

Reversal of Pakistani Norms: Homoeroticism and Gender - Formations in *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi

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Introduction

Hanif Kureishi, a contemporary British author of Pakistani Origin, was born on December 5, 1954 in Kent. His father was Pakistani and mother was English. Kureishi's father belonged to a wealthy family of Madras which migrated to Pakistan at the time of Partition. Then he came to Britain for studies and permanently settled here in Bromley. Kureishi also worked at Pakistani Embassy.

Kureishi has written extensively in the fields of fiction, screen plays, and film scripts. The overriding concerns in his fiction are race, religion, and sexuality (Kalsoom, 2015; Kaleta, 1997). As the discourse on sexuality has expanded to the gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer, Kureishi's works have assumed critical importance because it predominantly deals with various nuances of this discourse. Kureishi's novels *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *The Black Album* and *The Body* are clearly focused on human body and its sexual orientations. Although Kureishi's writings have often polarized the academic debate on the subjects related to sexuality, yet his works have not been the subject of academic research with particular reference to queer themes and with special reference to the reversal of norms which is a prime focus of this research.

This paper aims at analyzing the same sex desire and its dynamics from a queer perspective in Kureishi's debut novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The most glaring omission which became a sole reason for this research is the politics of sexuality in Hanif Kureishi. *The Buddha of suburbia* in this regard is a seminal work in which father son relationship, same sex relationship, and matters related to incest and gender inversion form the core thematic concern of the novel. Along with exploring the aforementioned constructs, the research in hand serves as a bridge which presents a comparison of the mentality of Muslims living in England and the mindset of the Muslims living in Pakistan. The paper attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

- (1) Are sexual divisions, as presented by Kureishi, in *The Buddha of Suburbia* based on gender categories? If not, how is sexual identity of a human being determined in the novel?
- (2) What position does Kureishi accord to the same sex desire and relationships in a historical perspective on sexuality? How differently or appropriately the author has represented Pakistani Muslim mindset?
- (3) Are human relationships, in Kureishi's novel, governed by cultural absolutes of cross gender nature? Is homoerotics the new normal?

This research is qualitative in nature. The primary text *The Buddha of Suburbia* has been analyzed by the theories of Michael Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler. Moreover, this paper has been divided into four sections. A brief introduction has been followed by the formation of theoretical framework based on the available theoretical data. In the part three,

primary text *The Buddha of Suburbia* has been analyzed in the light of theoretical framework. And finally, the findings of the research have been presented in a brief Conclusion.

Methodology

This research paper analyzes the homoerotic relationships and identities through the perspective of queer theory in Kureishi's selected novel. The scope of this analysis ranges from identity of an individual subject to the positioning of the subject in a wider cultural setup especially the Pakistani/Muslim culture. Queer theory is an evolving field of inquiry and research, which has gained particular significance in the contemporary debates about gender and sexuality. In simple terms, queer is positioned in opposition to the traditional theories about gender and sexuality (Spargo, 1999, p. 9). The term 'queer theory', as has been suggested earlier, is a discursive formation which focuses on the unconventional and the uncanny. Freud has also defined this idea of uncanny as something which "in reality nothing new or alien but something which is familiar and old- established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (1920, p. 241).

This paper includes following constructs as a theoretical framework to analyze the novel in hand:

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* quotes Simone de Beauvoir: "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (1990, p. 1). She deals with gender as an unfixed and fluid category. According to her, gender is not pre-defined. She clearly separates men and women from the humanist conceptions and calls them signifier. She further asserts that these categories are no more 'stable' terms (p. 6). Butler takes this distinction of gender categories to performance. It is asserted that these categories are confined to performance. It is performance that confirms the gender of a person. As discussed before, by performance a male can be female and a female can be male (p. 24). In this research work, the same categories will be explored in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* along with homosexuality.

Homo-Social and Homo-Sexual Desire

"Homosocial," according to Eve Sedgwick, "is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex" (2015, p. 1). It can also be caused by too much hatred for homosexuality and that hatred can be an initiating factor of homosexuality. As said by Sedgwick, "In fact, it is applied to such activities as "male bonding," which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" (p. 1).

Homosexuality, in Foucault's (1990) analysis of history had existed as a cultural practice and a discursive formation long before the seventeenth century. Sedgwick extends the practice of homosexuality to homosociality and confirms its existence in the canon. According to Sedgwick (2015), homosexuality and homosociality are interlinked; they can be taken as products of each other.

Discussion

The novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* revolves around the main character Karim Amir and his queer behavior. He develops intimate relationships with males and females both: "It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls" (Kureishi, 2009, p. 55).

His perverse behaviour is the continuation of Michael Foucault's Roman homosexual cultural practices of seventeenth century where homosexuality used to serve an educational purpose in that Roman Society (Foucault, 1990). This paper explores the prevailing homosexual acts pertinent to Roman culture of seventeenth century, and investigates it in a broader postcolonial context. Similarly, the queerness in Karim Amir links itself with Jaggose's notion of homosexuality that it is the product of a particular community which further forms its own culture: "Homosexuality came to be understood as the grounds for community; on this basis, a recognisable—though small and discreet—culture began to develop, which had its own 'ways of dressing, of talking, distinctive gestures and distinctive acts with an understood meaning, its own jargon'" (1996, p. 12). The in-depth textual analysis of this novel in the light of developed theoretical framework showed that Karim Amir fits into the categories such as homosociality; homosexuality; and gender performativity.

In this novel, two Muslim families and their social practices have been penned down. Besides the problems of 'otherness' among English people, there has been shown another form of 'otherness' which is from their own native culture. The textual analysis has shown that the Muslim immigrants in England with Indo-Pak origins have gone far away from their root culture. They have become aliens for their own people –as in the case of Amir Family and Anwar Family –by changing and reversing the norms of their religion and region.

Conclusion

Hanif Kureishi in his novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* describes the social practices of people living in England in contrast with their personal relationships. He portrays a very vivid picture of the people living in the suburbs and the city. Along with this comparison we find a striking contrast of Islamic values and the actual practices of Indo-Pakistani diaspora. His work is a narrative of the problems faced by both the immigrants and the natives in England: sexual and social.

A strong undercurrent of homosexuality is seen in the novel. People have developed this tendency in their behavior and the pace with which it is developing; it seems that the homoerotic has become the new normal. The research has explored the latent and active homoerotic and homosocial tendencies in various characters as displayed in *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

The impact of fulfilled and unfulfilled desires on gender-formation is of vital importance. It is shown that society also plays an important part in the development of human behavior. Majority of the characters introduced in the novel suffer from similar circumstances: domestic and sexual. They have crossed the legal boundaries and now they are striving for their satisfaction which is not possible within the traditional markers of gender and cultural propriety.

Gender categories, as is shown through this paper, are fluid and dissociated from sexual identity. This fluidity of identity markers is reflected by a rearrangement of gender and sexual ensemble which results in the formation of new identities which do not necessarily exist within the heterosexual discourse.

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