
Quest for Identity and Search for Roots in Hanif Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia"

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Abstract:

'When I was born, the name for what I was did not exist,' the famous quote by Madeline Miller from *Circe* alludes to the concept of self-discovery. The statement leaves ambiguity and interpretation and invites us to ponder on various possibilities to delve into crisis, search, and quest for identity. The quest for identity can be on multiple levels, such as personal, gender, sexual, racial, multicultural, religious, and social, in a multiethnic society. The novel '*The Buddha of Suburbia*', written by Hanif Kureishi, is an interesting text that explores the issue of the quest for identity roots among immigrants in Britain. The present paper explores the struggle of the main protagonist, Karim Amir, who finds it challenging to meditate between the conflicting set of values of East and West. Karim's quest for identity and discovery of true self goes on at a multicultural level, where he grapples with the emerging realities of complex relationships with British society. He dives deep into the sexual level, cultural level, and religious levels to relocate his identity into British society, where he finds himself dislocated.

Keywords: Quest, Identity, Struggle, Culture, Immigrants, Multi-level

Introduction:

To be or not to be is a big question, as quoted by Hamlet in one of Shakespeare's famous dramas named, '*Hamlet*.' The state of human identity and its perplexing identity was viable until today. The ever-going oscillation of indecisiveness, search for identity, and inner struggle is one of the major causes of the silent struggle for every individual. The crisis raised at different levels prior to literary writings assumes another remarkable exodus in Hanif Kureishi's '*The Buddha of Suburbia*'. The individual is at a crisscross within a multiethnic, multicultural society at various sub-sections, which beautifully connects to the reading of the novel.

Undoubtedly, the novel came up in a post-modern era, but it reflects an autobiographical strain of the novelist. The novelist was an inhabitant of the U.K.; his father was Pakistani, and his mother was an English woman. It meticulously reflects Hanif Kureishi's struggles with personal identity as an English person. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is the first novel he wrote, and it was published in 1990. It was an era of post-modern Britain where literary works were infused with a plurality of concepts and ideas that were affected by sociological and psychological lineage. (Duff, 89). The Fiction took a new turn with interpolations reflecting upon millennial anxieties, identity politics, and the relationship between the contemporary and the historical. New readings and writers came up, to name a few: Martin Amis, Beryl Bainbridge, Pat Barker, Julian Barnes, A.S.Byatt, Ian McEwan, Iain Sinclair, Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson, and Hanif Kureishi.

Fiction during this era engaged with the major cultural debates of the time, representing various identities; on the other hand, historical novels were written based on true facts of occurrences in the past. The novels rarely embody the true character. Literature underwent several interpolations and was influenced by psychological theories. Identity crisis was one of the theories that was applied in the literary context. It's a new approach where the focus is to understand the character by taking into account implicit and explicit influences. As Parini says,

“It helps us to understand the characters and the authors by considering their implicit and cultural orientations that define their writing.” (Parini 172).

Henceforth, the literary writings become alive, reflecting upon diversity, intersecting and probing into the mind of the character, and understanding the diversity of cultural setup, history, and distinct identity through subjective perception.

The word identity may seem very common, but it is of great value, and it's hard to find defining characteristics. People can never find themselves, or they keep on finding their different versions in different situations, but that is for sure. We all look ahead and seek our identity and belongingness. The quest for identity is not new, but it got its start in the twentieth century. The reasons were W.W. I. W.W.II and the atomic Bombings(1945) in Japan. These incidents wiped people to search for where they actually belonged. It didn't stop there. The freedom fight across the globe, and the Nazi oppression of the Jews in Germany also started people to doubt their identity. There is no one identity we owe, but humans possess distinct identities and certain identities demanded by society. There are certain unclear identities that are related to religion, culture, and sexuality, and with time, one can gain a new identity as one grows as per the demands of society.

With all these incidents happening around, the identity crisis emerges as an important focus to highlight the complexities of contemporary society and its challenges, where one time, people struggle with self-discovery. The process of self-discovery is not in water-tight compartments but with experimentation in one's day-to-day life. The greatest challenge was to relocate oneself in a diverse class setup. With changing society, discoveries,

technology, and psychological theories, the situation become more complex, and if we humans fail to crack our own space, there is a constant tussle where one is crushed inside.

The question of identity crisis can be observed from the very first line of the novel, 'My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishmen born and bred almost'(Kureishi 1). It is very clear that Karim is not confirmed about his identity as an Englishman. He thinks that he is almost born and bred because he is a second-generation Indian immigrant, being born of an Indian father and English blood, which makes him an entirely new person. Though Karim always wants to be an Englishman, society appears to be the main antagonist in his path. It is clear Karim is not able to forget his immigrant identity as a whole, nor is he able to accept his Englishman identity.

Karim's identity is always in question by himself and by others. He wanted to become an independent Englishman, Unlike his father, but again messed up, as his mother says that you are like your father. Margaret says that he is totally like his father. His identity as a son was also under question when his mother said he left his mother like his father. Karim finds his father, Haroon, a failure and never wants to be like him. Karim is struggling to make sense of his true life with regard to what he wants to do and what he wants to become (Moore-Gilbert 45). There are several wishes for him, as expected. His father wanted him to be a doctor; his mother wanted him to join the Navy. His school expects him to have a career in the civil service, which is very much part of English society, so as an adolescent, he is struggling with what he really wants and what others expect from him. Apart from that the identity of Karim questions his mixed identity. Karim was a generation South-Asian immigrant (Indian)born of an Indian father, Haroon, and an English mother, Margaret. The British society was not eager to accept Asians. Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of England, openly was against the immigrants or Asian immigrants. His hybrid identity has emerged from the mixture of two old histories. He considers himself, ' to be an odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belongingness and not.'" (Kureishi, 1)

The crisis with Karim and other characters is not related to their personal ethnicity, religion, or culture, but it is also related to the place they live in. The novel portrays Karim and his family living in the suburbs and later shifting to London with Eva. In the suburbs, Karim always wanted to have city life, and at the end of the novel, Karim thinks London is not for him. Suburbs are better than cities. This is not limited to Karim, but it is extended to his father, Haroon. Even though Anwar too faced a residential crisis, he went to the U.K. in search of a better life. They both spent twenty years in the U.K. but realized the U.K. was not their place. They both loomed between India and the U.K. As Karim says, "Now, as they aged and seemed settled, Anwar and Dad appeared to be returning to India." (Kureishi 64). They always had the impression that the U.K. was not really a place for them. Hence, these two first-generation immigrants are deeply facing a residential crisis even after spending their major lives in the U.K.

The novel provides an insightful reading and traces distinct dilemmas, such as how the main protagonist, Karim, an adolescent boy, attains manhood and begins to learn about

himself, his family, society as well and sexuality. Karim notices a big gap between their parent's marital life, where his father, Haroon. They both had a distinct journey. Haroon finds enlightened love for Eva; he finds his caliber at best when he is around Eva. Karim identifies problems relating to adolescent sexuality. The quest for sexual discovery makes him feel that he is naturally perverted. He is never clear about whether he is heterosexual or homosexual. He had a liking for both males and females, with as many people as possible of both genitals. "It was unusual, I know, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls." (Kureishi 55). It is evident that he likes boys; he feels betrayed by Charlie as he is with someone else. Karim also finds attraction towards females in terms of sexual relationships with Helen, Marlene, and Eleanor, who are his female love. He somehow depicts traces of both sexual tendencies.

The sexuality of Karim is not only in question, as it is with other characters too. The case of Jammie(Jamila). She has an illicit sexual relationship with Karim, and due to it, after her marriage, she is very indifferent toward her husband, Changez. Even Jamila had a homosexual relationship with a community girl named Joanna, where she lives. The same is the case with Pyke, the theater director, who has a relationship with both males and females; during Karim's visit to his house, he has oral sex with Karim. In the novel, it is very evident that Amir, Charlie, Jamile, and Pyke are not clear about their sexual identity.

The immigrants in the U.K. not only faced issues related to identity, but they were also treated as others in English society. The whites never accept immigrants and treat them as others. This otherness leads to racial discrimination and frequent attacks on immigrants. Karim, in the novel, says that his father is racially attacked several times and he feared whites, 'for fear of having stones and ice pops full of piss lobbed at him by schoolboy from the secondary modern his father regularly changed his routes" (Kureishi 28) to the office and home. Karim further thinks "even if he takes on the role of a guru and gains some kind of respect from people, he is still another"(KARA, 193)The other aspect is that of ethnicity, if one is not born in U.K. they are just the other as they cannot be accepted as Englishman.

The other is not from the side of English natives, but it is from the side of immigrants, too. They do think they are better than Englishmen in terms of culture, ethnicity, and religion. As Anwar says, 'This is not our way, boy, our way is firm.' (Kureishi, 60) Further, the immigrants also don't want to accept the ways of English people to boost their superiority.

It is very obvious that the search for roots and Identity crisis plays a crucial role, and it leads to the suffering of an individual at various levels. It will be a challenging task to look ahead and search for your identity as a society and family, and a lot of distinct demands and roles keep on reshaping our identity. Immigrants like Karim, Haroon, and Anwar are just mere representations to understand the state of human existence; their distinct hidden dilemma is articulated on social and public platforms. Karim finds it challenging to mediate between conflicting sets of values of the East and the West. He keeps on discovering his identity through different experiences and experimentation. In the end, however, Karim

chooses to maintain a balance between Indian Culture and the post-modern lifestyle of England.

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