University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

INNERVATE
Leading student work in English studies

Volume 8: 2016-16 ISSN: 2041-6776

'My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost'. Discuss the Ways in which Writers Have Made their Protagonists Relevant to the Question of National Identity and/or Representative of Social Developments.

Olivia Rook

The writers of *Troubles, The Remains of the Day* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* are all crucially aware of their own divided national identities, from the Anglo-Irish background of J. G. Farrell and the Japanese heritage of British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, to Hanif Kureishi's position as a British Pakistani novelist. They acknowledge this instability of identity through the protagonists of their novels, with Tracey J. Prince believing that Stevens, the butler of *Remains*, reflects 'an obliterated sense of self'.[1] To a certain extent, the Major, Brendan Archer, and teenager, Karim Amir, demonstrate a similar loss of self, being positioned as outsiders and performers within their separate narrative worlds. This struggle with identity, however, has implications beyond the isolated lives of the characters as it more broadly illustrates the unstable national identities of Britain and Northern Ireland during the twentieth century, due to factors such as the development of a multicultural Britain, the changing state of the English country house tradition and the fall of Britain as an imperial power in Ireland. These often unknowable and conflicted characters draw upon cultural stereotypes and their environment to invert, challenge and make revelations about established perspectives on national identity; as Steven Connor has recognised, the novel is 'not just passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made and remade'.[2] As the writers critically probe the national identities which form the foundation of each of the three novels, Connor's opinion is shown to have validity as cultural traditions and expectations are overturned and re-examined, with the protagonists placed at the centre of this process.

An unstable national identity is conceived through the characters' performance of identity in the three novels. Arguably in *Remains*, however, Stevens moves beyond the performance of his crucial, functional role within the English country house that he serves. Instead, he fully inhabits the position of butler and makes himself subservient to this traditional stereotype, the constant shifts between the present of 1956 and the past of the 1920s positioning him as an anachronism, "a genuine old-fashioned English butler", following the changes to England's great houses.[3] Steven Connor and Christine Berberich have both explored the way Stevens' language reflects his performance of Englishness and, thus, marks him as a relic. Berberich asserts that 'Steven's stiff and restricted verbal style, like his person, reflects his emotional repression' which is clear in his interactions with his father.[4] Failing to directly address Stevens senior, he repeatedly uses the term 'father' in the third person, telling him, "The fact is, Father has become increasingly infirm".[5] This distance in Stevens' use of language for communicative purposes demonstrates a total avoidance of engaging emotionally with those around him. He accesses language at a purely superficial level, which is evident when he fails to interpret his father's response to the news of his reduced duties. The reply of "I have waited at table every day for the last fifty-four years" is not dwelt upon as Stevens overrules and suppresses his father's response, simply continuing as though he has had no interruption, with the connective "Furthermore".[6] Birkin's interactions with Alice Keach in *A Month in the Country* similarly demonstrate an inability to articulate feelings, although his private musings reveal that he is not emotionally restricted in the same way as Stevens. They speak in circumlocutions when Birkin intimates that he finds Alice beautiful, revealing that "professionally, I must tell you, Yes, you're beautiful. Very".[7] However, neither is able to make verbal that which exists between them.

In the same way, Stevens and Miss Kenton are incapable of revealing more than their professional respect for one another, and this is discovered as much through their negotiation of space and physical distance as their conversations. Their scenes of conflict are often governed by their

[1] Tracey J. Prince, *Culture Wars in British Literature: Multiculturalism and National Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), p. 38.
[2] Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 1.
[3] Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 124
[4] Christine Berberich, *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature: Englishness and Nostalgia* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2007), p. 143.
[5] Ishiguro, *Remains*, p. 65.
[6] Ibid., p. 65.
[7] J. L. Carr, *A Month in the Country* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 73.

location within Darlington Hall, with Stevens physically distancing himself from the emotional through closed doors and private spaces. When Miss Kenton attempts to draw his attention to the incorrect position of the Chinaman, and therefore, his father's failing standards, he practically locks himself in the billiard room, establishing battle lines with Miss Kenton positioned beyond the door. The repetitive exchange which accompanies their eventual meeting demonstrates Miss Kenton's challenge to Stevens' orderly and controlled professional mask. Her interaction with him becomes an interrogation as she repeatedly rephrases the same query, asking "is that the correct Chinaman or is it not?"[8] Berberich's assertion that 'Stevens's narration is interspersed with metaphors of shadow and semi-darkness, as opposed to those of light' further illuminates this distance between Miss Kenton and Stevens as her marriage proposal is revealed in 'the cavernous… [space] of the dark and empty kitchen'.[9] The unbridgeable, emotional gulf is evoked through their environment as Stevens' ability to love and feel is as empty as the kitchen. It is, however, when he hovers in 'the dimness of the corridor', the most liminal location within the great hall, that his emotional disconnection is fully conveyed.[10] As Stevens observes 'the light seeping around [the door's] edges' from the darkness of the corridor, the contrast serves to illustrate how he denies himself the potential for personal happiness, lingering on the threshold but ultimately confined to his performance of Englishness and maintaining the reticence which John Fowles has deemed a 'national characteristic'.[11]

The performance of cultural stereotypes in *Buddha* serves to show the contradictions inherent within Britain's growing multicultural society during the 1970s, as migrants became both a source of intrigue and fascination, and something to be feared, by the white population. Hanif Kureishi's vision aims to expose this contradiction, as he writes, 'It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was… there must be… a new way of being British'.[12] In *Buddha*, he demonstrates that the racial 'Other' cannot be confined to one image and challenges the makeup of the nation's identity by weakening the binary between white westernised male and the black colonial subject. Through the struggle of his central protagonist, Karim, he demonstrates the position of the second generation immigrant: dislocated from his heritage yet born into a country which fails to recognise him. Indeed, Anthony Ilona has recognised that 'The heterogeneous African, South Asian and African Caribbean groups in Britain now became a single empirical Other', which Kureishi points toward in Karim's classification as one of the 'blackies' and 'niggers' of Beckenham; a threat to 'Hairy Back' and his white daughter.[13] His hybridised identity is most clearly articulated in his performance of cultural appropriation, assuming the appearance of Mowgli from *The Jungle Book* despite only knowing "The dirty words" of India's native language and having never visited his father's homeland.[14] He is dressed 'toe to head in the brown muck' and resembles 'a turd in bikini-bottom' as a designer covers him in 'shit-brown cream'.[15] The concealment of his mixed race skin demonstrates Karim prostituting himself to the racism which has spawned his career, and this is taken further in Shadwell's command that Karim adopt an authentic Indian accent, thus controlling his very means of expression.

Karim's performance of identity is complicated, however, when his racist depiction of Anwar is challenged by a black woman in his performance group. Head explains how Kureishi 'alerts his readers to the danger of seeking to perceive a 'type' in the reception of a character' and in this scene, he is at pains to demonstrate it is the "white truth", in other words, the white stereotype of the black immigrant, which Karim seeks to emulate.[16] In not only submitting to but actually perpetuating this racism, Karim completely denies his Indian heritage and becomes as responsible as his western oppressors. Although Kureishi's black and Asian characters are subject to this form of scrutiny, his white characters are also shown to be engaged in a performance of self. From the superficially perfect yet ever-changing Charlie, 'selling Englishness' to an eager American audience, to the aspirational Eva, whose sense of being incomplete is captured by her crudely symbolic single breast, Kureishi's characters are desperate to hide their suburban backgrounds.[17] Only Jamila, inheriting the expectations of India's culture, forges a

[8] Ishiguro, *Remains*, p. 58.
[9] Berberich, *English Gentleman*, p. 148; Ishiguro, *Remains*, p. 219.
[10] Ishiguro, *Remains*, p. 226.
[11] Ibid., p. 226; Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 119.
[12] Hanif Kureishi, *Collected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 34; quoted in A. Robert Lee, 'Changing the Script: Sex, Lies and Videotapes in Hanif Kureishi, David Dabydeen and Mike Phillips', in *Other Britain, Other British,* ed. by A. Robert Lee (London: Pluto Press, 1995), p. 77.
[13] Anthony Ilona, 'Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia:* 'A New Way of Being British', in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 92; Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 40.
[14] Kureishi, *Buddha*, p. 140.
[15] Ibid., p. 146.
[16] Head, *Modern British Fiction*, p. 222; Kureishi, *Buddha*, p. 181.
[17] Kureishi, *Buddha*, p. 247.

single and whole identity, despite being the character with the smallest amount of authority. Interestingly, Wendy O'Shea-Meddour argues for a gender inversion within the novel as female figures empower and create a space for themselves despite the restrictions of their culture. Indeed, 'Jamila is described as reinvesting the hijab with new meanings' as she forgoes sexualised western clothing in favour of the married woman's Islamic uniform.[18] Instead of contributing to her performance of the obedient wife, Jamila's clothing protects her true identity, the 'several sacks: long skirts, perhaps three, one over the other' becoming symbolic of her layers of defence.[19] Denigrated and reduced to a cultural stereotype, Karim struggles to transcend his imposed identity in the same way as Jamila: both within the microcosm of the theatre and, more broadly, within the narrative structure of the novel.

The carnivalesque descriptions which punctuate *Buddha*, frequently drawing attention to bodily fluids, such as in the incident with 'Hairy Back', and subversive sex acts like the orgy in Pyke's home, are similarly found in Farrell's novel to describe the fall of the Anglo-Irish hotel at its centre. Infested with hordes of ginger-haired, green-eyed cats, which overtake the aptly named Imperial Bar, riddled with damp and home to those who have imposed their squatters' rights, the Majestic, in complete opposition to its name, is a site of decay. It is the inextricable link between the hotel and the central protagonist, the Major, however, which focalises the novel's concern with Ireland's unstable national identity during the time of the failing Ascendency and England's waning control. In a revision of the Irish big house tradition, the English Major becomes drawn into the Majestic, eventually performing the role of proprietor despite his position as outsider. His lost sense of self, produced through his experience of war and the lingering effects of shell shock, is articulated through his environment. When he and Sarah run about the Majestic, investigating the mysterious bulges which line every surface, the hotel's tumours suggest that the Major's traumatic memories are emerging, despite his mask of English reserve. His fragile state is communicated through his desire to retreat to the sanctuary of the linen room, as though to escape not only the crumbling ruin but also the darker recesses of his mind. In the same way that the corridor proves to be a liminal space in *Remains*, the linen room is on the fringes of activity at the Majestic: a hidden refuge amid the madness. Its stacks of 'Blankets, hundreds of them' and the 'positively tropical' warmth leads the Major to remove his clothes and lie naked amongst the sheets in a perverse regression to infancy, the glorified closet, 'long and narrow and rather dark', becoming womb-like in its description.[20] The demise of the emptied hotel is synchronised with the Major's own near-death experience, which appropriately involves his being quite literally rooted to his location. Jacqueline Genet believes that they 'Both represent the downfall of a form of living', capturing the post-nationalist mood of the novel as it calls for a new perspective on relations between England and Ireland.[21]

Through the perspective of the Major, Head argues that Farrell 'is anxious to explode the Somerville-and-Ross-style portrayal of engaging Irish eccentricity… [as he] comes to realize that the true eccentricity is the dangerous lunacy of Spencer'.[22] The novel explores and challenges Irish stereotypes, reflecting the national identity crisis during this period of imperial collapse. The degeneration of Spencer and the tension between English and Anglo-Irish perspectives is most clearly illustrated during the visit of the Oxford University students. Their 'special study of Ireland', involves probing Spencer, exclaiming "What a rare find!" as if he is an endangered species, after Danby riles him by challenging his hatred of those sympathetic to Sinn Fein.[23] The scene has parallels with Spencer's obsessive experimentation as he sets up a 'makeshift laboratory' in the deserted ballroom.[24] His victims, a dead mouse and frog, the latter lying 'on its back with its legs in the air, exposing a flabby white stomach', are physically examined in the same way that Spencer is opened to the biting judgements and cruel taunts of the Oxford undergraduates.[25] His presentation, 'scribbling rapidly', madly, on bits of paper, and throwing them 'aside without waiting for the ink to dry' evokes an image of the mad professor and indicates the novel's engagement with the gothic genre.[26] Frequently, those connected to the Majestic become a part of this gothic tradition, with the hysterical representation of Murphy's arson, as he stands above the burning hotel, referencing one of the most famous gothic figures: Bertha in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In *What A Carve Up!,* there are similar gothic implications in the

[18] Wendy O'Shea-Meddour, 'The Politics of Imagining the Other in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia'*, in *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary,* ed. by Neil Murphy and Wai-chew Sim (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), p. 39.
[19] Kureishi, *Buddha*, p. 81.
[20] J. G. Farrell, *Troubles* (London: Orion Books Ltd., 1993), p. 259.
[21] Jacqueline Genet, *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), p. 244.
[22] Head, *Modern British Fiction*, p. 130.
[23] Farrell, *Troubles*, pp .410, 416.
[24] Ibid., p. 285.
[25] Ibid., p. 303.
[26] Ibid., p. 311.

geography and setting of the Winshaw family home upon the novel's denouement; from the pathetic fallacy of the 'howling of the wind, and the hammering of rain against the windowpanes' to the reappearance of the supposedly deceased Mortimer Winshaw in a secret chamber.[27] Parodic allusions to the gothic tradition in *Troubles* demonstrate how the Major finds himself caught in an environment which challenges perspectives on the nation's established identity.

Mark Stein posits that Karim is 'the outsider within' which is illustrated in *Buddha* through his voyeuristic observations: a further means of demonstrating his unstable sense of belonging within the novel.[28] From the moment he watches his father copulating with Eva in her suburban back garden, to his inclusion in Charlie's sexual experimentation whilst in New York and the argument between Jamila and Changez in the commune, Karim is always on the periphery of human experiences, preferring the world of the theatre to the realities and complications of life. Significantly, these scenes are deeply intimate and private, yet Karim's observation makes them grotesque. When watching Charlie be assaulted by a sadomasochistic mistress, he takes a closer look by moving into 'a seat in the front stalls', using the language of the theatre to demonstrate how sex is defamiliarised.[29] More uncomfortable, however, is his presence during Jamila and Changez's argument as his failure to see means that every sound is exaggerated. When Changez begs Jamila to kiss him, 'There was a sucking noise… Changez was panting', the various noises capturing his desperation.[30] Karim's failure to belong in these scenes is also intimated by their scattered locations, ranging from the suburbs of London to New York. The multitude of locations occupied by Karim demonstrates his inherent restlessness and isolation and reflects his state as a post-colonial subject without roots. John Clement Ball takes this further as he appreciates that the turning-point half way through the novel, the move from Bromley to the metropolis, 'becomes a local, miniaturized version of postcolonial migrancy'.[31] Karim's pull to the suburban stands for his connection with his Indian heritage, something which he frequently denies with his assertion that he is 'an Englishman born and bred'.[32] London, however, as a place of display and performance, fame and fortune, does not give Karim a sense of wholeness. Only when he travels to New York, and experiences a role reversal, being placed in the position of colonial while the Haitians dance for him, and is trapped in Charlie's hedonistic existence of drug-taking and spending, does he realise that he must embrace his hybridised identity, Indian and English, suburban and metropolitan, to feel complete. This is perhaps why Kureishi returns his reader to the conventions of suburban living upon the novel's conclusion, with the marriage between Eva and Haroon and Karim's role in a soap opera; to demonstrate the need to embrace both sides of your identity, just as England must accept its growing multicultural society and changing national identity.

Stevens, as with the Major and Karim, is positioned as an outsider within *Remains*, yet he has exclusive access to the inside. Despite occupying the role of butler in one of England's great houses at the pinnacle of his career, however, he reaches his glass ceiling, and is frequently reminded of his place on the outside. The comments made by Mr Spencer are pertinent to this as he uses Stevens as an example to criticise the parliamentary system, asking technical political questions in order to elicit the mechanical, repetitive response: "I'm very sorry, sir, but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter".[33] Stevens' engrained belief that 'a butler's duty is to provide a good service. It is not to meddle in the great affairs of the nation' has worrying repercussions, however, as his privileged position allows him to enact obediently, without question, the injustices committed at an international level, within the microcosm of Darlington Hall.[34] As Berberich has asserted, the attitude of Darlington echoes 'decades of public-school teaching, and the indoctrination of a nation obsessed with chivalry and fair-play'.[35] In this way, the nation's identity, as one of obedience and a rigid class structure, causes Stevens to perform an act of discrimination, at odds with his qualities of fairness and moral decency. His sense of division when firing the Jewish maids in his household, and thus carrying out his master's Nazi sympathies, is concealed once again behind his professional mask, although his language betrays his difficulty in confronting the subject as he explains, using an awkward double negative, 'I was not unperturbed at the prospect'.[36] Moreover, in a tone incongruous with Stevens' usual reserve he even admits that 'my every instinct opposed the idea of their dismissal', revealing the extent to which the

[27] Jonathan Coe, *What A Carve Up!* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 441.
[28] Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), p. 121.
[29] Kureishi, *Buddha*, p. 255.
[30] Ibid., p. 276.
[31] John Clement Ball, 'The Semi-Detached Metropolis: Hanif Kureishi's London', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature,* 27:4 (1996), 7-27 (p. 21); quoted in Ilona, 'A New Way of Being British', p. 100.
[32] Kureishi, *Buddha*, p. 3.
[33] Ishiguro, *Remains*, p. 195.
[34] Ibid., p. 199.
[35] Berberich, *English Gentleman*, p. 152.
[36] Ishiguro, *Remains*, p. 147.

butler allows his professional, national identity, to overrule personal judgement, leading to a fractured sense of self.[37]

The novelists' re-examination of national identity during the twentieth century indicates an attempt to reclaim the period, as *Buddha, Troubles* and *Remains* challenge existing ideas on the state of the nation. Their protagonists are divided, unstable and through their own narrative progression, demonstrate the wider national crisis which forms the foundation of the novels. Whilst *Buddha* and *Troubles* invoke brutally dark, yet humorous, carnivalesque moments to challenge the stereotypes which comprise the nation's identity, Ishiguro's skilfully conceived narrative voice captures England's reserved history. All of the protagonists undergo a process of self-realisation during the novels; Karim eventually appreciates his connection to both his Indian and English heritage, voicing that 'half of me [was] missing' but also realising he 'felt happy and miserable at the same time', in acknowledgement that his personal development must be followed by wider change.[38] Stevens understands he "cannot even claim" to have followed his own path, yet returns to a consideration of his duty as butler upon the novel's close, and, finally, the Major's eventual escape from Kilnalough does not provide *Troubles* with a sense of resolution; instead, his mind continues to drift to thoughts of Sarah, his time in Ireland being one of confusion and conflict.[39] Thus, the instability of the protagonists' sense of self, even upon the novels' conclusions, demonstrates the writers' call for a re-evaluation of England and Ireland's national identities.

[37] Ibid., p. 148.
[38] Kureishi, *Buddha*, pp. 212, 284.
[39] Ishiguro, *Remains*, p. 243.

Bibliography

Ball, John Clement, 'The Semi-Detached Metropolis: Hanif Kureishi's London', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature,* 27:4 (1996), 7-27

Berberich, Christine, *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature: Englishness and Nostalgia* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2007)

Carr, J. L., *A Month in the Country* (London: Penguin Books, 2000)

Coe, Jonathan, *What A Carve Up!* (London: Penguin Books, 2014)

Connor, Steven, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996)

Farrell, J. G., *Troubles* (London: Orion Books Ltd., 1993)

Garratt, Robert F., *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Genet, Jacqueline, *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991)

Head, Dominic, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Ilona, Anthony, 'Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia:* A New Way of Being British', in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 87-105

Ishiguro, Kazuo, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993)

James, David, 'Artifice and Absorption: The Modesty of *The Remains of the Day',* in *Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary Critical Perspectives,* ed. by Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 54-66

Kreilkamp, Vera, 'The novel of the big house', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel,* ed. by John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 60-77

Kureishi, Hanif, *Collected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011)

---, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)

Lee, A. Robert, 'Changing the Script: Sex, Lies and Videotapes in Hanif Kureishi, David Dabydeen and Mike Phillips', in *Other Britain, Other British,* ed. by A. Robert Lee (London: Pluto Press, 1995), pp. 69-89

O'Shea-Meddour, Wendy, 'The Politics of Imagining the Other in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia'*, in *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary,* ed. by Neil Murphy and Wai-chew Sim (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), pp. 33-54

Prince, Tracey J., *Culture Wars in British Literature: Multiculturalism and National Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012)

Scanlan, Margaret, *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)

Stein, Mark, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004)

Terestchenko, Michel, 'Servility and Destructiveness in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas,* 5:1 (2007), 77-89