

The Search for Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *The Black Album* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Abstract

Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith engage in a critical examination of the established conceptualizations of identity, challenging their rigidity and highlighting the inherent unstable nature of identity. The objective of this thesis is to examine the way in which Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith challenge the perceived stability of race, identity, and ethnicity within the dynamic cultural and societal landscape of post-war London. By drawing upon Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and the third space, both authors destabilize traditional dichotomies and offer critical perspectives on the highly diverse nature of London's metropolis. Kureishi and Smith, in their respective literary works, craft characters whose identities exhibit a dynamic and hybrid nature, characterized by a perpetual state of openness to transformation. In alternative terms, the characters within the narrative contest fundamental conceptions regarding identity and instead portray fluid and evolving manifestations. Upon conducting an analysis of the three aforementioned novels, it becomes evident that Kureishi and Smith share a perspective that regards identity as a dynamic and precarious construct within the context of an increasingly interconnected and globalized society.

Keywords: Ambivalence; fluidity; hybridity; identity; third space.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, characterized by enhanced mobility facilitated by accessible transportation, technological advancements, and the rapid dissemination of information, various factors such as the decline of colonialism, the emergence of diasporas, the establishment of refugee communities, and the expanding global reach of labor and commerce have contributed to a growing phenomenon wherein individuals are exposed to multiple cultures in a direct and personal manner. This phenomenon results in the amalgamation of diverse cultural elements and the emergence of novel perspectives on race, ethnicity, identity, and nationalism. Furthermore, the ongoing changes occurring in multicultural societies lead to the redefinition of these categories. Great Britain, too, is counted among the nations that have undergone a significant shift in their national identity, a process marked by turbulence primarily stemming from its colonial past. Furthermore, the matter of identity has become significantly intricate due to the migration of individuals who possess a diverse range of identities originating from former colonies, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War. The concept of Englishness underwent significant scrutiny and discussion upon the influx of individuals from former colonies. The exploration of multiculturalism and hybrid identities has emerged as prominent motifs within contemporary literature, reflecting the growing interconnectedness and globalization of our world. The primary aim of this thesis is to undertake a comprehensive examination of the representation of mimicry, hybridity, and third space in the literary oeuvre of Hanif Kureishi, with a specific focus on his works *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and *The Black Album* (1995), as well as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). The objective of this study is to examine the manner in which the aforementioned novels address issues related to race, ethnicity, and identity within the context of British society, employing postcolonial theory as a theoretical framework for analysis.

According to Homi K. Bhabha, it is his belief that both identities and cultures possess hybrid characteristics. He holds the belief that all cultural assertions and frameworks are formulated within a specific realm denoted as the "Third Space of Enunciation." As per Homi K. Bhabha's conceptualization, mimicry refers to the act of replicating the cultural practices of the colonizer by the colonized population, with the intention of seeking recognition and assimilation. Hybridity refers to the process of combining various cultural

elements to create new and unique forms of identity. Bhabha introduced the concept of the third space, which pertains to a realm of cultural discourse where innovative identities and perspectives are engendered. The selected literary works written by Kureishi and Smith provide valuable insights into the aforementioned concepts and serve as a rich field for scholarly analysis and discussion.

Kureishi's debut literary piece, titled *The Buddha of Suburbia*, explores the life of Karim Amir, a young British-Pakistani man who strives to establish his sense of self in an evolving multicultural London. The exploration of themes pertaining to mimicry and hybridity is undertaken by the author Kureishi, who employs the experiences of the character Karim as a means of elucidating these concepts. Karim encounters difficulties in the process of reconciling his personal identity as a result of the presence of contradictory cultural expectations.

The primary focus of *The Black Album* revolves around the personal encounters of Shahid Hasan, an undergraduate of British-Pakistani descent, as he navigates the complexities arising from the juxtaposition of Islamic fundamentalism and Western liberalism. Kureishi utilizes the character of Shahid as a vehicle to examine the complexities of hybrid identity and the challenges faced by immigrants and their descendants in contemporary British society. Kaleta believes that *The Black Album* by Hanif Kureishi, challenges its protagonists to explore the many facets of their identities (Kaleta, 1998, p.5). As noted by Ranasinha (2002), the primary aim of the author is to challenge the prevailing and limited portrayals of Britain by acknowledging the substantial impact of post-war immigration. He is actively engaged in shaping and defining the contemporary hybrid culture of Britain (Ranasinha, 2002, p.1).

The novel *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith intricately portrays the experiences of diverse families residing in London, encompassing various generations and ethnic backgrounds, in the aftermath of World War II. Smith's literary oeuvre explores the notions of mimicry and hybridity, establishing an intermediary space that enables the exploration of varied perspectives and interactions within a culturally heterogeneous community.

In the context outlined, the literary works of Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith, specifically *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *The Black Album*, and *White Teeth* can be regarded as reflective of British society. These novels serve as instruments for challenging

established concepts such as race, identity, and ethnicity, particularly within the post-colonial urban setting of London. This city acts as a convergence point for individuals from diverse backgrounds, particularly those hailing from former colonies, who collectively participate in a dynamic and swiftly evolving process of societal transformation.

RESULTS

The examination of the notion of 'identity' is approached from multiple perspectives. The characters consistently confront the inherent instability and unpredictability associated with a diasporic lifestyle, navigating the complexities by negotiating between their native culture and the British society in which they currently reside. The literature explores the concept of identity as a fluid construct that experiences continuous transformation and growth, rather than being a static entity. The characteristic under consideration is demonstrated by several literary figures, such as Karim Amir from *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Shahid Hasan from *The Black Album*, and Irie Jones from *White Teeth*. The formation of individual identities is not exclusively contingent upon one's origins and life experiences, but rather is influenced by the ongoing process of adaptation and transformation in response to the dynamic conditions of their surroundings.

DISCUSSION

Kureishi's portrayal of Karim in the introductory section of the novel provides the reader with insight into the protagonist's recognition of his ambiguous position within English society. Kureishi substantiates this viewpoint by demonstrating Karim's self-perception as a unique individual and by depicting his reception within the broader social framework. The protagonist of the literary work exhibits a profound comprehension of their distinct identity as a biological and cultural amalgamation stemming from their paternal Pakistani and maternal English ancestry. As a result, he identifies himself as part of the present-day generation of English individuals. According to Bentley (2008), Karim's self-representation can be described as that of a hybrid individual, incorporating elements from two separate ethnic origins. Karim's self-perception is the driving force behind his identification as a "new breed" (p. 162). This phenomenon can be observed in various instances throughout his cognitive and physiological development. The portrayal of the

identity formation process in Kureishi's work holds considerable significance due to its representation as an ongoing, adaptable, and ever-evolving phenomenon, thus resonating with Bhabha's viewpoint. Karim Amir demonstrates a fluid sense of self, as he adopts diverse identities in different circumstances. Ranasinha (2002) posits that Karim's identity is perceived as performative in nature (p.72). Karim acknowledges that the only strategy to counter exclusionary statements is to establish distinct identities that set him apart from others. Hence, Karim asserts that in order to acquire the additional advantage associated with an Indian heritage, it would be imperative to artificially create it (Kureishi (1990, p. 213). It is crucial to consider that Kureishi portrays Karim's identity as being in a state of transition, rather than fixed and immutable, as demonstrated by Hashmi's analysis (1993, p. 28).

The perpetual nature of identity construction is evident in Kureishi's characters, who employ unconventional means to achieve social visibility. Mimicry is considered to be among the various phenomena under examination. Mimicry, a significant notion often associated with Homi K. Bhabha, refers to the act of the colonized imitating the dominant culture in an exaggerated manner. The statement may be interpreted as a reaction to prevalent preconceptions regarding individuals who have been colonized. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as a mechanism that subverts colonial discourse through humor and undermines the hegemony of colonial power (Loomba, 1998, p. 178). The phenomenon of mimicry has the potential to cause unease and pose a perceived danger to the colonizing party, as it results in a replication that is not easily discernible from the original, thereby blurring the lines between the colonized and the colonizer. The novel portrays the adoption of English cultural practices by Karim, Haroon, and Anwar as a means of asserting their presence and influence in society. The persistent hybridity of these characters poses a challenge in terms of their classification, as they defy conventional notions pertaining to their identity.

Hanif Kureishi's novel, *The Black Album*, provides an elaborate and straightforward analysis of various themes, including identity, cultural mimicry, ambiguity, and the notion of a 'third space' within a culturally heterogeneous society. The novel offers a compelling and complex narrative that depicts the difficulties encountered by its protagonist, Shahid Hassan, a young British Pakistani individual who is navigating the intricacies of personal

and cultural identity in late 20th century London. The comprehensive examination of Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* offers a perceptive comprehension of concepts such as identity, third space, mimicry, and ambivalence. In the framework of this literary work, the concept of identity is depicted as being non-unitary, unchanging, and not solely determined by one's lineage; instead, it is portrayed as being flexible, complex, and primarily influenced by one's surroundings. The narrative of Shahid's personal exploration serves as a poignant illustration of the challenges inherent in grappling with a fragmented sense of self. Buchanan (2007) claims that both *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* depict a protagonist who undergoes a range of encounters within a multicultural environment, thereby playing a significant role in the formation and shaping of their personal identity (p.41). Thomas also (2005) asserts that Shahid, the protagonist of *The Black Album*, displays a proactive inclination towards the establishment of his personal identity (p.101).

In her novel *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith utilizes the theoretical frameworks of mimicry, hybridity, and third space to examine the multifaceted nature of the characters, such as Archie Jones, Samad Iqbal, and their respective families. In her novel, Smith delves into the intricate process of identity development within a multicultural context, placing significant focus on the interconnected themes of cultural dislocation, affiliation, and intergenerational discord. The primary focus of the novel revolves around individuals who are immigrants of the first generation, residing in the north-west region of London, and the subsequent generation of children they have raised (Dutta, 2013, p. 2). The experience of hybridity can be challenging for first-generation individuals who have migrated to England, as they may have previously been accustomed to their native cultures. Individuals may encounter challenges when attempting to relinquish or dismiss their established beliefs in favor of a novel setting. The novel depicts various instances of this phenomenon. One such example is when Samad expresses his discontentment towards his acquaintance Jones for addressing him as "Sam," which could be perceived as a diminutive version of his given name. He responds by saying, "My name is Samad Miah Iqbal. Not Sam". Not Sam. Not Sammy. And not -God forbid—Samuel. It is Samad" (Smith, 2000, p. 112). This demonstrates the inflexibility of adjusting to different cultural contexts. The narrative depicts various dimensions of hybridity, including but not limited to religion, culture, race,

and lifestyle. The main aim of this study has been to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex process of identity formation within the framework of third space, mimicry, and ambivalence through the analysis of the aforementioned literary works. Kureishi and Smith have undertaken a critical examination of the complexities of diasporic life and the associated conflicts in their literary works, revealing the diverse characteristics of individuals who adeptly maneuver through the intricate paths of their identities.

CONCLUSION

These particular literary works, particularly *White Teeth*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *The Black Album*, adeptly demonstrate the existence of ambiguity in the characters' quest for their individual identities. The pursuit of Irie to unearth her ancestral origins, the endeavor of Karim to reconcile his British-Indian heritage, and the vacillation of Shahid between secular and religious identities are all instances that exemplify this state of ambiguity. All of the aforementioned narratives take place in India. The protagonists' attempts to form a unified sense of self appear to be ineffective as they consistently find themselves caught in the midst of conflicting cultural domains, resulting in an enduring state of ambiguity. The main aim of this thesis has been to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex process of identity formation within the framework of third space, mimicry, and ambivalence through an analysis of the aforementioned literary works. Kureishi and Smith have undertaken a critical examination of the intricacies of diasporic life and the resulting conflicts in their literary works, thereby highlighting the diverse range of individuals who adeptly navigate the complex pathways of their identities. The characters in the narrative frequently encounter precarious situations, which serve as catalysts for their personal growth and a heightened comprehension of the intricate dimensions of their identities. The trajectory of the characters does not align with the pursuit of a static and unchanging sense of identity. Instead, it represents a continuous and cyclical effort to gain, discard, and regain knowledge, highlighting the adaptable, evolving, and seemingly paradoxical characteristics of identities that arise from experiences of diaspora. Through a careful examination of these narratives, a deeper understanding of the intricate nature of the immigrant experience emerges. This includes an exploration of the challenges and

achievements associated with navigating one's sense of self within the context of cultural diversity. The literary works mentioned above present a complex representation of identity in the contemporary global context, which is marked by its flexibility, ambiguity, and ability to adjust. The aforementioned vision is actualized through the adherence to the concepts of hybridity, third space, mimicry, and ambivalence.

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