

Crisis of Identity in Hanif Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia"

Zainab Salahaddin Hussein

Department of English, College of Language and Human Sciences, University of Garmian,
Kurdistan Region-Iraq

Abstract— This paper explores the problem relating to the formation and discovery of self-identity among the immigrant population in Britain. The immigrants that are being analyzed in this paper are based on Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, a novel that features postmodern trends of literary writing. The paper presents the struggle of the protagonist, Karim, to discover his true self in a multicultural and multiethnic society. The multilevel discovery includes sexual, cultural, and criminal orientation and identity in a postmodern society.

Index Terms—Identity crisis, Postmodern society, Self-identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The influence of postmodernism in the development and evolution of British modern literature is tremendous and worth considering (Duff, 2014, p. 72). The postmodern British literature is founded on the notion whereas absolute truth is lacking in all aspects of human life, this truth is mental construction that is contained in the human mind and one which must be explored to clearly demystify personal reality. The focus of postmodern British literature in general and the novels, in particular, is to deconstruct the social, political, and cultural realities that engulf and plays out in dynamic human interactions and relationships.

Analyses of the postmodern British literature are thus an exercise that grants one an opportunity to apply postmodern ideologies and philosophies to understand the themes, the characters, and objective of the author in the literary piece. This is because the literary works of postmodern Britain were infused with a plurality of concepts and ideas drawn from sociological and psychological orientations (ibid. p. 89). This explains why the critical evaluation of the novels in this era focused on self-identity, consciousness about the self and social structures in the society as well the implicit and covert struggles with self-identity and positioning in a pluralized society.

Most of the British postmodern novels were written from the perspective of the minority and dup that are exposed to non-conventional and deplorable conditions by their supposed seniors. The analyses of the literature adopt the approach guided by consideration of the position of the minority in a horizontally and vertically stratified society dominated by a clique of individuals that run the system (ibid. p. 46). The characters used in the novels are thus utilized to build themes that are consistent with socio-political ideologies of postmodern times. On the other hand, historical novels are based on true facts of occurrences in the past. Although they rarely embody true characters, historical novels use the characters to recapture historical context, including social, political, and cultural trends of the past.

The use of characters in historical novels is strategic and targets the reality of conflicts or problems in the complex human society as mirrored in the novel (Tew, 2007, p. 148). Where there is a mixture of real and imagined events in these novels, the historical events in these literary pieces are accurate. Indian novels, on the other hand, are founded on rich cultural and religious beliefs that dominated the pre-civilization era (Moss, 2001, p. 25). These religious beliefs and symbols such as Kamasutra and Indian gods make postmodern Indian novels unique from the British literature.

The relationship between modern British novels, traditional, and Indian novels is conspicuous in the sense that they all approach literature with an open arm that relies on the past to reconstruct the present and the future in a symbolic yet very strategic (Murphy and Wai-Chew, 2008, p. 45). In the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi uses his past experiences as a minority in Britain to present the crisis of identity that the main protagonist faces.

II. IDENTITY CRISIS APPROACH

An identity crisis approach is a new approach to literary analysis where the analysts reflect on the works of the author with a sociological and sociocultural lens. The focus of such analysis is to understand the characters and the author by considering their implicit and covert cultural orientations that define and influence their writing (Parini, 2008, p. 172). This approach is flourished on the understanding that society is multicultural and naturally dynamic. The authors of literary pieces are thus reflecting the diversity and multiculturalism and are reclaiming the sense of history and identity through subjective reconstruction of history.

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Corresponding author's e-mail: zainabsalahaddin90@gmail.com

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Identity crisis as an approach to literary analysis considers the complexities of the postmodern societies that leave its members in a crisis of having to struggle with self-discovery. By its very nature, the postmodern society features ethnic, national, class, and sexual diversities that have deep-rooted historical orientations and connotations. The members of this society must, as a matter of necessity, overcome this complex tide and position themselves within the most proximate distance to their true self. This is a task that calls for deliberate resolve to push aside other cultures, gender, traditions, and national values and to carefully sieve what suits one's own identity (ibid. p. 83). In the world of literature, this approach is essential in analyzing not only the themes of literary pieces but also using the packaging and presentation of the characters to depict the author's own struggles to comprehend him/herself within a dynamic and complex social system.

The characters are used to represent the construct of "otherness" in the society through their actions and relationships with other actors in the scenes, whether as protagonists or antagonists. This approach focuses on analyzing how the characters interrelate with other people. The racial, cultural, and social relationships between the characters in all literary pieces are analyzed on account of the identity of the characters in the novel or literary piece (Gardiner, 2012, p. 51). Thus, this approach is a perspective that considers the themes and characters in the story based on their struggles to rediscover their true self in amidst multicultural, multiethnic, and racial identities.

In the postmodern literary analysis, the construct of the identity of an individual evolves to become a social phenomenon that attracts the attention of sociological and psychological theorists and their ideologies to understand and explore (ibid. p. 63). However, such exploration must be done within the basic realization that the attributes of the elements under investigation are a symbolic representation of the experiences and encounters of the author himself/herself. Such analysis is thus considered to be the foundation of all the thematic analyses that follow so that the postmodern literary analysis proceeds with the knowledge and understanding that actors and authors of the postmodern literary pieces have compounded and concurrent identities that render them unique and special.

The composition of different and potential affiliations that create foundations provides the basis for the development of a crisis occasioned by the multiplicity of individual affiliations and interactions. This implies that whereas one's identity might be reflective of many other unique identities, there still remains some level of unique identity that one is under the obligations of discovering. This is because such identities are the consequence of a combination of multiple and complex interactions within the same social environment comprising of social actors from other boundaries/borders.

A Identity Crisis in The Buddha of Suburbia

Hanif Kureishi was born in 1954 in Bromley, U.K, to a Pakistani father and English mother. Whereas in King's

College in London, he read philosophy, which significantly influenced his later career in the theatre industry. He grew to become a multi-faceted author, playwright, screenwriter, novelist, and filmmaker. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is the first novel that the author wrote and published in 1990. The novel is auto-biographical novel reflecting on his struggles with personal identity as an English person (Kureishi, 2009, p. 122).

The story *The Buddha of Suburbia* is considered to belong to many different traditions, including English social realists, the picaresque, and the *Bildungsroman*. The novel provides a significant insight into the racial discrimination that the minority of Eastern descent faced in the mid-1960s. In his novel, he highlights the fact that during that time, being Pakistani was viewed "as a risible subject in England, derided on television, and exploited by politicians" (ibid. p. 3). This depicts the reality of racial discrimination in a multiracial England even up to the time of the publication of the novel. The contribution of Kureishi to the discourse of multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism is thus lauded, especially given that his novel provides a fist hand account of racist relationships that featured and prominently featured in the multicultural and diverse society of his time.

Kureishi in *The Buddha of Suburbia* makes use of the protagonist "Karim" to build the theme of identity crisis in the wake of a multiethnic and multicultural British society. Karim grows into manhood and begins to learn about himself and the society around him (ibid. p. 92). He begins to discover the current rules that operate in the family, institutions, at work and society at large. In the story, Karim is in the process of discovering himself in the same way as Haroon his father. Haroon is rediscovering his love for Eva and uses his effort and those around him to discover the full potential of human beings (ibid. p.13). Karim begins to learn the pleasure drawn from breaking from family boredom in sub-urban dwelling to the world of theater crowded with interesting people (ibid. p. 186). The theater industry thus provides Karim with an opportunity to learn and discover a new world that is free of restrictions.

The author through the main character, Karim, is pointing to the reality of racial discrimination against the minority in England. He uses Karim to underscore the fact that he experienced a sense of displacement whereas he was Pakistan and while meeting his family in a new multi-cultural environment in Pakistan and England (Willrich, 2009, p. 84). The cultural interconnectedness of the two societies was strange considering the fact that the two countries shared a strained past relationship of a colonizer and the colonized. This past relationship might have defined the relationship between Pakistan and Indian immigrants in Britain and the British natives in the same country (Buchanan, 2007, p. 45). It is thus, a discovery on the part of Karim who actually represents Kureishi that the experiences he is going through in England are part of the process to help him understand that he is an immigrant and the past tensions between Britain and Pakistan and India are still fresh in the mind of the natives.

The novel presents a society that is characterized by the hybridity of culture in a global world. The novel addresses the key problem of race and the multiethnic identity that features in contemporary British society (Yousaf, 2002, p. 118). The

multiethnic identity that presents in contemporary British society is one that is characterized by cultural heterogeneity (Buchanan, 2007, p. 45). However, in this heterogeneity lies the deep string of isolationism and discrimination that effectively creates two factions of the aliens and the natives. The aliens begin to discover the fact that their relationship with the British is one that is informed by their own identities as immigrants in a postmodern and liberal society.

The problem of sexual identity comes out explicitly in the novel. The main character, Karim, is an adolescent who is striving to find out his way and identify problems relating to adolescent sexuality (ibid.). He is trying to understand himself within the context of youth culture and the level of class structure playing out in contemporary British society. The novel is categorically a Bildungsroman story showing the growth of the protagonist from adolescence to maturity. The crisis that protagonist has is to discover himself as he develops from one level to the other (ibid.). The proponent in the novel alludes to the crisis of identity in the opening of the story when he highlights the fact that he has an “odd mixture of continents and blood.” One of the crises that he faces is the fact that he living in the suburbs and being exposed to a multiethnic and multicultural setting of society.

The young character, Karim Amir 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, 2001, p. 45). There are multiple wishes from various quarters that have preferences of what should become of him. His father would like him to become a doctor; his mother wants him to grow and join the navy (Kureishi, 2009, p. 23). The crises also present from the expectations from school where he is needed to build a safe career in the civil service, something that is part of the expectation of the English society toward the immigrant. He is expected by the school careers officer to build his career in customs and excise (ibid. p. 23). As an adolescent, Karim is also struggling with the need for and expectation on his part to be famous and adventurous.

The problem of identity comes out clearly with the need on the part of the main character to choose from what is perceived as a glamorous life characterized by mysticism, alcoholism, sexual experimentations as well as drug use (ibid. p. 15). He finds himself in a new world where he has to explore and discover new habits in what is considered to be the modern lifestyle in England. The quest for sexual discovery presents in the novel as the protagonist strives to break away from troubling sexual ambiguity. This ambiguity makes him wonder whether he was naturally a pervert who needs to be treated (ibid. p. 55). Karim struggles with the decision of preference to sleep with boys or girls with whom he has constant encounters in his newly found relationships in a new society.

Thus, Karim finds it challenging to mediate between the conflicting set of values that in the East and the West. To overcome their identity crisis in a multicultural and multiethnic society, Karim decides to maintain his Muslim-Indian male superiority over their wives and children (Whittaker, 2009, p. 62). However, he struggles to rethink about his identity by admitting his faults. In the era of religious fundamentalism, Karim’s life mirrors a cultural

conflict and confusion and eventually discovers himself after exploration and experimentation with crime, violence, and drug abuse.

Whereas on his journey to maturity, Karim is exposed to problems of the multiplicity of ethnic orientations (Kureishi, 2009, p. 45). However, he also displays some sense of English culture that disrupts homogenous ideas associated with ethnic representations that feature predominantly in the novel. This is evident in his opening statements that he is a born and bred Englishman. The identity crisis that the protagonist in the novel faces is multi-level. The problems of gender identity, sexual, religious, and historical divergences present the aliens like Karim to a life associated with complications in a complex society. The hostile attitude that the immigrants face in foreign land presents the challenge as they struggle to resolve the crises in a new world in British cultural orientation.

Rising from the struggle of having to accommodate the new relationship he has developed in the new world of the native English (Kureishi, 2009, p. 123). Consequently, he has to distinguish the norms and values of his Indian background in the east from the values and the norms of the English. This challenge not only leaves Karim with the challenge but also presents him with an opportunity to break from his conservative culture that is strictly guided and controlled by religious beliefs but also one which is bound by the new relationships (Bentley, 2008, p. 113). Thus, sexual explorations and endeavour to make new social networks characterized by liberty and freedom in a libertarian society is the struggle that Karim, the hero is hooking with.

III. CONCLUSION

The growth and development of literature in East and Western societies have witnessed transformation characterized by infusion of postmodern ideologies such as sociological, psychological, and philosophical orientations. These features have dominated the British postmodern literature, influenced, and shaped the Indian literature as well. In the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Hanif Kureishi uses the postmodern approach to build the theme of identity crisis. The protagonist, Karim is presented as one struggling with himself in a bid to discover his true self. To discover himself, Karim has to grapple with the emerging realities of complex relationship with the British society where the natives of the East are viewed as minority and inferior in cultural orientation. This explains why Karim has to shed off his orientation and adopt a new lifestyle that is characterized by exploration and experimentation with crime, drugs, and sex, among other challenges of the society. This reflects the evolution of postmodern British literature where the analysis of social relationships and interactions feature. However, Karim has to choose between maintaining the Indian culture and adopting the postmodern lifestyle in England.

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