

## Searching For Identity In Hanif Kureishi's 'The Buddha Of Suburbia'

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### ABSTRACT

Britain becomes the living place for many people coming from different racial, social and religious backgrounds. Having this diversity, however, may cause to some problems due to homogenization policies and conformist attitudes of WASP people in daily life. Some of the problems experienced by the immigrants such as racial and religious discrimination may result in identity crisis by enforcing them to feel as if second-class citizens and make their lives more difficult. When the problems of the immigrants in Britain are taken into consideration, the race issue seems to be the most important one among their problems since the English people adopt a hostile attitude towards the immigrants. The aim of this paper is to analyse the issue of the identity crisis and the problems of the immigrants in Britain with reference to Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). In the analysis of the identity issues, ideas of cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha will also be referred to within the context of the novel. Furthermore, the strategies of the immigrants to cope with these problems in order to survive in Britain will also be dealt with and the question of whether these problems would be solved in the near future will be raised in this paper. Thus, this paper aims at offering a more complete picture of Hanif Kureishi's Britain in the late 20th century.

**Keywords:** Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, identity crisis, multiculturalism, immigrants in Britain.

**Type of Study:** Case Analysis

## Hanif Kureishi'nin Varoşların Budası Adlı Romanında Kimlik Arayışı

### ÖZET

Britanya dünyanın dört bir tarafından göç aldığı ve zamanında da bir imparatorluk olduğu için farklı ırklardan, dinlerden ve dillerden birçok insanı barındırmaktadır. Bu çeşitlilik, zaman zaman Anglo-Sakson, Protestan, orta sınıf erkek egemen, homojenize edici kültürel eğilimleri olan beyaz nüfusu rahatsız etmekte ve bazı sorunları da beraberinde getirebilmektedir. Özellikle göçmenlerin maruz kaldıkları ırk ve din ayrımı onların kimlik bunalımına girmesine yol açarak hayatlarını daha da zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, İngilizlerin göçmenlere çoğunlukla düşmanca yaklaşması sonucunda, günlük hayatta sıkça karşılaşılan ırkçılık, göçmenlerin en önemli sorunu gibi gözükmemekte ve kendilerini ikinci sınıf vatandaş gibi hissetmektedirler. Bu durum da göçmenleri kimlik arayışına sürüklemekte ve çoğu zaman da kimlik bunalımına yol açmaktadır. Konuyla ilgili olarak, ünlü kültür teorisyenleri Stuart Hall ve Homi Bhabha'nın kimlik kavramı üzerine olan düşüncelerine değinilecektir.

Kısacası bu çalışmada, Hanif Kureishi'nin *Varoşların Budası* (1990) adlı romanına değinilerek göçmenlerin kimlik bunalımı ve sorunları incelenecektir. Ayrıca, Britanya'daki göçmenlerin hayatta kalabilmek için ırkçılık vb. sorunlara karşı ne gibi savunma mekanizmaları geliştirdikleri ve yakın gelecekte bu sorunların çözülüp çözülemeyeceği sorusuna yanıt aranacaktır. Bu çalışmada diğer bir amaç da Hanif Kureishi'nin son dönem 20. yy. Britanya'sının daha kapsamlı bir portresini okuyuculara sunmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hanif Kureishi, *Varoşların Budası*, kimlik bunalımı, çokkültürlülük, Britanya'daki göçmenler.

**Çalışma Türü:** Olgü Sunumu

If you live in a multicultural society like Britain, it is inevitable that you might come across with some problems such as racial and religious discriminations and as an extension of these, you may go through identity crisis.

Some sociological studies reveal that identity may be defined as the sameness of a person at all times under all circumstances and the uniqueness of identity rises from the fact that a person is itself and not like anybody else. This definition emphasizes individuality and the uniqueness of personality (see Kaye Deaux and Peter Burke's "Bridging Identities"). Thus, one's sense of being distinguishable from other

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people becomes significant in terms of identity. Overall, in theoretical definitions of identity, one's being distinguishable from the other or others is frequently underlined.

However, in "Bridging Identities" Kaye Deaux and Peter Burke oppose this claim by stating that "*viewing the self as a group member rather than as a unique individual*" are the primary factors [of] social identity theory, "*while self-verification (affirming self-meanings in the situation)*" is the primary factor in identity theory. Accordingly "[c]ategorization and self-verification show us that membership in any social group or role includes two important aspects: one's identification with and commitment to a category, and the behaviors that we associate with the category, both of which have been incorporated in varying degrees by theories in each discipline. More generally, both psychological and sociological theories of identity recognize that the self both exists within and is influenced by society, because socially defined shared meanings are incorporated" add Deaux and Burke. Under the light of the above-mentioned factors, it may be assumed that in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, most of the immigrant characters cannot completely identify with the English society due to the assumption of being always the other.

On the other hand, according to Stuart Hall, one can find his/her identity by comparing and contrasting himself/herself with the other. Like him, Klaus Eder also expresses that "persons and societies are cases of identities. Persons have an identity by positioning themselves relative to other persons and by giving to these relations a meaning" (428). In addition to these, Hall argues that identity is not a stable thing and it is open to changes and development:

[Identity] goes on changing and part of what is changing is not the nucleus of the 'real you' inside, it is history that's changing. History changes your conception of yourself. Thus, another critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other. Only when there is an Other can you know who you are. To discover that fact is to discover and unlock the whole enormous history of nationalism and racism...The English are racist not because they hate the Blacks but because they don't know who they are without the Blacks. They have to know who they are not in order to know who they are... They are not Black, they are not Indian or Asian, but they are not Europeans and they are not Frogs either and on and on... And there is no identity that is without the dialogic relationship to the Other. The Other is not outside, but also inside the Self, the identity. So identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself (1996, 345).

Thus, he defines identity in terms of binary oppositions as it is defined in many sociological and psychological sources (see Burke, Cerven and Deaux's writings). To clarify the point, one cannot know or define what day is without comparing it with night. And as a parallel to this, the majority in UK cannot know, who they are without comparing themselves with the minorities or immigrants in UK.

As in line with this, the issue of the identity crisis can be observed even in the first sentence of the novel, as *The Buddha of Suburbia* begins with the sentence of "*My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost (Kureishi, 3)*" and the word almost tells us everything about the immigrants in England as he neither belongs to India nor to England; he is not Indian enough because he lives in England and he is not English enough, because he has Indian origins as well as English.

In other words, it can be suggested that to be born into an immigrant family in England is to be born into the third space, which paves the way for constructing new identities. In Homi Bhabha's own words: "*These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself*" (1994: 1-2). Therefore, the clash of Eastern and Western culture and the sense of disbelonging can be observed in Karim's words, when he says "*perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored*" (Kureishi, 1991: 3). He is in a state of limbo, as he is a hybrid boy, having an English mother and an Indian father. Karim's mixed-race family not only reflects the cultural atmosphere of multicultural England, but also is an autobiographical element in the novel. After having a comparative look at younger and elder immigrants, it can be suggested that their reactions towards the English culture and their identity-constructions differ. The second generation immigrants in England develop a different kind of identity, which can be defined as a British Asian identity and which is not the same as being an Indian born in India. This issue is given through the main character, Karim in the novel. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, it is stated that Karim was "*becoming a decadent person with lax morals as*

*the rest of the society*” (Kureishi, 1991: 211). As he was born in England, he is likened to the English people who have lax morals. Being a British Asian is something not accepted even by the Indians themselves. This may arise from the fact that the grown-up immigrants did not try to become a part of mainstream English society. They preferred to live within their small circle. Contrary to them, their children or the second generation immigrants began to mingle with the English society. The elders wanted to continue their lives in England, but did not want to become a part of the WASP culture. Therefore, Karim’s father, Haroon begins to show an interest in some concepts of the Eastern cultures such as Ying and Yang, cosmic consciousness and Chinese philosophy (Kureishi, 1991: 27).

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, it is shown that the first generation of the Indian immigrants migrate to England for having better educational opportunities. For instance, Karim’s father, Haroon was sent to England by his family to be educated, but he failed. In the novel, it is stated that Haroon’s father was a doctor and their life standards were high in India. But in England, everything turns upside down and he becomes a clerk in the Civil Service for 3 Pound a week and begins to suffer from poverty and hunger. Similarly, Jeeta, who was an Indian princess, becomes a suburban shopkeeper in England.

In the novel, the discrepancy between the real England and the image of England in Haroon’s mind is shown and the stereotypes of the English people in his mind are challenged in some scenes. In the novel, it is shown that after having seen some English people working as dustman in poverty and learned that “not that every Englishman could read Byron”, Haroon was shocked because of the discrepancy between the real England and the England in his dreams. The real England was very different from the one in his dreams. Contrary to his expectations, England was very class-conscious and very racist.

Racism and discrimination seem to be important problems for both the first and the second generation of the immigrants in London and although Karim is half-English, he cannot escape from racial discrimination. One of his friend’s father does not like him as he has a darker skin. However, his friend Helen becomes the mouthpiece of the white people, who like blacks and Indians. She says “[b]ut this is your home... We like you being here. You benefit our country with your traditions (Kureishi 55)”. However, what attracts the English people’s attention is the differences, especially the physical differences, rather than the similarities or the cultural richness of the immigrants. In the novel, it has been observed that due to black and white, us and them attitude, racist actions are on the foreground. Karim says:

The area in which Jamila lived was closer to London than our suburbs, and far poorer. It was full of neo-fascist groups, thugs who had their own pubs and clubs and shops. On Saturdays they’d be out in the High Street selling their newspapers and pamphlets. They also operated outside the schools and colleges and football grounds, like Millwall and Crystall Palace. At night they roamed the streets, beating Asians and shoving shit and burning rags through their letter-boxes. Frequently the mean, white, hating faces had public meetings and the Union Jacks were paraded through the streets, protected by the police. There was no evidence that these people would go away – no evidence that their power would diminish rather than increase. The lives of Anwar and Jeeta and Jamila were pervaded by fear of violence. I’m sure it was something they thought about everyday. Jeeta kept buckets of water around her bed in case the shop was fire-bombed in the night. Many of Jamila’s attitudes were inspired by the possibility that a white group might kill one of us one day. (Kureishi, 1991: 56)

This paragraph highlights the problems of ethnic minorities in England. Racist groups are well-organized and obviously, even the police is on their side. Therefore, ethnic minorities may become victims of violence at any time. Therefore Jamila, Karim’s cousin and girlfriend started to learn karate and judo for self-defence. It is striking that these sports are certainly Eastern-originated. In the novel, it is observed that young Indians come together in small groups to protect themselves against the racial attacks, as it is observed among the young Turks in Germany.

Furthermore, one day one of these racist groups throws a pig’s head into an Indian shop, into Anwar’s shop. In this instance, the choice of the animal is significant as the Muslims are not allowed to eat pig’s meat. There is “the othering process” both on the the side of the Indian people and the English people. Changez says to Karim, as the latter is half English: “You are little English with a yellowish face like the devil. The number of morals you have equals none! (Kureishi, 1991: 184). On the other hand, for the English people, Karim

is the Black Paki devil. In Western culture, as it is also illustrated in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Bronte's *Heathcliff*, black is immediately associated with evil.

What is striking in the novel is that each party has a tendency to praise his own physical qualities and to look down upon the other races as inferior or as evil. For the black Indian man, the white English man is the evil, whereas for the white English man, black Indian man is the evil. In other words, what is different is something to be afraid of and is something evil.

Racial discrimination can be observed not only in the streets, but also at schools and in the education system. This may be because of the fact that education is given less importance than earning money among the minorities since the immigrant children have to work for supporting their families financially. This causes teachers to perceive the children of the minorities as incapable of learning. Racism and physical violence in the English education system is expressed by Karim in the following sentence, "*all my Dad thought about was me becoming a doctor. What world was he living in? Everyday I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury* (Kureishi, 1991: 63)".

After his failure in school, Karim began to take drugs such as "blues", which make him more depressed (Kureishi, 1991: 62). Drug-taking can be perceived as a way of escape from the frustration and the depression of being an ethnic boy in England. He may try to forget his sorrow by taking drugs, as he leads a life of a social limbo. However, later on, he moves to London and this city provides him with better job opportunities.

He had a part in the play, *the Jungle Book* by Kipling. *The Jungle Book* would be a starting point for Karim, but he was criticised very severely by his Indian friends and by his father. Haroon was angry about Kipling's representation of India, and his son's acting in such a play. Haroon says, "*That bloody fucker Mr. Kipling pretending to whitty he knew something about India! And an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White minstrel!*" (Kureishi, 1991: 157). Similarly, the play was disgusting for Jamila as well. She thought it included "cliches about Indians" and it was "completely neo-fascist" (Kureishi, 1991: 157). Parallel to these, in *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie suggests that English writers provide "*fake portraits*" of India, in order to "*provide moral, cultural and artistic justification for imperialism*" (1991: 89). In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Haroon and Jamila have the consciousness to perceive these imperialistic racial policies in *The Jungle Book*.

Afterwards, Karim was called to take part in another play, whose subject is the minorities. Karim could not escape from becoming the target of criticism by his friends again, as the play "*shows black people... as being irrational, ridiculous, as being hysterical and being fanatical*" (Kureishi, 1991: 180). Through the references to the misrepresentations of the minorities in the show-business, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi shows that racism can also be observed in the acting-world. From time to time, it can be a big problem for the actors as well.

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, it is shown that black actors cannot escape from racial discrimination as it happens in the case of Gene. Gene, Eleanor's ex-boy friend commits suicide as he can no longer endure the racial discrimination in London:

Sweet Gene, London's best mime, who had emptied bed-pans in hospital soaps, killed himself because everyday, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they thought him a nigger, a slave, a lower being. And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and all its self-regard-into the eye of Hairy Back, into the eye of the Great Fucking Dane. We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all bitterness and resentment, too. (Kureishi, 1991: 227)

This passage is a key passage about the situation of the ethnic minorities in England, but there is more to it. These minorities also have racist attitudes towards each other. For instance, ironically, Changez says that he does not discriminate people, except the Pakis. Thus, even the immigrants illustrate racist tendencies towards the other immigrants in England.

Moreover, in the novel, it is underlined that names are indicators of ethnicity and Karim's brother Amar called himself "Allie" to avoid discrimination. On the other hand, Haroon Amir is called by Ted and Jean as "Harry", as Aunt Jean is trying to impose English identity upon the Amir family. Besides, Karim's mother does the same by saying to him: "*You're an Englishman, I'm glad to say*" (Kureishi, 1991: 232).

On the other hand, his blood and physical appearance are enough to place him in the middle, in other words, his blood is not pure enough to be accepted as a pure English man (Avara, 2000: 18). Due to these, Karim has a sense of disbelonging; “*The thing was, we were supposed to be English, but to the English we were always wogs and nigs and Pakis and the rest of it (Kureishi, 1991: 53)*”. Thus, through changing their names, the immigrants try to escape from racism and adopt English identities.

However, later on Karim and Haroon started to make use of the advantages of being different and as a result, Haroon who had “*spent years to be more of an Englishman, now was putting it back spadeloads*” by exaggerating his Indian accent (Kureishi, 21). Moreover, we see an interaction between the two cultures, as Eva, a white character begins to learn Urdu and as Haroon begins to teach yoga and Eastern philosophy to the English. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, in this way, it is shown that it is not only the minorities, who are under the influence of the English culture, but also the English people are under the influence of the ethnic cultures.

After having a look at the foods and drinks in the novel, it is seen that even in the kitchens, there is an amalgamation of the Indian and English cultures. For instance, Karim’s mother prepares York Shire puddings, whereas Jamila’s mother prepares kebabs. Karim, being a hybrid, has the opportunity to taste both cuisines. Through the references to the richness of the food culture in Britain, the advantages of being a multicultural society is reflected in the novel, as well.

Towards the end of the novel, Karim manages to take a role in a soap-opera and as it is expressed in a song, they say they “will survive”. Karim says:

And so I sat in the centre of this old city that I loved, which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn’t always be that way. (Kureishi, 1991: 284)

Moreover, it can be suggested that the hybrid baby in the novel (whose father is an American and whose mother, Jamila is an Indian) can be taken as the symbol of multicultural Britain. It is significant that she was born neither in India nor in America, but in England. Thus, she carries different traits from different nations, and therefore she stands for the multicultural England in the future and may be a good example to Eder’s suggestion that Europe has “hybrid collective identities” and it is not a “melting pot”, but a “diversity pot” (433).

As a conclusion, taking all the examples given so far, it can be suggested that although these people suffer from racism and from living-in-between-cultures, their attempts to integrate to English society will give positive results for both the ethnic minorities and the English people. The survival of Karim through all the problems and his rise as an actor add to the optimistic ending of the novel. What is more promising for the immigrants is that they are (as it is indicated in the quotation above) surrounded by people, whom they love and everything would be better in the future as they persevere and manage to give more and take more in terms of cultural exchanges despite the hostile attitudes. Thus, they contribute to British culture by adding the flavours of indigenuos culture to it and they integrate to British culture by adopting the ways of British culture and manners day by day. Through amalgamation of different cultures, races, religions and the creation of “emotional attachment” (Eder 434) to somewhere or a group the idea of establishing a multicultural society becomes possible in practice as well. Thus, it may be concluded that sooner or later, the ideal of multicultural England may be achieved in the very near future thanks to the “emerging identifications with [Britain]” (Eder 434) as it is also illustrated in Karim’s words above.

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