

**SOMETHING'S BURNING (OUT)
IN MONICA ALI'S *IN THE KITCHEN*:
GABRIEL'S JOURNEY FROM ACHIEVEMENT-SUBJECT
TO *HOMO SACER* AND BEYOND**

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Abstract: *This paper reads Monica Ali's 2009 novel In the Kitchen from the perspective of Byung-Chul Han's philosophy of the burnout society and Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer, focusing on the protagonist Gabriel Lightfoot, an ambitious London chef. Gabriel, who starts out, in Han's terms, as an achievement-subject par excellence is profoundly changed by his encounters with London's exploitative underworld.*

Keywords: *achievement subject, burnout society, disciplinary society, homo sacer*

1. Introduction

Monica Ali's novels, including her highly acclaimed *Brick Lane*, deal with the transformation of contemporary British life and identity in the face of a changing, increasingly hybrid and globalised social milieu (Nyman 2011: 92). These themes, including globalised neoliberalism, human trafficking and irregular migration, are also central to her 2009 novel *In the Kitchen*, although its protagonist Gabriel Lightfoot (Gabe), in contrast to *Brick Lane*'s protagonist Nazneen, is a "white, English, middle-class character" with an arguably "Eurocentric and androcentric perspective" (Battisti and Fiorato 2018). Gabriel, originally from the declining Northern English mill town of Blantwhistle, is executive chef at the Imperial Hotel, which can be understood as a microcosm of a contemporary globalised, neoliberal London. Indeed, it resembles a kind of 21st century "upstairs, downstairs", where the largely immigrant, "rag-tag" kitchen staff (Caporale-Bizzini 2020: 587) serve a rich elite in the hotel's expensive restaurant (Marino 2019: 29).

In this context, this paper reads the ambitious Gabriel, who aims to establish his own restaurant, as an "achievement-subject" from the perspective of philosopher Byung-Chul Han's (2016) thesis of the "burnout society". Han argues that the exploitative Foucauldian "disciplinary-society" has been replaced by a "performance-society", whose "achievement subjects" no longer work for or are exploited by an Other. The performance-society, however, is characterised by "egotism, atomization and narcissism" (Han 2021), all characteristics which are attributed to Gabe or which he notes are rife in contemporary London. As discussed further below, while contemporary achievement-subjects perceive themselves as free, they actually

exploit themselves, as they are encouraged to work ever-harder in their drive to fulfil their ambitions, thus subjecting themselves to neurological diseases such as burnout, ADHD or depression (Han 2016).

Here, Han avails himself of Giorgio Agamben's (1998) well-known concept of *homo sacer*, a figure of bare life, who is simultaneously subject to the law, but bereft of its protection. Unlike Agamben, however, Han argues that in contemporary society we are all reduced to bare life not by the sovereign state of exception, but rather by our own drive to succeed, so that "it is not just the people at the margins or in a state of exception – that is, the excluded – but all of us, without exception, who are *homines sacri*" (Han 2016: 19).

Overworked, exhausted and burning-out, Gabriel's life changes after the hotel porter Yuri, an irregular migrant, is found dead in the hotel basement, where he had been living. As Gabe later recalls; "When he looked back, he felt that the death of the Ukrainian was the point at which things began to fall apart ... it was the following day on which, if a life can be said to have a turning point, his own began to spin" (Ali 2010: 9). Thus, *In the Kitchen* opens in the manner of a detective novel, as Gabe seeks to discover the mystery behind Yuri's death, yet develops into a novel of social critique, as he gradually becomes aware of the hotel's connection with London's dark underbelly of undocumented migrants and human trafficking (Caporale-Bizzini 2020: 587). Importantly, then, as this paper seeks to argue, Ali's London is not merely a performance-society, populated by auto-exploiting achievement-subjects; it is a city where irregular migrants are very much exploited, indeed reduced to bare, life by others.

2. Han: The burnout society and the autopoiesis of bare life

Byung-Chul Han (2016: 8) depicts contemporary neoliberal society as an "achievement" or "burnout" society characterised by "fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories". replacing Foucault's "disciplinary" society of "hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories" (ibid.) inhabited by "obedience-subjects", who were submitted to exploitation, or at least to orders, by an Other (Pari-Bedoya *et al* 2021). For Han (2016: 1), the disciplinary society was a society of *negativity*, characterised by an *immunitary* paradigm, which sought to distinguish clearly "between inside and outside, friend and foe, self and other".

Contemporary globalised neoliberal society, by contrast, is no longer a society of negativity in Han's view; it is rather one of positivity, where the Other no longer provokes an immunoreaction, so that it is no longer perceived as a threat or an enemy but simply as a difference which is softly integrated or tolerated (Han 2016: 3). Thus, even immigrants are no longer considered threatening immunological Others, or foreigners "in the strong sense" (idem: 2-3). For Han (2018: 7), therefore, the time of "the Other is over. The Other as a secret, the Other as a temptation, the Other as eros, the Other as desire, the Other as hell and the Other as pain disappear". The biopolitical work of contemporary philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben (1998) or Roberto Esposito (2011) also belongs to this immunitary paradigm and is, therefore,

passé in Han's opinion. Han (2016: 48) argues, for instance, that Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* is outdated, in that it belongs to the "scheme of negativity" of the past, as "perpetrators and victims, sovereign and *homo sacer* are clearly distinguished – and topologically too".

Building on the ancient Greek distinction between *zoe* (natural life) and *bios* (political life), Agamben (1998: 109) adds a third term, bare life (*nuda vita*). While bare life is devoid of political rights, it differs from *zoe* in that it is inscribed in the political realm, so that bare life is "outside but yet belonging" to the political order (Prozorov 2014: 95; Mills 2017: 45). In order to illustrate his concept of bare life, Agamben refers to the archaic Roman legal figure of *homo sacer*; a person declared *sacer*, usually after committing a crime, could not be sacrificed to the gods, yet could be killed with impunity.

For Agamben, then, bare life is intimately connected to the sovereign exception, so that:

The inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. (Agamben 1998: 6)

Despite its ancient origins, Agamben views bare life as increasingly characteristic of contemporary political life, including contemporary democracies as well as totalitarian states. As, in Agamben's (1998: 12) view, the sovereign state of exception increasingly becomes the rule, bare life has thus become almost ubiquitous, so that "exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction".

In Han's (2017: 20) view, however, both sovereign power and disciplinary power are broadly similar, in that they pursue allo-exploitation, which brings forth the obedience-subject, in contrast to the contemporary neoliberal performance or achievement-subject. In the contemporary performance-society, by contrast, the self, now liberated from dealings with alterity, grows in what Han terms *sameness* or *the own*, in a narcissistic fashion (Mora-Fandos 2017: 344). In this context, Han argues that biopolitics has been replaced by psychopolitics, which focuses on mental and psychological flexibility rather than on the control of bodies, as "the body no longer represents a central force of production as it formerly did in biopolitical, disciplinary society" (Han 2017: 25). For Han (2017: 14), contemporary psychopolitics is far more efficient than the commandments and injunctions of the disciplinary society, as psychopolitics "makes sure that people subordinate themselves to power on their own". This results in a society where "may-not" or "should" has been replaced by "can", and which creates the "achievement-subject" who "stand free of any external instance of domination forcing it to work, much less exploiting it" (Han 2016: 11). Thus, the achievement-subject follows the dictates of freedom, pleasure, and inclination rather than obligation, and aims to be a "self-starting entrepreneur" rather than working for the "commanding Other" (Han 2016: 38).

The achievement-subject's supposed freedom is, however, a paradoxical "compulsive freedom" (idem: 11), where the subject is self-compelled towards constant achievement and action in the form of work, movement, consumption,

self-improvement or entrepreneurship. Thus, this is an illusory freedom, as, for Han (2017: 3), true freedom can only be found in ‘a fruitful relationship – when being with others brings happiness’ and the achievement-society, which turns people into “autistic performance-machines” has rendered meaningful relationships impossible (Han 2016: 22). Therefore, this excess of positivity resulting from a culture of “overproduction, overachievement, and overcommunication” (idem: 3) can, like an excess of negativity, be harmful, as the constant pressure to succeed results in an array of neurological ailments (ibid.), including widespread anxiety, restlessness, exhaustion and depression.

This is, then, a situation of self-exploitation, where “freedom and [self] constraint coincide” (idem: 11), so that the achievement-subject embodies the Nietzschean “last man,” who does nothing but work (idem: 10). Thus, for Han, far from being *homo liber*, the contemporary achievement-subject only succeeds in making a *homo sacer* of himself: “The sovereign of achievement society is simultaneously his own homo sacer, by this paradoxical logic, sovereign and homo sacer still generate each other in achievement society” (idem: 49).

3. Homines sacri in the kitchen: Gabe Lightfoot as “achievement subject”

In the Kitchen is (mostly) set in a London that, at least on the surface, appears to correspond to Han’s 21st century performance society. As Gabe notes, London is a place of constant work and burning ambition: rather than being the brains or the heart of the country, it “was all belly, its looping, intestinal streets constantly at work, digesting, absorbing, excreting, fuelling and refuelling” (Ali 2009: 309). It is a city where people “want to live like celebrities ...because we’re worth it, as the ads say” (idem: 316), and where no-one interferes in, or even notices, their neighbours’ business (idem: 300). It is also a multicultural city seemingly devoid of negativity in Han’s terms, where a myriad of different ethnicities, cultures and races apparently live together in relative harmony, underscored by a British identity which has become “a marketplace of ideas and values and cultures and none of them are privileged over the rest” (idem: 364). However, London’s isolated, overworked inhabitants also seem to resemble Han’s “autistic performance-machines” (Han 2016: 22); as Gabe suggests, “the city bound everyone together or kept them all equally apart. Or maybe it didn’t, but at least everyone was too busy to give much thought to it” (Ali 2009: 222”).

As executive chef in charge of the Imperial Hotel kitchen, Gabriel himself can be read as an achievement-subject who aims to “become a self-starting entrepreneur” (Han 2016: 38). Indeed, he wants to set up his own restaurant, and takes the job at the Imperial to prove himself to his financial partners, Rolly and Fairweather, who expect him to ‘turn that place around’ (Ali 2009: 23). Gabriel had always been ambitious; as a trainee “he’d been the best. He got in earliest, stayed latest, worked on his day off” (idem: 348). At the Imperial, however, he finds himself working sixteen-hour days, a large part of which are spent, instead of creating new dishes in the kitchen, in meetings (37), dealing with spreadsheets (55) and “completing order forms or logging timesheets” (23). In this context, Gabe, recalling that “there

used to be a time ... when he actually cooked rather than sat at a desk” (59) worries that he is falling out of love with food (101-102). In Han’s terms, then, he can be understood as both sovereign and bare life, as, in his drive to achieve, “the sovereign of achievement society ... is the homo sacer of himself” (Han 2016: 49).

Moreover, as an achievement-subject, Gabe becomes increasingly isolated. He is so absorbed in his work that he almost loses touch with his family, while his relationship with his girlfriend Charlie, a glamorous singer, also suffers. At thirty-eight, Charlie is eager to settle down with Gabe and have a child, yet he always seems to prioritise his work so that they often barely even have time to speak to each other on the phone (Ali 2009: 30, 166). Charlie herself, intent on developing her singing career, can also arguably be understood as an achievement-subject in Han’s terms. However, she seems to question her lifestyle and priorities, long before Gabe does. When Gabe suggests that they were lucky not to have lived through World War 2, for instance, Charlie disagrees, contrasting the collective solidarity of the wartime generation to their own generation, which she views, in line with Han, as self-obsessed and isolated, as “our things just make us turn in on ourselves” (Ali 2009: 190).

London appears to contrast with Blantwhistle, which still retains traces of the Foucauldian disciplinary society of the factory, characterised by commandments and prohibitions (Han 2016: 10), and by negativity, marked by “borders, transitions, fences, ditches and walls that prevent universal change and exchange” (Han 2016: 3). This is evident, for instance, in the racist rumours which had been spread about the Pakistani workers in the town during Gabe’s childhood (Ali 2009: 164) and which are now spread by Pakistani immigrants themselves, such as the elderly Mr. Nazir, about the new migrants from Poland (251).

However, the decline of the older generation, symbolised by Gabe’s dying father Ted and his elderly grandmother, along with the closure of the last mill in the town (318), suggest the demise of the traditional British industrial, disciplinary way of life. Gabe remembers how, in his childhood, his father had been an authoritarian figure, “Moses, bringing down the law” (39). He can thus be read as a representation of the repressive, prohibitive paternal superego characteristic, for Han (2016: 46), of the disciplinary society, against whom Gabe, who suggests he became a chef “to annoy the hell out of Dad” (Ali 2009: 408), rebels.

Both Gabe’s father, Ted, and Gabe’s grandmother, known as Nana, who suffers from dementia, therefore appear to Gabe as belonging to a bygone age, and both feel out of place in the contemporary burnout society, which “erodes community, erodes anything social” (Han 2021). Like Nana, Ted misses the past “when people round here cared about each other. When you knew everyone in the street and they knew you” (Ali 2009: 218). However, remembering his eccentric, bipolar wife, Ted acknowledges the negative, immunological aspect of community, its tendency to exclude those who do not conform: “Community’s good for those what’s on the inside, but if there’s some inside there’s others what’s out. I’m thinking of yer mother. Thinking of my Sally Anne” (396).

In this context, as Ted notes, “to lose yer good character, that were a terrible thing in my day” (243), while for Gabe, as a contemporary achievement-subject, the idea of “having character” is a radically different one:

But “having character”, that was just a way of saying you did what was expected of you. It’s almost the opposite of having a character, a personality, of your own. Now you’ve got to know yourself, what you really are (Ali 2009: 243).

Later on, watching the Eid celebrations in Blantwhistle, Gabe realises that it is now the Pakistani immigrants and their descendants who embody the community spirit; “Kids in shined shoes and new clothes, it still happened, but only for Eid. Large families, clubbing together, kinship and community ... all the things that Nana missed most.” (393)

This sense of community is, however, miles away from the isolated half-lives led by some of the undocumented migrants in London, such as Yuri, who are, in Butler’s terms, disposable, ungrievable lives (Marino 2019: 30). Although Gabe, as a self-absorbed achievement-subject, attempts to distance himself from this underworld of exploitation and xenophobia, as Nyman (2011: 97) suggests “it comes to haunt him”. It does so principally through Lena, a dishwasher from Belarus, whom Gabe takes in after she is evicted from Yuri’s subterranean abode after his death. However, what is supposed to be a short-term charitable arrangement leads to the collapse of Gabe’s relationship with Charlie, and, ultimately, to his losing his job and even his sanity.

Gabe is simultaneously disgusted and attracted when the sullen, skinny and mysterious Lena offers him sexual favours in return for his hospitality: “The thought of her drew and repelled him, like an image of an atrocity at which he could not look and from which he could not turn away” (Ali 2009: 151). However, after he succumbs, he surprises himself by his lack of remorse, noting how his otherwise ubiquitous self-absorption disperses in Lena’s embrace; there was “no *I*, no *me*, no *who*, but only this, their bodies, and nothing more” (idem: 159). As Han (2018: 66) mentions, according to the French philosopher Levinas, to encounter a human being “is to be kept awake by an enigma”; it is thus arguably Lena’s very Otherness that enables Gabe, ultimately, to escape the prison of his self-obsession.

Gabe later learns that Lena was a prostitute, a victim of human trafficking and bonded labour, described in the novel as a “form of slavery for the twenty-first century. Taking away passports, debt bondage, threats of violence, that sort of thing” (Ali 2009: 326). The victims of these crimes are certainly not achievement-subjects who willingly exploit themselves without a master (Han 2017: 2). Instead, they are victims of exploitation by others, which can be defined as a lack of dignity and freedom in the workplace, where the worker is instrumentalised by others and obliged to carry out certain tasks against their will (Pari-Bedoya et al. 2021). Thus, Ali’s novel suggests that, beneath its gilded veneer, 21st century London is not merely a performance society, but, *contra* Han, hides a dark, biopolitical, indeed necropolitical, underbelly. This depiction of bonded labour and migrant bare life in a contemporary Western city, then, poses a challenge to Han’s claim for the ubiquity of the performance society. It also goes beyond Žižek’s suggestion that the exploitation

of others has merely shifted from the West to the so-called “Third World”, a point later conceded by Han (2021). It suggests, instead, that biopolitics, as well as psychopolitics, is very much alive in 21st century Europe.

According to Spengler et al. (2021: 123), the migrant, who, like *homo sacer*, exists at the threshold of the law, is “the living embodiment of whoever dwells in the space of exception, a zone of indistinction, where *nomos/bios ... physis/zoe ...*, violence and justice merge”. Lena, as a *homo sacer* figure, can thus not count on the protection of the law, a point which Gabe, who encourages Lena to report her pimp Boris to the police, has trouble accepting. Lena quips that, even if they succeed in catching him “I will be dead by then. Boris will kill me” (Ali 2009: 200).

To emphasise her point, Lena tells Gabe the stories of some other sex-trafficked women, which underscore that, while sex-trafficking victims are unprotected by the law, they are subject to it and, indeed, are often doubly criminalised, as both irregular migrants and prostitutes (Caporale-Bizzini 2020: 589). A Moldovan acquaintance of Lena’s, for instance, escaped from her pimp and reported him to the police, but he was soon set free after being questioned. The girl, on the other hand, was deported when it became clear that she was undocumented. On landing, however, she was immediately re-captured by her traffickers and brought back to the UK, following which the pimp “beat her like never before” (Ali 2009: 301-302). Using a term which Agamben borrows from Jean-Luc Nancy to describe bare life’s simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the law, the situation of these women can be described as one of being *abandoned* by the law, that is “exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (Agamben 1998: 29).

Gradually Gabe empathises with Lena and develops a sense of responsibility towards her. He gives her money and promises to find her a new job and flat, and even promises to help her find her “brother” Pasha, who Gabe realises is probably her lover. His contact with Lena and the other migrant *homines sacri* he encounters thus transform Gabe. As Han notes,

it is the negativity of the Other and of transformation is what constitutes experience in an emphatic sense. To have an experience of something means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us (Han 2018: 3).

Gabe is further overwhelmed when he discovers that some staff members at the Imperial, led by the manager Gleeson, are involved in running a prostitution ring. Tricked by the promise of lucrative singing careers, hand-picked chambermaids from the hotel are instead sold “like meat ... two dollars a kilo” (Ali 2009: 364). This discovery, as well as his burnout and the crises in his personal life lead Gabe to a mental breakdown, which had already been heralded by a panic attack (idem: 298), a kind of *katabasis* (Nyman 2011: 99), or metaphorical descent to Hell, during which Gabe, who barely recognises himself in the mirror (Ali 2009: 383) frantically questions his very identity: “What am I? What am I? A nobody? A nothing? A zero?” (idem: 272). However, as argued below, this crisis can be understood as the death of Gabe’s identity as a self-absorbed achievement-subject, and the beginning of his rebirth as a healthy subject, who is fully engaged with, and takes responsibility for, the Other.

In the midst of his breakdown, Gabe, wandering in Victoria Station, gets onto an Imperial Hotel minibuss, which he assumes is taking hotel cleaners to work. However, the bus takes him to an onion farm, a “parallel world of forced migration and indentured labour” (Nyman 2011: 99), where Gabe, mistaken for a migrant worker called Danilo Hetman, becomes trapped (Ali 2009: 517-518). Thus, during his short stay on the farm Gabe himself is temporarily transformed into the immigrant Other (Nyman 2011: 100), becoming a *homo sacer* at the hands of others rather than himself. This experience also weakens the hold of the achievement society over Gabe, disrupting what Han (2016: 5) terms the excess of the Same, allowing him to experience a deeper relationship with both nature and time. Despite the sordid conditions and the backbreaking work, then, Gabe finally feels fully alive, approaching a kind of mindful contemplation:

It was as if until now he had seen the world only in a blur... He felt the cool touch of the wind ... he felt alive ... All his life had been spent in planning, in asking what came next ... so that the present ... was only a dim possibility, as if life could never be truly lived. (Ali 2009: 514)

Gabe also experiences solidarity on the farm, as Olek, a Ukrainian worker, shares his food with Gabe and prevents him from getting into trouble with the management (Ali 2009: 511). Waking up “relaxed and fresh” (514) the next morning, Gabriel feels that his old self is being replaced by a new one, with “no voice or thought, and he sensed it rather than knew it, and it didn’t ring in his ears, and it did not divide him, but made him, for the first time, whole” (518). His sense of peace is shaken, however, when he discovers that the workers, overcharged for accommodation, food, and transportation, have had their passports withheld. Without work permits, they are irregular, and are thus unable to approach the authorities. Finally, Gabe himself demonstrates solidarity with the migrant workers when he confronts the farm owner, who turns out to be Gleeson’s brother, regarding a young Polish worker, whose pay has been cut. Escorted off the farm, he returns to find that Lena has deserted him. When he returns to the hotel, however, he attacks Fairweather, whom he suspects of having abused Lena, which leads to Gabe losing both his job at the hotel and the money he had invested in the new restaurant.

4. Conclusion

Initially, Monica Ali’s *In the Kitchen* suggests that early 21st century London has become a performance society, where individuals are no longer exploited by others, but instead, in their drive to succeed, make *homines sacri* of themselves. Gabriel, in this context, can be read as one of Han’s achievement-subjects, in that he effectively becomes a slave to his own ambition, and eventually burns out, becoming “tired, sick of himself and of the war with himself” (Pari-Bedoya *et al* 2021: 439). This, together with his father’s terminal illness and the events that follow Yuri’s death, contributes to his eventual breakdown. Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Gabe is an isolated, self-obsessed individual, unable to appreciate the world around him or to forge meaningful connections with others. However, Ali’s depiction of

London's exploitative underworld, populated by irregular migrants and victims of human trafficking and their abusers, challenges Han's thesis that allo-exploitation has been replaced by auto-exploitation, at least in the West.

At the end of the novel, Gabe, back in Blantwhistle following his father's death, finds his life in tatters, and his ambitions in ruins. However, his encounter with the immigrant Other and his confrontation with his own past have also arguably changed him for the better. He has, notably, become less self-obsessed, and has learned to take responsibility not only for members of the exploited immigrant underclass such as Lena or the farmworkers, but also for his own family, to whom he grows closer.

He takes an interest in his grandmother, for instance, and offers to take care of his niece and nephew, so that his sister Jenny can have a holiday. In this context, he and Jenny seem to recover their childhood closeness; when Jenny accuses him of having been "wrapped up in himself" for the last thirty years, "they sat and laughed like little children with tears pouring down their cheeks" (Ali 2009: 551). Finally, Charlie, who had broken off contact with Gabe following his affair with Lena, gets back in touch with him and suggests meeting for lunch. While, as Charlie emphasises, it is only a lunch date and Gabriel should not get his hopes up, he is left with "a great deal of hope in his heart" (Ali 2009: 553). The reader is also left with some hope that Gabriel, now a less self-obsessed individual, can win Charlie's heart once more.

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