

Ethnic Caricatures and Transnational Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*^a

Dilek Menteşe Kıryaman^{b, c}

Abstract

This study focuses on comic ethnic caricatures in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and argues that the construction and deconstruction of these caricatures transcend the concept of identity. Kureishi's novel narrates four years in the life of Karim, who is born to an Indian father and an English mother. Karim's identity conflict due to his mixed racial background prevents him from fitting in the British society. The novel revolves around Karim's and other immigrant characters' identity conflicts in the tense political and social climate of 1970s Britain. As the novel is narrated from Karim's perspective, his humorous perspective of the world produces comic characters, which are particularly caricatured versions of ethnic identities. This study argues that the shifting direction of humour generated by the construction and deconstruction of comic ethnic caricatures exposes the transnational sensibility of ethnic identities in *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Key Words

Hanif Kureishi
The Buddha of Suburbia
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About Article

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Hanif Kureishi'nin *Varoşların Budası* Adlı Romanında Etnik Karikatürler ve Ulusaşırı Kimlik

Özet

Bu çalışma, Hanif Kureishi'nin *Varoşların Budası* (1990) adlı romanında komik etnik karikatürlere odaklanmakta ve bu karikatürlerin yapımının ve yapıbozumunun kimlik kavramının ötesine geçtiğini tartışmaktadır. Kureishi'nin bu eseri, Hintli bir babası ve İngiliz bir annesi olan Karim'in yaşamından dört yılı öykü edinir. Karim'in melez etnik kökeninden dolayı yaşadığı kimlik çatışması onun İngiliz toplumuna uyum sağlamasını engeller. Eser, 1970ler İngiltere'sinin gergin politik ve sosyal ikliminde, Karim ve diğer göçmen karakterlerin kimlik karmaşalarını anlatır. Roman, Karim'in bakış açısıyla anlatıldığı için onun mizahi dünya görüşü, özellikle etnik benliklerin karikatürize edilmiş versiyonları olan komik karakterler üretmektedir. Bu çalışma, *Varoşların Budası* adlı romanda, komik etnik karikatürlerin yapımı ve yapıbozumu vasıtasıyla üretilen mizahın değişen yönünün eserdeki etnik karakterlerin ulusaşırı kimliklerini ortaya çıkardığını tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

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^b Contact Author: mentesedilek@hotmail.com

^c Res. Assist. Dr., Çankırı Karatekin University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, English Language and Literature, Çankırı/Türkiye. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4826-581X>

Introduction

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) explores the notions of race, ethnicity, belonging and Britishness through its protagonist Karim Amir. The novel narrates four years in the life of the seventeen-year-old Karim, who is born to an Indian father, Haroon, and an English mother, Margaret. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is set in the tense political and social climate of 1970s Britain. Karim experiences identity problems as he is from both British and Indian descent. Although he is partially of British origin, his dark complexion prevents him from fitting in the British society. While he insists on foregrounding his British identity as he is born and raised in Britain, the British society regards him as the Indian "other". As a result of his "hybrid" identity, Karim's sense of belonging fluctuates between "othered" immigrants and white supremacists. The experiences of his family and friends play a critical role in Karim's process of identity construction. The text, thus, revolves around Karim's and other immigrant characters' struggle to reach for a sense of belonging. Among the tragic incidents regarding racism, ethnicity and social class, humour maintains a significant role while explaining the fluidity of ethnic identities in the novel. Karim's humorous perspective of the world reinforces the questions around the concept of racial and ethnic identity. Humour is particularly produced by comic characters which are narrated from Karim's point of view. As Kureishi comments on the humour in the novel, Karim mocks certain adults and his parents by perceiving them as hilarious comic figures (Yousaf, 2002, p. 12). The function of humour takes on a significant role in Karim's narration since he combines humour and ethnic stereotypes in the representation of certain characters; thus, it can be argued that Karim creates ethnic caricatures. Significantly, laughter and humour generated by the combination of ethnicity and caricatured characters provide an insight into national and ethnic identities. This study discusses that comic caricatured representations of both migrant characters and white British characters expose and complicate national identities. In other words, this study argues that the shifting direction of humour generated by the construction and deconstruction of comic ethnic caricatures exposes the transnational sensibility of ethnic identities in *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Transnational Identity

A transnational perspective provides an opportunity to look beyond nation-state borders by offering an insight into the transformation of identity and citizenship while they are constituted and re-constituted in fluid social spaces. In its widest sense, "[t]ransnationalism may be defined as the flow of people, ideas, goods, and capital across national territories in a way that undermines nationality and nationalism as discrete categories of identification, economic organization, and political constitution" (Brazier & Mannur, 2003, p. 8). Transnationalism cannot be basically described as the mobility of migrants as it also includes the movement of their customs and activities. In the 1990s, as a new attitude to the state of migrants, a transnational perspective was discussed by migration scholars who argued that several migrants maintained strong ties to their home countries but at the same time became a part of the host country. Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc (2005) detected that certain migrants could not be described as "immigrants" or as the ones that are "remaining behind" since they did not belong solely to their homeland or to their host country (p. 5). Basch et al. delineated how these migrants participate in social, economic, political and cultural activities which extend across borders. Therefore, they "began to use the terms 'transnationalism' and 'transnational social field' to describe [these migrants']

interconnected social experience” (Basch et al., 1994, p. 6). Recent research cultivate the definition of the transnational and discuss that transnational identities are located within fluid social spaces which are continuously reshaped due to the migrant’s embeddedness in multiple nations or cultures (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2008, p. 131). As Schultermantl and Toplu (2010) state, “[s]uch identities are not unified or stable, but are fluid entities which constantly push at the boundaries of the nation-state, thereby re-defining themselves and the nation-state simultaneously” (p. 11).

Regarding the identity question of migrants and their descendants in Britain, transnationalism is a critical concept that should be employed to comprehend and explore their state in Britain. Migration from ex-colonies and Britain’s policy towards migrants and ethnic minorities induced, intensified and problematised the identity crises of migrants and their descendants born in Britain. Integration of migrants, racism, the parallel drawn between Britishness and a white skin colour intensified the racial and cultural tensions in the British society. In other words, the “British ‘society’ was generally conceived as a hermetically sealed homogeneous whole into which the ‘immigrant’ was expected to integrate, leaving behind the baggage of ‘inferior and archaic’ cultures” (Brah, 2005, p. 225). In particular, post-war generation of migrants in Britain and their children, who are described as second-generation migrants, experience a clash between their native identity and British identity. These people with Afro-diasporic or South Asian roots who usually hold a British nationality or citizenship experience identity splits or identity crises as a result of the fact that they actually “belong” to more than one nation or culture. A transnational optic enlightens their state in multicultural Britain since the clash they endure does not indicate that their experience is contradictory but, on the contrary, simultaneous. In this context, they may define and redefine themselves parallel to their interactions between their “homeland” and Britain. In addition, migrants who identify as “British” are positioned in a more complex situation since “[t]he unsuccessful attempt to secure the post-imperial Commonwealth vision immediately after the Second World War [...] created a political and legal legacy that intertwined race, citizenship and immigration with the search for ‘Britishness’ after decolonisation” (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2018, pp. 5-6). Their simultaneous engagement with multiple nations or cultures and the complicated interpretation of “Britishness” enhance their transnational positions as their sense of belonging cannot be categorised into certain types. Indeed, there are “multiple ways of being transnational, since transnationalism includes a multiplicity of historical trajectories or pathways that affect people in different ways” (Quayson & Daswani, 2013, p. 6). Concisely, trans-boundary social and political processes generate a need to look beyond nation-states, racial and cultural borders to scrutinise cultural and national identities of migrants in Britain.

Ethnic Caricatures and Transnational Identity in *The Buddha of Suburbia*

One of the significant migrant characters who is caricatured from Karim’s humorous perspective is Haroon, Karim’s father. Sigmund Freud (1986) delineates in *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious* that a caricature triggers humour and laughter by degrading a subject and by emphasising a single feature which is normally overlooked in the general observation of that person (p. 201). Caricatures, thus, focus on a certain characteristic and exaggerate it with the aim of criticism and of creating laughter. Karim caricatures his father by exaggerating Haroon’s South Asian appearance and culture. Haroon is an Indian immigrant who works as a Civil Service clerk in London. He suddenly decides to practice

yoga and Buddhism as a result of Eva's^a motivation. One day, Haroon asked Karim to bring him a towel and Haroon

spread [the towel] on the bedroom floor and fell on to his knees. I wondered if he's suddenly taken up religion. But no, he placed his arms beside his head and kicked himself into the air. [...] He was standing on his head now, balanced perfectly. His stomach sagged down. (Kureishi, 1991, pp. 3, 4)

Karim expects that Haroon will pray on the towel since he is a Muslim and ridicules his father's decision to practice yoga and Buddhism. Haroon is narrated as a comic figure with his non-Islamic attempt and his sagged stomach. Apart from his sagging stomach, Karim continues to exaggerate Haroon's ethnic physical features such as his hairy chest and big nose. He states that Haroon "told me that in India he shaved his chest regularly so its hair would sprout more luxuriantly in years to come. I reckoned that his chest was the one area in which he'd been forward-thinking" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 4). Moreover, "[o]n the train Dad would read his mystical books or concentrate on the tip of his nose, a large target indeed" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 28). Haroon is represented as a comic caricature with his Indian appearance and his desire to practice mysticism. As Lippitt (1991) states,

[T]he word [caricature] signifies a method of making portraits aiming at the greatest possible resemblance of the whole of the person portrayed while yet, for the purpose of fun, and sometimes of mockery, disproportionately increasing and emphasizing the defects of the features. (p. 36)

In this context, Haroon's sagged stomach, hairy chest, and big nose are disproportionately portrayed for the purpose of mockery. In addition to his physical features, his interest in yoga and Buddhism is also emphasised with a sense of humour. Thereby, he is transformed into the comic portrait of the ethnic "other" as a result of his Indian appearance and interests. Indeed, from Karim's humorous perspective, Haroon embodies the "typical" and "static" migrant identity. The representation of Haroon's stable identity indicates that Karim does not position his father in the transnational space in which identities are shifting and far from "static".

Although his ethnic identity is the object of laughter from Karim's British sense of self, Haroon employs his stereotyped ethnic identity to be a part of the "white" British community. Mehmet Ali Çelikel (2017) remarks that Haroon uses yoga and Buddhism as tools to be accepted by the British society. With Buddhism and yoga, he enters the homes of British people who are interested in mysticism (p. 105). To illustrate, Haroon begins to teach yoga and mysticism to "white" Britons at Eva's house. As Karim underlines the "white" audience, "[f]our middle-aged men and four middle-aged women, all white, sat cross-legged on the floor" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 11). During the yoga session, Haroon emphasises his ethnic background by "hissing his s's and exaggerating his Indian accent" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 21). He embraces and exaggerates his "otherness" in order to be accepted by the British society. This implies that Haroon stereotypes himself by exaggerating certain ethnic figures such as his Indian accent. Once again, he is narrated as a caricature due to his representation as a comic Buddha figure in the Western society. A caricaturist is able to "grasp the perfect deformity, and thus reveal the very essence of a personality. A good caricature, like every other work of art, is more true to life than reality itself" (Garland, 1988, p. 78). Haroon's "perfect deformity" is his conflicted sense of belonging. His comic caricatured character

displays the tension between his Indian identity and his longing to belong to the British society. In fact, humour produced by his exaggeration of the Indian accent stresses his “deformity” and criticises the idea that, as an immigrant, he can only be accepted as the “other”. Haroon “spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous and now he was putting it back in spadeloads” (Kureishi, 1991, p. 21). Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that the coloniser creates the knowledge of the “stereotype”, which is a fixated knowledge and limits the “other” to define itself; however, it also limits the “self” to define itself. Thereby, the colonised subject does not have an authentic position to construct a “self”, and he/she is always the “Oriental stereotype” confronted with its difference (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 46-47). In this sense, Haroon spends years to disrupt his fixed “otherness” and to construct an authentic “self”; however, as there is no authentic British “self”, Haroon can only exist as the “Oriental stereotype” or as a comic caricature by embracing his “otherness”. Thus, only by exaggerating his ethnic “otherness”, is he able to draw the attention of the white British crowd in Eva’s house and “[n]ow he [is] the centre of the room” (Kureishi, 1991, p. 31). His desire to be an “Englishman” and his change of decision to be an Indian Buddha figure reveals Haroon’s shifting sense of self. Although he is defined as an Indian stereotype by Karim’s perspective and although he constructs himself as a stereotypical Indian, Haroon is positioned in a transnational space as he is situated in the Indian social space as a “Buddha” and in the British social space as a man who desires to be an “Englishman”.

Another critical issue at Haroon’s yoga session is the racist joke of two “white” British men which further problematises Haroon’s national and ethnic identity. Çelikel (2011) suggests that while Haroon enjoys teaching yoga classes to the English middle class, he is the object of ridicule and the “other” for the same crowd (p. 176). The two white men in the audience at Haroon’s yoga session ridicule his ethnicity by asking

‘[w]hy 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!’ ‘And has he got his camel parked outside?’ ‘No, he came on a magic carpet’. (Kureishi, 1991, p. 12)

Their racist joke transforms Haroon into an object of enjoyment as “the two men [...] glanced at each other as if they wanted to laugh” (Kureishi, 1991, p. 13). In the light of Freud’s (1986) words, it can be noted that their Western gaze caricatures Haroon by emphasising only a single feature, which is his Indian origin (p. 200). Furthermore, the quotation above highlights the complex interconnection between national and cultural borders. Christie Davies argues that the pattern of each racist or ethnic joke is identical and clarifies that

[p]eople tell ethnic jokes not about a group they despise, but about a familiar group, much like themselves, who live at the margin of their culture [...] What the joke tellers are laughing at is a slightly different version of themselves. (as cited in Morreall, 2009, pp. 98-99)

Alternatively stated, the laughing subject does not laugh at a complete outsider, but at someone that lives in the margins of the society. In this framework, the racist joke of the two white Britons demonstrates that Haroon is not situated on the outside but on the inside of the British society. The reference to British carpet brands illustrates this point clearly. After one of the white men comments that Haroon came on a magic carpet, the other one asks if the carpet is a “Cyril Lord or Debenhams” (Kureishi, 1991, p. 12). The reference to these

British carpet brands implies that Haroon is not a complete outsider. While Haroon is perceived as the “unfamiliar” on account of his Indian origin, he is simultaneously positioned inside the British social space due to the imagination of his possible use of British carpets. Bhabha suggests that “in the discourse of colonialism, colonised subjects are split between contrary positions. They are domesticated, harmless, knowable; but also at the same time wild, harmful, mysterious” (as cited in McLeod, 2000, p. 53). Humour directed at Haroon’s ethnicity reflects that Haroon is both on the inside and outside of the boundaries of the British society. On the one hand, he is “knowable” and “harmless” since he enters Eva’s house with the imagined British carpet brands. On the other hand, he is “mysterious” and “strange” as he is defined as the oriental “other” who teaches mysticism. Haroon’s “unfamiliarity” as an Indian and his “familiarity” as a British citizen demonstrate his simultaneous engagement with both the Indian culture and the British culture. Thus, British references in the racist joke enhances his transnational position as his sense of belonging cannot be categorised as the “other” or “self”.

Humour takes on a different significance regarding carnivalesque laughter during Haroon’s first yoga session. Frederick Holmes (2002) argues that the whole novel is the embodiment of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque and grotesque realism:

As does the work of Rabelais, Karim’s narrations feature what Bakhtin calls ‘grotesque realism,’ in which ‘the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role. Images of the body are offered, moreover, in an extremely exaggerated form’. (Holmes, 2002, p. 647)

While Holmes discusses numerous scenes with reference to the carnivalesque, he does not draw upon Haroon’s first yoga session in relation to the carnivalesque. This study argues that Haroon’s first yoga session at Eva’s house is the first event which initiates a carnival and humorous spirit that explicitly disrupts fixed identity positions. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) establishes that carnivalesque laughter reflects a world of topsy-turvy in which codes and norms are transgressed and disrupted (p. 8). Therefore, carnivalesque humour subverts authority in order to create a free and alternative life through change and revival. Haroon’s yoga session offers Haroon and Eva an alternative life by disrupting social and cultural hierarchies since they change both appearance and social position for the yoga class. Haroon is described as a “renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist” and Eva looks more different than normal wearing a “kaftan” and having “darkened her eyes with kohl so she looked like a panda” (Kureishi, 1991, pp. 16, 9). It is evident that Haroon constructs a Buddhist “self” and that Eva creates an “exotic” appearance. As Bakhtin (1984) asserts, travesty, the revitalisation of physical and social appearance, is one of the critical concepts of carnival laughter since it questions the relationship between realism and idealism (p. 81). Thus, Haroon and Eva epitomise travesty in both their physical appearance and social status. Haroon struggles to escape from the reality of his Indian “otherness” by disguising as an Indian Buddhist in order to penetrate the British society. Eva endeavours to efface her suburbanite identity by impersonating an “exotic” and mystical South Asian woman with the aim of drawing the attention of non-suburbanites. Consequently, the yoga session offers Haroon and Eva an alternative reality to construct identities free from the codes of the British society.

Grotesque imagery in Haroon's yoga session lends support to the carnivalesque atmosphere which renders freedom by disrupting social codes. Bakhtin (1984) discusses that in grotesque realism, physical features of the body are emphasised (p. 303). He also underpins that eating, defecating, childbirth, and death are all imageries of the grotesque (p. 19). During and after Haroon's yoga class at Eva's house, cultural, social, and sexual codes are transgressed and unsettled via grotesque images. This can be illustrated by Haroon's and Eva's sexual intercourse immediately after the yoga session. When Karim accidentally witnesses their sexual act, he observes that "Eva had only one breast" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 15). Haroon's and Eva's intercourse challenges the cultural codes of marriage since Haroon is still married to Karim's mother. Also, the fact that Eva has one breast underlines the incomplete aspect of the body. Furthermore, Charlie, who is Eva's son, and Karim have sexual interaction while Haroon teaches yoga downstairs (Kureishi, 1991, p. 17). This interaction reflects that Karim transgresses sexual and cultural norms since his bisexuality is implied for the first time. Grotesque imageries in these examples reflect that Haroon, Eva, and Karim realise the possibility of transgressing their suburbanite, social, racial and cultural identities. Bakhtin (1984) also suggests that the orifices of the body like the mouth, anus, and reproductive organs are all stressed within grotesque realism (p. 19). The first yoga session highlights the openings of the body as there is excessive drinking and smoking. Karim and Charlie use drugs and Haroon drinks too much alcohol. As Karim expresses, "[Haroon] was drunker than I was stoned" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 18). The exaggerations of the orifices are once more highlighted when Haroon is described as "that man stinking of sick and puking all night" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 18). Through excessive drinking and vomit, the earthliness of Haroon's unstable and incomplete body is emphasised. His body, thus, is not narrated as a static or comic caricatured object any longer but becomes a dynamic formation which is in the process of becoming. Therefore, the carnivalesque laughter in the yoga session draws attention to fluidity and change by unsettling the idea of a fixed corporeality.

Haroon's yoga session is the threshold that marks the end of fixed identity categories and the beginning of change and transformation due to the regenerative aspect of carnivalesque laughter. Bakhtin (1984) argues that the carnivalesque celebrates the end of the old world and the birth of the new world. Therefore, it includes a dual perspective and "[t]his is why in carnivalesque images there is so much turnabout, so many opposite faces and intentionally upset proportions" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 410). Karim's mother, Margaret, for instance, reinforces the dual perspective in the carnival spirit of the yoga class since she is serious, does not attend the yoga session and is trapped in her lower-middle class suburban life. When Karim arrives home after the yoga session, he comments that "[s]he reminded me of the real world. I wanted to shout at her: Take that world away!" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 18). It can thus be suggested that Margaret enhances the contrast between the old world and the new world. To clarify, the old world is represented by the suburban and stable life of his mother whereas the new world includes transformation, freedom and laughter as in Eva's house. Karim's observation displays the dual perspective of his carnivalesque laughter since the new world and the old world simultaneously exist in Karim's family home. This clash demonstrates that Haroon and Karim become aware of the possibility of an alternative life and an alternative "self". As a result, the old world of "static" identities ceases and a new world of transforming, shifting and alternated identities is introduced after the threshold of the yoga session.

After the carnivalesque yoga session, the function of humour changes regarding Haroon's caricatured representation. To be specific, rather than Haroon's comic caricature-like character, the humorous incongruity of his existence as the "Buddha of Suburbia" starts to trigger laughter. Buddha and suburbia are two terms which are used in different contexts, but Haroon's new "self" amalgamates these terms. As a result, when Haroon identifies himself as the "Buddha of Suburbia", his stereotypical migrant identity is deconstructed. Morrell remarks that human beings live according to certain structures in a certain order among things and situations. Humour emerges when a certain object or a thought seems to be out of place in that certain order human beings live in (1983, pp. 15-16). Evidently, when a person's thought or perception violates his/her normal mental patterns, humour is created. In this context, Haroon's whole existence as the "Buddha of Suburbia" is the target of humour. The image of a Buddha in the suburbs violates the normal mental pattern in which Buddhism and the suburban are situated in totally separate contexts. In this context, humour's direction and function change after his yoga class as Haroon's incongruous existence starts to generate laughter rather than his caricatured ethnic identity. Therefore, Haroon's transnational existence becomes more apparent after the threshold of the yoga session since his complex identity as the "Buddha of Suburbia" epitomises the clash and fluctuation between his Indian and British identities.

Humour underlines the flexibility of boundaries and the fluidity of ethnic identities also by the representation of another caricatured character, Changez. Changez is Anwar's^b son-in-law who immigrates to Britain from Bombay in order to marry Anwar's daughter, Jamila. As their marriage is forced and arranged, Jamila rejects marrying Changez, but he is eager to marry Jamila. Later, Jamila agrees to marry Changez since Anwar threatens to starve himself to death if she does not marry him. Despite their wedlock, Jamila never engages in a romantic relationship with Changez. Like Haroon, Changez is also caricatured from Karim's humorous perspective. Yousaf (2002) indicates that *The Buddha of Suburbia* portrays stereotypical images of the Asian family and states that

[t]he 'popular' image of the Asian family involves tropes of the authoritarian patriarch, the unhappy arranged marriage, and the Asian woman as submissive victim of the family itself. These features would seem to characterize the family unit that is Anwar, Princess Jeeta [Jamila's mother], and Jamila. (Yousaf, 2002, p. 41)

Changez is another stereotype in the typical Asian family since he represents the "imported" Indian husband. From Karim's perspective, this stereotype is transformed into a comic caricature as Karim exaggerates certain features to criticise, ridicule, and laugh at Changez's migrant identity. He defines Changez as an ugly, old and ridiculous Indian migrant (Kureishi, 1991, p. 57). In this sense, it can be suggested that Changez's caricatured identity displays Karim's laughter from the gaze of his British "self". Aristotle's view on laughter is a critical point in order to comprehend Karim's laughter directed at the caricature of Changez. In *Poetics*, Aristotle (2006) articulates that laughter is initiated by the feeling of superiority over someone or something and asserts that this superior laughter is the result of contempt and mockery caused by the ridiculous (25, 1449b). Karim laughs at Changez with a sense of superiority; for instance, he mocks that "as a dowry the ageing boy [Changez] had demanded a warm winter overcoat from Moss Bros., [and] a colour television" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 57). In this sense, while Changez is the inferior Indian whose demands are laughable, Karim is the "superior" laughing subject who mocks the comic "other". Karim

perceives Changez from the gaze of the British “self” as he feels a sense of superiority while describing Changez’s humorous “inferiority” related to his migrant identity.

Furthermore, Aristotle (2006) defines the ridiculous as a “certain sort of missing mark and a deformity that is painless and not destructive” (25, 1449b). Changez is the “ridiculous” in Aristotle’s terms, since he has a deformity which is painless and non-destructive. Changez has a deformed arm, and his arm is not narrated as a tragic incident but as a comic deformity which caricatures him by generating contempt and mockery. His deformed arm is repetitively reminded in the narrative while his comic actions or characteristics are described. To illustrate, Anwar dreams of a son-in-law who will work at his grocery shop, but when he learns that Changez has one arm, he is disappointed. Karim observes that “I couldn’t see Changez decorating Anwar’s shop with one arm. In fact, had he four Mohammed Ali arms I doubted if he’d know what to do with a paintbrush, or with a toothbrush for that matter” (Kureishi, 1991, pp. 81-82). Moreover, when Anwar forces him to work at the shop, Changez acts as if he does not know how to do the work, and sleeps during his shifts. The moment Anwar sees Changez sleeping at the shop, “[h]e picked a bunch of bananas and threw them at his son-in-law, hitting him so hard in the chest that Changez toppled off his stool and badly bruised his good arm” (Kureishi, 1991, p. 97). As seen in these examples, Changez’s deformed arm and his “ugliness” are disproportionately increased and emphasised which indicate his “ridiculous”, comic, and caricatured character. As John Lippitt (1991) comments, the finest caricatures usually exaggerate and distort the characteristics of the caricatured person. As a result of these exaggerations and misrepresentation, the caricature does not resemble the real person any longer (p. 36). Changez does not resemble a real person anymore, but his deformity and “otherness” are narrated as comic and farcical aspects by Karim’s British gaze. Evidently, Karim closely associates Changez’s deformed arm to his “inferior” and comic migrant identity as an “imported” Indian husband. Concisely, humour produced by the portrait of the caricatured Changez accentuates the superior laughter of Karim’s British “self”.

The transformation of the direction and function of humour regarding Changez’s character casts a new light on his identity. Like Haroon, who disrupts his caricatured “otherness” by identifying as the “Buddha of Suburbia”, Changez deconstructs his caricatured ethnicity by repositioning himself in the British society. Throughout the novel, Changez changes from a fixed comic caricature into a flexible character. His decision to move to a communal house, since Jamila desires to live there, marks the start of the distortion of his fixed identity. Karim describes Changez in the communal house by stating that “he looked like Oliver Hardy^c in a room of Paul Newmans^d, and was as frightened as a new boy at school” (Kureishi, 1991, p. 217). Although Karim still struggles to caricature Changez as the object of humour, Changez’s extreme transformation rejects being caricatured and laughed at by Karim’s Western gaze. To exemplify, Changez “love[s] the communal life”, babysits the “communal baby” who is the child of Jamila and another man named Simon, and accepts Jamila’s newly discovered bisexuality (Kureishi, 1991, pp. 222, 231, 273). In this sense, Changez deconstructs his caricatured migrant image and positions himself in the cultural and social space of the communal house. Referring to Stuart Hall’s concept of “identification”^e, which includes the idea that identity is a combination of the ways we are positioned in and in which we position ourselves, Friedman and Schultermandl (2011) assert regarding transnational identities that “no longer does it suffice to look into specific locations, such as within a nation-state, to determine identities. We must also look into how these locations confine, interfere with, and

contradict individual projects of selfhood" (p. 13). In this regard, the text portrays that Changez cannot be identified within the limits of the comic and caricatured Indian "self". The disruption of his caricatured character which is caused by the interaction between his communal life and his migrant identity demonstrates that identity is an ongoing process. This suggests that his Indian "self" interferes with this individual project of selfhood in the communal life belonging to the Western cultural space. Thus, Changez as the de-caricatured character is not only involved in the Indian cultural space but also in the British cultural space of the communal house which points out his transnational existence.

Apart from characters who disrupt their caricature-like representations and who are engaged in transnational spaces such as Haroon and Changez, the text also narrates migrant identities who are unable to transgress their caricatured personalities. Michael Ross (2006) writes that "the more inflexible a character's conception of identity, the more vulnerable will that character be to Kureishi's corrosive laughter" (p. 236). Correspondingly, Anwar who rejects change and fluidity regarding his migrant identity position is one of the most comic caricatures in the text. Anwar's "typical" migrant identity becomes the target of humour. To illustrate, he holds a capitalist perspective, he gives much importance to earning money, he works from eight in the morning until late at night in his shop, and he "didn't even have Sundays off" (Kureishi, 1991, pp. 27, 51). Furthermore, he is a fundamental Muslim, forces his daughter into an arranged marriage, does not drink or sell alcohol, and criticises Haroon's Buddhist practices. It is evident that Anwar is a stereotypical migrant "other" as a result of the exaggerated representation of his religious, capitalist and cultural views. As Mark Stein (2004) states, "[*The Buddha of Suburbia*] also treats with humor the stereotypical expectations supposedly held by those from a migrant generation" (p. 120). In this sense, humour created by Anwar's caricatured character is remarkably generated by his "machine-like" existence. Henri Bergson (1956) notes that a lack of "elasticity" leads to laughter and that the laughable person is machine-like and inflexible. The comic figure resembles a "piece of clockwork" or has "puppet-like" movements different from a naturally behaving human being (pp. 156, 152). In Bergson's view, "[the comic character] lives by formulas, not by animation, and his behaviour is a series of repetitions. But life should be a negation of repetition. So we laugh at him" (as cited in Sypher, 1956, p. xi). In this context, Anwar is transformed into the object of laughter due to his "puppet-like" character. He works in a machine-like manner and expresses, for instance, that "[o]nly three hundred and fifty-seven days until we can rest freely again" and he dreams of raising his grandchildren as perfect Muslims (Kureishi, 1991, pp. 51, 80). Anwar lacks "elasticity" as he refuses to integrate into the British society. Although he lives in a multicultural Western society, Anwar strictly maintains the cultural and social customs of his Indian background, and, as a result, he becomes a comic caricature.

Changez's adaptation to a new and free life in Britain contrasts with Anwar's fixed cultural norms which underlines Anwar's lack of fluidity. Bergson's analysis of laughter mirrors his philosophy that life is a "vital impulse", "an *élan vital*", which cannot be comprehended only by reason or rational science, but which should be explained by instinct and experience (as cited in Sypher, 1956, pp. viii, xi). Thus, life is not mechanical; therefore, incongruity appears when human beings act like a puppet instead of living according to the changes in life. Anwar's "machine-like" character generates humour as it clashes with the spontaneity of life. That is, Anwar's "puppet-like" character clashes with the realities of multicultural Britain, and this contrast triggers humour as his machine-like character is recognised and disrupted.

Crucially, “Anwar becomes over the course of the novel ever-more dictatorial and closed-minded” (Holmes, 2002, p. 655). Laughter created by the clash between Changez’s spontaneity in life and Anwar’s inelasticity is intensified through the end of the novel. When Anwar gets infuriated as he sees Changez and his Chinese girlfriend, Shinko⁶, holding hands, Changez knocks Anwar unconscious with a sex toy he had bought for Shinko (Kureishi, 1991, p. 211). As a result, Anwar’s “puppet-like” character is disrupted by the spontaneity of life represented by Changez and his new relationship with a Chinese woman.

Anwar’s caricature-like character delineates that it is impossible to exist with a lack of transnational sensibility in multicultural Britain. The reason for this is that after Changez attacks Anwar, Anwar experiences a heart failure and dies. Although Anwar dies of a heart failure, Changez’s attack on Anwar is the reason which indirectly kills him. Bergson (1956) implies that the function of laughter is humiliation which reflects that laughter is used as a social corrective by humiliating certain situations or people. Laughter must “[a]lways [be] rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social ‘ragging’” (pp. 147-148). Regarding Anwar’s comic representation and his humiliating but comic death, it can be suggested that humour functions to correct or criticise static migrant identities who reject spontaneity, fluidity and adaptation. Anwar, for instance, rejects integrating as he attempts to go back “home” to Bombay. As he declares, “I want to go home now,’ [...] ‘I’ve had enough of this damn place” (Kureishi, 1991, p. 172). Clearly, Anwar’s situation epitomises the “myth of return” since he imagines an ideal India where he will return. Salman Rushdie (1991) rejects the melancholic context of the myth of return which disrupts the assimilation process in the land of settlement. Rushdie (1991) declines to recall home with a gloomy view as it hinders adapting to the country of sojourn since the protection of a “fixed” ethnic or cultural identity restrains assimilation that causes a “ghetto mentality” (p. 19). In this context, Anwar’s desire to return to Bombay prevents his integration into the hostland. His fixed cultural identity is criticised through humour caused by his caricatured and “puppet-like” representation. While Haroon is able to transform and position himself in the fluid transnational space, Anwar rejects change and, therefore, cannot exist within the transnational perspective of the narrative and in the multicultural atmosphere of Britain. Whereas humour functions to represent Haroon’s and Changez’s transformation from caricature into a fluid migrant “self”, it humiliates and criticises Anwar’s “ghetto mentality” and lack of transnational sensibility.

In addition to the function of humour which targets migrants as ethnic caricatures, humour is also directed towards white British society. The most significant suburbanite racist character is Helen’s father. When Karim arrives at Helen’s house, he encounters her father and describes him as follows, “[h]e was a big man with a black beard and thick arms. I imagined that he had hairy shoulders and, worst of all, a hairy back” (Kureishi, 1991, p. 40). Subsequently,

‘You can’t see me daughter again,’ said Hairy Back. ‘She doesn’t go out with boys. Or with wogs.’ [...] We don’t want you blackies coming to the house [...] However many niggers there are, we don’t like it. We’re with Enoch’. (Kureishi, 1991, p. 40)

Karim exaggerates the large and hairy body of Helen’s father which mocks and degrades his suburbanite and racist view. Thus, it can be argued that Karim’s Indian “self” caricatures British and racist people. While Karim’s British “self” mocks the migrant “other” by portraying caricature-like characters such as Haroon, Changez and Anwar, his Indian “self”

caricatures the racist and British "self". Freud (1986) articulates that the most significant aspect of a caricature is that it produces laughter by targeting people of authority (p. 200). Similarly, Nicholas Garland (1988) agrees that caricatures direct laughter at authority and points out that through caricatures, "we create a kind of distorting glass through which [figures of authority] are seen" (p. 77). In this context, by naming him "Hairy Back", Karim ridicules and laughs at the man's authority as a father and as the representative of the oppressive racist society of the suburbs. Also, the text does not provide "Hairy Back's" given name or surname, which distorts his individuality and reinforces his comic caricatured image. Rather than a British citizen who has authority over racial "others", "Hairy Back" is represented as a deformed and comic character. Remarkably, the change of the target of humour displays that Karim is involved in complex cross-border spaces. A transnational perspective indicates "how migrants and their descendants participate in familial, social, economic, religious, political, and cultural processes that extend across borders while they become part of the places where they settle" (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007, p. 130). In this regard, Karim participates in the social and cultural practices of the British society by laughing at the migrant "other"; however, he is also involved in the Indian community when he laughs at and degrades the British "self".

"Hairy Back's" dog is another significant figure which problematises the racist attitude in the suburbs with the integration of laughter. When Karim confronts Helen's father, the man is accompanied by a "Great fucking Dane" (Kureishi, 1991, p. 40). Karim tries to run away from the big dog, but "suddenly there was a flurry and I felt something on my shoulders. [...] The dog was in love with me" (Kureishi, 1991, pp. 40-41). The text implies that the Great Dane ejaculates on Karim's clothes. Holmes (2002) comments on the incident between the dog and Karim by stating that

[i]n its virulence, the racism of Helen's father has dehumanized Karim; in effect, it has reduced him to the level of the family's large dog, who has selected him as a sexual partner. But the abusive language that peppers Karim's depiction of the scene works to degrade Helen's father in turn and with him the racist National Front, to which he proudly proclaims his allegiance. (p. 649)

In this sense, it can be suggested that while Karim degrades and caricatures "Hairy Back", he is himself degraded by the racist society represented by "Hairy back" and his dog. Briefly, Karim's encounter with "Hairy Back" and his dog implies British laughter's hegemonic dominance over the ethnic "other", yet, this encounter also signifies Karim's attempt to challenge the racist view by constructing a caricatured version of Helen's father and the attack of the dog. As a result, humour is directed both at the oppressed "other" and at the oppressor which disrupts the "stable" positions of the "self" and "other". The bilateral direction of humour underlines the simultaneity of Karim's ethnic and national identity. Simultaneity is discussed as one of the key concepts of transnational identities since transnational identities "change and swing one way or the other depending on the context, thus moving our expectation away from either full assimilation or transnational connection but some combination of both" (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2008, p. 288). Karim's attempt to caricature both the white British society and the Indian migrant community, thus, reveals his simultaneous embeddedness in more than one national space as the changing direction of his humour exposes his identification as both British and Indian.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, humour generated by caricatured representations of migrant and non-migrant characters exposes and complicates national and ethnic identities. Directing the course of humour towards both the “other” and self” by caricaturing specific characters, the text unsettles essentialist notions of identity and provides an alternative perspective to the concept of national and ethnic identity. In this regard, laughter produced by the caricatured version of Haroon’s national identity discloses the construction of the migrant “other” and the problematic relationship between the colonised and coloniser. Likewise, the shifting direction of humour portrays that Changez cannot be identified within the limits of the caricatured Indian “self”, which opens up new spaces to define his fluidity. While humour reflects Haroon’s and Changez’s transformation from a fixed comic caricature into a fluid migrant self, it criticises Anwar’s lack of ability to transgress his caricatured migrant identity. Anwar maintains his “static” and comic caricature-like identity which reflects the impossibility of his survival in a transnational space. Moreover, the shifting direction of laughter complicates the relationship between the British “self” and Indian “other” by caricaturing the racist suburbanite “Hairy Back” and by ridiculing Karim. Briefly, comic caricatures of both migrant and British characters provide an alternative and distorted perspective of stereotyped identities. Both the Indian community and the British community are mocked and caricatured by the British or Indian gaze, which challenges the fixed notions of the British “self” and the migrant “other”.

Humour, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, is employed to transgress the notion of ethnic and national identities. The fluidity of the “I” and “other” is underlined by the shifting direction of laughter. As humour leads us to re-evaluate certain categories by changing our perception, humour created by the comic ethnic characters in the narrative provides an alternative perspective to national and ethnic identity categories. Kureishi employs caricaturing as a strategy to amalgamate the comic and ethnic stereotype in order to underline the absurdity of representing ethnic clichés in present day Britain. Kureishi (1992) states in “The Rainbow Sign” that “[being British] [n]ow it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time” (p. 36). In this sense, the fluctuating direction of laughter in *The Buddha of Suburbia* ensures a new perspective on British identity in a society which includes transnational identities such as Karim, Haroon, and Changez.

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Notes

- ^a Eva is Haroon's friend, but later they are involved in a romantic relationship. Eventually, Haroon leaves his wife, Karim's mother, and moves into Eva's house.
- ^b Anwar is Haroon's Indian friend and he is like an uncle to Karim. Anwar and Haroon immigrated together to Britain and have been close friends for many years.
- ^c Oliver Hardy (1892-1957) was an American comic actor with an overweight, moustached, and comic appearance. He performed in silent comic films.
- ^d Paul Newman (1925-2008) was an American actor with striking good looks and charisma. He performed in numerous dramas in which he was the antihero.
- ^e For more information see Hall, S. (2004). Who Needs 'Identity'?. In P. Gay, J. Evans & P. Redman (Eds.), *Identity: A Reader* (pp. 15-30). London: Sage, 2004.
- ^f Shinko is a Chinese prostitute. Changez and Shinko have a relationship based on affection and sexual intercourse. Although Changez is officially married to Jamila, he maintains his affair with Shinko. When Jamila learns about the affair, she accepts and encourages their relationship. Consequently, both Jamila and Changez have relationships with others, but they stay officially married.