

“Going somewhere”
The Nomad and the Tourist in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal’s *Tourism*

Éva Pataki
University of Debrecen
vicapataki@yahoo.com

Abstract

In *Nomadic Subjects*, Rosi Braidotti reinterprets Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of nomadism and creates the feminist nomadic subject, who, unlike the migrant, is neither homeless nor directionless, but whose very existence is about resisting and transgressing dominant views on subjectivity, and about “the act of going, regardless of the destination”. Proceeding from their respective concepts of nomadism (viewed from the aspects of both race and gender), as well as John Urry’s interpretation of tourism in *The Tourist Gaze*, my paper focuses on the immigrant as a nomadic subject and as the figure of the tourist – tourism proving to be yet another aspect of immigrant identity, a subjectivity both drawing on and complementing Braidotti’s notion of the nomad. The analysis of the three novels highlights how tourism and nomadism inhabit and influence the consciousness of fluid identities, and reveals that tourism intersects and at the same time contradicts and transcends nomadism.

Keywords: Hanif Kureishi, identity, Monica Ali, nomadism, simulacrum, tourism

In her introduction to *Nomadic Subjects*, Rosi Braidotti compares and contrasts the figure of the migrant and the nomad. She highlights their shared aspects of movement, fluid identity, and crossing boundaries but at the same time emphasises the migrant’s in-betweenness, homelessness, and lack of clear destination in contrast to the nomad, who is neither homeless, nor directionless, whose identity may be seen as resisting and transgressing the dominant views on subjectivity, and is characterised by “the act of going, regardless of the destination” (23). Braidotti reinterprets Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of nomadism and creates the feminist nomadic subject as “an epistemological and political entity to be defined and affirmed by women in the confrontation of their multiple differences of class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference” (4). Drawing upon their respective concepts of nomadism, and through the analysis of the three novels, my paper will focus on the immigrant both as a nomadic subject and, generated by my reading of Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal’s *Tourism* (2006), as the figure of *the tourist*, which may be seen as yet another aspect of immigrant identity – a subjectivity both taking off from and complementing Braidotti’s notion of the nomad.

While tourism is not gender-specific, Braidotti’s nomad is definitely a female subject with a “desire to suspend all attachment to established discourses” (18). Not always literally moving but rather perpetually becoming, the female nomad trespasses the boundaries set up by patriarchy, turning from a “category of oppression into a category of empowerment” (Draga Alexandru). The protagonist of *Brick Lane* (2004), for example, goes through a process of emancipation and an evolution to nomadic identity during the course of the novel.

Nazneen, the „unspoilt girl” (Ali 22) from her Bangladeshi village is sent to England to marry the immigrant Chanu, that is to be an obedient Muslim wife who serves her husband

and brings up their children. Her life is restricted to her wifely duties and her living space is confined to the desolate Bengali neighbourhood of Tower Hamlets, a little Dhaka in the heart of London, where she can get by without speaking English or making any contact with “the natives” and their culture.

It is during her pregnancy that Nazneen starts to develop a nomadic identity: for the first time, she crosses the boundaries, leaves the house without her husband, mapping the neighbourhood in her directionless wandering. After the birth of her daughters Nazneen gradually acquires English, she starts working, starts a love affair with a young Bengali, Karim, and finds in herself the strength to start a new life – for a second time. In the end, she chooses neither to return to Bangladesh with her husband, nor to marry Karim - after years of struggling to belong, she suddenly feels that she belongs nowhere, and that she has let fate and men control her life for too long: “Suddenly her entire being lit up with anger. *I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one*” (Ali 405). Thus, Nazneen’s initial double subaltern identity as an ethnic and gendered “other” transforms into a multiple nomadic subjectivity; she becomes an emancipated woman who makes her own choices, who has learned “to adapt to a multicultural context” (Hussain 95) and to accept her female agency.

Meanwhile, Chanu goes through a process of de-subjectivization. His Muslim male superiority is considerably undermined when Nazneen starts working and thus making money for the family instead of him; as she is discovering her own strength and the fact that there is life outside her home and her marriage, his control over her is gradually disappearing. Chanu’s “defeat” is even more humiliating and disappointing because to him Nazneen was initially what Baudrillard calls a *simulacrum*, the image of the perfect submissive wife, trapped by her traditional upbringing and appearance. Similarly, he perceives England as a simulacrum of the sophisticated and welcoming mother country of grand financial opportunities. Apparently, Chanu holds on tight to both of these simulacra, he consciously refuses to discover “the real” behind them, and it is only after a series of harsh confrontations (Nazneen’s job, affair, and refusal to return to Bangladesh with him, as well as his failure as an educated man, the breadwinner, and superiority to his family) that he finally lets go of the simulacra and simulation, left with bleak reality and nothing to hold on to.

Chanu’s adherence to the simulacrum of England as “the promised land” is characteristic of South Asians migrating in hope of financial gain and being able to return home as “a success” (Ali 35). Drawing on John Urry’s characterisation of the tourist, I consider Chanu to be a *migrant-tourist*: his departure is merely “a limited breaking with established routines and practices” (Urry 2), his destination is chosen because “there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures” (Urry 3) and existential security, and his intention is to return home in a relatively short time. Furthermore, Chanu as a *migrant-tourist* sees merely the simulacra of his surroundings; he does not experience reality directly, but through what Boorstin calls “pseudo-events” (qtd. in Urry 7): living in Tower Hamlets, Chanu is isolated from the local people and culture, finds pleasures in his phantasmatic version of inauthentic Englishness while clinging to his traditional customs in terms of food, clothing, and entertainment.

At one point in the novel, thirty years after his arrival in London, Chanu takes his family on a sightseeing tour, admitting: “Now that we are going home, I have become a tourist” (Ali 290). He makes careful preparations for the overall “tourist-experience”: he buys a pair of shorts, fills his pockets with “a compass, guidebook, binoculars, bottled water,

maps, and two types of disposable camera" (Ali 289); he makes a list of tourist attractions, systematised according to historical significance; asks a passer-by to take a picture of them in front of Buckingham Palace; and has a picnic of traditional Bengali food on the lawn of St. James Park. Ironically, he applies the perfect mimicry of the tourist, whereas all along it is his Englishness that has been mimicry, and being a tourist his natural identity.

While in Ali's novel I have associated women with nomadism and first generation immigrant men with *migrant-tourism*, in the case of second generation immigrants, in other British Asian novels, I find that the figure of the nomad and *the tourist* may not only intersect but also merge or alternate, partly due to their shared features. Karim, the protagonist of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), exists in permanent fluidity; he is on the move from adolescence to young adulthood, from one home to another, shifting between identities and locations. He is a hybrid subject, both in terms of identity formation and identity performance: "an Englishman born and bred, almost", the embodiment of "the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not" (Kureishi 3), a chameleon who "reinvents and repositions himself as black or white, Asian or cockney, as the situation suits him" (Procter 153). In a Braidottian sense, Karim is also a nomad, transgressing the borders of sexuality, race, and social roles, repeatedly deconstructing and reconstructing his own identity, being in constant mental and spatial movement. Furthermore, his trajectories within London, between the suburbs and the city, make him a nomad in the Deleuzian sense as well: he "has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points" (Deleuze and Guattari 283); and because the nomad's path is in-between two points, Karim's life, like "[t]he life of the nomad [,] is the intermezzo" (Deleuze and Guattari 284). Criss-crossing London, claiming to be "going somewhere" (Kureishi 3), Karim is on the road most of the time, in a perpetual nomadic movement between points, only temporarily settling at various locations (his mother's house in Bromley, his father's place in West-Kensington, or in Penge at his cousin's).

Nevertheless, Karim is neither homeless, nor carrying his home with him: wherever he is, he is longing for another place, his "other" home, which, once he gets as far as New York, turns out to be London itself. Thus, Karim displays a significant feature of the migrant-tourist: travelling for the sake of pleasure, in hope of finding a better place than the one he departed from, but eventually returning to the starting point. Moreover, at different locations Karim impersonates or mimics not only in order to survive, but to play up and play on his identity; he performs different identities i.e., unlike Braidotti's nomad, he avoids confrontation with social constraints and expectations, and therefore applies *locational mimicry*, plays the "when-in-Rome game" of the classic tourist. By the end of the novel, Karim returns home, back to London and his family; although his journey as a tourist comes to an end, he does not settle in a fixed mode of existence, his free spirited, transgressive, dynamic nomadism remains.

In Dhaliwal's *Tourism* the aspiring writer Puppy is a similarly transgressive character, who breaks laws and crosses boundaries, even the one between nomadism and tourism. At the beginning of the novel, Puppy appears to be a tourist in the original sense of the word, touring the big European cities, enjoying his holiday and breaking away from his everyday life. However, he is "penniless and indifferent" (Dhaliwal 8), lacking the inspiration to write anything other than his memories. His story portrays him as a tourist in his own home, someone who has no desire to return but to move on and up, to travel in search of and to get lost in pleasure. However, the pursuit and attainment of pleasure does not satisfy Puppy but keeps him in motion, thus he does not – cannot – feel the need to become attached to

any person or location. Puppy's peregrinations within and outside London are a classic case of a certain conception of tourism: living in a city but not inhabiting it, adjusting to society but not being fully integrated, moving in-between two locations but never really arriving. Consequently, he is both in the stasis of failure and in constant spacial mobility, watching his life through a frame: the window of a taxi or the lenses of expensive sunglasses; as he says, "I'm a tourist...I just look at the view" (Dhaliwal 85).

Puppy is not a *migrant tourist*; his tourist identity can be best characterised based on Feifer's concept of the "post-tourist" (qtd. in Urry 100): he perceives London in terms of its sights and the entertainment it has to offer; to avoid boredom, he "delights in the multitude of choices" and "of games that can be played" (Urry 100). Not willing to unveil his tourist identity, he engages in a constant identity performance, applies locational mimicry, only to realise that his "jumble of accents: cockney enunciation and occasional West Indian inflection [which] overlaid a quiet drone from the Punjab" (Dhaliwal 189) will always give him away. As Puppy comes to understand that it is not only he who is aware of his outsider status and tourist identity, but the people around him as well, he decides not to look for the authentic experience any more, to discard "imaginative hedonism" (Campbell qtd. in Urry 13). Getting off the rollercoaster of ambition and failure, pleasure and disillusionment, passion and indifference, Puppy does what he knows best: he engages in tourism, sets off on a journey, along which, however, he discovers a so far hidden aspect of his identity: his nomadism.

According to Ann J. Cahill, when the Braidottian nomad transgresses boundaries, this does not leave her/him unmarked: "... boundaries situate the nomadic subject in particular locations, determine ... the kinds of actions and behaviours that a subject can undertake, and shape ... the types of interactions that subjects can have with each other" (58). Having travelled both physically and metaphorically, transgressing both social and spatial boundaries, as well as those of the self, Puppy eventually comes to terms with his fluid identity. "At home" in London he was a *tourist*, travelling to fulfil his elemental desires; as a tourist abroad, he embarks on a nomadic journey, relinquishing "all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity" yet embracing "the desire for an identity made of transitions" (Braidotti 22).

While Braidotti's nomadic subject was inspired by the actual experience of nomadism, my interpretation of *the tourist*, as the above examples have shown, derives yet also deviates from the theoretical understanding of tourism as "[t]he temporary movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live and work and their leisure activities during the stay at their destinations" (O'Dell qtd. in Beaver 313). In my theory, spatial movement is not the prerequisite of *tourism* – being a *tourist* is more of a state of mind and a mode of living. In this respect, *the tourist* is a lazy nomad: s/he is not necessarily on the move; s/he may stay in one location, city or country for a lifetime, yet never develops any attachment, never settles or creates a real home. Nevertheless, *the tourist* is not homeless; s/he has not lost his/her home but opts for temporary accommodation instead. Similarly to the nomad, *the tourist* favours transition and despises fixity, has a trenchant sense of territory but no possessiveness about it, can impersonate or mimic but resists assimilation. On the other hand, while for the nomad a predetermined destination is irrelevant, *the tourist's* ultimate destination is pleasure (comfort, happiness or personal gain); the nomad "makes those necessary situated connections that can help her/him to survive" (33), whereas *the tourist* tends to (ab)use connections for her/his own pleasure or well-being; in contrast to the nomad's resistance to any kind of fixity, the tourist primarily resists belonging to either different locations or people.

Through the analysis of the three novels, I have come to the conclusion that *tourism* intersects, and at the same time contradicts and transcends nomadism. Both concepts can characterise the immigrant identity, but they are not necessarily inherent features of all immigrants. *Tourism* and nomadism are innate attributes of individuals, activated and intensified by social and spatial circumstances, embodied in the act of trespassing and going, experiencing and growing; the consciousness of fluid identities.

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