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**COSMOPOLITANISM IN THE CHARACTER OF KARIM OF THE  
BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA**

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**Abstract**

*The immigrant of the new globalized world forces theoreticians, critics and even politicians to cast a fresh look upon the identity issue. Linked to the importance of diaspora, the immigrant is thought to be part of a community to which s/he must or at least is expected to be loyal. The question I am asking myself in this paper is: how important is for an individual of double origin to consciously and purposefully connect with a specific group? Seen in this light, what is the meaning of cosmopolitanism?*

**Key-words:** community, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, home, migrancy

**Introduction:**

Since the people's "new way of life" (xii), as Appiah (2006) puts it when speaking of cosmopolitanism, is able to affect other people, it means that one has responsibilities to the others. The "global tribe" (Appiah 2006: xiii) in which we have come to live can bear the label of "globalization" or "multiculturalism" but Appiah prefers to call it "cosmopolitanism", emphasizing the fact that cosmopolitanism is not a solution to the issues it purports but rather a challenge – the challenge triggered by the

clash between the “universal concern” and “the respect for the legitimate difference” (ibid.).

This paper is meant to discuss and analyze Karim, the main character of The Buddha of the Suburbia, and his “cosmopolitan” (or not) behaviour in relation to his presupposed lack of interest in his Indian origins. According to Appiah, one must admit that in the human community and in the national one, there must be ways of co-existence: “conversation” in the old sense of “association” (ibid. xix). Thus, it is not wrong to say that one cannot and should not force an individual to become part of a specific community and behave accordingly.

### **The cosmopolitan character**

In a discussion within the group of actors of which Karim, the main character of the novel, was a member, a black young woman called Tracey starts shouting at him, disappointed and irritated by the way in which he tried to impersonate a real person of Karim’s group of Indian friends:

*Your picture is what white people already think of us. That we’re funny, with strange habits and weird customs. To the white man we’re already people without humanity, and then you go and have Anwar madly waving his stick at the white boys. (...) You show us as unorganized aggressors. Why do you hate yourself and all black people so much, Karim?* (Kureishi 1990: 180)

Tracey is defending the group of people that is not white; for her, being black is the same as being Indian as in her mind there are just two categories of people – “white” and “black” –who are definitely and forever at opposite poles.

The issue here is about being different or not, being “funny” (read “strange”) or not, being aware or not of one’s strangeness. While Tracey thinks that “we have to protect our culture at this time” (ibid.181), feeling that it is a mistake to play by the whites’ rules by making fun of “ourselves”, Karim is not even aware of the danger that she suddenly presents to him. In his case, being part of a group or community within a multicultural society is not of importance (just yet) and therefore he is not afraid to show

uncle Anwar just as he is in reality and in circumstances not altered for the sake of politics.

As simple as Karim might appear, he is a sort of a cosmopolitan, in the sense that it is his humanity and interest in people of any culture that are emphasized in the novel rather than his cultivated bonds with a certain community. This may have been in part the result of his origins (the father was Indian while the mother was English) or even his close relationship with his stepmother-to-be, Eva, an Englishwoman, who is trying to introduce her lover, Haroon, along with his son, Karim, to the cosmopolitan modern society of London. All these factors may have played a role in Karim's non-awareness of his "real identity", of Indian origins.

Another woman in his theatre team, Eleanor, "an upper-class English woman in her sixties who'd grown up in the Indian Raj, someone who believed herself to be part of Britain's greatness" (ibid. 179) told Karim that his "accent was cute" (ibid. 178), a detail that the accent-holder had not even been aware of so far, and who – as a consequence – "resolved to lose [his] accent" and "speak like her" (ibid.). On the contrary, another character, an English director called Shadwell who cast Karim in Mowgli's role "for authenticity and not for experience" (ibid. 147) is disappointed with Karim's incapability to speak either Urdu or Punjabi and with his lack of accent which spelt lack of "authenticity" for him. Shadwell's disappointment is related not only to the fear that his play will not be "authentic" enough, but also to the fact that the "orientalism" that Karim was supposed to impersonate was not rising to his "white" expectations:

*'What a breed of people two hundred years of imperialism has given birth to. If the pioneers from the East India Company could see you. What puzzlement there'd be. Everyone looks at you, I'm sure, and thinks: an Indian boy, how exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we'll hear from him. And you're from Orpington.'* (ibid. 141)

This paragraph is an illustration of the fact that a large part of the white society thinks by stereotypes and cannot be but disappointed when reality proves the opposite of what they used to think. Thus, for an Englishman, an Indian is definitely someone coming from a

large family, with a great and interesting exotic history. At this point, Shadwell is struck with a new idea:

*'Oh, God, what a strange world. The immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century.'* (ibid.)

Migrancy is indeed a characteristic of the new society that cannot be ignored even if one would like to. Along with different risks and difficulties (social, financial, religious etc.) encountered by the immigrant, being accepted by the host-culture is probably the hardest. Shadwell is representative of the part of society who is not ready to accept "others" as their equals as they will always remain "others" (read "strange", "different", "weird", "inferior"). He thinks that what Eva is doing for him is "trying to protect you from your destiny, which is to be a half-caste in England" (ibid.). It is him, not Karim, who wants to discuss and understand the boy's situation:

*'That must be complicated for you to accept – belonging nowhere, wanted nowhere. Racism. Do you find it difficult? Please tell me.'* (ibid.)

To which Karim simply answers:

*'I don't know (...). Let's talk about acting.'* (ibid.)

As it stands, it is more the English who always remind Karim of what and who he is. Both Eleanor and Shadwell are but impersonations of the West who needs the East's "strangeness" in order to reassure itself of its greatness and superiority. What I want to underline here is that the author's choice of white characters to emphasize the fact that the world is still distributed between "us" and "them" and that "they" are just a "half-caste" proves what Vijay Mishra states in one of his books, in which he speaks of the position of power held by the nation-state (the dominant culture),

*It remained a structure of control that kept minorities where they are in the guise of a 'colonialist' (white) respect of cultural difference without changing the unified selves of the 'managers' themselves. (Mishra 2007: 135)*

and of the need of the nation-state to recognize the diaspora (re-asserting one Taylor's idea from 1994):

*At the heart of the politics of multiculturalism is the demand for recognition and at the heart of that recognition is the subject of diaspora (...). (ibid.)*

Still, the nation-state needs the diasporas to remind it of its own homeland (*desh*, in Hindi).

Karim cannot be said to be a character in search of his *desh*, although at a certain point in the novel he admits that,

*(...) I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now – the Indians – that in some way these were my people, and that I'd spent my life denying or avoiding that fact. I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd been colluding with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them. (Kureishi 1990:212)*

Nevertheless, although aware that “in some way” he was part of a “people”, Karim does not dot change anything in his behaviour or discourse to prove that he belongs to one specific group; moreover, he needs to be “pushed towards one's past” or towards a group. He connected his denial to his father's lack of interest in going back to India. Haroon, always “Harry” for his sister- and brother-in-law, “preferred England in every way” (ibid. 213) for practical reasons: it was not hot like in India, “terrible things” were punished etc. As much as the past was concerned, Haroon was not proud of it “but he wasn't unproud of it either; it just existed (...)” (ibid.). Therefore, for Karim, there was no such thing as an Indian past:

(...) if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it. (ibid.)

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, one may assert that Karim is definitely a cosmopolitan, aware of being part of and sharing two different cultures: his friends are both Indian and English, he likes English pop music, he enjoys being both with girls and with boys. It may be a little too much to say that he has found the middle ground between the two cultures as these are not static, just as the very character's identity is not static, but fluid, having been on the move and still moving at the end of the novel.

If one agrees with Arjun Appadurai (1996), who says that,

*One man's imagined community is another man's political prison.* (Appadurai 1996: 32),

one is able to say that Karim may have avoided this risk by preferring to live life as it is, being just another boy and not *that* specific member of *that* specific group, by observing and analyzing others rather than himself.

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