



Contemporary fiction critical commentary: Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

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An analysis of male gender norms is present in both Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (*TBoS*) and Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* (*BD*).¹ The extract from *BD* (see appendix) is located at the very end of Part Three of the novel (set in France), directly after Jeremy, the novel's first-person narrator, engages in a physical fight with a man who he sees mistreating his son. McEwan's portrayal of masculinity is consistent – he repeatedly presents male characters who engage in violent acts and highlights this trait by opposing his male characters with authoritative yet maternal female characters. The extract from *TBoS* (see appendix) is located in a chapter of notable development for Karim, who like Jeremy is the novel's first-person narrator. Karim is faced with what he calls, two pages prior to the extract, a 'moral dilemma' (*TBoS*, p.186). He is torn between using his friend Chagnez as the basis for developing a character for a play or remaining loyal to Chagnez by not doing so. Karim chooses the former, and during the extract must navigate the ethics of representation to construct this character. Kureishi's analysis of male gender norms is more complex than McEwan's. Kureishi's narrator, Karim, constructs the character of Tariq as a male who in some ways subverts male gender norms, whilst also somewhat adhering to them. As a result, Kureishi invites his reader to be active; to question normative ideas surrounding masculinity and gender fluidity. Both extracts draw on the notion that masculinity is a social construct that is performative, and changes as characters move between different places and spaces.

McEwan's novel explores a gendering of violence, presenting the idea that to be a man is to act violently. When Jeremy witnesses the child being hurt, he responds with physical violence against the father. By using the same method to try to solve the situation (physical violence) that provoked his feelings of anger in the first place, Jeremy acts no longer as just a witnesser of violence, but as a perpetrator. Jeremy's statement that he could have 'kicked and stomped him to death' (*BD*, p.131) echoes the violent actions used against Bernard earlier in the novel, in the Berlin chapter. McEwan's return to such portrayals of violence in different chapters, set in different locations, reflects the notion that violence is a widespread, universally felt consequence of normative masculinity. Jeremy adopts the masculine ability to imagine horrors, as he states: 'They were gathering round Bernard, ready, I thought, to kick him to death' (*BD*, p.98). As he relays information about Bernard, it is worth noting that Jeremy's reliability as a narrator is limited by the fact that he is a memoir writer, who oscillates between being sympathetic to the reader, uncovering information about the other characters, and being a writer, relaying this information.

¹ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1990); Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs* (London: Vintage, 1998).

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To analyse male gender norms is, in part, to distinguish them from female gender norms. McEwan presents masculinity and femininity as binary opposites, by juxtaposing his male and female characters. While the men are violent, the women are authoritative yet maternal. In the *BD* extract, it is a female character, 'the woman from Paris', who de-escalates the moment of extraordinary violence before it becomes fatal. Her 'calm' voice juxtaposes the chaos created by the male characters. The French she speaks 'from the lighted doorway across the road' (*BD*, p.131) translates to 'Sir. Please. That's enough.' The conciseness with which she speaks, using only one or two words per sentence, places her in a position of command. Her use of the phrase 'Ça suffit' ('that's enough'), provides her with power, through her use of a condescending tone ('ça suffit' is a phrase commonly used to discipline children). Similarly in the Berlin scene, it is a female character – 'a furious young woman' (*BD*, p.98) who diffuses a situation of anger fuelled men, 'reducing them to naughty children.' (*BD*, p.98). Interestingly, the phrase 'Ça suffit!' is used by June towards the black dogs (*BD*, p.149). Through this parallel, McEwan implies that men, with their seemingly uncontrollable tendency to choose violence, are animalistic. The female characters in *BD* are unnamed, and instead identified through other factors: their place of birth ('woman from Paris'), gendered role ('waitress'), 'pretty' appearance, 'young' age, or maternal instinct. By referring to women in this way, Jeremy refuses to see them as fully rounded humans.

As well as spoken language, McEwan uses body language to distinguish male gender norms from female ones. The 'pretty young waitress' is described as having 'maternal arms'. In the paragraph prior to the extract, Jeremy states 'I felt something snap in my knuckle.' McEwan presents a striking contrast between the male tendency to use one's arms and hands as a way to exert force and cause pain to others, and the female tendency to use one's arms to 'wrap' and 'embrace'. Jeremy states that Mme Auriac 'bound my hand with a crêpe bandage.' The female characters provide physical aid to heal the damage caused by the male tendency towards physical violence. In *TBoS*, body language is also used to set apart the female characters from the male characters. In the second paragraph of the extract, while the men are 'sat back without expression', the women 'smile encouragingly', or are 'sat in the lotus position.' Although the men are not acting violently here (like they do in *BD*) their relaxed body languages imply that they still feel dominant. Just after the extract, it becomes clear that the reason Tracey was sitting forward is because 'she had an objection coming on' (*TBoS*, p.189). Tracey has her arm only 'half-raised' (*TBoS*, p.189) implying she feels inferior to the men in the room. While the female characters of McEwan's novel gain authority through spoken language, Tracey's sense of inferiority is reinforced when the male character Pyke speaks before she has the chance to.

In the *TBoS* extract, by working to develop the male character of Tariq, Karim mirrors the authorial work of Kureishi. Karim takes ownership of the process, and of Tariq, through using a possessive pronoun in 'my Tariq.' Chagnez represents a decaying sense of traditional masculinity through the fact that he has a disability. Karim works on his 'shambolic walk and crippled hand', subverting the traditional male stereotype (present throughout *BD*) of a physically strong, able-bodied, working man. To construct a personality for his character Tariq, Karim creates the story that Tariq has 'been informed in Bombay by a racetrack acquaintance that you merely had to whisper the word 'undress' in England and white women would start slipping out of their underwear.' In this sense, the character of Tariq adheres to the misogynistic male stereotype, with his uninformed ideas about women. In

terms of sentence structure, it is the men who act first, whispering 'undress', before the women do not speak, but act in such a way to comply with the commands of the men. The complexity in Kureishi's analysis of male gender norms comes from the fact that Karim, in acting as Tariq, portrays these beliefs satirically. In a similar sense to when Karim portrays the Jungle Book's Mowgli earlier in the novel, the audience of the play, as well as Kureishi's reader, are expected to find humour in, and mock, the sexist nature of men that is presented here.

Karim's performance of Tariq in this way brings us to the following notion: masculinity is performative. To draw on the notion of place/space, in the extract from *TBoS*, the first paragraph begins: 'At night, at home', signalling to the reader that Karim is working on his characterisation of Chagnez alone, in private. In the second paragraph, the setting changes to: 'On that day, in that room by the river'. Karim moves from a private realm to a public one, to perform his male character. For Karim, his home, which is more private than the outside world, is a place of comfort, to which he can return if, as he puts it, 'there were objections to my portrayal.' Karim is alert to the performative nature of masculinity in how he speaks of his friend Charlie. Charlie blurs the masculine gender stereotype by expressing his identity differently throughout the novel – from styles of androgenous glam rock style, to ultra-masculine punk rock. When in a club, performing his punk rock identity, Karim states that Charlie is: 'magnificent in his venom, his manufactured rage, his anger, his defiance' (*TBoS*, p.154). The adjective 'manufactured' emphasises the performativity of masculinity as something as emotive as 'rage' is something one can choose to display in public situations. Like Karim, Jeremy too transitions from the public outside realm, where he performs masculine stereotypes of gender, to a more private inside one. Jeremy tells the reader that he 'crossed the road and follow[ed] the woman from Paris inside.' For Jeremy, this signals a move away from violence and danger to a place occupied by female figures, offering reassurance and aid.

Bibliography

Kureishi, Hanif, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1990).

McEwan, Ian, *Black Dogs* (London: Vintage, 1998).

Appendices

Appendix 1: *The Buddha of Suburbia* Extract, Page 188-189.

At night, at home, I was working on Changez's shambolic walk and crippled hand, and on the accent, which I knew would sound, to white ears, bizarre, funny and characteristic of India. I'd worked out a story for the Changez character (now called Tariq), eagerly arriving at Heathrow with his gnat-ridden suitcase, having been informed in Bombay by a racetrack acquaintance that you merely had to whisper the word 'undress' in England and white women would start slipping out of their underwear.

If there were objections to my portrayal I would walk out of the rehearsal room and go home. Thus, in a spirit of bloody-minded defiance I prepared to perform my Tariq for the group. On the day, in that room by the river, the group sat in a half-circle to watch me. I tried not to look at Tracey, who sat leaning forward concentratedly. Richard and Jon sat back without expression. Eleanor smiled encouragingly at me. Pyke nodded, note-book on his knee; Louise Lawrence had her writing pad and five sharp pencils at the ready. And Carol sat in the lotus position, putting her head back and stretching unconcernedly.

Appendix 2: *Black Dogs* Extract, Page 131.

The voice was calm. 'Monsieur. Je vous prie. Ça suffit.'

Immediately I knew that the elation driving me had nothing to do with revenge and justice. Horrified with myself, I stepped back.

I crossed the road and follow the woman from Paris inside. While we waited for the police and an ambulance, Mme Auriac bound my hand with a crêpe bandage and went behind the bar to pour me a cognac. And at the bottom of the fridge she found the last of the summer's ice-creams for the boy who still sat on the floor recovering, wrapped in the maternal arms of the pretty young waitress who, it must be said, appeared flushed and in the embrace of a great happiness.