

An Old Mind in a New “Body” by Hanif Kureishi

Ayşe Demir

Pamukkale University, Turkey / Contact: ayse Demir@pau.edu.tr 

Abstract

Finding ways to live an eternal life has always been an issue that intrigues the minds of people and finds an important place in literary works, as well. At times, the key to live forever is through a magical touch; sometimes it is a scientific experiment on dead ones and it might also be a surgical operation that helps the characters sustain an endless life just like Hanif Kureishi’s novella, “The Body” in which Kureishi introduces the reader an old, famous playwright named Adam who is offered a chance to live a second life in a different body. The novella is mainly based on the operation that transplant Adam’s brain into a brand new body. Everything seems perfect at the beginning; he experiences an almost hedonistic lifestyle, but the accumulated experiences of his past life do not leave him. In other words, his consciousness, thoughts and memories are also transferred into his new body creating a big dilemma for Adam. The paradox he experiences, caused by an old mind in a new body, evokes the present subject of this paper; namely the dual nature of flesh and spirit, body and mind. Therefore, this paper aims to explore these dualities together with their effects on the individual and social self.

Keywords

mind, self, identity, body, Kureishi, youth, aging

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“After a bit you realize there’s only one invaluable commodity. Not gold or love, but time. Who hasn’t asked: why can’t I be someone else? Who really wouldn’t want to live again, given the chance?” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 13)

Whoever these questions are asked, a similar confirming answer is heard. The longevity and the quality of human life are among the main concerns of people of all

ages in the present day society. We are looking for the ways to remain young forever. Since the governing principle of being among others and one's relationship with the other people around him/her depend mainly upon the concepts of physical appearance; the traditional way of thinking which respects the elderly for the experience and the intellect are apt to be replaced by giving much more value to the young, beautiful and energetic ones. The main reason behind this idea is that the old people are seen as weak for the time being. They are under the risk of losing their lives or having illnesses, so they cannot be expected to be active agents in a society and are therefore cast aside. The young people, however, are perceived as having the necessary health, energy and potential for the future. Therefore, in order to reach an ideal, the two must be combined; a young body with an experienced mind. Hanif Kureishi applies this ideal in his short novella, *The Body and Seven Stories*, and tells the story of an old man who is offered to have his brain transplanted into another body. Having the advantage of the experience and knowledge he compiled all his life, Adam, the protagonist of the novel, is given the chance to do everything the younger ones can do. The paradox he experiences, which is an old mind in a new body, evokes the present subject of this paper; namely the dual nature of flesh and spirit. Therefore, this paper aims to explore these dualities of body and mind together with their effects on the individual and social self.

Throughout the ages, youth and beauty have always been desirable things for all human beings. However, it was the Ancient Greeks that gave probably the greatest importance to these concepts. From architecture to sport, from daily life to social values and many other fields, beauty was very influential for Ancient Greeks. They either held beauty contests, or presented the various beauties as altars to their gods. The goddess of beauty, Aphrodite, belongs to Greek Mythology. The Greeks were the ones who even had the greatest wars in history for the sake of a beautiful woman. They perceived having smart physical qualities as crucial to such extent that being old turned out to be something like an illness or an unfortunate thing condemned to be bad for those who become old and ugly. In that, these were drawn as wicked or dangerous characters for the society. That is why, the beauty and youth meant more than being only the physical qualities; they also connoted innocence, morality and goodness. "Youth, represented

by a youthful body, is good; old age, represented by the aging body, is bad” as suggested by Kathleen Woodward (1991, p. 7) was a common idea for most of the people at the time. The same idea was strengthened by the development of a strong religious conscience in the middle ages: “old age represented the body and sinfulness and youth represented the soul and salvation” (Troyansky, 1992, p. 41). Despite the fact that becoming old has never been such a positive thing to be emulated, it was the Industrial Revolution that made being old more sensed as the reason for being regarded as wretched for people. The accelerated technology and progresses, which become the ground figure of the present societies based on industry and capitalism, lead the people to see the old ones as a source of problem; because these people not only need special care but they are also unable to be part of the productive working. Since the main criteria are the practicality and productiveness, “the worker was idealized as a rational, mechanical element in an organizational machine” (Hassard, 2001, p. 117). However, the old people can neither catch up with the pace of life, nor be integrated into the harsh conditions and long working hours. As Kureishi explains in his work, nobody “wants a lot of Oldbodies hanging about the world? They’re ugly and expensive to maintain. Soon they’ll be irrelevant” (2003, p. 103).

In modern civilizations, in addition to the technological developments, under the effect of media while the discontent of old age has increased, being young and beautiful has reached its peak. Peter Laslett regards some fears as mainly felt by the aging people who “have begun to recognise for the first time how much of their life still to come will be spent as an older person” (1991, p. 14). In addition to the fear of serious illnesses that threaten their life or the threat of the end of life, they also feel the risk of losing “beauty, attractiveness, fertility, potency” (1991, p. 14). In order to get rid of the disadvantages of old age and its reflections on people’s bodies, a newly emerged term “body maintenance” (Featherstone: 1991, p. 82) which means keeping the body fit, has become the motto of modern life. Either for aesthetical or practical purposes, body is placed at the centre of attention. The concept of body maintenance, which is mostly determined through not only the consumers’ needs but also the strategies of those who manipulate the economy and the society, turns out to be almost compulsory within the ideology imposed by marketing. Some products and techniques are presented to the consumers as the ways to solve the problems arising from aging

and keep them young. As Mike Featherstone suggested, it appeared as “an indicator of the popularity of the machine metaphor for the body, so that, like cars and other consumer goods, bodies require servicing, regular care and attention to preserve maximum efficiency” (1991, p. 182).

Thanks to the technological developments that have exceeded the limits of human imagination, just like the mechanical devices, people’s bodies can be fashioned in many ways. In addition to the treatment of illnesses, people can modify their bodies as they wish. There are numerous gadgets and cures that are used for body alteration. Thanks to cosmetic surgery, people can alter lots of things about themselves such as their appearance, physical shapes of their organs. Besides, various scientific steps are contributed to the world of science every single day; in that the scientific developments of modern age have ongoing attempts to find the right combinations of the genes or even create clones from the already existing ones. Also, it is possible to see instances of the cases in which the organs of one’s body can be easily transplanted to another person through medical surgeries. Hanif Kureishi, by taking a surgical operation that will transplant the protagonist’s brain into a young man’s body as the starting point of his novel, draws attention to the individual and social problems and difficulties of the old people in modern times and being aware of the facilities that are presented to human beings by technology; he constructs his novel in this frame.

The novel starts with the discontented remarks of an author named Adam. He is introduced to the reader as a successful, sophisticated but unhappy man in his mid-60s. He longs for the youth while watching the young people enjoying themselves. He meets a young man who claims that he knows and loves Adam’s earliest writings. However, that is impossible and Adam is startled to hear that he knows those details about so much time ago since the man has the appearance of a young boy. This young man must most probably be a child when the play was put on stage. Thus, when this man named Ralph tells Adam that he is in fact older than him, but that this young and healthy body shelters his brain; Adam cannot believe what he hears. Showing the attractive sides of this operation, he asks Adam to do the same. Adam is captured with curiosity by this extraordinary offer. Since he has been thinking upon his old age and the disadvantages of it for some time, he decides to experience this adventure, as well. He tells his wife

that he needs a holiday for a short period of time. Agreeing upon half a year for the experiment, he goes to the secret hospital where *newbodies* dying at a young age are hired or sold for brain transplantation. He chooses one of the bodies that are exhibited just like the clothes on a row.

Having drawn a brief theoretical and informatory part, the following part of the article will be devoted to a detailed analysis of Kureishi’s novella and the most common problems modern people experience; the fragmented self, and the disconnected relation between one’s body and mind. Through Adam’s feelings and ideas, Kureishi shows that anybody might feel alienated from the world they are born into, the society they live in, their families, their jobs, and even their bodies. Kureishi draws the character of Adam as having a successful life, a lovely wife and two children in order to emphasize that if a person’s body and his soul are not in harmony with each other, he cannot be happy; no matter how appropriate the other things are. For Adam’s situation, the first and perhaps the foremost problem is his aging body. He is not happy with his bodily functions. When he observes his body in the mirror, what he sees is an old man “with [...] rotund stomach, veiny, spindly legs and left-leaning posture” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 17). He notices that he approaches to the last phase of his life; he “was beginning to resemble his father just before his death” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 17). Moreover, in addition to the physical deficiencies and the disturbance his old body cause, Adam is also disturbed by the fact that he will not be desired and liked any longer. He thinks that

“the older and sicker you get, the less your body is a fashion item, the less people want to touch you. You will have to pay. Masseurs and prostitutes will caress you, if you give them money” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 34).

He laments that these are only for the youngsters. He thinks that “to participate in the world with curiosity and pleasure, to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and uninformed” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 5). His physical age also affects his social life. As Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth state, in modern age “the process of growing old is complicated by the fact that there are really two kinds of ageing: biological and social” (1982, p. 3). In other words, the person passes through two different stages of aging. While Adam heavily feels the biological one, he is not ready for being cast away socially. He struggles to be able to keep up to date with the recent

events. He feels that “education and experience seem to be of no advantage” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 5) at his age. He also asserts that he is “no longer familiar with the pop stars, actors or serials on TV”, but he is eager to participate in the things going around him; he never stops “being interested in others or in culture and politics - in the general traffic of mankind” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 4).

The main problem is that Adam does not want to accept the reality that his body is not young any longer. While coming to the party which the story begins with, Adam walks for about forty-five minutes. When he arrives, he is “breathless and feeble” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 6). In the party, Adam finds the opportunity to observe the young people. When he arrives at the party, his mind has already been busy enough with the idea of being young. At the party, the glamour and fashion of young people fascinates him. Adam

“couldn’t help noticing how well-groomed everyone seemed, particularly the pierced, tattooed young men, as decorated as a jeweller’s window with their hair dyed in contrasting colours. Apart from the gym, these boys must have kept fit twisting and untwisting numerous jars, tubs and bottles. They dressed to show off their bodies rather than their clothes” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 9).

What attract Adam’s attention are especially the young bodies in the party. He feels a kind of envy for them. In fact, he has many successful works which have attracted many people’s attention and appreciation over the years. However, these were of no importance for him any more. The only thing he looks for becomes being young, or at least having a young body before he leaves this world. Thus, Ralph’s proposal at the party seems really attractive, because as Ralph explains, the years pass by so abruptly that one cannot understand how valuable it is. People constantly put off the things since they are busy with temporal desires; while some try to earn money, some are captured by the ambition to be successful. This adventure extends Adam’s longing for “a new world” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 16), and after a short evaluation of his life, he concludes that:

“the end of my life was approaching, too; there was a lot I was already unable to do, soon there would be more. I’d been alive a long time but my life, like most lives, seemed to have happened too quickly, when I was not ready” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 17).

Adam feels worried about what he will be living through the operation. However, the doctor’s approach is too rigid not only for the operation but also for Adam’s worries. He says, “just as there has been argument over abortion, genetic engineering, cloning and organ plants, or any other medical advances, so will be over this” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 22). Although the doctor tries to trivialize the operation and its consequences, in fact it can be regarded as a revolution, something that will change the perception of life for human beings. Ralph explains that there are only three or four doctors in the world today who can do this operation, and “they’re like the men who made the atomic bomb – hated, admired and feared; having changed the nature of human life” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 99).

Adam’s decision to have this transplantation done makes it necessary to choose a *body* for him. As if he was shopping in a store, Adam has to choose in which body he wants to spend his next six months. Among many choices, it appears to be a difficult decision for him, because he has to pick up the appearance he will be seen by the others:

“All the bodies, as far as I could see, were relatively young; some of them looked less like young adults than older children. The oldest were in their early forties. I was reminded of the rows of suits in the tailors I’d visit as a boy with my father. Except these were not cloth coverings but human bodies, born alive from between a woman’s legs” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 24).

After the operation, Adam’s new life starts. He finds a new name at first hand; “Adam” bears a symbolical meaning for emphasizing the beginning of his new life which also connotes the creation myth of Adam and Eve. With his new body, he sets off a hedonistic trail across Europe, including Paris, Rome, Vienna and Switzerland, where he falls in with a group of young film-makers, discovers ecstasy and rediscovers sex. Then, on a Greek island he finds an odd job at a spiritual centre. It is here that the tension between who Adam is and who he appears to be becomes more apparent. He inevitably constructs two identities; the private self of the old writer and the public

appearance of the new young hedonist man. Adam soon finds out himself regretting what he has done and feels confused with these two identities. He longs for the things he has walked away from and feels guilty over the responsibilities he has ignored. Through the end of the novel, Adam is introduced to a rich, yacht-owning playboy named Matte at a party. He learns that including Matte and him, there are also many new bodies around them. Adam gets into trouble with this man because Matte wants Adam's new body for some reason and tracks him down until he catches him. When Adam could flee from Matte and his men successfully, he realizes that he has nowhere to go; neither the body he wears belongs to him, nor the life he lives is his own. As he himself asserts at the end of the novel, he becomes a stranger to everything: he "was a stranger on the earth, a nobody with nothing, belonging nowhere, a body alone, condemned to begin again, in the nightmare of eternal life" (Kureishi, 2003, p. 126).

Just after the operation, he is captured by the facilities his new body presents. He enjoys all the physical convenience of his new body. From that moment on, he regards himself as "a body which wanted things" (Kureishi, 2003, p. 32). He attempts to do all the activities that require flexible or young muscles, the things that were unimaginable for his previous body:

"I sat lay down, jumped up and down, touched myself, wiggled my fingers and toes, shook my arms and legs and, finally, placed my head carefully on the floor before kicking myself up and standing on it – something I hadn't done for twenty- five years. There was a lot to take in" (Kureishi, 2003, p. 28).

After the operation all the weary thoughts which made his mind busy are not with him. He does not have to think about the pains his old body used to cause, he does not need to worry about the approaching end of his life; he "had more important things to do, like standing on [his] head" (Kureishi, 2003, p. 31).

The main goal of Adam's new life in his young body seems to be doing everything he can without any limitation. When he undergoes the operation, he promises himself about not to miss any chance that is laid before him and it is clear how decisive he behaves for the purpose he determined. When he is offered by a woman to make love for money, he says "my deal with myself was not to turn down such

offers” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 55). Adam experiences lots of new things with his new body. The things, he did not have the chance to do all those years because of his family and work responsibilities, are waiting for him to be picked up now. When his sixty-five years’ accumulation of knowledge and experience is combined with his attractive, young and handsome dress, this paves the way to new adventures for him: What gives meaning to Adam’s present life is his “old mind in a new body” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 36).

Despite all the physical attractiveness he desired once, it does not take much for him to understand the fact that he cannot stand living in that body for so long. He deeply feels the alienation, estrangement and isolation. Having experienced all the troubles he has lived because of his new body, Adam wants to take his old body back. He realizes towards the end of the novella that the second chance he yearned for has not ended up as he wished. All he wanted was to enjoy everything he missed for a certain period of time; however, when he saw that this new body became the source of many problems, pointing at his body he says “all I want is to get rid of *this* (my emphasis), to get out of this meat” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 122). When he first saw the body in the hospital he defines it as a sculpture and this time he refers to it as *meat*. This can be interpreted that at the beginning, the body seemed something beautiful although it had no sense of soul in it; however, at the end of the novel the body loses all the importance and value it once had for Adam, even the physical beauty, youth and attractiveness of the body do not have any charm for Adam. It becomes a worthless meat that must be dispensed with as soon as possible.

When he returns back to hospital where he thinks his old body is kept, he is startled with a great feeling of wonder and disappointment once again because “there were no bodies around, neither new nor old” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 124). This is the time Adam refers to the body as something “condemned to eternal life” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 126). Since he cannot find his real body, he is bound to live a life that will never belong to him; he might live in either his present body or in another one, however; Adam will never be able to turn to his own body, the real self that is constituted by Adam’s former old body and his tired soul. Adam clearly states that what he has experienced is in fact the image of eternal damnation. When he compares himself with one of the characters, who is unaware of Adam’s secret he concludes that “her body and soul were one; she was ‘real’” (Kureishi, 2003, p. 103). Whereas, Adam has to live in a body that does not

belong to him just like being imprisoned or captured somewhere he does not know.

To conclude, under the effect of becoming old, Adam cannot resist the idea constantly imposed on people that being young and beautiful is the desired features for being in a society and having a happy life. Adam's yearning for the ideal pictured before him; namely, having the adventure of an old mind in a new body does not bring him what is idealized. On the contrary, he is split between the things he brought from his former life and the new things he has been experiencing. The real self he owns cannot comply with his new body. Wishing to fulfill the bodily desires he longs for, he dreams of being young for some time, but his attempt causes an endless trouble. He used to feel estranged to his old body, but it was his *own* body, with the new body in addition to the division he experiences in his own self, he needs to set up a public identity and pretend to be the man he actually is not.

Notes on the contributors

Ayşe Demir is an Instructor of English at Pamukkale University, School of Foreign Languages, Denizli, Turkey. She has been teaching English since 2006. She completed her Master's Degree in 2010, at Pamukkale University, Department of English Language and Literature and she has been going on her studies with her PhD thesis in the same field. She specializes in Post-colonial studies. Her research is focused especially on the Post-colonial illusions and juxtapositions.

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