everest conqueror Alleluia Cone, the description of a pilgrimage of a small village that ended with an alleged parting of a sea and many others. All those constitute the fabric of *The Satanic Verses* by constantly interpenetrating one another; it seems that the clash between Gibreel, who is eventually turned into God’s reckoning angel, and Saladin, appropriately changing into a sulphur-breathing demon of a goat, informs also the other strands of the novel as though their conflict has been waged simultaneously across the past fifteen hundred years.

Such a multifarious assembly of histories as displayed in Rushdie’s most famous novels takes its cue from “Lyotard’s central thesis that late twentieth-century existence is composed entirely and exclusively of competing discourses and modes of representation” (Bradford 2007, 195). Lyotard explains his central contention, asserting that in what he calls the postmodern condition the quest for the Grail is elevated over the Grail itself; it is not a teleologically assumed goal of investigation that matters to the postmodern artist or philosopher but rather the process of searching for it. Similarly, Rushdie accepts that the *grand recits* of the past are no longer valid and in their stead he conjures the many

small narratives that make up the face of the contemporary reality. This condition of plurality and fragmentation is, according to Rushdie, where the novel “comes in [...] [This] is the point from which fiction begins” (1992, 422).

The Satanic Verses to a large degree attempts to ridicule the possibility of any form of finite and stable truth or knowledge. The blasphemous depiction of Mahound as a fallible man shows religion as untenable, since the reputed word of Angel Gibreel in fact comes from Farishta who is transported to that *illo tempore* of Islam in his sleep. Furthermore, the words Mahound wishes to be recorded are changed by his scribe, whose name is Salman. In a conversation with the once powerful poet Baal, Salman reveals his sacrilege: “if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God’s own Messenger, then what did that mean? What did that say about the quality of the divine poetry?” (367). Importantly enough, Salman does not provide Baal with any answer, leaving him to his own conjecture as to the nature of God’s word. Thus the many stories that comprise the novel may be argued to substitute for the lack of the first and at the same time final word of the Almighty. In this world of small narratives the issue of language comes to the fore in that an infinite variety of language games are called upon to fill in the gap left by the disappearance of the supreme discourse. This, of course, is of vital importance to the issue of identity, since the sort of metaphor one chooses for oneself must under the circumstances be as good as any other. It is no matter whether one wishes to be an Indian nationalist like Zeeny Vakil or an English-infatuated immigrant such as Chamcha, as long as the role one has chosen fits in with no friction; the only danger here is posed by those who will not accept any exception to their paradigm. Those in *The Satanic Verses* are represented by the religious zealots in the like of the mad Gibreel, the butterfly-covered Aysha or the business-oriented prophet Mahound.

Unlike the unwavering people of God, Chamcha as one who has renounced religion is an archetypal figure of postcolonialism. Having come to England, he embraces the white man’s culture uncritically and seeks to be a part of it in spite of taunts he receives from the native-born.

[H]e would be English, even if his classmates giggled at his voice and excluded him from their secrets, because these exclusions only increased his determination, and that was when he began to act, to find masks that these fellows would recognize, paleface masks, clown-masks, until he fooled them into thinking he was *okay*, he was *people-like-us*. He fooled them the way a sensitive human being can persuade gorillas to accept him into their family, to fondle and caress and stuff bananas in his mouth (43 emphasis in original).

Chamcha eventually succeeds in making himself even more English than the English themselves with an impeccable accent and a beautiful white wife, Pamela. The implication is that he has deceived not only the white people but himself. He acts out a Brit so well that he almost entirely forgets that he is an Indian. Yet, Chamcha in the above-quoted passage is shown to be a smarter man than the crude English with whom he wishes to mingle. The fact he outwits them by promoting an identity that seems to stem from his inherent understanding that who you are does not depend on your skin colour or where you were born but on what language game you choose to adopt as your own.

Towards the end of the novel Chamcha returns to India and makes up with his long-estranged father, as a result reclaiming his Indian identity and original name of Salahuddin Chamchawala. Yet, this re-emergence as an Indian does not seem to signify that he has found out the truth about himself. Rather, amid lots of possible ways of being a self, he finds the one that befits him, even if temporarily. He does not wish to be reunited with the traditional India, nor does he hanker after an Anglicised version of the country; in the light of those facts, the return to the old name of Chamchawala cannot be seen as a symbolic restitution of his native identity. After all a name is a name and just as Chamcha was a name under cover of which he created his life in London so Chamchawala becomes a name which he associates with a new beginning of life back in Bombay.

Unlike Gibreel, whose madness of monomania and belief he was God's avenging angel lead to multiple homicide, Saladin, or Salahuddin, never ceases to be a teller of tales, the truth-seeker insatiate, the "Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice." If throughout the novel he does embark on a quest for identity, it is a quest away from what his friend from radio calls "slave mentality" (61); only when he has understood that Englishness is in fact forced on him, will Chamcha become a profane and unlogocentric man, in other words – it is once he has dropped his incongruous facade that he will gain the freedom of not having to make a final choice. The novel ends with an optimistic image, quite unlike those with which Rushdie finished his earlier works; Chamcha looks musingly on the view that spreads before the window of his early room: "Childhood was over, and the view from this window was no more than an old and sentimental echo. To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born" (547). This image, at the same time violent, slightly mournful and hopeful, captures the idea of the new self that Rushdie has worked on throughout his novel. Once the old mores and sentimental allegiances are done away with, the new world may be born; one with no prophets and final truths, free from imposed codes of conducts and enforced identities,

a landscape neither British nor Indian. It is a sad irony that this message of hope should have instigated violence and brought fatwa on Rushdie.

What Chamcha and his many impersonations in *The Satanic Verses* promote is the oft-quoted idea of hybrid identity. As Rushdie put it, *The Satanic Verses* “celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure” (1992, 394). As an actor, migrant and a mimic man, Saladin is a perfect example of an unstable figure. Contrary to many critics’ opinion (Procter 2006, 109), it seems that Chamcha exemplifies a hybrid character better than Gibreel who obviously bears lots of traces of the notion but they are essentially forced on him. Throughout the novel he attempts to shed this variety in favour of a unified self. However, if hybridity may succinctly be explicated after Bhabha as “a state of ‘in-betweenness,’ as in a person who stands between two cultures” (Habib 2005, 750), then both Saladin and Gibreel are hybrids; should the positive facet of a hybrid identity be sought, Chamcha appears a fit exemplum in that he persistently looks for a face that will not suffocate his dreams and desires until he comes to terms with both his Englishness and Indian self in order to form a figure in between two cultures.

This perception of hybrid identity chimes with Radhakrishnan’s idea of “authenticity” as a “critical search for a third space that is complicitous neither with the deracinating imperatives of westernization nor with theories of a static, natural and singleminded autochthony” (755). So understood, hybrid identity must shed all stable points of reference, indeed it must give up on traditionally delineated identity as a state of “sameness-with,” and exist in the perpetually renewed act of self-invention, a redressing of the language of auto-creation. *The Satanic Verses* ends in a hopeful tone, suggesting that “newness comes into the world via the exuberant, hybrid commingling of cultures: a hybridity akin to the polyphony of the novel as form” (Israel 2005, 451). While it would be problematic to accept placing Rushdie in the tradition of the novel that is a characteristically western genre – given his own dismissal of such a taxonomy (Rushdie 1992, 64) – it does appear that polyphony is an apt term for describing Rushdie’s notion of identity.

Rushdie, in *The Satanic Verses*, offers a path beyond the long-established routes of cultural identity by articulately voicing his criticism of religion and an essentialist worldview. In *Imaginary Homelands*, he asserts that “rejection of totalized explanations is the modern condition,” adding in another essay that “perhaps I write, in part, to fill up that emptied God-chamber with other dreams” (1992, 422, 377). By creating the figures

of Gibreel and more importantly Saladin, as well as Salim Sinai in the earlier *Midnight's Children*, he successfully demonstrates that a plurality of discourses can take over from a single grand narrative. Rushdie most vivaciously and efficaciously delineates a milieu in which hybridization, Radhakrishnan's idea of "the third space," appears to be a particularly feasible form of self-creation, because only as hybrid figures, open to constant change, can we navigate through the world of plurality of language games. The novel ends with Saladin turning his back on the past and moving to the future; however, it is another postcolonial writer that has come to grapple with this future.

Although he disavows any links with Rushdie's works (Holmes 2001, 296), Kureishi faces the postcolonial condition from an angle sketched by Rushdie but left untraversed. Kureishi, identifies a wholly new situation in England of the mid- to late 1980s, noting the country's decline and decay: "strike-bound, drug-ridden, riot-torn, inefficient, disunited, a society which has moved too suddenly from puritanism to hedonism and now loathed itself," this "panorama of futility" calls for a new perspective according to Kureishi, one that avoids "insularity, schism, bitterness and catastrophe" (Bradford 2007, 203). This new point of vantage lies with what has been termed in regard to Kureishi's first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the Assimilated Postcolonial Novel:

For Kureishi's narrator Karim, and many of his fictive contemporaries, their Pakistani legacy is a curiosity, something that exists and is indeed still capable of generating racist antagonism, but which can for most of the time be treated with affectionate indifference [...] [the likes of Karim do not] attempt to extinguish their sense of difference; rather they make use of it to create a more subtle form of cultural hybridity (ibid.).

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi constructs Karim as a figure of otherness in several different respects; his father whom Karim both loves and loathes is a Pakistani, his mother is English, he is a bisexual and, when he becomes an actor in Matthew Pyke's play, Karim also becomes the intellectual Other. Yet, in spite of all those differences, Karim hardly hesitates as to his sense of belonging – he is "an Englishman born and bred, almost", as he informs the reader at the very beginning of the novel. He takes white boys' taunts and skinheads' threats for granted in that they constitute a part of his life as an English teenager. Karim lives at the threshold of the future created by Rushdie in the sense that he has successfully penetrated English society; even though he is still exposed to racism, he understands it as part of his social class fate: there are those born into riches and those born into rags, he is just in-between and also a little outside, somewhere one might call "the third space."

As Saladin and Gibreel, Karim ends up being an actor. Like they, he enters adult life through impersonating others. His first role is that of Mowgli. Although it could be suspected that he will fume at the role, given to him due to his skin colour, he jumps at it, seeing a chance for himself. He understands that if his otherness can help him, it is so much the better. After the play, Karim's father, Haroon, chastises him:

"Bloody half-cocked business," he said. "That bloody fucker Mr Kipling pretending to whity he knew something about India! And an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White minstrel!" (157).

Karim's cousin, Jamila, accuses him of pandering to the general prejudice but Karim knows better. The role will help him secure a part in a production by renowned Pyke, essentially what he has hoped for. Acting out what would traditionally be perceived as his "original identity" does not pose too great an obstacle to Karim, since he no longer feels part of that culture. He has become an Englishman of Indian origin and when his accent betrays him, it is not his immigrant ancestry that is revealed but his South London background (Kureishi 1999, 178). He eventually overcomes both the white people's preconceptions and his father's qualms over the role. It is this hybridity understood as perpetually meandering in between that permits Karim to look at his contemporary England from a secure vantage.

After Karim's father, together with his lover Eva, moves to central London, Karim immediately notices the woman's attempts to jettison her suburban past: "I saw she wanted to scour that suburban stigma right off her body. 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" (134). There is hardly any contempt in Karim, nor is he being vindictively candid about Eva's behaviour, rather he is quick to perceive the pathetic exertions that, instead of ensuring she is seen as a metropolitan intellectual, emphasize her difference. However, the general view of Britain is also duly, if mockingly, set down: the British "were exhausted now; their Empire was gone; their day was done and it was our turn" (250). Such a commentary must come from one who enjoys a broader perspective than the socially-bound and clichéd opinion of a suburbanite.

Karim's innate understanding that – to borrow Kathrine Pratt Ewing's idea – he lives in a "border-crossing" world that requires everyone to "negotiate multiple identities" (Ewing 1998, 263) grants him an overview of the social situation and of the problems pervading the country. As a result he is equipped to capture the paradox of the postcolonial

condition: “We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all bitterness and resentment, too. How was this possible when bitterness and resentment were generated afresh every day?” (227). Here finally the subtler language of postcolonialism is put forth. The postcolonial condition as a state of “in-betweenness” is a paradoxical ruse towards negotiating one’s difference in an attempt at articulating one’s identity; the very anxieties it seeks to overcome constitute its foundations.

For Karim, to find a way beyond the “bitterness and resentment” would thus be tantamount to locating a socio-scape above postcolonialism and that at least so far seems untenable. Karim exemplifies a hybrid figure who has already contrived to enter a space derived from the two genealogies: that of the former empire and that of modern England, as exemplified by the transformative and fluid London: “where values derive not from being but from seeming” (Ball 25). Even though in the process of identity amalgamation much has been lost, filtered out through the pores of the fluctuant identity, it appears that the “third space” language of auto-description prevailed; it takes whatever is needed in order to propel the self into contingent change so as to help it survive. It may be a supreme irony that the seemingly slighting words of the director of Karim’s first play, Mr. Shadwell, bear witness to the indisputable ubiquity of the idea of hybridity in the contemporary world: all in all, “The immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century” (Kureishi 141). It appears that this claim reverberates even more potently in the twenty-first century.

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