

Ambivalent Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*: Exploring the Protagonist's Struggle for Self-Identification



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Abstract: *The ambivalent identity of the protagonist, Karim Amir, in The Buddha of Suburbia is the subject of the present study. The protagonist's identity takes on new dimensions as he is reminded about his roots. He has half-Indian roots, and, like others with mixed Indian lineage, he finds it hard to convince people to view him like the natives in England. In England, the non-whites were considered inferior. These ideas made way for the formulation of ambivalence in Karim Amir's nature, which is a third space according to Homi K. Bhabha's theory and is a space of interference between two cultures. Karim feels that he is torn between two selves. He cannot easily identify with either one. He is raised to be an Englishman, which is why he can relate to English people and culture. Because of this background, he does not have an insider's view of Indian culture since he's never even been there. Using qualitative textual analysis and Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity, the article explores this issue. The theoretical background focuses on the ambivalent status of the protagonist whose identity is fluid which leads to his identity crisis. He grapples with this inherent tension to the normative ideals of supremacy, differences, of his existence and experience, resulting in the perpetual facing of self and the identity. Finally, Karim's hybridity of Indian and British roots is a sign of multi-cultural existence.*

Keywords: Cultural hybridity, Liminality, third space, Textual Analysis

Introduction

The Buddah of Suberbia portrays an identity crisis of the protagonist, Karim Amir. Karim Amir is culturally hybridized: he belongs to a family of an Indian father and English mother. The nove opens with Karim Amir, the protagonist's narration of himself: "My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred - almost". People often think I'm a bit of a funny English man" (Kureshie. 1990, p.3). Karim is a half-Indian Englishman, who views himself as English "funny kind" in a society and land where his family has always remained on the margins. He sees himself an Englishman but

they mark his outsider status.

Shadwell, a drama director, comments on non-English part of Karim:

Shadwell, a drama director looked at me for my reaction, a twitch or faint sneer may be. 'You're perfect for the role,' he added. 'Actually, you are Mowgli. You're dark-skinned, slim and wiry, and will appear appealing yet decent in the costume. Hopefully, not too indecent. Some critics will like you. Oh yes. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!' (Kureishi, 1990, p.142).

Because of his mixed parentage, he struggled to gain equal position like his peers of host society

(Sabir et al., 2021). Non-Westerners are frequently seen as unclear and due to this considered as being less than Whites.

These ideas opened the door to the potential duality in Karim Amir's character. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) asserts the third space that is an intervening territory between two cultures. The cultures of the two – Indian and British – mix and combine to create something unexpected, something fresh and something unidentifiable. English characters see Karim like an outsider. This is the reason that Shadwel calls him Mowgli.

Karim understands that he is sandwiched between two worlds. He cannot fully embrace either one. He is raised as an Englishman that is why he is attached to the English people and culture. Because of which he is not really knowledgeable about the Indian culture as he had never been in India (Holmlund, 2016). Karim is no great respecter of Indian tradition, up from which he has been brought only insofar as his father tells the odd story, but he is born into a world where he must remind himself that he is not an English man. Even though he can boast half English blood, he is not treated with the same amount of credibility and courtesy he would be getting if he would have been a full white bloke in the suburbs of London, UK!

The current research paper explores the ambivalent identity of Karim Amir, the protagonist of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, within the context of postcolonial diaspora. Drawing upon Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence, the study investigates how Karim's struggle for self-identification reflects broader challenges of immigrant identity formation in multicultural Britain. The novel illustrates how ambivalence shapes Karim's oscillation between his British and South Asian heritage, how cultural transformation alters his values and social interactions, and how hybridity emerges as a negotiated space of belonging. Through textual analysis, this paper highlights Kureishi's portrayal of diasporic identity as fragmented yet dynamic, offering insight into the complexities of selfhood in postcolonial migrant experiences.

Problem Statement

Diaspora migrants encounter a series of challenges. Some of the issues emerge due to cultural clash. The target text reading indicates distinct horrific cultural issues in regard to the formation of self in the diasporas' world. This study is concerned with understanding multiple factors affecting migrants' identities in diaspora and the issue of their ambivalent identity in the diasporic setting.

It will explore the kind of problems and challenges that the migrants of first and second generation face in diaspora. The investigation also reveals the multiple factors that push the migrants towards uncertainty and insecurity. It also compares the different contexts in which the two characters find themselves while being introduced to the new cultures. Karim Amir assimilated the English cultural values with a weak interior knowledge.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study comes from the phenomenon which has been observed by a larger population of the world now i.e., migration. The Diasporas' experiences in newly settled zones are the main focus in this study, a point of concern for many people. The kind of experiences that the migrants go through, become the cause of their self-recognition as well as self-development. Similarly, migrants' struggle to settle in new lands etc., lead these characters to experience hybridity. The study is significant in this scenario that findings of it yield information about circumstances which the migrants experience when they settle in new societies.

Literature Review

This study is about Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, focusing on Karim's ambivalent identity. While critics have examined issues of race and hybridity in the novel, fewer studies directly explore how Karim's conflicted selfhood reflects the deeper struggles of diasporic self-identification. Karim, the novel's protagonist, embraces British culture ... but Englishness is not bestowed upon him. These emotions leave him feeling ambivalent.

Ambivalence is a dynamic state of having conflicting feelings or ideas about identity. Karim feels as such after facing too many events.

Those immigrants who had travelled to Britain from other nations under the 1970s immigration policy stood under obligation to assimilate to British culture – they were to practice their culture only in the private, in their house, behind the four walls, and publicly place themselves under the orders of the English culture. Kureishi (1994) highlights in *The Buddha of Suburbia* that this, however, was hardly enough for the British who had still never regarded this community as their equals. “The truth was, we were meant to be English, but they always labelled us with derogatory terms like ; wogs, nigs, Pakis and other alike” (p. 53).

Azeem (2020) analyses English superiority attitude in relation to ethnic minorities and global culture. Karim’s thoughts replicate portrayal of negative terms despite knowing there would be assimilation as these are the complicated relationship addressed in Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994) concept of cultural hybridity.

In the study, Karim is faced with difficulty in seeking a group with which he has a total sense of belonging. As Karim attempts to fit into the alien world that is his new home, the novel focuses on the migrant’s experiences belonging to first and second-generation.

It implies that immigrants of first-generation are stereotyped as being primarily concerned with making money. They also want to preserve their native culture in the routed society. Karim is one of those characters whose persona is shaped and raised by the society and situation of his country. On one hand he is nostalgic for his motherland, India, but he doesn’t want to return to this same India. His passion for moving pictures, Western culture, Indian, the associations with numerous occurrences and the setting, all contribute to defining him.

The Second-generation children of the emigrants in those countries where their grandparents migrated to are likely to be assimilated into the new society. They are looking for meaning and relationships with the

world around them. Karim is struggling between two different cultures having two identities. He feels that he is to a great extent an Englishman, but he acknowledges that he is not a genuine Englishman, because everybody tells him he does not quite belong to the English community. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that there are so many racist people who out of their hatred for Karim, cannot really accept him.

Karim experiences the in-between-ness, a position of being sandwiched between fixed notions of identity and culture. Karim longs to develop an identity of complete acceptance for himself; however, he feels torn between his English and Indian identities.

Karim considers his uncle Anwar’s actions as irrational- the man has been away from the Indian roots for a long time, and then they are the next minute pointing to but still he is under influence of his Indian beliefs. This also happens as Karim’s father, too, decides to go back to his own cultural identity which further alienates Karim who remains stuck between two cultures, wondering why all of the sudden, the older generation feel so intensely about their heritage and the conflict between Karim and his father’s beliefs makes Karim feel conflicted and ambivalent.

The cultural clash that Karim faces adds to his ambivalence position. He even encounters this clash when assigned a role in a play in London. They are brought by Eva, who arranges an audition for Karim with her friend, the director Shadwell. Karim is annoyed with Shadwell’s questions about his culture rather than discussing him and his life as an actor.

For Karim, Shadwell’s questioning feels invasive and insulting: “he describes his discomfort at being addressed so personally as the director had the right to demand answers” (Kureishi, 1990, p.142). Karim’s doubt derives from his meeting with Shadwell. Karim's ambivalence is stimulated as Shadwell had replied so coldly and so psychological turbulence and confusion ensued. Karim can’t believe that he’s been cast in the part because of where his roots, rather than his abilities or experience. This bombshell upends his

conception of acting, leading to discussions with the director. Karim tries to reason with the man, but the director is adamant. "Karim, the role was given to you for authenticity rather than expertise.' I found it hard to accept. Even after I did, we talked about it many times, yet he refused to change his mind" (Kureshie, 1990, p. 00)

Karim has bad feelings about his identity, since due to least attachment with his roots, he considers himself as a part of the English society. Most of the questions Shadwell poses here reveal that Karim can't coherently answer because of his more disintegrated sense of self. Karim is the Indian immigrant's son having a British woman. Karim's situation is different from the first generation immigrant (his father), yet for some English people it can be quite difficult why they grow up with the psychological problems of ambivalence.

Research Methodology

This article looks at South Asian diasporic literature to consider what happens when migrants flee their homes to negotiate the complexities of their new environment. The study is qualitative in nature and the research design is textual analysis (paying attention to the selected texts as well as the characters having it into context of *Homi K. Bhabha*' theories of ambivalence, hybridity and cultural transformation. Textual analysis, according to Belsey (2013), a research procedure that closely interacts with the text, by which it is possible to look closely into the bugs of the text merely with minimum pre-assumptions.

Theoretical Framework

According to Bhabha's theory (1994), ambivalence is produced through the ambivalent relationship of dominant and subordinate cultures, since people could oscillate between two opposite identities and values. This derives from the contradiction of the process of obeying the dominant culture and process of asserting the distinctiveness of one's cultural identity resulting in a continued self-affirmation and identity, and self and identity affirmation. Bhabha underlines the complex and ambivalent nature of identity in the modern multicultural

and postcolonial world.

Delimitations

The study is delimited to analyzing diasporic novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi. It includes the parameters of diaspora as set down by these texts that are of particular concern here. The research draws on Homi Bhabha's hybridity, furthermore, examination is restricted to the issues of ambivalence of identity crisis, appropriation of the alien culture, and self-formation.

Data Analysis

Adopting textual analysis as a research method, I attempted to support the analysis with the theory of cultural hybridity. These theoretical principles are relied upon as tools to disinter diasporic literature with a view to the impact of diaspora on the ideology, conduct, national ethos, behaviour and gender relations of the émigré.

Against this very context on Bhabha's perspective, the present study also analyses diasporic literature in the context of theories which reflect upon theoretical dimensions of socio-cultural formations and dynamics of religion impacting upon cultural metamorphism. The use of textual analysis as a method allows for targeted querying, finding textual evidence that supports and explains the study concept.

In a society migrants are commonly subordinated to be motor mechanics, clerks, etc and the indigenous are the more prestigious jobs. For all they do, migrants seldom end up on top of the social and economic ladder. Natives and second generation of the migrants are born in the same society but the latter is not given the same rights with regard to education, employment, etc. Simply put, it is just that immigrants do not feel ascertained nor possess the assertiveness to believe that they belong to the society or to take the same life style as the natives do.

Karim's identity shifts between Indian and British heritages, reflecting the complexity of multicultural life. This fluidity, in part, contributes to his ambivalence toward constructing his identity within societal expectations and stereotypes, particularly when

viewed by characters like Shadwell, who ultimately underscore his feelings of being an outsider.

Karim lives in a “third space,” devised by Homi K. Bhabha, in which he belongs to neither culture completely, resulting in a hybrid identity that refuses to be acknowledged. His Indian heritage complicates his wish to belong, adding perceptions of “otherness” despite his British upbringing. This cultural limbo leads to constant negotiation of identity and epitomizes the hurdles which second-generation immigrants face. The generational divide between Karim and his father, Haroon, intensifies his ambivalence. As Haroon reconnects with his Indian roots, Karim grapples with integrating this aspect of his identity, which puts him at odds with his father’s traditional values. Karim’s ambivalence is compounded by his fluid sexual orientation and developing relationships, and by his idealization of city life and subsequently suburban disillusionment.

Karim’s identity struggles are exacerbated by external pressures such as Shadwell and Pyke, who impose racial stereotypes on Karim and reinforce his position in a liminal space. According to Orientalism, Western dominance shapes his identity, leaving little room for self-definition. He is further distanced from both cultures through racial stereotyping and thus he is associated with “Mowgli.”

Karim’s internal monologue exposes this sense of anger and frustration for being linked with these stereotypes, and he struggles throughout the novel between his British and Indian identities. Though he speaks perfect English, he can never truly fit in with White British society, underscoring his cultural alienation. Encounters with racism and discrimination sharpen his ambivalence, showing a painful aspect of moving through a hybrid identity in a hostile society.

Characters like Eleanor criticizing Karim for his suburban accent highlights this tension between Karim’s hybrid identity versus the expectations of the White upper class which further complicate and render Karim’s ambivalence and displacement. Bhabha (1994) observes that

individuals in subordinate positions often resort to mimicry of those in power as a strategy for assimilation, which simultaneously reveals their sense of alienation and perceived inadequacy. Karim’s remorse about abandoning his comfortable suburban life for what appears to him an inauthentic life underscores his discomfort about his hybrid identity. Cricketing ambition in the “third space,” where cultures collide, complicates his mixed identity; he longs to play for England but wrestles with his Indian roots. There is also a pressure to assimilate — his brother, Amar, anglicizes his name — which fuels Karim’s internal conflict.

Even though he has come to terms with his biraciality and sexual orientation, Karim is a misfit compared with those around him — especially his family. This physical outside view cements the never completely belonging to both cultures which makes him even more indecisive and ambiguous. Only his Uncle Ted and his mother refuse to acknowledge that he is the product of two cultures though he bears the internal scars of this conflict.

Karim is characterised from the outside by racial stereotypes that erase any subjectivity and devalues him to the status of categories: “Paki”, “black”. As he is objectified by caricatured hypersexual Orientalist ideals (such as the shallow interest Eva takes in his “Oriental”-ness), he is effectively stripped of personhood and the sense of who he is grows increasingly more complicated; he is little more than a symbol walking around. Karim imitates his father’s cynical playing on Indian identity as he negotiates a course of hybridity between authentic and societal claims.

In Karim’s professional journey, merit is often overshadowed by tokenism. His Indian background is emphasized and exploited, while his English identity is marginalized, reinforcing his ambivalence. As a result, Karim occupies a liminal space—neither fully accepted as English nor authentically represented as Indian—leading to an ongoing identity confusion. His identity as an Indian is limited by societal expectations to be “authentic,” avoiding the multiplicity of Bhabha’s notion of in-betweenness. Karim’s mixed heritage offers career opportunities, but it

causes personal strife for complete acceptance like other natives. External pressures, like Shadwell's demand for "authentic" Indian experience, feed his ambivalence and highlight the larger difficulties of straddling cultures.

In addition to his ambivalent identity, Karim suffers socio-economic challenges, insecurity and anger towards his social position at this stage. His experiences, contrasted with people of better financial conditions, expose the structural injustices that immigrants have to face. Both Karim and his father Haroon are disillusioned by life in England: Their reality becomes a far cry to their idealized expectations, causing an increasing sense of ambivalence. Cultural and economic barriers add to their sense of inadequacy and dislocation. Both, despite their attempts to "fit in", still find themselves as outsiders, facing systematic racial discrimination and societal contempt. This continuing marginalization feeds into Karim's ambivalence and complicates his search for identity.

Conclusion

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim Amir's struggle for self-definition epitomizes the ambivalent identity of second-generation immigrants caught between inherited traditions and adopted cultures. His oscillation between Indian and British heritages situates him in Homi Bhabha's "third space," where hybridity resists fixed categorization yet results in a continual negotiation of belonging. This ambivalence is compounded by generational conflict with his father Haroon, by his fluid sexuality, and by the disillusionment he experiences when urban life fails to meet his expectations. Externally, figures such as Shadwell and Pyke reinforce Orientalist stereotypes, reducing Karim to racial caricatures like "Mowgli" and stripping him of individuality, while class-based exclusions and linguistic prejudice further alienate him from white British society. His mimicry of Indian stereotypes for professional survival mirrors the broader dilemma of negotiating identity within rigid cultural frameworks. Despite moments of acceptance, Karim remains liminal—neither fully English nor authentically Indian—

rendering his identity fragmented, performative, and unsettled. Economic marginalization and structural racism intensify this condition, leaving both Karim and Haroon disillusioned by the disparity between their imagined futures and the reality of exclusion. Ultimately, Karim's identity embodies the complexities of hybridity: fluid, contested, and continually reshaped under the pressures of race, class, and cultural expectation.

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