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Satire in Service of Postcolonialism

An Analysis of Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Trevor Noah’s *Born a Crime: Stories of a South African Childhood*

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Introduction

I’m an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. (Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* 3)

Apartheid was perfect racism. It took centuries to develop. . . . During apartheid, one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race. Needless to say, my parents committed that crime. (Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime: Stories of a South African Childhood* 19, 21)

Hanif Kureishi and Trevor Noah are both of a hybrid background, born into societies where they are marginalized for inhabiting ambivalent identities. In South Africa during the apartheid regime, anyone born to people of different races, as defined by the state, was legally the result of criminal activity. It was regulated as any other crime, and maintained by a police state, with associated punishment and the child’s potential removal from the parents, to be placed into state care (Noah vii, 29). In Britain lines of infraction were more insidious with limits set by cultural, economic and social borders. The two authors’ disparate stories are told in different genres yet each protagonist, Kureishi’s Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Noah’s Trevor in the autobiographical *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*, represents identity not fully reflected in the norm, or Otherness, while seeking acceptance for and their own acceptance of their unstable and fluid identities, or hybridity.

Hybridity and Otherness figure prominently in *The Empire Writes Back*, a formative work on post-colonial thought, which argues that the idea of history, as conceived by the European colonizers, is disputed and that the postcolonial writers instead change the
perspective “to that of the ‘Other’” (Ashcroft et al. 34). The authors further argue that the postcolonial discourse replaces “the past which stressed ancestry, and . . . valued the ‘pure’” and instead values “the ‘composite’” (36), or with another word hybridity. Ashcroft et al. then concludes that “the strength of post-colonial theory may well lie in . . . the hybridized and syncretic view of the modern world” (36, 37). These postcolonial concepts of Hybridity and sense of the Other, in opposition to the ‘norm’ and racial purity, are principal concepts for this essay.

Kureishi’s protagonist, with a British mother and an Indian born father, lives in a south London suburb, and straddles British and Asian cultures. At the beginning of the narrative, Karim states that he is “going somewhere” (3). It is an ambivalent statement possibly signifying a wish for change of social status as in “I’m moving up.” However, as the narrative develops it becomes evident that Karim also wants to move physically and socio-culturally, to be associated less with his hybrid past and more with society’s norm (15). Kureishi’s protagonist is by all indications conflicted by his fluid identity, or hybridity (3). The perception by others is equally fluid which is not helpful. His best friend Jamila, a Pakistani and sometime girlfriend, calls him “Creamy” (54), presumably a reference to his light skin tone. His English sometime girlfriend Helen’s father shouts “Blackie” (40) as he chases him away, evidently for the opposite reason.

Kureishi’s own Indian born father’s relatives moved to Pakistan, as did the majority of Punjabi Muslims, after its separation from India. He describes in The Rainbow Sign, a personal essay published as an additional and introductory work in the first imprint of My Beautiful Launderette, how, at age nine, he was in his south London school and the teacher displayed some pictures of peasants in India and told the class: “Hanif comes from India” (9). Having been taken to expensive London hotels and restaurants by his uncles visiting on business from Pakistan, and who were wearing suits and taking taxis,
he wondered: “Did my uncles ride on camels [back home]? . . . Surely not in their suits?” (9) The absurd binary opposition, rich versus poor, of the teacher’s perception of Indians against the clearly well-to-do relatives of Kureishi is ultimately ironic. Thus efficiently, without any additional commentary, it allows the reader to dismiss this preposterous premise with a laugh. Hence Kureishi extracts the irony in this situation, although in essence it is bullying of a nine-year old, as the teacher transforms him into the Other.

This sense of ‘Otherness’ is also represented by Trevor Noah, a South African stand-up comedian, himself an example of a racial intersection as the child of a Swiss father and a Xhosa mother during apartheid. The father was not entered on Noah’s birth certificate to protect both parents from arrest (Noah 27). In 2016 Noah published his autobiography, *Born a Crime – Stories from a South African Childhood*. In a review in *The Guardian*, Marianne Thamm writes that: “Noah’s story provides an intimate ringside seat, for those who might not have one, to the fractured arena where a divided South Africa – white, black, coloured, Indian, Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, Tsonga and so on – intersects” (Thamm). Currently Noah is the host of *The Daily Show*, previously hosted by Jon Stewart, on Comedy Central. The show won its first Emmy Award with Noah as the host in 2017 (Bradley). Becoming a comedian and moving to the US was a path out of the past and South Africa, however this path was not inevitable. Noah grew up at times, in secrecy, in Hillbrow, a white Johannesburg suburb, where, he says, “nobody looked like me,” at times, during apartheid ostensibly in hiding, in Soweto, a black township, “where nobody looked like me” then for a time in Eden Park, a “colored area” in Johannesburg, where “everyone looked like me” (117). The story of Trevor’s childhood, with its racial intersection, also represents ‘Otherness’ and hybridity.
The source of otherness and hybridity is examined in depth by Homi Bhabha, an influential postcolonial theorist, in *The Location of Culture* where he explains that “[t]he colonial signifier – neither ‘one’ nor ‘other’ – is, . . . an act of ambivalent signification, literally splitting the difference between the binary oppositions . . .” (182). With this idea, of an ambivalent, undefinable, signification, the colonizers attempted to separate the natives of mixed background, from both other natives and colonizers, into otherness. Bhabha determines that this “ambivalent signification” of the “binary oppositions” is revised by the “postcolonial perspective,” and thus disputes the nationalist theory that placed “Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition” as a faulty logic. Bhabha declares this analysis as fundamental to postcolonial criticism (248). Pursuant to Bhabha’s analysis, especially the faulty logic in the binary opposites, it is illuminating to review Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam’s sixteenth-century essay *In Praise of Folly*, where the author makes an example of how binary opposites often are inherently satirical. Making two arguments in one, the ironic function of binary opposition and simplicity in argument, Erasmus ruminates on irony and satire using Silenus, a Greek two-faced deity, signified as a young man’s face with a donkey’s ears or conversely as the face of an old drunkard. The opposing images symbolize the opposite sides of one man, following the imagery the satirist gives a few binary examples “. . . obscurity and fame, learning and ignorance, rich and poor . . .” and the rumination ends wondering if maybe “. . . I’ve expressed this too philosophically; well, I’ll speak bluntly, as they say, to make myself clear” (43, 44). The closing stance is itself ironic in that the rumination is not at all philosophical, it is instead exceedingly simple. In the notations of this section of the essay A. H. T. Levi states that “lofty discourse can obscure the simplest things” (44) and herein lies the irony: ‘speak bluntly to be clear’ or, in other words, expose the hidden absurdity simply inherent in the binary opposites, ergo
there is clarity and ridicule through irony, without any elaboration, and thus satire. Erasmus gives a subsequent example; a King in full regalia with nothing but vices is really just a slave (44). Postcolonial criticism often reveals the absurdities inherent in colonialism and similarly these absurd positions are, once revealed, ridiculed by their inherent irony and thus satirized. It suggests that satire can, without much effort, be used to state postcolonial arguments hence indicating a connection between Bhabha’s and Erasmus’s disparate ideas, both based on opposites in the base arguments.

Such a connection also appears to exist between Kureishi, his ironic humor and postcolonialism. This is supported by Anna Wille who demonstrates the link to irony in Kureishi’s “sense of the ridiculous” through Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry,” with its importance to the idea of (post) colonial representation, and a “highly ironic take on the colonial ideal as mimetic” (450). Hence Wille elaborates on the connection of Bhabha’s ideas to postcolonialism with humor, in the form of irony. That, “like mimicry, humor can ‘rearticulate the whole notion of identity’ and thus subvert power imbalances” (456). In The Buddha of Suburbia, Kureishi situates these scenes of discourse, based in the remains of the powers of colonialism, within the theater, where Karim the actor represents the transposed native, who is put in degrading positions by subsequent British directors, representing the colonizers (Wille 456). The subverted imbalance of powers, between Karim and the directors, creates situations of opposition with resulting ironic absurdities demonstrating the critical connections between the ironic and postcolonialism. As Wille states: “[w]hile mimicry can render power visible, humor can render power laughable” (456). This type of irony, with opposites revealing an absurdity, and which thus ridicules a point of view especially one based in an ethical or moral quandary becomes satire at the point of the laugh. It must be added though that the
definition of satire, especially in the contemporary context, may not be as firmly established as it once was.

In *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, Dustin Griffin makes an attempt at a definition as it were, based in what Griffin refers to as a traditional consensus. He states that a “work of satire is designed to attack vice or folly.” To do this it uses “wit or ridicule” and attempts to persuade an audience that an action or a person is “reprehensible or ridiculous.” It employs exaggeration and narrative; however, satire is not divorced from the ‘real world’ completely. “Its victims come from that world, and it is this fact . . . that separates satire from pure comedy.” Griffin concludes by stating that satire often refers to “some moral standards or purposes” (1). The Greek satirist Juvenal makes the claim that: “difficile est saturam non scribere” (qtd. in Ferretter 105), which loosely translates into “it is difficult not to write satire” and can be interpreted to mean that most subjects may be satirized without difficulty. Juvenal’s famously searing satirical tone is different from either of the primary writers studied in this essay but satire takes many forms, as confirmed by Griffin who unequivocally states that he does “not claim . . . that all satire can be gathered under one generic head” (Griffin 3). Juvenal’s idea that satire is present in unexpected or even most places as a possible source of discourse is however noted in combination with the awareness, as Griffin states, that there is really no generic satire. In Luke Ferretter’s article “Hanif Kureishi and the Politics of Comedy” the author claims that Kureishi’s work is “analogous” with the satirist Rabelais (119), who is also part of Griffin’s “historical survey of major satirists” (1). The “analogous” relation to Rabelais is, according to Ferretter, due to the fact that Kureishi’s work functions so that there is no “position that he does not represent ironically” and every value in the representation of this irony may also be made a joke, each positive point-of-view in Kureishi’s work is reversely also subjected to criticism in the form of a joke (Ferretter 119). Linking
Griffin’s preceding definition of satire with Juvenal and Rabelais and hence with Kureishi’s work, it can be surmised that the latter’s work often and with ease turns to satire as a tool of socio-cultural criticism.

Noah, in turn, uses satire as a tool of socio-cultural criticism of apartheid in *Born a Crime – Stories from a South African Childhood*, which is structured as short stories preceded by intercalary chapters. It traverses childhood to young adulthood with life restricted by the incomprehensible absurdities of apartheid, “where he could not walk openly with either of his parents” (Thamm). Noah comments that “[w]here most children are proof of their parent’s love, I was proof of their criminality.” This absurdity is on display as Trevor’s grandmother in Soweto refuses to let him play outdoors. His cousins would go out and he would beg: “Please. Please, can I go play with my cousins?” but his grandmother replied “No! They’re going to take you!” Noah explains that “for the longest time I thought she meant the other kids . . . but she was talking about the police” (Noah 27, 29). The scene shows irony efficiently revealing the core of a complex issue, exposing and ridiculing the folly, and thus satirizing and criticizing the arguments of apartheid.

In *The Rainbow Sign* Kureishi describes a different racial folly, as he writes of growing up watching state funded BBC with TV-programs featuring comedians making Pakistani jokes and shows where “the Pakis” were funny characters. As Kureishi puts it: “The British were doing the assimilating; they assimilated Pakistanis to their world view” (12). These portrayals of Kureishi’s heritage also made the author aware of how humor can impact the views of the audience beyond the joke itself. Ferretter writes that “[Kureishi] recognizes that if comedy can reinforce racism in this way, it can also be used as a critique of racism and as a form of protest against it” (107). This recognition is
essential in Kureishi’s use of comedy, in the form of ironic humor, as a tool to criticize and disempower institutional racism.

Critique and protest of institutional racism seem to have been Noah’s objective for his first appearance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. He opened his stand-up set thus:

“I just flew in [from South Africa], and boy are my arms tired.” Jon Stewart laughed politely . . . [it was] only [the] set up . . .: “No seriously. I’ve been holding my arms like this since I got here!” He raised his arms [over his head] in the . . . I surrender pose. [He then said] that his experience made him “a little nostalgic for the old days back home.” (qtd. in Rossing 614)

Noah’s satire may not destroy an entire system of racism; it is nonetheless true that comedic discourse plays a role against what Rossing calls “hegemonic racism” (615). The point, which has bearing on this thesis, is that this form of discourse, racial satire, undermines the contentions of the established arguments by the dominant political groups, which creates an opportunity to educate the public for transformative action on matters of race (615). One can undoubtedly question if joking about racism ultimately is effective, an important issue which will be revisited in a subsequent chapter.

The information above presents studies on postcolonialism, and its connections to irony, through work from Homi Bhabha and others. There are examples of studies on satire in works from Dustin Griffin and of Jonathan P. Rossing, who also argues that satire is an effective rhetorical instrument in fighting racism. Kureishi’s use of irony, which, by repudiating the colonial arguments, results in satire, is exemplified in his own personal reflections on hybridity in *The Rainbow Sign* and is the object of academic study by Anna Wille in relation to *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Wille hence connects Kureishi and his ironic humor with Bhabha and postcolonialism through mimicry. Noah,
a comedian, has been studied by Rossing in the context of satirical stand-up comedy and its importance in stating the discourse as racial satire to undermine what Rossing defines as “hegemonic racism” and by Marianne Thamm, in a review with commentary on Noah’s comedic work and his representations of hybrid identity at the racial intersections of the apartheid state in *Born a Crime – Stories from a South African Childhood*. While Rossing connects the use of satire with the fight against racism he does not connect this to postcolonialism and hybridity and Wille connects Kureishi’s use of ironic humor to postcolonialism, as does Ferretter while adding the purpose of public discourse. There is however a distinct lack of studies on the particular subject of how satire, based on the colonial dichotomies, may be deployed specifically to discuss hybridity in a postcolonial context, which thus is the gap this thesis attempts to fill. Therefore, this essay contends that both Kureishi and Noah, despite their differences, apply satire as a tool to further postcolonial criticism and thus voice arguments against otherness and for the acceptance of hybridity, while subverting the power of racism through public discourse.

**Fight It! – Subverting Racism**

The postcolonial critic Edward Said writes: “All that entire ideology of separation and exclusion and difference etc.—the task is to fight it” as quoted in Mark Stein’s *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (vii). In this current thesis, humor through satire is considered a tool of this oppression but also a means of fighting the same separation and exclusion. By subversively introducing ideas of opposition into the hegemonic structure through satire, the use of verbal discourse functions as a tool of resistance and of fighting racist oppression. The thesis contends that to successfully use verbal discourse, as for example satire, for the purpose of subverting the power of racism it is essential to reach a large enough audience. Considering the reach of Kureishi and
Noah through their literary work and additionally through television and film as well as, in the case of Noah, through live audiences, the potential reach is exponential and may effectively lead to change, even if such change is not always self-evident.

Change through satirical verbal discourse is purportedly an option but there remains the problematic question of whether humor can ultimately be effective or whether it may cause uncertainty and destabilize the argument. Rossing points out that this discourse in the public forum, or what he identifies as “public pedagogy,” when dominant, can be complex and not always positive:

Public pedagogy provides a theoretical framework for understanding racist hegemony. Dominant public pedagogy—that is, the prevailing messages and discursive practices in public culture—enables, legitimizes, and reinforces the devaluing of people of color, condones acts of violence against racial minority groups, renders this violence invisible, and creates sanctuary for White privilege.

(Rossing 616)

In relation to this, Ferretter explains how Kureishi evaluates racist jokes in public discourse, and the possibility of their negative impact and how the author considers that these jokes “allow their hearers to strip their objects of dignity, humanity and rights, and they legitimate this aggression as a shared norm of the community in which they are told” (106).

These troubling aspects of racist jokes presented by Rossing and Kureishi point to some serious concerns, although there are arguments that point to the opposite outcome and suggest that satire can challenge deeply held racist ideological beliefs. Ferretter brings up this point by quoting the writings of Sukhdev Sandhu, Director of the Center for Experimental Humanities at NYU. Sandhu describes the sense of liberation by
Kureishi’s own work as it was welcomed by British Asian readers and audiences, who previously had been used only to “stereotypes and caricatures of themselves” (qtd. in Ferretter 107), but now, “Kureishi’s work not only captured [our] anxieties but offered for the first time a recognizable portrait of [our] life. Previously we had made do with sitcoms . . . in which Asians wore comical headwear and were the butts rather than the tellers of jokes.” Ferretter then adds that Sandhu “sums up the counter-political effects of comedy . . . [as] ‘Kureishi’s provocation made us laugh, confident, fighting fit’” (Sandhu qtd. in Ferretter 107). Sandhu’s arguments, in aggregate with Rossing’s and Ferretter’s, leave the impression of confirming that satire can work as an instrument against racist ideas, just as the opposite can also be true. This aligns with Kureishi’s ideas as paraphrased by Ferretter and presented previously in this essay: “if comedy can reinforce racism . . . it can also be used as a critique of racism and as a form of protest against it” (Ferretter 107).

Having established that theoretically the positive subversion can be effective, there is the question of the effectiveness of different methods, and it can certainly be argued that actions would speak louder than words. However, it is also arguable that the sort of “pedagogy of disruption” (Giroux qtd. in Rossing 616), as the subtler influence of verbal discourse has been defined, has a significant effect. Rossing thus argues that “emancipatory racial humor functions as a critical public pedagogy or ‘pedagogy of disruption’ (Giroux qtd. in Rossing 616) that struggles against the dominant discourses sustaining racist hegemony” (616). It follows that the works by Kureishi and Noah, through their use of satire as a form of political commentary provide counter arguments to the traditional ‘white hegemony’ so that it is dismantled or at the very least de-leveraged.
When making these arguments there is some risk, according to Anna Wille, in having humor penetrate every aspect of a work. The risk is that the reader may laugh at the character instead of with him, or her, by confusing subject and object due to the ambivalence of the scene (463). There are, however, ways to counter the risk by removing the ambivalence and instead focusing on some ridiculously static point, as she demonstrates with an example including Changez, a supporting character in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and his “background of prejudice against the whole world” (Kureishi 273). He is allowed to be “just as self-centered and limited as any Orientalist” but from a particular perspective where binary opposition to the ‘standard’ and the ‘other’ is not needed (Wille 468). Changez tells Karim, subsequent to their conversation about the lesbianism of Jamila: “Whatever Jamila does is alright by me. I’m not a tyrant fascist, as you know. I have no prejudice except against Pakistanis, which is normal” (Kureishi 273). The flexible Changez, who may be more inflexible about lesbians than he lets on, is stating a paradoxical inflexibility, all in a demonstration of ironic exemplification of a static racist idea. It is the flexibility in “I have no prejudice,” in opposition to the rigidity in “except against Pakistanis,” which creates the absurdity. Wille adds subsequently that: “without flexibility, rigidity would after all be hard to assess” (468). The exemplification points to the chasm splitting “I have no prejudice” versus “except against [those I don’t like].” The Other is performing as the colonizer in an abject racist, and a subconsciously homophobic, statement to demonstrate absurd ideas of prejudice and stereotyping, thus attacking the dominant hegemonic societal structures with subversive satire of abjekt opposites.

The idea of using unfiltered cynicism as a joke, as explained by Ferretter, is discussed and supported by Freud who “. . . distinguishes a class of jokes, which he calls ‘cynical,’ whose objects are society’s ruling institutions and ideologies” (108). Freud argues, that
“the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of
exacting and ruthless morality” (qtd. in Ferretter 108) especially because morality in our
time is devised as a “selfish regulation laid down by the few who are rich and powerful
and who can satisfy their wishes at any time without any postponement” (Freud qtd. in
Ferretter 108). Freud’s argument effectively justifies the use of radical and possibly
offensive jokes, especially when opposing a hegemonic structure in society to shift the
balance of power to those less empowered.

The use of humor in public discourse, especially to disempower the powerful, is in
collection thus both acceptable and effective which raises the importance of the role of
cultural contributors such as Kureishi and Noah as well as how they are useful: “The
development of critical consciousness proves emancipatory insofar as it develops
understanding about the nature of social injustice and the practices that sustain injustice
so that people might discover strategies to change their reality and bring about greater
equity and social justice” (Rossing 617). The consequence of the work by these cultural
contributors is that they create an alternative viewpoint, which works to change and
disrupt the dominant “ideology, knowledge, meaning, common sense and power
relationships” (617). This alternative viewpoint produces an environment of
representation which subsequently is able to identify and dissent from dominant, or
hegemonic, voices. The goal of cultural contributions is to engage the minority, to foster
critical consciousness leading to personal agency, which then leads to permanent change
through activism in the form of discourse and resistance (617).

Serious? – It’s Satire!

The Belgian cleric Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam who, with the essay *In Praise of
Folly*, intended to satirize pious self-regard, expounds on how contradictions,
synonymous with oppositions or opposites, in themselves create what Erasmus defines
as Folly and which is, in this argument, a component of satire. Speaking satirically of personal vanity, in this case trying to hide one’s age with make-up and other progressively ridiculous assistance, Erasmus declares this to be “absolute foolishness” and adds: “but meanwhile they’re pleased with themselves.” Subsequently he asks the reader to consider which is better: to let “folly” sweeten life or, instead, to “look for the proverbial beam to hang from” (49). He continues:

The fact that such conduct is generally frowned on means nothing to my fools, for either they don’t realize anything is wrong, or if they do, they find it easy to take no notice. If a rock falls on your head it does positive harm, but shame, disgrace, reproaches, and insults are damaging only in so far as you’re conscious of them. If you’re not, you feel no hurt at all. What’s the harm in the whole audience hissing you if you clap yourself? And Folly alone makes this possible. (49)

In the essay’s notations Levi comments on the above passages that: “Folly’s specious arguments are ironic inversions of perfectly serious humanist contentions, and there is a strong element of self-parody running through Erasmus’s text” (qtd. in Erasmus 49). The argument is turned inside out, stating one thing while meaning the opposite, to emphasize how it is possible to have someone laugh at their own absurdity, maybe also wittily point out stupidity, or foolishness by another name. The real point of this piece of text is to criticize the length people go to, especially those of wealth, to try to prevent the sign of ageing while in fact just making themselves look “stupid” and all the while the subjects of the joke are laughing along in agreement. Erasmus separately remarked that “such is the power of wit and liveliness that we can take pleasure in a witty remark even when it is aimed at us” (qtd. in Griffin 164). Erasmus’s ideas can hence be linked to both Kureishi and Noah, whom equally use wit to relieve, through laughter, the absurd
situations in the lives of their respective protagonists and point out the ‘foolishness’ of the underlying colonial ideas while the racists, “the fools,” may in fact also get a laugh, thus using the classical tool of satire to further the anti-racist sentiments.

Satire, a central term in the argument of this thesis, is a tool of discourse documented since antiquity with two of the formative examples being those of Horace and Juvenal (Griffin 1). Erasmus belonged to what is sometimes referred to as the Renaissance Humanists (Griffin 56), who brought satire back into prominence from classical antiquity, as antiquity was revived and became a subject of literary study and translation during the renaissance. Satire later surged as a medium of discourse in English starting in late seventeenth century and with an ending of sorts at the emergence of the nineteenth century (Griffin 1). The form was never entirely abandoned, however, and has been a device in literature ever since, for example in Poe, Dickens and Wilde.

Professor John Drew at Buckingham University in an article about Dickens’s work, “Dickens, Miscellanies, and Classical Traditions of Satire,” covers some of satire’s different forms. The article claims that Dickens arrives at satire through a theme of conviviality, with an “emphasis on shared enjoyment, sociability and consensus” even though this could appear to be “at odds with the properly satirical” and, Drew adds, this means satire leaving a “sting in somebody’s flesh” and “usually exposes two sides to any question, leaving some unfortunate soul – at times even its readers – uncomfortably stranded on the wrong bank, scrambling for safety” (Drew 221-222). The works by Kureishi and Noah being considered in this thesis each resort to satire in order to expose the underlying issues, such as colonialist oppression and racism, without formulating a specific target, which the reader then instead has to identify. This somewhat subversive style of these two writers, while deceptively witty as they make a joke of an unknowing target by simply exposing some contradictory fact, does not fit neatly into the traditional
satirical labels, as defined by Drew or Griffin (1). There is also, according to Drew, a
difference in style between Horacian and Juvenalian forms of satire, the latter is “harsher
and more corrosive” in its effect. Juvenalian starts with the speaker from outside the
power structures, “an outraged moralist who decries modes of vice and error” and shows
these to be ridiculous yet harmful, this speaker uses outrage as the prominent means of
delivery. The Horacian satirist in contrast is considered to be of a higher social class,
from within the social power structure, “an urbane, witty, and tolerant man of the
world.” The speaker hence uses a subtler attack resulting in glee rather than outrage at
the spectacular display of foolishness, self-importance and two-facedness by fellow
humans (Drew 222, 225).

Drew in the final analysis of Dickensian satire arrives at the conclusion that it is more
Juvenalian than Horacian even if these lines of division are not self-evident nor clearly
delineated. The significant line of division is “the insider/outsider split” or with a later
articulated distinction divided between “what is inside and Establishment, and what is
excluded and marginalized” (Drew 240, 241). The separation of ‘the outsider’ and ‘the
marginalized’ aligns with the sense of Other and hybridity and thus with Kureishi and
Noah and their work, and their postcolonial arguments. It is imperative to consider that
since they address a reader who may be in opposition to the ideas of the writer, as they
do, on complicated issues of a personal nature and in a modern public environment, it
may be advantageous, in an effort to gain agreement, that the resulting satire is an
amalgamation of Horacian and Juvenalian styles rather than a clearly delineated form.

The fluid definitions of satirical style and reservations regarding earlier definitions,
and their inadequacies in the contemporary context, are noted by Griffin, who writes that
“[f]rom the point of view of the best current criticism of satire, the old theoretical
consensus is clearly inadequate. . . . vigorous and probing criticism of individual texts
has not led to a new theoretical consensus” (Griffin 2). The old or traditional consensus definition, according to Griffin, included in the introduction to this essay is still useful as a generic point of reference. However, contemporary satire, as is exemplified in the work by Kureishi and Noah, can be considered a hybridized form. A form of satire specifically intended to subvert the message while openly and unambiguously revealing the source and their representations of separation and exclusion.

Hegemonic racism in apartheid is pivotal to the story in the intercalary chapter to one of the short stories in *Born a Crime – Stories from a South African Childhood*. In this chapter Noah first ponders language and its importance in the creation of identity and culture. He writes: “A shared language says ‘We’re the same.’ A language barrier says ‘We’re different.’ The architects of apartheid understood this” (Noah 49). In school, children were only taught their own language, to ensure their separateness. In the subsequent short story, the author recalls how Trevor’s mother uses considerable language skills, in more than five languages contrary to the norm, to navigate complex situations. Once, in front of them, a shopkeeper said to the security guard, in Afrikaans:

“Follow those blacks in case they steal something.”

[Trevor’s] mother turned around and said in, beautiful, fluent Afrikaans: “Why don’t you follow these Blacks around so you can help them find what they’re looking for?”

... Then—and this was the funny thing—[the shopkeeper] didn’t apologize for being racist, he merely apologized for aiming his racism at [them]. “Oh, I’m so

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1 Bhabha expands greatly in *The Location of Culture* on the subject of language and its importance to colonialism. Specifically, in “Chapter 5 – Sly Civility” (Bhabha 132-144). It is however for the arguments in this essay of lesser importance and here only used as an introduction.
sorry, . . . I thought you were like the other blacks. You know how they love to steal.” (Noah 55)

In an almost perfect representation of Noah’s premise D. C. Muecke suggests that the ironist may at times simply “show the obviously absurd conclusion that must inevitably follow from the supposedly reasonable premise” (Muecke 40). Noah applies this form of irony to expose and deride the ‘supposedly reasonable premise’ to turn it into satire, in a subtle form, as the irony exposes and thus repudiates the vice of racism. This logic can be seen as extensions of the ideas of both Erasmus – “the absurd in binary opposites” – and Juvenal – “satire is everywhere” –, thus confirming that Noah’s simplicity works as satire.

Decca Aitkenhead, the journalist, possibly ponders the previous subject as she asks Noah in an interview for The Guardian: “Would [you] call [your]self a satirist?” After a long pause Noah replies: “On the strictest definition of what satire is, yes. In a lot of people’s opinions, satire is only scathing, only unfriendly and mean, only goes for the jugular – and there are different schools of satire” (Aitkenhead). Indeed, satire is not just singular nor scathing, as determined previously. Satire arrives in many variations, born out of different forms of absurd or contradictory base conflicts. The style is determined by context, for example whether the speaker is part of the establishment or outside of it.

In an example of satirical form originating from outside the establishment, Kureishi’s protagonist has difficulties with his ethnic identity, which is additionally complicated by his unstable sexuality. Karim states that: “It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls. . . . I felt it would be heart-breaking to have to choose one or the other, . . . I never liked to think much about the whole thing in case I turned out to be a pervert and needed to have treatment, hormones, or electric shocks through my brain” (Kureishi 55). The immediate laugh is provoked by the funny juxtaposition of
the elemental facts; mixed sexuality, medical ignorance and ineffectual treatment; but this joke is not so simplistic. There is a racial element in this dilemma, perhaps not obvious: Karim is thinking of this as his Pakistani girlfriend Jamila wants them to have sex in a park bathroom while Karim is thinking about Charlie, a beautiful white boy, with whom he has recently had sex (55). It is the ultimate hybridity, and while the Asian versus English is obvious there is also straight versus gay, and later in the novel these dichotomies are joined by rich versus poor, and all conflate with race. The racial aspects are crucial and, in each instance, Kureishi adds the element of satire to spotlight the points of inflection and expose the absurdities in the differences in race and sexuality while adopting a strong postcolonial stand.

The ability to use satire to politicize simple reality makes it a refined tool in the postcolonial discourse. This type of racial discourse can easily cause discomfort in, and conflict with, the intended audience but, according to Kureishi: “[i]rony is the modern mode, a way of commenting on bleakness and cruelty without falling into dourness and didacticism” (qtd. in Ferretter 108). It follows that using this form of irony to create satire disarms the intended audience or, as has been argued previously in this essay, at the very least neutralizes the opposition.

No Joke! – Postcolonialism, Related to Satire

A young Algerian psychotherapist, Frantz Fanon, during the Algerian war of independence reflects on oppressive colonialism in *The Wretched of the Earth*, a seminal text in postcolonial criticism. He writes that “. . . the native intellectuals, . . . decided to go further back and delve deeper down; and, . . . they discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past but rather dignity, glory and solemnity” (169). Fanon goes on to argue that “[c]olonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip” but that the colonizers additionally erased all history from the natives’ memory.
Subsequently, he concludes that “[b]y a kind of perverted logic, [colonialism] turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.” Fanon connects the colonial history with the present, through the work of destroying the pre-colonial history which he states, “takes on a dialectical significance today.” The enormous effort of this work of alienation is linked to the age of empire and the fact that what was really intended by “colonial domination” was to persuade the colonized peoples that colonialism had arrived to spread light on their dark existence and that if the colonizers were to leave “[the natives] would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality” (Fanon 169). Fanon, together with Said, are at times considered the founders of postcolonial thought and in this representation of Fanon’s text he sets out to place colonialism in its context of exploitation and domination as he points to the resulting prejudices while formulating some of the fundamentals of the postcolonial argument.

Homi Bhabha, follows and builds on Fanon’s thinking and at times refers to him. He writes that: “. . . the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (18). He becomes more specific, while embracing Fanon’s ideas, and adds that “[p]ostcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order” (245). The Eurocentric ideas are in effect meant to dehumanize the native and their descendants, in this argument, and thus are the source of postcolonial criticism, with the paradoxes, untruths, oppositions and fabricated realities of colonialism at its origin. Bill Ashcroft et al. further elaborate on and confirm that “[t]he idea of ‘post-colonial theory’ emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing” (11). The ideas presented by these
writers, Fanon, Bhabha and Ashcroft et al., are all fundamental in understanding postcolonialism as it is applied when advancing the arguments in this thesis.

Bhabha further elevates the colonial paradoxes in an example, which he points to twice in fact, where he quotes Nathaniel Halhed and dissects his interpretation of the definition of “native ‘folly’” in the preface to the “Code of Gentoo Law” (Bhabha 141, 196). Halhed writes that no European synonym exists for this affect but that the term is a form of perjury, by the native, and which consists

in falsehoods totally incompatible with each other and utterly contrary to [the natives’] own opinion, knowledge and conviction. . . . It is like the madness so inimitably delineated in Cervantes, sensible enough upon some occasions and at the same time completely wild and unconscious of itself. (qtd. in Bhabha 197)

Claiming that despite adequate juridical and sociological explanations regulating perjury, Bhabha writes that, “the lie persists in the pages of power, . . . What is the truth of the lie?” (197) The lie underlying Halhed’s reasoning is the lie that this “native ‘folly’” in actuality exists and also that perjury law is insufficient to adjudicate it. Instead Bhabha explains that “the truth” is that “[t]he existence of the disabled native is required for the next lie and the next and the next” (197-198). In this analysis the colonizers have created a legal code for no other purpose than to control the local peoples, an analysis that is devastatingly direct and difficult to dispute. Conversely, Halhed’s reference to Cervantes in this context is striking if one considers that Cervantes’s text is well known to be a set of literary mirrors with a constantly changing fictional reality, replete with literal contradictions. Considering Halhed’s text in a different context, Bhabha speculates that “the other side of narcissistic authority may be paranoia of power” (141, 142). Halhed’s arguments fall apart by their own illogic, as
Bhabha’s reasoning reveals the absurd oppositions at its core, which thus create a link to Erasmus’s thoughts of binary opposites as elemental and revealing.

Another remarkable and revealing piece of colonial writing is apartheid South Africa’s “Immorality Act” a section of which is re-printed in the preamble of Noah’s autobiography (Noah vii). In simple terms the act regulates who may have “carnal intercourse” with whom and the repercussions if the law is not followed (vii). The act is based on what race you have been assigned, which is also decided by detailed laws set out by the apartheid state and with their own inherent absurdities (75). The Immorality Act is analyzed in an article by Ralph Goodman, a South African researcher and educator, where he argues that this legal document is essentially an example of white people projecting their own inferiority on all other races by creating a system of separation. Once established, the government was forced “to naturalize it by labelling any breach of the system as abhorrent” (Goodman 63). Postcolonial criticism questions the underlying colonial argument of a document such as the Immorality Act, revealing the absurdity and the irony inherent in the colonial apartheid argument, which thus links to satire through its basis in ironic derision of an absurd position.

In his autobiography Noah builds on similar apartheid arguments and in an example states that “[a]partheid, for all its power, had fatal flaws baked in, starting with the fact that it never made any sense” (Noah 75). The example of proof is the South African (ZA) Chinese population who “were classified as black” and Noah continues that he “do[es]n’t mean they were running around acting black” (75) but there just “weren’t enough” to make them into a single classification, due to all the complications of separation that would then inherently follow. In contrast “Japanese people were labeled as white because the ZA government wanted to establish good relations with the Japanese” (75) ostensibly for commercial reasons, in other words for the importing of
fancy cars and electronics. Noah then places these facts in a hypothetical situation; including a policeman, whose duty it is to enforce the separation of the races, but presumably with trouble separating the Chinese from the Japanese on sight alone; centred on a white-only park bench with a Japanese person sitting on it. Noah then speculates on what the policeman will say:

“Hey, get off that bench, you Chinaman!”

“Excuse me. I’m Japanese.”

“Oh, I apologize, sir. I didn’t mean to be racist. Have a lovely afternoon.” (75)

This sequence connects the absurdity perpetrated by the colonial power, the idea that Chinese and Japanese can be defined as different on a scale of black to white and shows the irony in this preposterous idea. It demonstrates how this untruth, or lie, in apartheid reveals the absurdity in the underlying reasoning and transforms into satire as it presents the postcolonial argument.

The linking of satire to the subversion of the remains of colonial powers and thus to postcolonial criticism is similarly illustrated in an exchange between Karim and the director Shadwell at an audition, as noted by Anna Wille (456). Karim is auditioning, but unbeknownst to him it is for the role of Mowgli in Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, a roll which Shadwell assumes Karim must know. “Yea I’ve seen the film” Karim replies, presumably referring to the Disney cartoon, to which Shadwell retorts, “I’m sure” and the narrator continues: “He could be a snooty bastard, old Shadwell … Instead of talking about the job he said some words in Punjabi or Urdu and looked at [Karim] as if he wanted to get into a big conversation” (Kureishi 141). As mentioned earlier, Karim is born to an English mother, in England, and grew up in South London. The absurdity in Shadwell’s presumption that Karim speaks Punjabi or Urdu, representing subverted remnants of colonialism, is revealed. Shadwell’s false notion is based on Karim’s
hybridity, which makes Shadwell consider him Indian while Karim considers himself an “Englishman born and bred, almost” (Kureishi 3). The unspoken and subversive conflict between Shadwell, a representation of the colonizer, and Karim, the implicitly transferred native, viewing the world through opposite realities, is, in all its irony, the essence of what postcolonial criticism aims to reveal. This is also at the center of hybridity and otherness, “neither ‘one’ nor ‘other’” (Bhabha 181).

**What Am I? – “Neither ‘One’ Nor ‘Other’”**

When describing the supporting character Changez, Wille writes that “irony is the driving force in Kureishi’s representation, and the ‘Dildo Killer’ remains as unique and comic a mixture of subverted sexual and ethnic stereotypes as his nickname indicates” (466). In Kureishi’s novel, where the theme of hybridity includes sexuality, the irony is mixed with hilarity and rhetorically effective representations. With a name too perfect to be accidental in its ambivalence, Changez is Karim’s friend Jamila’s husband through an arranged marriage. Changez is fundamentally not metropolitan in mindset but eager to learn about how to fit into his adopted home, London. Having arrived straight from Mumbai in order to marry Jamila, a Pakistani, he finds out she is bisexual. “How could he have had any idea, when he kicked off from Bombay, of the convoluted involvements ahead of him” asks Karim (Kureishi 273). Nothing is stable or fixed in this situation, instead everything is fluid. Changez expects to have children with his newly acquired bride. The preceding analysis is confirmed by Wille who states that in many instances Changez is prepared to negotiate his place and what and whom he represents, depending on the context, more easily than Karim: “Changez is continually associated with a surprisingly playful approach to gender roles: ‘They’re gentlemen’, he claims of the English, ‘Especially the women’” (465).
Changez displays this playful ability to adapt when Karim arrives, directly after his own stay in America. Changez opens the door with a baby on his arm as Karim asks:

“Where is everyone else?”

“Mr. Simon the father is away in America. He’s been long gone. . . .”


“She’s here, intact and all, upstairs.” . . .

“You must be pleased, eh, . . . you’ve got Jamila to yourself full time. Any progress?” . . .

“We are all progressing. There is another woman. . . .”

“Where?”

“No, no. Jamila’s friend, you fool.”


“. . . Jammie loves two people, that’s all. It’s simple to grasp. She loves Simon, but he’s not here. She loves Joanna, and Joanna is here . . .” (Kureishi 272-273).

It is Changez who, surprisingly, explains the simplicity in this arrangement, including that the baby is not his but Simon’s, to Karim, the actor brought up in London (Wille 466). Changez, described as dark skinned and originally from Bengal, is stereotypically expected to be narrow minded and provincial not metropolitan and sophisticated like Karim, who is from London. The underlying colonial ideas are articulated by Bhabha: “. . . the stereotype is at once a substitute and a shadow. By acceding to the wildest fantasies . . . of the colonizer, the stereotyped Other reveals something of the ‘fantasy’ of [the] position of mastery” (117). Kureishi infers the paradoxical colonial ideas which hence provide for a naturally ironic conclusion by their inverted absurdity. Everything
about Changez, who is transposed into the metropolitan colonizer, subversively argues for the acceptance of dynamic hybrid identity, while rejecting the fixed idea of Other.

Noah writes of different challenges of identity, also based in colonial stereotypes. Trevor is a not-quite-black boy in Soweto who is treated as white where everyone else is indisputably black, including all family members also living there. His maternal grandfather had a somewhat extreme solution to driving this hybrid child around in the car. Trevor says that “He called me ‘Mastah’” followed by “‘Mastah must always sit in the backseat.’” I never challenged him on it. What was I going to say? ‘I believe your perception of race is flawed, Grandfather.’ No, I was five. I sat in the back” (52). Using irony Noah identifies the absurdity in that apartheid created artificial racial limits. He resolves to accept this paradoxical situation and looks back with irony instead and, as did Kureishi previously, turns the inherent absurdity into satire and simultaneously provides the arguments against colonial fixed limits, the sense of Other, and for acceptance of hybridity.

Thamm points out that “Noah writes of his profiling as white in a black world with characteristic insight and humour. . . . Noah did not think this special treatment was because he was light-skinned, but because he was special” (Thamm). Noah writes that: “It wasn’t ‘Trevor doesn’t get beaten because Trevor is white’. It was ‘Trevor doesn’t get beaten because Trevor is Trevor’” (53), thus referring to his grandmother’s inability to give Trevor equal corporal punishment to his black cousins. Just prior in the story, Trevor has explained that: “I had a choice. I could champion racial justice in our home, or I could enjoy granny’s cookies. I went with the cookies” (53). Noah tries to make Trevor fit in while using laughter to comment on his fluid or unstable identity, not white enough, not black enough, being poor and in many ways forced to create liminality from this otherness: “[t]hat’s who I was. Always the outsider. As the outsider, you can retreat
into a shell, be anonymous, be invisible. Or you can go the other way. . . . For me it was humor . . . even though I didn’t belong to one group, I could be a part of any group that was laughing” (Noah 140-141). The defensive weapon of choice is some form of humor and often satire based in paradoxes, rejecting the underlying falsehoods, while arguing for hybridity and against otherness.

Karim describes himself with equally complicated ambivalence as he declares: “Englishman I am (though not proud of it). . . . Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, or here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored” (Kureishi 3). This is subconsciously a description of hybridity and from a sense of the Other. Later Karim’s father becomes a Buddhist life-guide to suburban English couples in Chislehurst, despite being a Muslim. While assisting his father in the house where the meetings are held, Karim meets the owner’s son Charlie. He describes Charlie’s beauty: “his nose was so straight, his cheeks so hollow, his lips such rosebuds. . . . Men and boys got erections just being in the same room as him” (9). Karim later explains the conflict in this love; “It was not generous. . . . I didn’t wish him well. It was that I preferred him to me and wanted to be him. . . . I wanted to wake up with [it] all transferred to me” (15). This is a subversive expression of Karim as non-European and exotic and/or immoral, the quintessence of otherness. Karim turns the argument inside out with his ironic self-designated status in subversive mimicry of colonialism, he is brown and wants to be white. Ferretter writes of Kureishi’s literary style that: “the meaning of an utterance, along with the social point of view in which it has this meaning, is subverted by the counteraction of another meaning, which derives from another social perspective” (119). There can be no doubt that Karim’s subversive expression, while exposing remnants of colonialism in the internalized racial emotions, is a representation of the Other as an abstract postcolonial argument in reverse. Karim
wishes in actuality that he would reflect the ‘norm’ or simply: that he was white. It is an exceptionally poignant example of otherness perpetrated through colonial racist norms, and which postcolonial criticism aspires to reveal and dispute. Karim wishes he was going somewhere else or becoming what he can never be – a different skin color – to become part of, or represented by, society’s norms including what it considers beautiful.

Bhabha discusses, and questions, the issue of representation and the role of postcolonialism and the ideas of the ‘Other’ in The Location of Culture, where he asks: “Is the language of theory merely another power ploy of the culturally privileged Western elite to produce a discourse of the Other that reinforces its own power-knowledge equation?” (30-31) He deliberates around this subject at considerable length and with great vigor from different points of view, but ends with the reply, which seems to explain Karim’s sense of inadequacy, that “[it] is not to state the obvious, that there is no knowledge – political or otherwise – outside representation” (32).

Conclusion

Through the two texts The Buddha of Suburbia and Born a Crime: Stories of a South African Childhood, this thesis focuses upon the work of Hanif Kureishi and Trevor Noah respectively and their representation of “Otherness,” resulting from the fixed colonial mindset of identity, and Hybridity, as in identity as double or fluid, and acceptance of the latter. The thesis uses arguments from the two works above juxtaposed to the seminal The Wretched of the Earth and The Location of Culture, and others, so as to analyze the postcolonial implications in Kureishi’s and Noah’s work. Thus, this thesis pursues the question of whether the use of satire functions as an effective instrument of postcolonial discourse and attempts to break down, or at the very least undermine, underlying colonial theories concerning race. The contention in this thesis is that satire
can serve as an effective instrument to oppose racism, often subversively, and hence to affect social change over time.

The protagonists in the texts by Kureishi and Noah both struggle with racism and diverse challenges within several postcolonial areas of discourse. However, the thesis focuses on the concepts of “Otherness” and Hybridity. These authors resolve the difficulties within their respective stories through the use of an acute ability to identify the underlying absurdities of their protagonist’s situations. These absurdities are tied to the protagonists’ lack of an affirmative association with their respective societies and the opposition this creates to the dominating racist ideas of colonialism. Kureishi and Noah, although from widely different circumstances, create their views of the world through satire. Kureishi does it through words in books, as well as later through film and television, and Noah does it through stand-up comedy, leading to television and his autobiography.

The use of humor and irony to create satire makes their work notable in the public discourse, while they are for the most part involved in different genres and write for somewhat different audiences. This thesis argues, with support from texts by Jonathan P. Rossing and Luke Ferretter, that there is a definite positive impact by cultural contributors with works like those by Kureishi and Noah. The essay demonstrates that, even though satire is at times a dual tool when used in public discourse, the conclusion is that the effect of satire, as presented by the two authors, has a positive impact for subversive change, over time, in opposition to racism.

The authors’ use of satire in opposition to racism connects Erasmus, Juvenal and Horacio, seminal thinkers regarding satire, with Bhabha and Fanon, fundamental postcolonial thinkers. This link between satire and postcolonial criticism, both of which are based on the underlying contradictions of colonialism, is first presented in the
introduction and further developed throughout the essay. The argument demonstrates that not only can segments of postcolonial criticism, through its origin in colonial paradoxes, be linked to satire but the components of this area of critical theory are well represented by both Kureishi’s and Noah’s work. The basic fact that postcolonialism in its fundamental origins arises at the intersection of opposites or contradictions in the underlying colonialism, ripe with paradoxical arguments, makes for fertile ground for their work. The connection between postcolonialism and the works of the authors has been examined, together with evidence of Kureishi’s and Noah’s writing on Otherness and Hybridity.

This connection between the authors and hybrid identity and otherness is the focus of the chapter “What am I?”. This essay demonstrates that both Kureishi and Noah extensively reflect on these postcolonial characteristics in their respective works. The authors, as mentioned previously, come to their work from different backgrounds; Kureishi from a suburban and mostly white setting in south London, and Noah from mostly black or colored but constantly changing suburbs and townships in Johannesburg; nonetheless, these differences play a minimal role in differentiating the authors from each other in the area of postcolonial discourse precisely due to their texts’ focus on hybridity and otherness.

Therefore, the final analysis is that both Kureishi and Noah, despite their multiple differences, through their application of satire as a tool in postcolonial criticism, give voice to arguments against otherness and for the acceptance of hybridity, while subverting the power of racism through public discourse.
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