Pakistan Social Sciences Review *P-ISSN 2664-0422*
June 2020, Vol. 4, No. 2 [852-861] *O-ISSN 2664-0430*

Pakistan Social Sciences Review
www.pssr.org.pk

RESEARCH PAPER

From Suburbanization to Gentrification: A Postcolonial Study of (Dis)placed Identities in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Mumtaz Ahmad [1] Qasim Shafiq [2,] Dr. Ghulam Murtaza [3]

1. Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan
2. Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Associate Professor, Department of English, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

PAPER INFO

Received:
April 28, 2020
Accepted:
June 15, 2020
Online:
June 30, 2020

Keywords:
Hybridity,
Identity,
Pakistani Literature
Postcolonialism

Corresponding Author:
qasimmirzaa@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article argues Hanif Kureishi as a 'postcolonial writer' who emphatically rejects to be called so, although, paradoxically, his biracial foundation, plus the nature and effects of his literary works, categorizes him as a 'postcolonial writer'. With delimitation of *The Buddha Suburbia*, this article traces that the postcolonial issues of 'identity' and 'hybridity' are the noticeable features of Hanif Kureishi's literary works. This study examines how Kureishi presents the struggle of the British Asians, especially the Muslims, for cultural assimilation in the Post-colonial time of England. In this regard, this study argues the nature of the postcolonial subject's identity concerning Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'the third space'. This article focuses on how Muslim immigrants confront cultural complications in their efforts to integrate into uncompromising, class-conscious, mixed English society.

Introduction

Although since the dawn of the second half of the 20th century many of the once-colonized countries have made decolonization happen, freeing themselves from the stranglehold of the imperialist powers by unleashing counter-violence upon and initiating powerful resistant movements against the imperialist powers, yet colonialism is far from being erased all over the world and the newly independent countries have had to grapple with the legacy of colonialism in terms of language, government law education and hybrid identity. The gradual demise of colonial empires and the emerging self-esteem of the former colonies heralded a new voice of Literature called 'post-colonial literature' which can be said to have emerged as an inevitable corollary of the complex and varied cultural contact and interaction between the colonized and the colonizer. The post-colonial literature was and is being created by the Diasporas, exiled or indigenous writers to reclaim a legitimate voice that had been invalidated

under the British or other European countries colonialism and is still being continuously suppressed and silenced by the incorrigibly class-conscious, racial societies of the world.

In the post-colonial era, in the presence of a sweeping wave of globalization and cosmopolitanism, cultures are intimately connected leading to the production of cultural mixedness and the notion of the double, hybrid or fluid identity. This study reveals that post-colonial writer believes hybridity to be the legacy of the imperialist regime and hybridization to search the unceasing struggle on the part of mixed people. This flux of identity is indeed what gives rise to continuously changing and becoming of new culture(s) and identities. Kureishi's belonging to two cultures and his specific ethnic situation correspond to the claim of postcolonialism as the right of all people on this earth to the same cultural and material well-being (Young, 1995). This interesting situation necessitates the author of our debate to be placed in a particular socio-cultural and historical context to understand the issues and the various elements of tradition adopted by the protagonists of Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* wherein diametrically different cultures of the East and the West become the structural matrix in which the postcolonial plot is placed and unfolded.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based upon the cultural transactions and hierarchies concerning what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) conceive as 'hybridity' or 'the third space' to unwrap "a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal" (p. 34). This negotiation is neither integrated nor associated rather emerges an 'interstitial agency' that rejects the binaries of cultural hierarchies. Bhabha (2006) goes against Edward Said's ordering (1978) of cultural limitations of East and West and argues when cultures come across they generate 'the third space'. This 'third space' or 'hybridization' abandons "the politics of polarity" (p. 157), hence, according to Bhabha (1990), blurs the cultural boundaries of self/other and fashions the opportunities that endorse "something different, new and previously unidentified" (p. 211). This postcolonial study of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) argues how 'the third space' or hybridization negotiates the cultural hierarchies to classify the Asian Muslims in postcolonial London.

Literature Review

Kureishi elegantly presented in his work the Anglo-Asian lifestyle with its tradition, elements of culture and technique of assimilation. Noting this leading role of Bart Moore Gilbert's *Hanif Kureishi* (2001) observes that Kureishi "has acted as a pathfinder for [the] explosion of British – Asian cultural expression in a number of domains" (p. 190). Sukhdev Sandhu (2003) argues that the inaccessibility of the Pakistan culture and community in Britains: "before Kureishi made his way into the writers club through the postcolonial narratives Pakis were unknown material, off the cultural radar" and "young Asian had no cultural ambassadors or role models" (p. 1). Susie Thomas (2005) relates that Kureishi's birth, upbringing and education in the British Society – not to talk momentarily of the racial prejudice that the colored people

are subject to in race and class-ridden British Society – is the vital factor that differentiates him from his generic (postcolonial) predecessors like notoriously famous Salman Rushdie or V.S Naipaul, a significant first-generation immigrant writer, and help us understand why he is not unlike them "a displaced postcolonial writing back to the centre [rather] writing from the centre" (p. 1).

Having this advantage over the others, Kureishi seems to be in a fully authoritative position to represent the Asian minority owing to his simultaneous insider/outsider position, biracial background and experiences as a hyphenated Anglo-Asian. This interesting position of knowing both the cultures, belonging to the East and the West, representing the dominant ideologies of the ancestral and assimilated cultures however raises the problem of misrepresentation between the immigrant writer and the community represented. No exception to this allegation of misrepresenting and exploiting the community is Hanif Kureishi who was and is still being accused of failing to provide positive images of his community. He has been mordantly criticized not only for his obsession with projecting homo and heterosexual characters but also for his distancing himself from the Asians whom he represents. What seems to give credence and authenticity to some of the adverse criticism of Hanif Kureishi that to ensure the approbation and warm reception of his work by the white readership, he exaggerates and exploits the insufficient knowledge of his community are the words of his own mother who frankly admitted that her son tried to make an impression upon his readers by telling fake stories. Kenneth C. Kaleta (1998) says that working-class background is not now a trendy pretention for an author but "Hanif had everything he wanted as a child" (p. 15). This delicate balance which the postcolonial immigrant writers fail to maintain is responsible for the feelings of disillusionment and bitterness experienced by this immigrant community. in this regard, Kenneth C. Kaleta (1998) observes about Kureishi's characters that his "cosmopolitan characters see who they are and who they want to be" (p. 3), blind to the fact that city, just like England itself, will prove to them no more than an illusion. He observes that "his peregrination of London elevates it from merely providing a setting to actually being a character" (Kaleta, 1998, p.36).

Suburbia and the Quest for Identity

From Suburban Margin to Urban Centre

Striving to improve the standards of their life, the suburban characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) travel a lot from vicinities to cities, both physically and mentally and idealize the metropolitan cities and its covetously cultured and shrewd people, conversely abhorring the suburbanites. Straper, a character in *The Black Album,* says: "People always need to escape" (Kureishi, 1995, p. 201). This too frequent and too painful tendency of postcolonial escape emanates from the unrelieved feelings of entanglement in oriental stereotypes and the protagonists' alienation as they experience estrangement with their own family on different grounds. Their escape has two dimensions: literal and metaphorical, and it is difficult to tell which one is more significant. Their minds are always fully possessed by the unswerving longing for the

exodus and this insuppressible desire becomes the centre of their efforts. They unleash their energies and direct all their abilities to ensure they get successfully adjusted with the city dwellers and imitate their lifestyles. Whether fully conscious or not of the fact, the hybrid characters are subject to changes triggered by their inflexible desire to move to the centre. The usual direction of this migration or escape is from the suburbs to the centre of London, the immigrants' imaginary of milk and honey.

Kureishi's characters in this regard reflect his own inordinate ambitions as he was very desirous of making a significant move to the city which he imagined would bring a drastic change in his life. Bearing the indelible stamp of autobiographical elements, his characters hope and strive to leap into the centre of London to get rid of the derelict and penury-stricken area of Bromley. This much anticipated and likely-to-bring-happiness flight to the city promises them to be able to do away with the suburban stigma. The difference between the suburbs and the city is the difference between what they are, and what they aspire to be.

In-Between Rich City and Poor Suburbs

Kureishi's novel can be discerned as an agreed symbolic border between poverty and riches. His protagonists frequently cross the bridges spanning the Thames as they serve as a link between North and South London. The bridges fill the gulf between the opulent and the poor, the latter particularly engaged in activities that require them to move recurrently from their shanties to the splendor of the city. The division between two parts of the city has so great a significance that Kureishi has split *The Buddha of Suburbia* into "In the suburbs" and "In the city" to illustrate Karim's peregrination to gradual social acceptance. Both the father and the son gradually rise into prominence and make their identity felt in the upper circles of the city by appropriating the attention and friendship even the love of some of the celebrities of the city. They become fully conscious of the nature of the city and its people that things don't happen spontaneously in the city of their dreams-London, for survival here entails making the things happen by quickly learning the ins and outs of the life of the city-dwellers. Coming into a working relationship with the denizens of the city, they learn more about themselves than their metropolitan counterpart that the best way to change the rigid and inflexible, biased attitude of the city people towards hybrid characters is either to exploit their (city dwellers') weaknesses as does Haroon by assuming the role of Buddle to comfort their agitated souls, or they subscribe to the roles they prescribe for you as we see Karim becoming Mowgli against his wishes, and all this is to be done only to get known in the city circles. About the significance of the river, Kureishi explicates in one of the interviews: "For us the important place, really, was the river, at that moment there was an incredible sense that you were entering another world….And, so, for me, London became a kind of inferno of pleasure and madness" (McLeod, 2004, pp. 138-139).

More than the elderly members of the community of hybrid characters, these are the young characters that often emphasize the repulsive features of the suburbs and endeavor for better and wealthier existence believing that settlement into posh

areas will ensure the accomplishment of their dream life. Rebelling against the compromising nature of the first generation, the youth of the second generation, like Karim of *The Buddha of Suburbia* express discontentment with the suburbs, desperately wanting to flee from its clutches. Kureishi, the author and his autobiographical creation, and Karim, both share the characteristic inability to alienate themselves from the suburban belongings despite having settled into the recipient culture. Kureishi can't help feeling confused even after years of settlement wondering whether the suburbs are out of him or not.

London: An Ideal of Profligacy and Freedom

Karim's promiscuity and tasting of the forbidden tastes in London confirm that Kureishi's London is his "postcolonial playground" (Thomas, 2005, p. 108), where his young inexperienced protagonists taste sex, alcohol, drugs, and spiritual barrenness, and jostling city life with all its banes and boons, attractions and corruptions, glamour and affectation. The city is a "chaotic and vicious interface of ignorance, greed and desire" (Tew, 2004, p. 96). Karim's morbid obsession with London keeps him restless, fantasizes about it in a dreamy possessive mood and consoles himself with thousands of blacks everywhere (Kureishi, 1990, 127).

It is to absorb into his soul the reality of new experience and search for authenticity not found in Bromley that Karim undertakes the peregrination to London, but it does not take him long to realize that London does not have any great reality to reach at. Bored and frustrated with the uninteresting, narrow life of Bromley which is unsuited to the flourishing of his latent talents, and where the demanding claims of the family inhibit him from going after his own heart and forge a brand new identity, Karim decides to abandon the permanent living with his family.

In their robust enthusiasm for an escape to London, an imaginary place and representative of true Englishness which they despair to acquire, Kureishi's characters seem to be oblivious of the tangible reality of London life. They perceive London only as an ideal state of reality, think from only imaginative and romantic standards, and almost willingly overlook the other side of life there. It is pertinent to emphasize that such an unrealistic attitude displayed by the second generation protagonists towards city life is a hereditary trait which they have acquired from their parents as they also used to live in irrational adoration of the city and exaggerated complex of the suburbs. These young first-generation-protagonists more than their parents, believe that London is not only the privilege of the English, it does not belong to the English only, it is in the wake of sub continental and many other countries' freedom resulting influx of immigrants to London, an international place now, which belongs to and to which everyone belongs irrespective of religion, ethnicity, class and color.

Kureishi, under his fastidious attention to the minute details of the settings, shares with ThomasHardy the tradition of animating or personifying what makes the background of the novel-in Hardy's case the imaginary Wessex region and in Kureishi's fairly idealized glamorous London. Kureishi's concept of the city is all-embracing, inspirational, magnetic and cosmopolitan and his fascination with it,

enduring and energizing: "My love and fascination for London endures. Here there is fluidity and possibilities unlimited. Here it is possible to avoid your enemies, here everything is available"(Kureishi, 1990, p. 237). Karim, being in many ways the projection of Kureishi himself reflects the author's attitude towards the postcolonial capital which "blew the windows of (his) brain-wide open", and during his promenade in the London streets, "nothing gave [him] more pleasure than strolling around (his) new possession all day'' (Kureishi, 1990, p. 126). Ambling joyfully in the streets of his favorite city reminded Karim of "a house with five hundred rooms, all different'' and "the kick was to work out how they connected, and eventually to walk through all of them" (Kureishi, 1990, p. 126).

Roaming about the streets of London, even when having nothing worthwhile to do, and to absorb into heart and soul all the captivating, iridescent colors and sonorous voices, was inexplicably vitalizing and mesmerizing experience albeit that it failed to offer a solution to all the issues and burning questions of life confronting Karim. Although Karim had come to the city full of hopes, prospects and promises of a prosperous and fruitful future, secure in his naive belief that London, the sweet city of dreams had an inexhaustible fund of wealth, fame and opportunities to offer to its devoted visitors regardless of their ethnicity and identity, he had "no idea what [he] was going to do". Having no one with him to show the right path and help him find all that he had come to have in the city, he felt "directionless and lost in the crowd'' and despite his best efforts to understand the nature and temperament of the city, he "could not see how the city worked" (Kureishi, 1990, p. 126). Nevertheless, not feeling discouraged by the baffling nature of the city, he makes the momentous decision of abandoning the suburbs, forsaking his mother and younger brother. Obviously, Kureishi's protagonists are enamored of the irresistible charms of the city and fail to adjust themselves in any other milieu. They are fundamentally the men of the city and when out of it feel themselves like fish out of water. They are in love with the city and woo it like a beloved, ready to pay any heavy price not to part from it, for the city provides them very warm and comforting feelings of snugness, and the possibility of materializing their desires, but of course at the cost of alienation and loneliness.

Inversion of Idealized Centre

London, losing its civilized and sophisticated side, becomes the equivalent of a jungle and becomes redolent of Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1898). Mowgli has to negotiate his identities as a human and a wolf-cub. Karim is likewise torn between varying cultural identities and, like Mowgli, is in a process of maturation that involves choices between conformity to law and promptings of nature (Gilbert, 2001). Once the colonial centre, a seat of high learning, and culture from where the torch-bearers of knowledge, enlightenment and civilization voyaged to different *dark parts* of the world, itself becomes a metaphorical jungle, horrible and relentless. The Asians in this jungle feel lost and baffled, unable to comprehend western reality, more complex than white/black or good/bad binaries.

The postcolonial capital in Kureishi's novels is replete with lies, contradictions and hypocrisies which the protagonists sometimes feel disgusted with; they are in one sense like Hemingway's 'Hemingway heroes' young and green trying to understand the ways of the world filled with corruption, deceit, killings, lawlessness and moral perversity, etc. When faced with such a situation, their awareness and disenchantment make them escape. Karim's burning aspirations to escape the ennui and monotony of his life in the unattractive life of south London continuously eggs him on to flee to the place of his wild dreams where he gleefully imagines to enjoy whatever the postcolonial capital has to offer in terms of sex, alcohol, money and career-making. The actual presence there in the city nevertheless engenders in the protagonist the much-despaired feelings which he seeks to escape from.

Just like Karim's leaving his mother and younger brother to find his new place and identity in the city, in the last scene of the *Black Album*, Deedee and Shahid also say goodbye to London. Disillusioned of the intolerable surroundings of London, they intend to stay together "till it stops being fun'' (Kureishi, 1990, p. 276). From the beginning, when in south London, Karim, like many young boys, caught in a maze of dead circulating reasoning, roams in the labyrinth searching his mind for answers. Getting rid of the narrow confines of south London seems the only way out to his proud and melancholy spirit that cannot tolerate the burden of suburban reality because he painfully sees himself out of touch with suburban values, and the only flattering option to come out of this conflict seems to him to fly to the city which ironically is itself "in the conflict" (Tew, 2004, p. 109) paralleling the young postcolonial generation's nihilism resulting from inner struggle and lack of meaningful values. Caught in the whirlpool of thought, the characters are torn between London's "utopian potential and its sobering relation" (McLeod, 2004, p. 139). It is no surprise then that in a moment of sheer despondency and despair when Karim's mind nostalgically thinks about south London and his assertiveness decreased: now he feels like escaping back to south London where he belonged and feels that he had stepped out of it with mistaken arrogance (Kureishi, 1990, p. 148).

Karim fails to strengthen himself in the city and does not have the strong confidence needed to feel at ease in any circumstances. His weakness is rooted in his psychological complex that he belongs to a suburban class. London at the micro-level, in the postcolonial circumstances, assumes the role of the colonial empire and deals with the suburbanites in the same manner as were the colonized dealt with by the colonizers. The postcolonial London reproduces in microcosm the geographical differentiation of the former empire (Gilbert, 2001) particularly by showing a prejudiced approach towards minorities by marginalizing them and pushing them to the suburbs. The Suburbans, therefore, never have confident feelings of being Londoners. They remain partly London and partly suburban. Likewise, the constant and undiminished feelings of being "almost a Londoner" is an indispensable part of a postcolonial's life. Without appreciating the role of London in Kureishi's works and life, any discussion of his work is bound to remain incomplete. Kureishi's characters bear a striking resemblance with the author as both the writer and his ethnically mixed characters are reared in the suburbs and long for the city. Infrequently, they are

obsessed with London. It is hauntingly present in their imaginative and lived life and their most significant and enduring experiences of life are had in this postcolonial centre.

Karim's Shift from Suburb to Centre

Karim's family lives in a respectable middle-class area which saves Karim's mother nobody likes: Karim himself, Haroon and young Allie all yearn for changing this place and going to the fashionable part of the city. What Eva calls 'the higher depths' has nothing profound in it to capture the heart of Karim, so when Karim and his childhood friend Jamila and the daughter of the hairy back, Helen, walk by the Victoria road, what they see is typically suburban: "Past sturdy parks, past the Victoria school with outside toilets, our true playgrounds and sexual schools, and past the neat gardens and scores of front rooms containing familiar strangers and televisions shining like dying lights" (Kureishi, 1990, p. 150). It could make Karim want to stay there, rather its gloominess and sordidness drive him impatient and he passionately thinks about how he will get out of it, where he will go, and how he will find his way in the world. This is only for his inextinguishable longing for the escape from the suburbs that he is ready to leave behind his family and friends. With thousands of hopes for his future when he sets off journey to London, a name that inspires him with sweet promises, his first sojourn is Beckenham which is an upper class by Victoria road standards. Reaching Eva's house, Karim can't help observing very closely how his step-mother's dwelling place is in sharp contrast to their own at Bromley. Always a frantic lover of beauty, sensuality and wealth, Karim stands mesmerized by the extravagant display of material wealth and a combination of sensuality and intellectualism.

From west Kensington, a cultural map and a place where Karim met many VIPs and where he was far away from the suburbanites, to Chelsea where he is thrilled to have the job of acting in a theatrical company and meets exceedingly beautiful, upper-class girl, Eleanor whom he passionately falls in love with even though he had already had a sexual experience with both male and female, but the superior beauty and elegant manners of Eleanor drive him crazy and he is drawn to her flat whenever she calls or whenever he gets free from work. In Eleanor's company, Karim knows what is class, culture and money and this phase of Karim's social-climbing marks the acme of his life and sedated his agitated soul. Karim loved London and in turn, he had wanted London to love him, to accept and acknowledge his existence particularly. He was ambitious to get approved of by the Bohemian aristocracy of London so at being invited to St. John's wood his happiness knows no bounds because Brainyville, London, was a place as remote to him as Marseilles before. But, ironically, Brainyville, a place that Karim's imagination had made full of cultural richness, did not come up to the lofty anticipations of Karim and he feels quite disappointed at newly found knowledge about his highly imagined artistic and cultured people of London that they can be sham and counterfeit.

Conclusion

Regardless of the validity and truth of the incriminating reviews, Hanif Kureishi feels it incumbent upon him to represent the marginalized immigrant community – the one he belongs to – to the dominant one – the one he aspires to be assimilated into for the juxtaposition of the comparative difference between the two. And in doing so, irrespective of his intentions, representation forges power relationships in which the white audience's judgmental gaze determines the marginalized identity. This position of being representative of one's own community that results in friction and strained relation between the community spoken for and the immigrant writer as the fictional representation does not exactly correspond to the reality of neither immigrant experience nor meets the expectation of the community represented. The one major reason why these representations are eyed with suspicion and create the gulf between the writer and the community is the belief that they are a typically western – educated and well-assimilated intellectual's view and hence don't synchronize with the majority of the immigrant community. Most often than not this position of the writer results in an ironic and conflicting relationship between the published voice of the immigrant author and the silence of the community he attempts to represent. This controversial position of the writer raises many questions about the validity of his representation, his insider/outsider position, and the acceptability of the representation by the concerned community. Far from receiving warm acceptance and credibility from the immigrant community, such representations engender a lot of controversy about the authenticity, falsification, offensiveness, misrepresentation or even exploitation of the community represented.

References

Bhabha, H. (2006). Cultural diversity and cultural differences, *The post colonial studies reader*,B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin (eds). New York: Routledge.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.

Bhabha, H. (1990). *Nation and narration.* London: Routledge.

Kaleta, K. (1998). *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial storyteller*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Kipling, R. (1898). *The jungle book*. London: Macmillan.

Kureishi, H. (1995). *The Black Album.* London: Faber and Faber.

Kureishi, H (1990). *The Buddha of Suburbia*. London: Faber and Faber.

Mcleod, J. (2004). *Postcolonial London.* London: Routledge.

Moore-Gilbert, B. (2001). *Hanif Kureishi.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.

Sandhu, S. (2003). *London calling: How black and Asian writers imagined a city.* London: Harper Collins.

Tew, P. (2004). *The contemporary British novel*. London: Continuum Books.

Thomas, S. (2005). *Hanif Kureishi.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Young, R. J. C. (1995). *Colonial desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race.* London: Routledge.