

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* :

outline for a commentary

Hanif Kureishi was born in London to a British mother and a Pakistani father, just like the hero of his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, an autobiographical novel set in the multicultural and multiracial Britain of the 1970s. In this *Bildungsroman*, Hanif Kureishi relates the story of Karim Amir, the homodiegetic narrator of the story, a restless character torn between his British and Pakistani cultures. The novel thus explores Englishness and national and personal identity in a post-imperial world.

Such questions are also at stake in the extract under study. In this passage the first-person narrator has been invited with his English girlfriend to his cousin Jamila's arranged marriage: the scene describes the party when Jamila and Changez, the Indian groom chosen by Uncle Anwar for his daughter, meet. The reader is thus given a glimpse of an age-old Eastern tradition (arranged marriages) in London, in the West. What the narrator describes is an awkward party, a moment of disunion when East meets -and clashes with - West. But he does so with a peculiar tone, full of irony and humour for the passage is a biting satire of this community sticking to its traditions. This critical distance shows the narrator as both inside and outside his community, forever in-between two cultures, understanding both but unable to decide where he is standing.

Studying first the awkward atmosphere of the party and the clash of cultures, I will then focus on the humorous tone of the text and the underlying satire of this little community before moving on to the status of this in-between narrator who seems to belong nowhere and must still find a place in Britain.

1 An awkward party: when East meets West

The atmosphere of the party is tense: while an engagement party or a wedding is supposed to be a moment of rejoicing when families gather, this scene is first pervaded by **silence** and embarrassment. Indeed neither Uncle Anwar nor Helen, the usually talkative British girlfriend of the narrator, manage to break the ice (l. 2-3 and l. 6-7). Only when "four relatives of Anwar's" (l. 31) arrive does the situation change: "soon the room was noisy and busy and animated".

A) Embarrassed looks

The gloomy atmosphere of the party is enhanced throughout the text by the **looks the characters exchange -or rather don't exchange**.

→the narrator and his girlfriend look away, embarrassed: the narrator 'examined the threadbare carpet', while Helen looks out of the window (l. 7).

→ **the bride and the groom** never once look at each other (“I can guarantee that not a single surreptitious glance was exchanged by the future bed-mates” (l. 10)). For Changez and Jamila are poles apart: on the one hand Changez ignores his bride and only pays attention to his father-in-law, laughing at all he says in a sycophantic way (l. 56). On the other one Jamila’s antipathy for her husband-to-be is made obvious when, instead of showing interest in the conversation between Anwar and Changez or in Changez himself, she picks a book by Kate Millett “staring into it” (l. 61).

→ **Anwar**, who forces his daughter into a marriage she doesn’t want, is presented as a blind character, at least blind to his own daughter’s needs. After explaining that Anwar doesn’t know anything about his own daughter (being a girl, she is more of a burden to him than anything else), the narrator states that Anwar simply “didn’t see her” (l. 28).

→ Only the **mother** casts a glance at her daughter but it is a “reproachful and pitying” one (l.62) as she blames her for reading a book and probably pities her for having to marry a cripple.

B) When East meets West

The awkwardness of the scene betrays oppositions and antagonisms between the characters - between father and daughter, between mother and daughter, between bride and groom and above all between West and East. Ultimately the text shows **the clash of two cultures**, the Western and the Eastern one. → Study **space** in the text. At first sight the scene looks typically Indian (an Indian arranged marriage) but it takes place in the West, in the suburb of London, in a single room symbolizing the **communitarian attitude of the father clinging to his traditions and customs**. A fundamentalist, the father is presented as an authoritarian figure who expects his daughter to obey him whatever the consequences.

C) Jamila

Nevertheless Anwar seems oblivious to the fact his daughter is not only an Indian daughter anymore, but the product of Western education as well. The portrait drawn by the narrator of **Jamila shows her as a rebellious and emancipated girl, proud of her Britishness**: she wears “National Health” glasses + her **Dr Martens**, “that gave the impression that she was about to take uphill walking” (l. 18) as if she was about to go up –and overcome- her father’s mountain of prejudices, + her “**sacks**” + her not wearing any bra (suggesting she is a feminist and a hippie).

Surprisingly Jamila agrees to marry Changez at the end of the extract and her fate seems to be sealed – she is bound for a life of misery with a man she doesn’t have anything in common with. *Yet the tone of the text is far from tragic: there is no pathos here, but a humorous, satirical look on this community.*

2 Humour, irony and satire: in the comic mood for love

The text can be read as a satire of a community of immigrants who cling to their values and traditions and refuse to adjust to the West. No one is spared by the narrator: Anwar, Changez, Jamila are all made fun of.

A) A father's disappointment: exaggeration and understatement

Maybe one of the main targets of the narrator's criticism is **Anwar** who is so full of himself and unwilling to adapt. Ironically enough, Anwar whose main goal in marrying his daughter was to find someone to help him in the shop, someone with "nimble, shop-painting, box-carrying fingers" l. 48 discovers that his son-in-law is in fact 'unsuitable' and disabled. The man Jamila's "father had selected from millions "(l. 68) **is, ironically, a cripple**, a one-armed man who will prove unfit for any kind of work in the shop and will be a lifelong burden ("I couldn't see Changez decorating Anwar's shop" l. 52). Thus the grand ambitions of the father and his inability to see his daughter's needs are deflated and punished - Changez's inability to help and the absence of his arm being ironically conveyed by an **accumulation of words** (in particular adjectives). Hence also the sarcastic tone of the narrator who seems to enjoy the bathos of the situation: Changez is certainly not the "rippling physical specimen" Anwar expected (l.38), the **exaggeration** conveying the idea that Changez is the opposite, i.e. neither handsome nor strong, and as a consequence, Anwar is definitely "concerned" and entertains "minor reservations" (l.55) about Changez – both expressions being **understatements** which suggest on the contrary that Anwar is devastated.

B) Grotesqueness

Study the mesmerizing description of **Changez' arm** (ludicrous because overdetailed and but also somewhat obscene and evocative of castration) to undermine the father's ambitions and his fundamentalism.

Changez, whose name paradoxically suggests a paralysed community, the inability of the community to change, is thus a **grotesque** character. →distorted body + a missing limb; he is the laughing stock of the narrator, the butt of his jokes, the object of his taunts. Of course, there is absolutely **no political correctness** here, but an irreverent narrator making fun of a man who, on top of being a cripple is also ridiculous, fawning, useless and dirty- this is part of the humour of the scene. For example the reference to Muhammed Ali (l. 52) or the subsequent reference to the toothbrush "I'd doubted if he'd know what to do with a paintbrush, or with a toothbrush for that matter" (l. 52) humorously suggests that Changez probably doesn't brush his teeth very often. Another example is line 56-7 when the narrator presents Changez as either flattering or dumb (and definitely ridiculous) when he laughs at everything Anwar says even when it is not funny.

C) Irony

Eventually much of the humour of the scene comes from the **ironic remarks of the narrator who is constantly resorting to exaggerations and ludicrous comparisons mocking everybody**: cf. Anwar compared to Oscar Wilde although he is not particularly witty and talkative (l. 2) or Jamila compared to a Chinese peasant.

The narrator's humour shows he is distant from what he is witnessing. Although he is supposed to be a homodiegetic narrator, he is not really taking part in the scene, which reflects his in-betweenness.

3 In-between two worlds

A) An in-between narrator having access to both cultures.

The narrator is clearly **in-between two worlds**, being half-Indian and half-English. First **he is a member of the Indian family** he is visiting. He ushers readers into the world of arranged marriages, a world he knows. Using **internal focalization**, he seems to know what the other characters are thinking and shares their thoughts and feelings with us. Thus he knows who Jamila is deep down, beneath the several layers of skirts and her "outfit" (l. 19) – a rebellious character drawn to Western culture, someone who will never love Changez ("Did Changez have any idea of the reluctance with which his bride-to-be.....would be exchanging vows with him?" l. 60). But he also understands Anwar and the more traditional vision of women he embodies. Thus when he writes: "there were just certain ways in which this woman who was his daughter had to behave" (l.30), he seems to be speaking Anwar's mind about what a daughter's obligations should be. Karim is thus a voyeur and a peeping Tom, someone who knows other people's secrets.

B) Retreat

Yet at the same time, it seems as if **Karim did not completely belong to this world** or refused to belong to it. Indeed even if he seems to know this culture very well, he retreats from the scene and merely watches it from a distance, refusing to take part in it: examining the carpet (l. 4), he doesn't want to have any role to play. It is merely a comedy of manners that he is watching from a distance.

In fact like Jamila, **Karim also feels English** as shown by his going out with an English girlfriend. But again, his attitude is **ambiguous**: if arranged marriages are all about business and money (Anwar marries his daughter to get some help in the shop), relationships in the West amount to no more than sex (as expressed by the crude "Jamila had phones me the day after Helen and I fucked in Anerley Park" l. 64). His motivations for seducing Helen are also far from clear: he mentions having seduced Helen, "the dog-owner's daughter" (l. 66), implying that going out with her is a sort of revenge against her father or is imbued with class envy or the desire to belong to a world he feels excluded from.

C) A hybrid text

What remains then is **a character who is torn between two cultures and wavering between them. Even the style of the text reflects this in-betweenness.** It is a mixture of high and low style (cf. the abundance of hyphenated words in the text) + hybrid text too (Jane Austen's comedy of manners and arranged marriages or Wilde's plays rewritten as a novel in a 1970s context)