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ART AND ARTISTIC SELF IN HANIF KUREISHI'S *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA*

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Abstract

Hanif Kureishi was born in South London in 1954 to an English mother and Pakistani father. His father came to England in the 50s with the hope of studying law. But he ended in working as a civil servant at the Pakistani Embassy in England. Kureishi went to school in Bromley and studied philosophy at the University of Lancaster and King's College London. He got his early success as a playwright, working with the Hampstead Theatre and the Royal Court. Hanif is an eminent British playwright, screenwriter, and novelist who deals with the subject of the 'identity' of his Asian and English characters. Most of his characters are willing to be an artist like writers, musicians, and an actor. Kureishi's treatments of the theme are class, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture of the English multicultural society. Kureishi's first successful novel is *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) that won the Whitbread Award for the first novel. This work draws Kureishi's own experiences as a hybrid person and struggle to find his true self. The protagonist, Karim Amir, belongs to the British Asian community, which lives in a London suburb. He represents all the second-generation Pakistani immigrants in Britain and trying hard to search for his belonging.

Keywords

Self reflection, Culture, Ideology, Globalization.

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Kureishi's books are predominantly involved with artists, such as actors, writers, painters, and musicians. His concerns with art and the artistic self in his first novel can be traced in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The protagonist of the novel, Karim Amir wants to be an actor, and his half-brother Charlie wants to be a pop-musician. However, the journeys of Kureishi's protagonists are not easy. They will face some stiff competition, uncertainty in the path of getting their artistic dream. In this novel, Kureishi has shown his life's journey of becoming a writer. It is a self-reflexive novel per se.

Unlike most of his contemporary writers, Kureishi explores the multiple ways of finding true self. In this category, art has played a significant role for his artistic protagonists. Kureishi seems to be worshipping art in his novels. As a teenager, he grew up in suburban London in the 70s. He witnessed the changing cultural milieu of British society. The post-war British society was growing under a new umbrella of music, fashion, and style. Kureishi's novels are full of art and artistic references to pop icons like Tamla Motown, Prince, Sex Pistols and Beatles. He uses art as a way of exploring the hidden world of artist's struggles and success. It would be interesting to know how he perceives an artist. Kureishi says, 'An artist is somebody who starts with the rules, then breaks the rules, then takes the whole thing through another language'. (Interviews by Rachel Lees)

Artists have always been the creator of unimaginable and memorable things in the world. They have known as the mysterious self with magical creative power. Plato says about a poet who is a 'light and winged thing, and holy.' Even Coleridge viewed a poet who had fed 'on honey-dew' and 'drunk the milk of Paradise.' Both

Plato and Coleridge seem to celebrate the poet as a heavenly being with heavenly power. Artists are the creator of their own magical world where they meditate and live away from the world's humdrum. They are like a drunken and enchanted person. They focused on their artistic self by living in an alienated world.

Artists are creative people, and creativity demands certain personality traits. Jane Piirto (2009) talks about many studies that have emphasized the fact that creative persons in all domains have certain personality attributes in common. Piirto has listed the following personality attributes of creative people from well-documented studies: androgyny, creativity, imagination, insight, intuition, introversion, naivete or openness to experience, over excitabilities, motivation or passion for work in a domain, perceptiveness, persistence, preference for complexities, resilience, risk-taking, self-discipline, tolerance for ambiguity, and volition or will.

Carl G. Jung in his book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), talked about one of the key sources for artistic creation. He pointed out human beings 'collective unconscious' as the leading source for artistic creation. He defined collective consciousness as a state in which 'a certain psychic disposition shaped by the forces of heredity (Jung 165). The tenacity of unconscious desire makes a simple person into a poet, a seer, or a leader. Jung further says that 'the artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realise its purpose through him' (Jung 169). According to his theory of artistic creation, every individual has 'a ruthless passion for creation', but one must seek it through himself. However, each one of us is gifted with a 'certain capital of energy' or human impulse at birth.

Identity is the way we recognize and express ourselves in society. The factors and conditions in defining one's identity can be his ethnic heritage, sex, or social inclination. Although, these factors can be vulnerable to change his or her life for so long yet identity is prone to changeable by people's behaviours how they see themselves or are perceived by others. However, society's fashion, music, arts, and political beliefs are accountable for someone's identity construction. It could better apply to artist's lives. The question must arise that why would one like pop music over classical and how music defines someone's personality? Many pop artists, musicians, writers, and painters reflect, express, or explore their identity through their works of creativity.

Kureishi's characters have undergone certain crises in their ordinary lives before embarking on a world of art. But at the end of the novels, they all get their desired dreams of becoming an artist or writer and solve all their issues related to personal and familial lives. Kureishi has used music as a tool to portray an attitude and milieu of a particular era. As a fan of pop culture, Kureishi says in one of his interviews that, "I grew up in the sixties and seventies. When I was growing up, pop music was our salvation. ...pop music for my generation was very liberating because those boys - the Beatles, the Who, the Rolling Stones - they were all suburban boys mostly." (Bradley Buchanan, 2007 p- 71-72).

Pop culture had a great effect on Kureishi's artistic protagonists. It helped to shape their identities with a positive note. It became one of the famous subcultures

in the multicultural society of England. Consequently, Kureishi's characters behave according to current cultural norms and later mould them in their way. The uniqueness of pop culture reminds us of the hybridizing power of Bhabha's ethno-cultural hybridity. However, the focus of subcultures is to create a third space, which "displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom." (Bhabha, 211)

Kureishi has presented pop stars and their ideologies to break age-old traditional notions of society. The rock and roll and spunky looks of the pop stars had some deep hidden meanings. They had given an open space for many youths to construct their artistic identity. The same is the case with Kureishi's characters in the novels. The pop stars are the role models for Kureishi's young and enthusiastic art lover characters like Karim Amir, Shahid, and Gabriel. Most of Kureishi's characters are aspire to be an artist. They dismiss race, class, and gender-based discrimination. Kureishi's protagonists come from very traditional communities of the East or English. They are not elite or sophisticated. But one thing that is common among them is to get into the world of art and literature.

There journey of Karim Amir in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is very similar to the journey of Kureishi. The novel contains many autobiographical elements. It is necessary to understand how Kureishi's own life influenced his stance on politics, pop culture, and representation. (Kaleta chapter, 3). As a teenager, Kureishi was inspired by his father's obedient commitment to writing. His father Rafiushan wanted to a writer. He had written six novels during his lifetime, but none of which were published. Rafiushan encouraged his son, Kureishi, to become a professional writer. Kureishi's understandable, vibrant, and engaging characters are the result of his inspiration from his father.

At the beginning of the novel, Karim Amir seems to be confused. But after interacting with other characters like his half-brother Charlie, he came to realize his potential. Charlie motivates him from his school level. They work and perform in the same musical band at the school. Although, Karim and Charlie belong to a different ethnic background. Karim is the son of an Indian immigrant father and an English mother. He is of a lower-middle-class of Asian descent. However, for Karim, most of the great names in the pop world like The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and David Bowie became such an inspiration. These famous artists come from the working or middle class of England. They showed that there was a way to surpass the hardest obstacle of Britain's stiff class structure. Art is not only fascinating for teenagers but also all group age. Karim idolizes artists like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and David Bowie, who are the inspiration for millions of aspiring artists in the world.

The artist David Bowie is always present in the novel for Karim's inspiration. Kureishi epitomizes Charlie as Bowie, who personifies Bowie with his musical creativity and the presentation of sexuality. Charlie shows his bisexual nature to the world with his songs and performances on the stage. Charlie and Karim have a homosexual relationship in the novel. They are studying in the same college, where David Bowie studied seven years ago. So, they are fortunate to be a

part of the same college and trying to imitate the success path of David Bowie. As Karim finds in the college where: "Boys were often to be found their knees before this icon [a poster of Bowie], praying to be made into pop stars and for release from a lifetime as a motor-mechanic, or a clerk in an insurance firm, or a junior architect (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 68).

Karim's father comes from a very traditional family from Pakistan. He came to Britain with the hope to make, money as much as he could. He wants Karim to be someone very professional such as a doctor or engineer. Karim seems to be helpless as he failed to convince his father to become an artist. Consequently, he shared his plan with Eva Kay rather than his father, that he wanted to be an actor. Eva senses out the real desire of Karim, and she plans to get him into the theatre world. She tells him to read aloud from books to make his voice sound clear. Although Karim has a good voice, so she appreciates him. Eva Kay after, settling down with Karim's father Haroon in London, arranges a party 'as her launch into London'. At the party, she invites people from the film and theatre world and introduces Karim to theatre-director Shadwell. Shadwell is impressed by Karim's audition from Sam Shepard's speech of 'The Mad Dog Blue'. In response, Shadwell says, "I'm looking for an actor just like you" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 140).

Karim became so desperate to get the part in Shadwell's play because he, "couldn't face going back to that flat in West Kensington not knowing what to do with my life and having to be pleasant, and not being respected by anyone" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 139). Karim is told that he would play the character Mowgli from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. But he was expecting to play the role of an English rather than an Asian. Eva did not mention Shadwell's intention of giving Karim a character from the oriental background. However, Shadwell takes the side of Eva by saying to Karim that, "She's trying to protect you from your destiny, which is to be a half-caste in England. That must be complicated for you to accept-belonging nowhere, wanted nowhere" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 141).

Shadwell's intention behind picking Karim is to bring authenticity to his play. Therefore, Karim is instructed to work on his Indian accent. To hone his accent, he starts to read a lot of books from classical literature. Karim never expected such hard work from himself. He starts working day and night to perform better at the play. Karim proudly says that he reads, "a lot, proper books like *Lost Illusions* and *The Red and the Black*, and went to bed early, in training for love and work" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 145). But one day something unusual happened with Karim; when he comes to know about the costume of Mowgli. Karim is compelled to apply shit-brown cream on his face to give more Indianness to the character Mowgli. He has to practice different voices and also wears animal masks.

Karim's self-esteem is hurt not by the play's performance but by how it was presented on the stage. Although, he decides to play the role of Mowgli and wants to give a remarkable performance because he 'relished being the pivot of the production'. But he despises Shadwell and wants to run away from the theatre group. Karim must ignore these kinds of artistic exploitations based on ethnic grounds. These are the testing time for the artist to be calm and patient.

Charlie is another character in the novel who aspires to be an artist. He is the son of Eva Kay. He is a few years older than Karim and comes from a suburb like him. However, he belongs to the middle class, whereas Karim belongs to the lower middle class. Charlie is quite a different character than Karim. His family believes in a 'Bohemian' lifestyle, and he knows what to do in his life. Eva Kay is always ready to help her son in his artistic activities. Charlie's dream is to become a famous pop star in the world.

Karim always looks up to Charlie for confidence and gets up his dream of becoming an actor. Even Karim copies Charlie's dresses and says: "I, who wanted only to be like Charlie-as clever, as cool in every part of my soul -tattooed his words onto my brain. Levi's with an open-necked shirt, maybe in a very modest pink or, I would never go out in anything else for the rest of my life" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 17). Charlie as a pop star plays the role of David Bowie in the novel. Kureishi himself admires the charm and glory of David Bowie, who inspires millions of artists throughout the world. Karim looks up to Charlie as a role model.

Charlie starts his career in England with a hippy rock 'n' roll band. He wants to take advantage of his girlish physical features, to create a different impression of a pop star. He manages to present himself as neither male nor female to fascinate the audience. Karim notices that Charlie's band "didn't have an original sound" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 118). Charlie flaunts to carry a book of poetry in his pocket, which he occasionally takes out in the middle of a conversation. He cultivates the attitude of "an enraging affectation, worthy of an Oxford undergraduate" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 118). In the middle of the novel, Karim realized that Charlie is not genuine talent as a musician. He regards Charlie as "a back-door man" who sells his appearance rather than talent.

Karim ends his artistic journey with Charlie after returning from America. He saw some of the darkest aspects of the art world in America while living with Charlie. In London, Karim auditions for the role of the rebellious son of an Indian immigrant. Ultimately, he gets the role and starts his new journey of an acting career in London. He finally gets his true artistic self after going through some rough phases. The novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* is about two aspiring artists of two different persuasions. One does the practice of social realism with the help of theatrical activity and wants to engage with the masses. The other does not bother to see social aspects rather exploit the consumerist appeal of a social movement. Both these artists get their artistic selves with the help of art.

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