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# Racialization, Linguistic Exile and Hybrid Identity in Leïla Sebbar's Arabic as a Se-cret Song and Hanif Kureishi's The Bud-dha of Suburbia

# العنصرة والمنفى اللغوي والهوية الهجينة في العربية كأغنية سرية لليلى صبار وبوذا الضواحي لحنيف قريشي

## Racialisation, exil linguistique et identité hybride dans L'arabe comme un chant secret de Leïla Sebbar et The Buddha of Suburbia de Hanif Kureishi

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## Abstract

This article offers a comparative, postcolonial and narratological reading of Leïla Sebbar's Arabic as a Secret Song and Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia. It argues that the two works construct identity not as a stable essence but as a fractured, relational and historically burdened process shaped by colonial violence, racialization, linguistic dispossession and class hierarchy. Sebbar's autobiographical text foregrounds the wound of Arabic as a paternal language withheld from the daughter, while Kureishi's autofictional novel stages the ambivalence of a British-born subject whose Pakistani and Indian genealogies are alternately denied, commodified and belatedly reclaimed. Drawing on Karima Lazali's analy-sis of colonial trauma, Fanon's critique of racial interpellation, Bhabha's concept of in-betweenness, Said's critique of Orientalist hierarchies and Bourdieu's sociology of linguistic capital, the article examines four decisive sites of identity formation: the proper name, school, social class and language. The comparison shows that Sebbar and Kureishi do not merely narrate minority experience; they expose the symbolic mechanisms through which Europe produces the immi-grant, the mixed-race child and the postcolonial subject as figures of permanent conditional belonging.

## Keywords

Racialization, linguistic exile, hybrid identity, Leïla Sebbar, Hanif Kureishi, postcolonial trauma, class, naming

## الملخّص

تقدّم هذه الدراسة قراءة مقارنة، ما بعد كولونيالية وسردية، لكتاب ليلى صبار «العربية كأغنية سرية» ورواية حنيف قريشي «بوذا الضواحي». وتبيّن أن الهوية في العملين لا تُبنى بوصفها جوهراً ثابتاً، بل باعتبارها سيرورة متصدّعة وعلائقية ومحمّلة بتاريخ العنف الاستعماري والعنصرة والحرمان اللغوي والتراتبية الطبقية. ففي نص صبار تتجلى جراحة العربية بوصفها لغة أبوية لم تُنقل إلى الابنة، بينما تكشف رواية قريشي التباس الذات البريطانية المولودة من أصول باكستانية وهندية، وهي ذات تنكر أصولها أحياناً، وتُستثمر إثنياً أحياناً أخرى، قبل أن تعود إلى مساءلة نسبها الثقافي. بالاستناد إلى تحليلات كريمة لازالي وفرانتز فانون وهومي بابا وإدوارد سعيد وبيير بورديو، تتناول الدراسة أربعة مواضع حاسمة في تشكل الهوية : الاسم الشخصي، المدرسة، الطبقة الاجتماعية واللغة. وتخلص إلى أن صبار وقريشي لا يكتفيان بسرد تجربة الأقليات، بل يكشفان الآليات الرمزية التي

تنتج بها أوروبا صورة المهاجر والطفل الهجين والذات ما بعد الكولونيالية بوصفها صوراً لانتماء مشروط ومؤجل.


## الكلمات المفتاحية

كلمات مفتاحية: العنصرة، المنفى اللغوي، الهوية الهجينة، ليلى صبار، حنيف قريشي، الصدمة الاستعمارية، الطبقة الاجتماعية، التسمية



## Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture comparatiste, postcoloniale et narratologique de L'arabe comme un chant secret de Leïla Sebbar et de The Buddha of Suburbia de Hanif Kureishi. Il montre que les deux œuvres construisent l'identité non comme une essence stable, mais comme un processus fracturé, relationnel et historiquement chargé, déterminé par la violence coloniale, la racialisation, la dépossession linguistique et la hiérarchie sociale. Chez Sebbar, le récit autobiographique met au premier plan la blessure de l'arabe, langue paternelle refusée ou non transmise à la fille ; chez Kureishi, le roman autofictionnel met en scène l'ambivalence d'un sujet né en Grande-Bretagne, dont les généalogies pakistanaise et in-dienne sont tour à tour déniées, théâtralisées, marchandisées puis partiellement réappropriées. À partir de Karima La-zali, Fanon, Bhabha, Said et Bourdieu, l'étude examine quatre lieux décisifs de formation identitaire : le nom propre, l'école, la classe sociale et la langue. La comparaison montre que Sebbar et Kureishi ne se limitent pas à raconter l'expérience minoritaire ; ils dévoilent les mécanismes symboliques par lesquels l'Europe produit l'immigré, l'enfant mé-tis et le sujet postcolonial comme figures d'une appartenance toujours conditionnelle.



## Mots-clés

racialisation, exil linguistique, identité hybride, Leïla Sebbar, Hanif Kureishi, trauma colonial, classe sociale, nomination

## Introduction

Some of the most compelling works written in French and English during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have emerged from writers whose genealogies do not coincide neatly with the national imaginaries in which they write. Their literary authority is inseparable from a historically charged displacement: they inhabit the language of former imperial centres while carrying the memory, the wound or the trace of colonized territories. In this sense, Leïla Sebbar and Hanif Kureishi occupy particularly revealing positions. Sebbar writes from the fracture produced by the French colonization of Algeria and by the silence surrounding Arabic in her own childhood; Kureishi writes from the racialized afterlife of the British Empire and from the British social spaces in which South Asian descent is continually made visible as difference.

The present article examines how Sebbar's *Arabic as a Secret Song* and Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* transform the experience of mixed ancestry into a privileged site for thinking colonial memory, racial conflict and identity crisis. The comparison is not based on a simple thematic analogy between Algeria and Pakistan, nor on the assumption that French and British colonial histories are interchangeable. It is based, rather, on a shared problem: how does a subject whose family history crosses the line between colonizer and colonized, between metropolitan language and paternal origin, narrate the self when available categories of belonging are already contaminated by hierarchy?

The question is particularly significant because both texts refuse the comfort of a single affiliation. Sebbar's autobiographical voice is neither simply French nor simply Algerian; it is marked by the paradox of being the daughter of an Algerian father and a French mother, yet deprived of Arabic, of familial memory and of the immediate cultural intimacy that the paternal line might have transmitted. Kureishi's narrator Karim Amir, for his part, defines himself from the opening of the novel as an "Englishman born and bred, almost", a formula whose last word unsettles the entire sentence. The adverb "almost" condenses the conditionality of racialized citizenship: Karim is English by birth, accent and everyday culture, but not entirely recognized as English by the symbolic order around him.

This study therefore argues that identity crisis in Sebbar and Kureishi is neither psychological indecision alone nor a purely private conflict of self-definition. It is a historically produced fracture. The proper name, the school, the street, the theatre, the family and the language of everyday interaction become scenes in which the subject is named, misnamed, exoticized, assimilated or excluded. The identity crisis is thus inseparable from what may be called racial interpellation: the social act through which a person is forced to recognize him- or herself through categories imposed by others.

Methodologically, the article combines comparative literary analysis, close reading and postcolonial theory. It focuses on recurrent motifs and narrative situa-

tions: naming and renaming, childhood humiliation, paternal silence, linguistic deprivation, class distinction and the belated return toward a disavowed genealogy. Karima Lazali's account of colonial trauma in Algeria is used as a decisive point of departure because it articulates the psychic and political consequences of colonial erasure. Fanon helps clarify the racial production of the inferiorized subject; Said illuminates the persistence of Orientalist hierarchies; Bhabha makes it possible to think the unstable space of in-betweenness; Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital clarifies Karim's perception that classed language opens or closes access to cultural legitimacy.

The article is organized into three major sections. The first frames the comparative inquiry by clarifying the theoretical and methodological premises, reconstructing the colonial legacies at stake and locating Sebbar and Kureishi within autobiographical and autofictional mediation. The second studies the concrete scenes through which racialization and exclusion become visible: the proper name, schooling, social classification and linguistic exile. The third brings these analyses together by examining identity crisis, paternal silence and the return of disavowed genealogies before offering a comparative synthesis of hybrid identity as critical knowledge.

# 1. Framing the Comparative Inquiry: Theory, History and Corpus

## 1.1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is deliberately interdisciplinary because the texts under examination do not separate literary form from historical injury. A purely biographical reading would reduce Sebbar and Kureishi to their origins, while a purely thematic reading would risk treating race, language and identity as abstract motifs detached from the narrative structures that produce them. The present approach therefore combines postcolonial theory, discourse analysis and close textual reading. It asks not only what the two works say about identity, but also how they stage identity as a process of naming, interruption, translation, imitation, performance and belated recognition.

The notion of racialization is central. Race is not approached as a biological fact but as a social and symbolic process through which bodies, names, accents, religions and genealogies are interpreted as signs of difference. Sebbar and Kureishi repeatedly show that the subject becomes racialized before speaking: a name sounds Arabic or South Asian, hair appears too dark or too curly, an accent is expected, a role is assigned, a body is imagined as authentic for a colonial character. Racialization is thus a practice of reading imposed by the social world. It converts partial signs into total identities and makes the individual answer for a collective fantasy.

Fanon's work is particularly useful because it describes the violence of being fixed by the gaze of the Other. In Black Skin, White Masks, the racialized subject is not merely insulted; he is objectified within a system of meanings that precedes him. This mechanism helps explain why naming and renaming are so important in Kureishi and why Sebbar's Arabic name can be experienced both as inheritance and as exposure. Fanon also clarifies the ambivalence of return: the subject who has been inferiorized may come back to a rejected culture with an intensity shaped by guilt, shame and the desire for repair. Karim's late recognition of his Indian past belongs to this structure.

Bhabha's concept of in-betweenness helps articulate the unstable position of the mixed or postcolonial subject, but it must be used cautiously. In many simplified readings, hybridity becomes a celebratory term, as if mixture automatically produced freedom. Sebbar and Kureishi resist such simplification. Their hybrid subjects are creative, mobile and ironic, but they are also wounded, exposed and sometimes forced to perform the stereotypes attached to them. The in-between is not an empty space of freedom; it is a historically produced zone of negotiation structured by unequal power relations.

Said's critique of *Orientalism* provides another indispensable axis. The Orientalist imagination does not disappear after formal decolonization; it persists in theatrical roles, school expectations, social jokes, cultural curiosity and the commodification of ethnic difference. Karim's casting as Mowgli is a particularly clear example: the British stage does not discover his individuality but consumes his body as a sign of exotic authenticity. The same logic, though differently configured, is present in the questions addressed to Sebbar about veiling, circumcision or pork. Such questions reduce a complex family to a set of cultural stereotypes and treat the child as an informant about an imagined Muslim or Arab difference.

Lazali's contribution is decisive for the Algerian dimension of the article. Her work on colonial trauma allows us to understand silence not as mere absence but as an effect of historical violence. Sebbar's father does not simply fail to speak; his silence belongs to a colonial history in which language, genealogy and memory have been injured. The daughter's exclusion from Arabic must therefore be read at several levels: familial, linguistic, gendered, colonial and psychic. Arabic is not only a language she did not learn; it is the trace of a paternal world that colonial history and domestic choices have made unavailable.

Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital is introduced to clarify Kureishi's class analysis. Karim speaks English, but he discovers that mastery of a language is not equivalent to possession of legitimate speech. The upper-class world of Eleanor and her friends possesses not only vocabulary but ease, cultural references, confidence and the implicit right to speak. Such competence is not innate; it is socially produced and recognized. Karim's humiliation before educated speech shows

that language can exclude even those who are native speakers when they lack the cultural capital associated with legitimate forms of expression.

Methodologically, the article proceeds by close reading of selected scenes that function as nodal points of identity formation: Sebbar's reflections on her name, the school path, the father's translations and silences, Karim's opening self-definition, the renaming of Haroon and Amar, the school memories, the Mowgli performance, the encounter with educated language and the funeral scene. These scenes are read comparatively, not to flatten their differences, but to show how analogous structures of othering appear in different colonial histories. The comparison remains asymmetrical: Sebbar's relation to Algeria is marked by longing for a language lost before acquisition, whereas Karim's relation to South Asian ancestry is mediated by racial visibility and by British class culture.

The study also distinguishes between author, narrator and character. Sebbar's *Arabic as a Secret Song* is autobiographical, and its "I" is openly connected to the author's memory; Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* is autofictional and should not be reduced to direct autobiography. Karim is not simply Kureishi, even if the novel draws on social and familial materials that resonate with the author's experience. This distinction is necessary in order to avoid psychologizing the writers. The article studies textual constructions of identity, not private personalities.

Finally, the article treats the primary corpus as a site where individual memory and collective history intersect. The aim is not to prove that Sebbar and Kureishi have identical experiences, but to demonstrate that both works reveal the afterlife of empire in the most ordinary forms of social interaction. The originality of the comparison lies in placing linguistic exile and racial performance together: Sebbar shows what happens when the paternal language is absent; Kureishi shows what happens when the subject possesses the national language but remains racially and socially conditional. Together, the two texts make visible the many forms through which postcolonial Europe produces incomplete belonging.

## 1.2. Colonial Legacies and the Genealogy of Divided Subjectivities

Algeria, one of the central territories of French colonial rule in North Africa, has a history shaped by conquest, settler colonialism, the War of Independence, postcolonial trauma and the difficult work of national reconstruction. The lives of Algerians, whether considered socially, politically, linguistically, culturally or psychologically, continue to bear the imprint of that violent history. French colonial discourse justified domination through the rhetoric of a civilizing mission. Lazali recalls that one of the defining features of the French conquest of Algeria was its insistence, against historical evidence, that the territory was without history or culture, a kind of virgin land awaiting conquest (Lazali, 2018, p. 46). Such a discourse did not merely legitimize military and administrative control; it

attacked the symbolic foundations through which a people names itself, remembers itself and transmits itself.

Language was one of the central instruments of this colonial project. French was imposed not only as the language of administration and schooling but also as the privileged medium of symbolic legitimacy. Arabic, in both its classical and vernacular forms, and Tamazight were not simply neglected; they were placed in an inferior position, associated with backwardness, domesticity or silence. Lazali's formulation is particularly useful here: the erasure of languages and history constitutes a distinctive feature of French coloniality in Algeria (2018, p. 46). The aim was not only to govern bodies but also to reorganize memory, to produce subjects whose access to public recognition passed through the colonizer's language.

This linguistic history is crucial for understanding Francophone Algerian writing. During and after colonization, many Algerian writers chose French not as a transparent medium of assimilation but as a conflicted instrument. For Kateb Yacine, Mohammed Dib, Malek Haddad and others, French could become a weapon, a site of resistance and a space in which silenced histories were forced into visibility. Yet the use of French remained structurally ambivalent: it was the language of the Other and the language in which the Self had to speak to become audible. Lazali's distinction between translation and transliteration is illuminating in this regard. French, for several Algerian writers, was not merely a language into which Algerian experience was translated; it became a surface on which oral languages, rhythms, idioms and memories could leave their trace.

The concepts of relexification and indigenization help explain this process. Relexification designates the alteration of a language's lexicon through the insertion or pressure of another lexicon, while the grammatical structure may remain largely intact. Indigenization, by contrast, refers to the process through which a foreign or colonial language is adapted so that it becomes able to carry local gestures, idioms, rhythms, social relations and cultural meanings. Algerian writing in French therefore does not simply reproduce French; it unsettles it, makes it resonate with an absent Arabic or Amazigh background, and transforms the colonizer's language into a contested archive of the colonized.

The situation becomes more paradoxical in the case of writers such as Leïla Sebbar, whose family history brings the colonial divide into the intimate space of filiation. Sebbar is not a first-generation nationalist writer confronting French as an external language; she is the daughter of an Algerian father and a French mother, born into the very crossing of the two histories. Her mixed origin does not dissolve the colonial binary; it internalizes it. Algeria and France are not only geopolitical entities in her work. They are parental figures, linguistic territories and affective wounds. Her writing repeatedly asks how a subject can inherit a

history that has not been fully transmitted and how a daughter can belong to a paternal language from which she was excluded.

The South Asian and British context surrounding Kureishi is historically different, yet it produces comparable effects of displacement. The Indian subcontinent was marked by British imperial rule, by the institutionalization of English education and by the violent Partition of 1947, which created India and Pakistan and led to massive displacement, communal violence and long-lasting trauma. British colonialism did not operate in precisely the same manner as French assimilationist colonialism in Algeria, but it too reorganized cultural prestige through language, education and administration. English became a medium of power, class mobility and imperial imitation, while the colonized subject was encouraged to measure himself against British standards.

Amrouche's description of colonialism as an operation of uprooting beginning at school, though formulated in relation to Algeria, can be extended cautiously to colonial education more broadly. The school does not merely teach a language; it teaches a hierarchy of values, bodies, accents and memories. Under colonial conditions, it may lead the subject to contest his own identity and to become accustomed to fragmentation (Lazali, 2018, p. 123). This structure is fundamental for reading Kureishi. The legacy of empire appears not only in the biography of Haroon, Karim's father, but also in the London suburbs where Britishness is policed through class, skin colour, accent, sexuality and cultural competence.

The comparison between Sebbar and Kureishi is therefore not reducible to the fact that both have mixed parentage. It rests on the shared afterlife of empire: both authors show that colonial and postcolonial histories survive in domestic speech, children's insults, school hierarchies, names, accents and bodily appearance. Algerian literature in French and Pakistani or South Asian British writing in English become privileged corpora for investigating how history inhabits the individual. They make visible the tension between memory and amnesia, inheritance and loss, imposed identity and self-invention.

## 1.3. Locating Sebbar and Kureishi: Mixed Genealogies and Autobiographical Mediation

Leïla Sebbar was born in Laghouat in 1941 to an Algerian father and a French mother. This biographical fact cannot be reduced to anecdote because it structures the symbolic economy of her work. Her father's Algeria and her mother's France do not form a harmonious synthesis; they remain historically unequal, emotionally separated and linguistically divided. Sebbar's childhood in Algeria was marked by a decisive absence: she lived in a society where Arabic surrounded her, yet she was raised in a French-speaking household and did not learn the language of her father. This deprivation becomes one of the major wounds of *Arabic as a Secret Song*.

The text does not narrate Algeria as a lost homeland in a nostalgic and simple sense. Algeria is both near and inaccessible. It appears in family visits, in the voices of women, in the rhythm of conversations that the child hears but does not understand, in the silence of the father and in the memory of violence. Sebbar's relation to Arabic is therefore not merely linguistic. Arabic is the name of an interrupted transmission, a paternal secret, a sonic presence without semantic possession. The child listens, but meaning remains elsewhere. The adult writer returns to this absence through writing, not to repair it completely but to give it form.

Sebbar's oeuvre repeatedly circles around these questions. Texts such as *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, *Mes Algéries en France*, *Lettre à mon père* and *Lettres parisiennes* explore exile, memory, women's voices, paternal silence, war and the impossibility of a single national belonging. In this sense, her writing participates in a broader Franco-Algerian memory work while refusing any monolithic representation of Algeria. Stora's idea of several superposed Algerias is particularly appropriate: Sebbar's Algeria is not one territory stabilized by national discourse; it is a plurality of fragments, languages, images and familial traces.

Hanif Kureishi, born in England in 1954 to an English mother and a South Asian Muslim father, occupies another form of postcolonial crossing. Unlike Sebbar, he did not spend his childhood in Pakistan or India. His relation to his father's background is mediated primarily through family narrative, racial perception and the imperial memory that shaped British society. Kureishi's own statement that he was "a sort of English kid" but always linked to empire clarifies the central paradox of his writing. Britishness is his immediate environment, yet empire is the historical condition through which his difference is made readable.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* stages this condition through Karim Amir, a narrator who is both intimate with British suburbia and marked as not fully belonging to it. The novel's opening formula - "My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost" - is a theoretical statement in narrative form. It suggests that national identity is not only a matter of birthplace or language but also a matter of recognition. Karim's body, name and genealogy prevent the sentence from closing on itself. He is English, but the social world keeps the identity incomplete.

Kureishi's early work has often been read as a major intervention in contemporary British culture because it exposes the racial, sexual and class conflicts of post-imperial Britain. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is not a conventional realist novel of immigrant suffering; it is ironic, theatrical, comic, politically sharp and formally self-aware. It presents identity as performance, negotiation and sometimes compromise. Karim's trajectory through suburbia, theatre, sexuality and the city shows how race can be commodified, how class can be mimicked, and how the subject may collaborate in his own exoticization in order to gain access to cultural visibility.

Sebbar and Kureishi thus share a position at the crossroads of two histories, yet they do not respond to it in identical ways. Sebbar is haunted by the lost paternal language and by the impossibility of a complete Algerian inheritance. Kureishi's narrator is less concerned with recovering Urdu or Punjabi than with navigating British class codes and racial stereotypes. Sebbar's crisis is organized around linguistic deprivation; Kureishi's around racialization within a language he already masters. This difference is crucial, for it prevents the comparison from becoming symmetrical or reductive.

## 2. Scenes of Racialization and Linguistic Exclusion

### 2.1. The Name as a Scene of Racialization and Symbolic Interpellation

The proper name is one of the first sites where social identity becomes visible. It is not a neutral label. It carries linguistic, religious, ethnic, familial and historical information, and it exposes the individual to recognition or misrecognition. In the works of Sebbar and Kureishi, the name functions as a threshold between intimate identity and public classification. It can affirm belonging, but it can also trigger suspicion, mockery, exoticization and social exclusion.

In *Arabic as a Secret Song*, Sebbar directly associates her identity problem with her name. She is half-French, yet she has an Arabic name. The name is a paternal mark placed within a world that often reads it before it listens to her. It demands repetition, spelling and explanation. It can be mispronounced, simplified or racialized. More profoundly, it announces an affiliation to a language she does not speak and to a cultural world she desires but cannot fully inhabit. The name therefore names both belonging and deprivation.

The situation is intensified by the way Sebbar is referred to as the daughter of the roumia, the daughter of the European or French woman. The phrase does more than identify maternal origin. It reduces the child to a relational category and deprives her of an autonomous identity. She is not allowed simply to be herself; she is named through the colonial divide embodied by her parents. In Algeria, her mother's Frenchness exposes her to hostility; in France, her father's Algerianness marks her as insufficiently French. The name becomes the linguistic site where the impossibility of choosing one side is made socially visible.

Contemporary research on names and migration confirms the importance of this experience. A first name can function as a salient cultural marker through which otherness is produced in social encounters (Amit & Dolberg, 2023). It can also affect self-image when immigrants or children of migrants experience mispronunciation, forced adaptation or pressure to adopt names considered more acceptable in the host society (Ainciburu & Battazi, 2019). Sebbar's case is more complex because the name connects her to a paternal language from which she

has been separated. Her name does not merely expose her to discrimination; it reminds her of an unfulfilled inheritance.

In Kureishi's novel, Karim begins by naming himself proudly: Karim Amir. The declaration gives narrative authority to the protagonist. Yet the novel quickly demonstrates that names are never entirely controlled by those who bear them. Haroon becomes Harry, not because he freely reinvents himself but because English relatives and social convenience rename him. The gesture may appear friendly, but it participates in a broader process of symbolic domestication. A name that sounds foreign is softened, Anglicized and made more acceptable. The colonial subject enters the English family by losing a part of the name through which another history speaks.

Amar's transformation into Allie is even more revealing because it is motivated by fear. He changes his name "to avoid racial trouble". The act can be read as a strategy of survival, but it is also an internalization of racial hierarchy. Amar assumes that a name associated with South Asian or Muslim origin exposes him to danger, while an English-sounding name may offer protection. He therefore attempts to move from the position of marked otherness toward that of social invisibility. Yet invisibility is purchased at the cost of symbolic self-erasure.

Fanon's analysis of naming is useful here. To be named by the Other is to be fixed within a system of perception that precedes one's own self-understanding. The imposed name does not simply describe; it produces a subject position. Haroon/Harry and Amar/Allie illustrate different forms of the same violence. Haroon is renamed by others; Amar renames himself under the pressure of others. In both cases, the name becomes one of the white masks through which the postcolonial subject is invited to suppress, soften or conceal his difference.

The semantic irony of Amar's chosen name is striking. "Amar" can evoke command, duration, life or vitality depending on linguistic context and pronunciation. "Allie", by contrast, suggests alignment and alliance. The new name symbolically allies the character with the very social order that has made his original name dangerous. Kureishi thus exposes the paradox of assimilation: the subject may change the signifier, but the social gaze continues to racialize the body. A new name can modify reception, but it cannot abolish the history inscribed in skin, family and social memory.

Sebbar and Kureishi therefore treat naming as a performative scene. A name does not merely indicate who someone is; it reveals who has the power to classify, accept, translate, distort or erase. In Sebbar, the Arabic name is a wound because it points toward a paternal language that remains secret. In Kureishi, the ethnic name is a risk because it exposes the subject to racial violence. In both works, the name condenses the larger colonial drama: the subject is forced to ask whether identity is inherited, chosen, imposed or negotiated under pressure.

## 2.2. Schooling, Social Classification and the Everyday Violence of Othering

The violence experienced by Sebbar and Karim is not limited to explicit political discourse. It appears in ordinary spaces: the road to school, the classroom, the street, the theatre and the family circle. This is one of the strengths of both texts. They show that racism and social discrimination are not exceptional events but everyday practices through which social worlds reproduce their hierarchies.

Sebbar's memories of schooling in Algeria are marked by fear, humiliation and verbal aggression. Walking to the girls' school with her sisters resembles walking along a path of hostility. The boys insult them, mock their appearance and attack what they represent. Their words are in Arabic, the father's language that Sebbar does not master. This detail is essential. The language she desires reaches her first as aggression. Arabic is the secret song she longs for, but it is also the language in which she is wounded by children who read her as the daughter of a foreign woman.

The psychological effect of this experience is profound. The child does not merely suffer insults; she receives the social message that she is out of place. Her dress, ribbons, socks, curls and family status are interpreted as signs of privilege and Frenchness. The body becomes an archive that others read before she can speak. In this context, Sebbar's withdrawal into reading is not escapism in a trivial sense. Books become a protected space, a substitute community and a symbolic shelter. The library offers a world in which she can inhabit language without being immediately attacked by it.

This movement toward reading also anticipates the adult writer's vocation. Writing allows Sebbar to return to the scenes of childhood violence and to reorder them without denying their wound. The literary text becomes the place where silence is broken and where the child who did not understand the language of insult can later analyze its symbolic force. The passage from mute suffering to narrative reconstruction is a crucial ethical movement in Sebbar's work.

Karim's school experience is similarly marked by humiliation, though in a different social configuration. In the South London suburbs, school reproduces the violence of class and race. Karim recalls returning home covered in spit, snot, chalk and wood shavings; he also remembers a teacher who physically attacks him. The school, ideally imagined as a site of equality, becomes a space where racialized and classed children learn their assigned position. Karim's relation to education is shaped by this hierarchy. He spends time in woodwork because the institution assumes that he cannot deal with books. Such an assumption silently distributes futures: some children are prepared for intellectual confidence; others are directed toward manual or marginal roles.

The contrast with Sebbar is instructive. Sebbar belongs to a relatively privileged educational family; her parents are teachers, and education is accessible to her. Yet that very privilege becomes a source of hostility in the Algerian village. Karim, conversely, grows up in a lower-middle-class suburban environment where education appears remote, boring or not designed for him. The comparison shows that discrimination does not operate through one single social mechanism. Sebbar is attacked because she is perceived as too close to French privilege; Karim is marginalized because he is perceived as racially and socially insufficient for the cultural capital associated with the British elite.

The theatre episode in *The Buddha of Suburbia* develops this logic further. Karim is selected to play Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* because of his skin and ethnic appearance, not because of his artistic training. Shadwell's claim that Karim is Mowgli because he is dark-skinned, small and wiry reveals the exoticist gaze through which British theatre consumes racial difference. The role offers Karim visibility, but the price of visibility is stereotype. He is invited to embody a colonial fantasy of the primitive, agile, exotic boy. His discomfort with the costume and accent indicates that he understands the violence of the role, yet his ambition leads him to accept it.

This episode is central because it turns racialization into performance. Karim does not merely suffer stereotypes; he performs them before an audience. He becomes the medium through which British culture confirms its own image of the colonial other. Said's analysis of *Orientalism* is relevant here: the West produces the East as knowable, theatrical, sensual, inferior or primitive in order to stabilize its own superiority. Karim's ethnic casting reproduces this logic in the cultural industry. He is not asked to be a complex actor; he is asked to authenticate an already existing fantasy.

Pyke's later interest in Karim repeats the same pattern in a more sophisticated artistic context. Even when Karim moves toward innovative theatre, his ethnicity continues to determine his usefulness. He is invited to perform the immigrant, the Indian, the racialized body. His career risks becoming enslaved to the very difference he seeks to use strategically. Kureishi's irony lies in the fact that Karim's path to social mobility passes through the reproduction of stereotypes about people like himself and his family.

The broader implication is that racism operates through comparison. Sebbar and Karim are continually compared with a normative Self: the Algerian children who reject the daughter of a French woman, the French society that reads Sebbar's Arabic name and dark hair as foreign, the British white subjects who view Karim as a Paki, wog or exotic performer, the educated elites whose language makes him feel inferior. Miles and Brown's description of the dialectic of Self and Other helps clarify this mechanism. The characteristics attributed to the Other refract the imagined qualities of the Self. The Other is backward so the Self may be modern;

the Other is primitive so the Self may be civilized; the Other is excessive so the Self may appear balanced.

Sebbar and Kureishi reveal that such comparison is not innocent. It produces shame, anger, mimicry, silence and self-division. Immigrants and mixed-race children are not rejected because they are absolutely different; they are often rejected because they disturb the fantasy of a homogeneous national identity. Their very existence proves that nations, languages and cultures have always been entangled. *Racism* therefore attempts to restore a purity that history itself has already made impossible.

## 2.3. Linguistic Exile: Father's Language, Mother Tongue and Class Registers

Language is the most decisive difference between Sebbar's and Kureishi's identity crises. Sebbar's crisis is organized around the absence of Arabic; Karim's around the stratification of English. Both situations produce exile, but the form of exile differs. Sebbar is exiled from a paternal language she desires; Karim is exiled within the language he speaks because classed accents, registers and cultural references determine who belongs to the world of confidence and prestige.

Sebbar's passion for Arabic is inseparable from childhood scenes of listening. She hears conversations between her father, his mother, his sister and domestic figures, but the meaning remains inaccessible. The father translates between his mother and his wife, between Arabic and French, between two worlds that do not merge. Translation structures the family encounter, yet it also marks loss. What is translated is never the entire world of the language: gestures, tones, silences, jokes, forms of address, memory and affect remain partially untranslatable. The child witnesses communication but is not fully included in it.

The father's silence is therefore one of the central symbolic facts of *Arabic as a Secret Song*. He says little about his mother's house, his people, his language, his country and its histories. The possessive pronouns are revealing. Sebbar often says "his language" rather than "our language", "his country" rather than "our country". The grammar of possession records a failure of transmission. The paternal inheritance exists, but it has not become shared property. Arabic is near enough to wound and far enough to remain secret.

The title itself condenses this paradox. Arabic is a song because it is heard first through rhythm, sound and affect rather than semantic mastery. It is secret because it is withheld, inaccessible and associated with the father's silence. The secrecy does not simply come from Arabic as a language; it comes from the historical conditions that made the father choose French in the household, from colonial schooling, from the desire to protect, from assimilation and from the unspoken trauma that often makes family histories difficult to narrate. Lazali's account of colonial trauma helps explain why family memory may become

blocked. Colonial violence does not end with political independence; it continues as silence, shame, forbidden memory and broken transmission.

Writing becomes Sebbar's response to this linguistic exile. In *Lettres parisiennes*, writing is described as a suture that hides the wound. The metaphor is crucial: writing does not erase the injury; it covers it, holds it together and makes survival possible. Sebbar's French is not simply the mother's language or the colonizer's language. It becomes the language through which she tries to speak toward Arabic, toward the father, toward Algeria and toward the absent memory that French cannot entirely recover. Her writing is therefore haunted by the language it cannot possess.

Kureishi's linguistic problem is different. Karim does not experience Urdu or Punjabi as a lost object of desire in the same way Sebbar experiences Arabic. He is primarily an English-speaking subject. Yet English is not homogeneous. It is divided by class, education and cultural capital. When Karim encounters Eleanor's circle, he discovers a world where people speak of books, art, theatre, architecture and travel with an ease he finds both attractive and humiliating. Their language appears to him as "capital", a term that resonates strongly with Bourdieu's sociology. Language does not merely communicate; it grants access, authority and legitimacy.

Karim's statement that language is the currency capable of buying the best the world can offer is one of the most important reflections in the novel. He realizes that his English is not enough. He speaks the national language, but he does not command the socially consecrated version of that language. His lack is not grammar alone; it is cultural confidence, references, tone and habitus. In this sense, Kureishi displaces the question of linguistic exile from the opposition between colonial and native language to an internal division within English itself. One can be exiled in one's own language when that language is stratified by class.

This distinction also clarifies the two paternal figures. Sebbar blames her father for not transmitting Arabic. Karim does not primarily blame Haroon for not teaching him a South Asian language; he blames him, at certain moments, for not giving him a usable relation to an Indian past. Haroon's own trajectory is ambivalent. He assimilates into English life but later performs a stylized interest in Buddhism, Sufism, Confucianism and Zen for a white English audience. He becomes, in a sense, a mediator of exotic spirituality, turning the East into a consumable sign within suburbia.

Language, in both texts, is inseparable from power. It determines who can speak without explanation, who must spell a name, who needs translation, who is mocked for an accent, who is imagined as authentic and who is denied intellectual legitimacy. For Sebbar, linguistic exile is the deprivation of the father's language and the impossibility of fully inheriting Algerian memory. For Karim, linguistic exile is the recognition that English itself contains gates guarded by class

and cultural capital. In both cases, language is not only a tool of expression; it is a map of belonging and exclusion.

# 3. Identity Crisis and Comparative Synthesis

## 3.1. Paternal Silence and the Return of Disavowed Genealogies

Sebbar's identity crisis is stated with striking clarity when she asks where she can be found: girl or boy, on the side of the colonized or on the side of power. The question is fragmented because the identity it seeks to name is fragmented. It includes gender, colonial history, family division and symbolic affiliation. Sebbar's position as the daughter of the colonized father and the colonizer mother does not produce a simple synthesis; it creates an ethical impossibility. To choose one side would be to deny one parent. To refuse the choice is to remain divided.

This scene resonates with other Franco-Algerian texts, notably Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué*, where the narrator confronts the impossibility of stable identification between Algerian and French, boy and girl, here and elsewhere. The intertextual resonance indicates that Sebbar's crisis is not an isolated autobiographical fact. It belongs to a wider corpus of postcolonial writing in which mixed identity appears not as a fashionable hybridity but as a painful structure of exposure. The subject is repeatedly asked to belong clearly to one side, even when history has made such clarity impossible.

Memmi's account of the colonized subject caught between two problematic identifications is useful here, but Sebbar's case complicates it. She is not simply the colonized subject tempted by the colonizer's values; she is genealogically connected to both sides. The colonial divide traverses her family. The father is associated with the colonized and with the absent Arabic language; the mother with French, protection and enclosure in the maternal language. The subject is therefore not located outside the binary; she is produced inside its most intimate contradiction.

Karim's crisis is formulated differently. He is "almost" English, and this almostness defines the novel. He is not torn between two territorial homelands in the same way as Sebbar. His uprooting is internal to Britain. He belongs to the suburbs and to English youth culture, yet he is racialized as foreign. Trimm's observation that the second generation prefigures a broader unsettled identity is particularly relevant: Karim's uncertainty does not simply reflect his family background; it exposes the instability of Britain itself after empire. The empire returns home through the bodies of those whom the nation tries to treat as external.

The father's role in both texts is decisive. Sebbar writes after the father's death, as if the text were an extended conversation that could not occur during his life. The father's silence becomes both accusation and mystery. Why did he not transmit Arabic? Was it assimilation, protection, shame, trauma, colonial pressure,

marital compromise or the ordinary gendered silence of fathers in that historical context? The text does not resolve the question. It transforms it into a literary and ethical inquiry.

Haroon, in Kureishi's novel, is less silent but equally ambivalent. He is an immigrant father who both adapts to England and performs an exoticized Eastern spirituality. He does not return to India; he does not transmit a stable South Asian inheritance; yet his presence continually reminds Karim that Englishness is incomplete without the imperial histories it has tried to forget. Haroon's transformation into a suburban Buddha is comic, but it is also symptomatic. It shows how postcolonial origins can be theatricalized for white desire and how the father himself may participate in that performance.

Religion adds another layer to the identity crisis. Sebbar's denial of any relation to Islam may be understood as a defensive response to discrimination and as a symptom of the colonial gaze through which identity is externally defined. Karim's relation to Islam and to South Asian community appears most powerfully during Anwar's funeral. Watching men read from the Qur'an, he experiences them as strange and yet as his people. The scene produces shame, recognition and incompleteness. He understands that he has spent his life denying or avoiding a part of himself, and that this denial has aligned him, at least partially, with the white gaze that wanted Indians to become like them.

This moment illustrates Fanon's description of the inferiorized subject who, after deculturation and alienation, returns with passionate attachment to the culture previously abandoned or despised. Karim does not suddenly become whole, nor does he gain an authentic Indian identity ready-made. What he discovers is the absence itself: a missing half, a genealogy not lived but still operative. His desire for the "additional personality bonus of an Indian past" is ironic, but the irony does not cancel the seriousness of the longing. He must create the past because it was not transmitted to him in a usable form.

Sebbar and Karim therefore share a structure of belatedness. They come after the loss. The language, the country, the memory or the communal affiliation is already fractured by the time they become capable of asking for it. Their writing and narration do not restore an original identity; they expose the impossibility of such restoration. What remains possible is a critical identity: an identity conscious of its fractures, capable of reading the history that produced them and unwilling to accept the categories through which racism and colonial memory seek to define it.

The identity crisis in both works is consequently unavoidable not because mixed origins naturally produce confusion, but because colonial and postcolonial societies impose mutually exclusive categories on subjects whose lives disprove those categories. Sebbar and Kureishi show that hybridity is not a neutral celebration of mixture. It is a lived negotiation under unequal conditions. It may

produce creativity, irony and narrative freedom, but it also produces loss, silence, shame and the permanent labour of self-translation.

## 3.2. From Hybrid Biography to Critical Knowledge

The comparative value of Sebbar and Kureishi lies in the fact that both writers transform biographical fracture into critical knowledge. Their texts do not present mixed origin as a decorative motif, nor do they reduce it to a fashionable celebration of hybridity. They insist, instead, on the costs of living in a body and a language that are read through inherited colonial categories. Hybridity becomes meaningful only when it is returned to the historical asymmetry that produced it. In Sebbar, the asymmetry is visible in the relation between French and Arabic, between the mother's linguistic enclosure and the father's withheld language. In Kureishi, it is visible in the relation between British national belonging and racialized exclusion, between English as native language and English as classed capital.

This difference explains why the two works should not be placed under a vague rubric of 'identity crisis' without further qualification. Sebbar's crisis is genealogical and linguistic: she inherits a paternal line whose language has not been transmitted to her, and she writes in order to approach the very absence that constitutes her. Kureishi's crisis is civic, racial and performative: Karim belongs to Britain in the everyday sense, yet he is repeatedly compelled to perform or explain the difference that Britain projects onto him. The comparison therefore reveals two modalities of postcolonial subjectivation: one organized by the wound of non-transmission, the other by the spectacle of racial visibility.

The name, the school and the language are the three principal institutions through which this subjectivation is produced. The name precedes speech: it introduces the subject into a network of assumptions. The school disciplines bodies and distributes expectations: it tells children where they are likely to belong before they have chosen a future. Language, finally, decides whether the subject may inhabit memory, culture and class with ease or whether he or she must stand at the threshold, translating, imitating, spelling, explaining or remaining silent. These three institutions are ordinary, but their ordinariness is precisely what makes them powerful. They transform colonial history into daily experience.

Sebbar's childhood scenes in Algeria and Karim's suburban experiences in London show that racism is not limited to explicit doctrine. It is also a grammar of perception. It is a way of reading hair, skin, clothes, accent, name, school trajectory and family arrangement. Sebbar's curls, socks and ribbons become signs of foreign privilege in the eyes of Algerian boys. Karim's skin and body become signs of theatrical authenticity for Shadwell. In both cases, the subject is not seen first as a complex person but as an emblem. The social gaze reduces the individual to a sign of a group, a history or a stereotype.

The texts also show that the racialized subject may internalize the gaze that wounds him or her. Sebbar's denial of religious affiliation can be read as a defensive attempt to escape the categories imposed upon her. Karim's discomfort before the Indians at Anwar's funeral reveals that he has partially adopted the white gaze through which Indians appear strange, excessive or embarrassing. This internalization is one of the most damaging effects of colonial and racial hierarchy. It does not merely exclude the subject from outside; it installs the logic of exclusion within the subject's own perception.

Yet neither Sebbar nor Kureishi leaves the reader within a closed economy of victimhood. Their writing converts injury into analysis. Sebbar's return to the father through memory and address reopens the question of Arabic without pretending to master it. Kureishi's comic irony exposes the absurdity of British racial and class performances without denying the pain they produce. Both authors therefore practice a form of literary counter-interpellation: they take the categories imposed on them - Arab, French, English, Indian, immigrant, mixed, exotic, almost - and transform them into objects of critique.

This is why the selected works remain highly relevant for contemporary debates on postcolonial Europe. They show that national identity is not a neutral container into which individuals are included or excluded. It is a narrative and institutional construction maintained through language, memory, schooling, race and class. The mixed-race or postcolonial subject is troubling because he or she exposes the fiction of national purity. Sebbar and Kureishi demonstrate that Europe is not external to Algeria, Pakistan or India; Europe is historically entangled with them. The postcolonial subject does not arrive from outside European history. He or she is one of the returns of that history.

A further difference concerns narrative tone. Sebbar's prose tends toward recollection, elegy and address; it often returns to the father as to an absent interlocutor. The temporality is retrospective and reparative: the adult writer revisits the child's wound, not to abolish it, but to understand the conditions that made it possible. Kureishi's narrative, by contrast, is driven by irony, theatricality and movement. Karim's voice is quick, irreverent and self-exposing. The novel does not mourn loss in the same register; it stages compromise, desire, performance and opportunism. Yet both tones serve a comparable critical function: they prevent the postcolonial subject from being reduced to a silent victim.

The gendered dimension of the comparison also deserves emphasis. Sebbar's relation to language is mediated by the mother's enclosure and the father's silence. The daughter is contained within the maternal French language while being excluded from the paternal Arabic language. Her identity crisis therefore intersects with gendered access to family memory: women's voices are heard in Arabic, but the daughter is not fully admitted into their semantic world. Karim's crisis, conversely, is shaped by masculinity, sexual exploration and the pressure to prove

himself within classed and racialized spaces. The theatre, the street and the sexual field become places where masculine identity is tested and performed. The two works thus show that postcolonial identity is never only national or racial; it is also gendered.

Memory functions differently as well. In Sebbar, memory is often an archive with missing pages. It contains images, sounds and gestures, but it lacks linguistic access. The writer's task is to make absence legible without falsely filling it. In Kureishi, memory is less about a lost language than about a disavowed genealogy. Karim must realize that what he imagined as external or strange is part of his own history. The funeral scene is therefore not simply a return to religion or community; it is an epistemological shock. He discovers that the people he has kept at a distance are also the mirror in which his own incompleteness appears.

The role of class in Kureishi allows the comparison to avoid an overly culturalist model of identity. *Racism* in the novel is inseparable from class hierarchy. Karim's sense of inferiority before educated speech, his desire for cultural access and his theatrical ambitions demonstrate that racialized subjects do not merely seek recognition as ethnic minorities; they also seek entry into social worlds structured by economic and cultural privilege. Sebbar's case, by contrast, shows that privilege does not cancel racialization. Her family's educational status does not protect her from violence; it can even intensify hostility because it is read as evidence of proximity to the colonizer. Class therefore modifies racialization without abolishing it.

These observations also clarify the ethical stakes of comparison. To compare Algeria/France with India-Pakistan/Britain is not to erase the singularity of each colonial formation. French settler colonialism in Algeria, with its assimilationist language politics and its violence against historical memory, cannot be simply equated with the British imperial structure in South Asia and its post-Partition diaspora. The value of comparison lies elsewhere: it shows how different imperial histories generate related forms of symbolic injury. The mechanisms vary, but the effects often converge around shame, conditional belonging, linguistic hierarchy and the need to narrate oneself against imposed categories.

From this perspective, the two works also invite a reconsideration of the term 'home'. Home is not merely a place of origin or residence. For Sebbar, Algeria is home and not home, because it is the father's land but not the daughter's fully inherited language. France is home and not home, because it is the maternal language and the place of adult life, yet it remains marked by colonial memory and racial perception. For Karim, England is home by birth and habit, but its social gaze continually renders him partial. Home becomes a contested narrative rather than a stable location.

The critical contribution of this comparison, therefore, is to move beyond a simple description of alienation. Alienation is present, but it is not the endpoint.

The endpoint is an understanding of how alienation is produced, repeated and sometimes transformed. Sebbar's linguistic wound and Karim's racialized almostness become methods of reading the social world. Through them, the reader learns that identity is not found once and for all; it is negotiated in relation to the names one receives, the languages one loses, the roles one performs and the histories one is allowed or forbidden to inherit.

## Conclusion

The comparison between Leïla Sebbar's *Arabic as a Secret Song* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* reveals a profound convergence between two distinct postcolonial situations. Sebbar writes from the Franco-Algerian wound of colonial language, paternal silence and untransmitted memory. Kureishi writes from the British afterlife of empire, in which South Asian descent is racialized within the very society that claims the subject as native-born. Their historical contexts are not identical, but both works demonstrate that identity is produced through conflictual relations between name, body, language, class and memory.

The study has shown that the name functions as a privileged scene of racialization. Sebbar's Arabic name marks her as connected to a paternal world that remains inaccessible; Haroon's and Amar's Anglicized names reveal the pressure to soften or erase ethnic difference in Britain. Schooling and social life further dramatize the everyday violence of othering: Sebbar's path to school and Karim's suburban education expose the ways children learn the hierarchies of race, class and culture before they can fully conceptualize them. Theatre, in Kureishi, extends this violence into the cultural marketplace, where ethnic identity becomes both opportunity and trap.

Language is the deepest site of fracture. Sebbar's exile is organized around the Arabic she hears but does not understand, the paternal language that remains a secret song. Karim's exile is internal to English: he speaks the national language, yet he lacks the classed and cultural capital that would grant him effortless legitimacy. In both cases, language is not merely communication; it is inheritance, memory, access and power. The father, finally, appears as the figure through whom interrupted transmission becomes visible. Sebbar's father withholds or fails to transmit Arabic; Haroon transmits an ambivalent, theatricalized relation to South Asian ancestry.

The comparative reading also demonstrates that literary narrative is an irreplaceable mode of knowledge for postcolonial studies. It gives access not only to historical facts but to the intimate textures through which history is felt: shame before a name, fear on a school path, discomfort before a role, anger before classed speech, nostalgia for a language never possessed and guilt before a community kept at a distance. Such affects are not secondary to politics; they are one of the ways politics survives inside subjectivity.

Sebbar and Kureishi therefore do not merely describe identity crises; they theorize them narratively. They show that the postcolonial subject is not divided by essence but by history, not confused by nature but fractured by systems of classification that demand impossible choices. Their works make visible the symbolic mechanisms through which Europe continues to produce the immigrant, the mixed-race child and the racialized citizen as figures of incomplete belonging. Yet their writing also transforms fracture into critical knowledge. By narrating the wound, both authors refuse the silence that made the wound possible.

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