THE LURE OF THE GURU FATHER: MECHANISMS OF MIMICRY AND HYBRIDITY IN HANIF KUREISHI'S THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA *AND V.S. NAIPAUL'S* THE MIMIC MEN

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***Abstract*:** *This article attempts to interrogate the essentialist ontology of racial identity by focusing on two post-colonial bildungsromans and the father-son relationships depicted within. I focus on the way in which both fathers perform guru-like parts and bring into discussion the concepts of mimicry and hybridity in order to better explain their subversion of orientalist discourse.*

***Keywords*:** *Performativity. Hybridity. Mimicry.*

There is perhaps too much truism in that old koan "like father, like son," but it nevertheless proves, I think, a decent starting point for examining the ways the former influence and impact the lives of the latter in two postcolonial novels of formation, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*; or to put it more plainly: the fathers' successes and failures anticipate those of the sons. Haroon Amir and Kripal Kripalsingh[††††††††††††††††] both embrace and perform the role of the Guru to the dismay of their children, attracting the attention and devotion of sundry disciples. But their performances, nevertheless, exploit the potential of both mimicry and hybridity: they prey upon the indeterminacies and liminialities of the orientalist discourse in which they are inscribed for their own ends; and this performativity is itself mirrored by the lives and deeds of the sons who disregard them, enacting a powerful duality that calls into question the essentialist ontology of racial identity.

The father-gurus of Kureishi and Naipual stand united in their rebellion against the norms and racial roles of their respective societies (the London suburbs and the Caribbean island of Isabella, respectively), yet they nevertheless rebel in markedly different ways: Haroon, the Muslim Indian immigrant seeking a way out of the stultifying drudgery of civil service, where, due to his background, he has been denied social advancement; and Kripal, the Caribbean Indian schoolteacher, who, unable to bear the inequalities of his small island, starts preaching against the government. It is interesting to note that they both begin their journeys from positions subservient to the state (civil servant and school teacher, respectively) – positions they then come to abjure; an intimation, perhaps, of the fact that the mechanisms of mimicry require a thorough understanding of both sides of the third space.

Of the two, Haroon, the eponymous Buddha of Suburbia, is less interested in the grand picture of social revolution, than in the betterment of his own lot in life; the

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[††††††††††††††††] His full name is never clearly stated in the novel itself, but can be surmised from the following passage: "We were Singhs. My father's father's name was Kripal. My father, for purposes of official identification, necessary in that new world he adorned with his aboriginal costume, ran these names together to give himself the surname of Kripalsingh." (Naipaul, 2001: 11)

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performance he constructs is thus rooted in the petit bourgeois tastes of the (lower-) middle class audience he courts; as Graham Huggan suggests, he self-exoticizes (cf. Huggan, 2001: 96), concocting a heterogeneous mixture of eastern philosophies out of his

> preferred yoga books – *Yoga for Women*, with pictures of healthy women in black leotards – from among his other books on Buddhism, Sufism, Confucianism and Zen, which he had bought at the Oriental bookshop in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road. (Kureishi, 1990: 5)

The ironic juxtaposition of Eastern religions and Cecil Court, that arch-British street renowned for its book sellers, suggests Edward Said's conceptualization of Orientalism as an (oft logocentric – hence Cecil Court) discourse that

> can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said, 1979: 3)

It is within this discourse that Haroon situates his performance, playing on the tropes commonly associated with the Orient:

> He was certainly exotic, probably the only man in southern England at that moment (apart, possibly, from George Harrison) wearing a red and gold waistcoat and Indian pyjamas. He was also graceful, a frontroom Nureyev beside the other pasty-faced Arbuckles with their tight drip-dry shirts glued to their guts and John Collier grey trousers with the crotch all sagging and creased. Perhaps Daddio really was a magician, having transformed himself by the bootlaces (as he put it) from being an Indian in the Civil Service who was always cleaning his teeth with Monkey Brand black toothpowder manufactured by Nogi & Co. of Bombay, into the wise adviser he now appeared to be. (Kureishi, ibidem: 31)

It is a performance which suggests itself as authentically oriental by playing on the popular perceptions of the time -- hence the reference to George Harrison, himself a disciple of a Guru, and enamored by all things Eastern. But what grants his performance authority is not merely the recapitulation of eastern signifiers, but their filtering through a western gaze: again, George Harrison, but also the gaudy magician-like combination of waistcoat and pajamas, and the recognizable grace of a Russian ballet dancer. The orientalist tropes are necessarily communicated in a language palatable to the audience. To enhance the symbolic capital of his act he must change his very way of speaking: "he was hissing his s's and exaggerating his Indian accent. He'd spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, and now he was putting it back in spadeloads." (Kureishi, ibidem: 21). Graham Huggan has well identified this as a man engaged in two consecutive processes of mimicry (Huggan, ibidem: 96), going from a mimicry of mainstream white Englishness to one of oriental mysticism; one that can be seen as a "a means of exposing, not so much his own insecurities, but rather the self-serving enthusiasms of his captive audience, for whom Eastern philosophizing is little more than the latest temporary panacea to their own middle-class suburban boredom." (Huggan, ibidem: 96).

Musing on the political – subversive – uses of mimicry, Homi Bhabha describes the concept, in his seminal *The Location of Culture*" as

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> the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. […] Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask: it is not what Usaire describes as 'colonization-thingification' behind which there stands the essence of the *présence Africaine*. The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. (Bhabha, 1994: 86, 88)

For Bhabha it is then precisely this lack of essence that mimicry sheds light on, what legitimates it as a means of colonial resistance: it evinces and ironizes the artificiality of imperial discourse, betrays the fact that its hierarchies and oppositions are mere roles that can be assumed and acted; when the presumption of essence is cast aside, what remains is the free play of performance – and it is exactly this performance that Haroon delights in and capitalizes on. But I would not go as far as Susheila Nasta and deem it "fraudulent" (Nasta, 2002: 191) – or at the very least not less fraudulent than his prior mimicry of the English mainstream – rather I would suggest that it represents an exoticized augmentation of his own private performance; a way of more cannily selling a philosophy he genuinely believes in and espouses to both family and strangers; the Orientalist signifiers of his act may be a mere guise, but the words behind them are sincerely said. The guru remains a guru in both the public and the private sphere, as he confesses to his son, Karim, after quitting his job:

> "What reveries I've been having recently. Moments when the universe of opposites is reconciled. What an intuition of a deeper life! Don't you think there should be a place for free spirits like me, wise old fools like the sophists and Zen teachers, wandering drunkenly around discussing philosophy, psychology and how to live?" (Kureishi, 1990: 266)

It would be naïve, of course, to believe that he wouldn't be lying to his son, but his discourse is justified by the narrative itself; between that first scene of suburban mysticism and this much later scene of quitting his job, he is in many ways guided by a desire to reconcile that universe of opposites; to move beyond a mimicry of orientalism into a liminal third space (as much is suggested in the quote above by the crosspollination of Greek sophists and Eastern Zen teachers – and let us not forget that his original religious discourse – that mix of "Buddhism, Sufism, Confucianism and Zen" (Kureishi, ibidem: 3) – also brought with it the hope of hybridity). But it is a hope that is forever deferred; as he moves beyond the confines of suburban life – those outdated outskirts of the big city – where his exotic pose stands brilliantly against the banality of his adoring audience, he finds himself not knowing anyone at a party hosted by his new girlfriend, Eva, whose object of desire his Indianness had been at the onset of the novel and who encouraged him into the guise of the guru; "she didn't want the new smooth crowd to think she mixing with a bunch of basket-weavers from Bromley." (Kureishi, ibidem: 135) Mimicry and self-exoticizing thus functions well at the level of the margin (the suburb – where the binaries are most firmly entrenched), but loses much of its power as it nears the centre (which had long since moved on from the late 60s fascination with all things Eastern); the upmost level of power are denied to Haroon, whose fame and seductive power becomes second to his future wife: at an interview with a design magazine, her halfway Thatcherite opinions are treated with respect, while

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his are mostly ignored (Kureishi, ibidem: 263), and shortly before that, after arriving home from New York, Karim finds him in a weakened state, incapable "of moving without flinching" (Kureishi, op.cit.: 261) – the power relation between the two has been inversed and the son is now the stronger of the two.

But we should not ignore that Karim himself has been engaged in a process of mimicry, by which he has sought to evince the artificiality of racial identity and its myth of authenticity (most brilliantly as a brownfaced Mowgli playing up the stereotype for all its worth) – father and son mirror each other here, both engaged in performing and destabilizing the presumptions of their audience; but it is the hybrid Karim (biracial/bisexual) who is able to transcend mere mimicry and traverse the Third Space, which Bhabha describes as constituting "the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Bhabha, op. cit.: 37). His assumed/overt performance – as an actor – allows him to inhabit guises unavailable to his father – from punk rocker to Indian soap star – and this, in turn, opens up further spaces of acceptance and social advancement – while both father and son attempt to "conquer" the centre, as it were, it is the latter who might, in the end, prove successful.

A similar dialectic of mimicry-hybridity is found in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, although the roles are here reversed, with the son trapped between two masks and the father attempting to transcend the two loci of authenticity available to the Caribbean Indian: the dream of the Aryan past and the reality of the colonized present. The eponymous mimic men of the novel are, according to Ralph Singh, the exiled narrator of the novel, looking back on his life as a failed politician from a small Caribbean island, people who "pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new" (Naipaul, op.cit.: 175) while contrasting the New World with the locus of purity and reality: Europe, whose printed books they read and copy (another example of the logocentrism of colonial discourse). As Huggan notes, Naipaul's conceptualization of mimicry differs considerably from that of Bhabha:

> It seems necessary to point out that Naipaul's own conception of mimicry is very different; that he sees the deference of the 'mimic man' as a marker of his own frustrated impotence or even despair. Mimicry, for Naipaul, is a characteristic of colonial cultures (such as Trinidad's) that feel obliged to aspire to—or, perhaps more accurately, have been coerced into looking for—cultural models and values elsewhere. (Huggan, op.cit: 276)

Mimicry, then, is for Naipaul an internalized discourse of inferiority, one that furthers the mechanisms of oppression inherent in colonial rule, by understanding that which is mimicked as intrinsically superior – by granting it an aura of unmatchable authenticity. Mimicry as an active strategy thus garners a different dimension and must be understood as engendered by a pervasive inferiority complex in relation to that which is mimicked – although it nevertheless passively still suggests to the reader the ambivalences and artificialities outlined by Bhabha: the coloniser-colonised binary is still necessarily questioned by the element of believable performance. Further complicating things, the apparent disorder that is considered by the narrator the quintessential quality of post-colonial spaces is, from the onset, revealed as a trait inherited from the colonizers themselves: "For those who lose, and nearly everyone in

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the end loses, there is only one course: flight. Flight to the greater disorder, the final emptiness: London and the home counties." (Naipaul, ibidem: 11)

Kripal Kripalsingh, an Indian school teacher and former childhood missionary, joins a dock strike after a traumatic trip to the countryside, winning the crowd over with his hybrid brand of Christian rhetoric and Hindu philosophy:

> He broke in and told his own story. He told of his early life, of the missionary and his lady and the aboriginal young man in a clearing in the forest. He told of the years of darkness that followed his abandonment. He told of his marriage and his service with the government. He had never spoken of these things before; he held his audience. He told these men as despairing as himself of his decision, perhaps made even as he was speaking, to turn his back on this darkness. He was aware of his audience: the sons of slaves. Once, he told them, after the abolition of slavery, the ex-slaves had abandoned the foreign city and withdrawn to the forests to rediscover glory and a way of looking at the world. […] It was the Hindu mendicant's robe that he wore in the hills; and for all the emblems and phrases of Christianity that he used, it was a type of Hinduism that he expounded, a mixture of acceptance and revolt, despair and action, a mixture of the mad and the logical. (Naipaul, op.cit.: 151, 154)

His narrative navigates a series of binary oppositions – Christian missionary/Hindu mendicant, civil servant/civil disobedient, slave/free man, acceptance/revolt, despair/action, the mad/the logical – and manages to unite them into an ideology that is nevertheless understood as coherent by his followers. In fact, I would argue that its coherence fundamentally betrays the fact that these binary oppositions are in the end merely markers of difference that have been conceptualized as such within the discourse of colonialism – a discourse that Kripal seeks to bypass by literally moving outside of its sphere of influence: into the jungle. This hybrid subject/discourse thus engendered is suggested to the reader as a way out of the vicious circle of mimicry, but one of which the narrator himself is not cognizant. He fails to understand that his father's movement is not about widespread rebellion along and within colonial lines, but about moving beyond them; his own later political movement (predicated, in part, on the fame of his father) fails to learn this lesson:

> What did we talk about? We were, of course, of the left. We were socialist. We stood for the dignity of the working man. We stood for the dignity of distress. We stood for the dignity of our island, the dignity of our indignity. Borrowed phrases! Left-wing, right-wing: did it matter? Did we believe in the abolition of private property? Was it relevant to the violation which was our subject? We spoke as honest men. But we used borrowed phrases which were part of the escape from thought, from that reality we wanted people to see but could ourselves now scarcely face. We enthroned indignity and distress. We went no further. (Naipaul, ibidem: 235)

Unlike his father, he proves incapable of moving beyond mimicry – he merely adopts and performs European phrases and ideologies wholesale, without seeking to adapt them to the realities of Isabella – and the result is predictable: racial violence and the disorder he has long dreaded. The man stuck between two "myths of historical origination" (Bhabha, op.cit.: 72) – the Hindu Aryan horsemen of his childhood fantasies and the western colonizers on their civilizing mission – cannot cohere or transcend either, but is forced to merely repeat them.

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The mechanisms of mimicry and hybridity, whether employed for personal gain – the exotic self transformed into a symbolic commodity – as in the *Buddha of Suburbia* or subordinated to the goal of political liberation as in *The Mimic Men* prove potent instruments for communicating the inherently performed and constructed dimension of the racial/colonial subject. Hybridity does, in the end, engender a more transformative solution to the entrenched binaries and hierarches of colonial discourse, but both, at the very least, serve to make these categories manifest and to betray their sheer artificiality.

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