
Redefining the Sexual Orientations in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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Abstract

The paper will study Kureishi's treatment of gender and sexuality from the perspective of his character's sexual orientation. I will examine his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, to find out the sexual orientations of his characters. Kureishi's body of work has touched upon nearly every aspect of sexuality in his novels. He has gone very deep to portray his character's sexual orientation without any restriction. He uses his writing ability to put such critical themes of sexuality like homosexuality, bisexuality, lesbianism into his novels. Kureishi has experimented with his character's deep sexual idiosyncrasies like orgies and infidelity in their sexual relations. His protagonists get their sexual identities after going through many social, political, and cultural upheavals.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Queer theory, Father-son relationship

Hanif Kureishi, with the publication of his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* has depicted a contemporary socio-cultural British society in reference to sexuality. The novel is full of colorful characters with many sexual codes and conducts. But, before redefining the sexual orientations in Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the article wants to mention some of the contemporary critical theories on sexualities. The views on sexuality have changed a lot over a period. Although, sexual practices, such as homosexuality, lesbianism, and bisexuality were always present in history. It may have coded differently in different cultures. The concepts of gender and sexuality became one of the significant parts of cultural phenomena in post-modern society. It emerged with the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s.

The most prominent critic on raising the feminine issues in society was the French philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir. She argued over the role of the cultural construction of females in society. In her influential book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir writes:

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One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychical, or economical destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilisation as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. (293)

The ideas of gender and sexuality are largely the construction of society. It's a society that defines identity and provides behaviours to both masculine and feminine. We grow up with the idea that sex determines someone's gender. However, sex is biological, and gender is social. It is the result of cultural construction that made woman the 'Other (inferior)' and man the 'the Self'.

After de Beauvoir, Kate Millett was another influential critic in the field of feminism. Kate Millett also addresses and criticizes the erroneous narrative of women within male writings. In her book, *Sexual Politics* (1969), she says that the relationship between men and women must work within the power structure. The power structure must contain some political implications for a better future. She coined the phrase 'sexual politics' to denounce the patriarchal society that established male supremacy through various means. Kate Millett "believed that women were subjected to an artificially constructed idea of the feminine" (Tolan 326).

Millett reveals that people from the patriarchal society have oppressed women by putting cultural pressure and physical violence. They not only discouraged women but also internalize their inferiority until it became psychologically rooted. Literature has always worked as a tool to re-create sexual inequalities and patriarchal values in society. Millett has read some of the great 20th century male authors like D. H. Lawrence, Gustave Flaubert, and even psychoanalyst Freud. The reading of these writers helped her exposed the biased masculine attitudes towards the feminine. This approach of reading male authors from a female perspective came to be known as "phallogocentric criticism" in the literary world.

It was the need of the hours to scrutinize more of the female writings. However, phallogocentric criticism had achieved great success in exposing male bias and sexual politics in texts written by men. But it did not address the lack of women writers in the literary canon. Elaine Showalter came with the idea of 'gynocriticism' in her book, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). Gynocriticism was developed with the view to address and recover forgotten texts written by female writers. It also worked to recover forgotten texts for reassessment and encouraged the emergence of more new writers. Showalter suggested that female writings should be read differently because it is different from male writings. She recognized some of the recurrent themes in women's writing as hidden rooms, fantasies of mobility, and images of madness.

Starting from the question of gender constructedness, feminism progressed beyond gender inequality to a point where gender itself became an unstable category. Julia Kristeva's account of the progression of feminist discourse records how it must be proceed. According

to Kristeva, as pointed out by Fiona Tolan, "feminism begins with liberalism when women demand equality with men, then, reacting against equality feminism, radical feminists reject patriarchy in favour of a separate matriarchy; finally, women come to reject altogether the difference between masculine and feminine as metaphysical" (Tolan 337). The first two stages were based on equality (anti-essentialist) and difference (essentialist) feminism. In the third phase, which is also called 'post-feminism' the idea of gender itself is deconstructed and made unstable.

A new kind of sexual orientation emerged with the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement in the late 60s and 70s. The Gay and Lesbian movement brought a different complexity in the construction of gender and sexuality. In the beginning, this movement was not considered a part of the feminist movement. But later, they seemed to share a common ground for being dominated by the male heterosexual group. However, ideological disagreements between them created two groups; one came to be known as essentialist and other anti-essentialists. Essentialists laid their views on the biological difference between males and females. They thought that because of biological sexual differences, women are psychologically and emotionally different. The anti-essentialist blamed society's cultural conditioning for the construction of gender identity. Although, women got proficiency in concealing and suppressing the differences within society. Somewhere, they became a slave to their cultural conditioning.

Gay and Lesbian theories flourished during the 1980s with a variety of different sexual orientations. The theorists of Gay and Lesbian started parting away from the dominant feminist ideology. They felt to be negated from the mainstream feminist discourse of the literary canon. However, they shared some common concerns like freedom of sexuality and society's role in gender construction. Lesbian feminists emphasized that lesbianism and homosexuality are alternative forms of sexuality. This new field of study came to be known as 'queer theory' in literary criticism. The word 'queer' denotes a new variety of sexual orientations and is considered derogatory by the dominant normative heterosexual culture.

It will be suitable to say that Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is a study of sexuality. However, the novel contains many facets of human relationships like father-son, friendships, matrimonial, and some biographical elements. Karim, the protagonist at the very beginning of the novel has shown to be bisexual. His homosexuality becomes known after meeting with Eva's son Charlie. Eva is the newfound love of Karim's father Haroon. Charlie is Karim's schoolmate, who runs a small pop music band and very famous among school girls. However, Karim's father becomes violent after finding him with Charlie in an intimate condition. Haroon thinks his son Karim is suffering from some neurotic disease and threatens him to consult a doctor. Although, Karim is so comfortable with his homosexuality. He thinks his inclination towards bisexuality is a privileged stage since he can have a relationship with anyone. It is like a bonanza offer for Karim in the field of his sexual orientation.

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Karim shares his homosexual feeling by saying that:

I didn't believe in monogamy or anything old like that, but my mind was still on Charlie and I couldn't think of anyone else... .It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls. I liked strong bodies and the backs of boys' necks. I liked being handled by men, ...I turned out to be a pervert and needed to have treatment, hormones, or electric shocks through my brain. When I did think about it I considered myself lucky that I could go to parties and go home with anyone from either sex – not that I went to many parties, none at all really, but if I did, I could, you know, trade either way. (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 55)

Karim has never shown any shyness or hesitation in accepting his relationships with both the male and female characters. He does not believe in moral values while seeking a sexual partner. He is comfortable with Charlie, Jamila, Helen, and Pyke while fulfilling his sexual appetite. His father's influence is on him is very noticeable. Karim's actions and infrequent sexual indulgence are the results of his father's licentiousness. His father is in a relationship with an English lady Eva, who is making money out of his exotic Asian look. She calls Haroon 'Buddha' and instructs him to learn some yoga. In a conversation with his father, Karim feels great affinity because he comes to know the secret of his father's mystic quality of being the 'Buddha' of Suburbia. Haroon accepts the presence of his son and says, "I like having you with me, boy. I love you very much. We're growing up together, we are" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 22).

Karim describes his father's sexual act with Eva, which establishes some similarity of sexual orientation between father and son. One day, Karim got an invitation from Eva to her place. When he got there, his father was delivering a speech on Oriental philosophy. Karim feels the warmth of love between his father and Eva. He gets an idea of their relationship, which goes further when he sees both Eva and his father having sex in the garden. Karim sees how, 'Eva released her hand from his mouth. He started to laugh. The happy fucker laughed and laughed. It was the exhilaration of someone I didn't know, full of greedy pleasure and self' (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 15-16).

After seeing the act of physical love between his father and Eva, Karim returns to a room with the feeling of sexual desire. He made love with Charlie without bothering anything. His physical love with Charlie gives him a kind of metaphysical experience. The relationship might be the result of his father's aversion to homosexual tendencies, which forces Karim to make it possible. Karim's first sexual experiment with Charlie is the first step for understanding his true sexual orientation.

Haroon gets angry when he catches Karim is making love with Charlie. He rushes towards them and asks, 'What the hell were you doing?. .My God, you're a bloody pure shitter! A bum-banger! My own son - how did it transpire?' (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 18). Haroon's reaction clearly shows that he will not approve of his son's sexual orientation with

Charlie. However, Karim comes to realize the physical changes in his body with the revelatory moment with Charlie. He realizes that sexual desire can be fulfilled even if it is not agreed with the social norms. This father-son confrontation on sexual orientation draws our attention towards Kureishi's misogynist portrayal in his novels. Kureishi's male characters are always engaged in an association against women, which is in a literal sense as an insult to women in general. However, Karim shows deep sorrow and guilt for his mother, who has been left alone by his father.

Karim starts his journey as an adolescent to perform his part, with the effect of his coming-of-age process and going away from his father's ways. The impact of Haroon on Karim's sexuality is quite evident. Karim learns to flirt with the character with whom he desires to have sex. He accepts his father's teaching of flirting by saying that: "Dad taught me to flirt with everyone I met, girls and boys alike, and I came to see the charm, rather than courtesy or honesty, or even decency, as the primary social grace' (The Buddha of Suburbia, 7).

Karim has such a seductive charm to attract and fulfill the needs of other characters. Consequently, his identity becomes attractive as well as elusive. His sexual orientation with the male is somewhat different from the female. He becomes very conscious and concern about his sexual identity. He often remembers his father's advice while selecting someone as a girlfriend. Karim's relationship with Eleanor reminds him of his father's taste for a white woman. He remembers how his father said to him that:

We little Indians love plump white women with fleshy things. Perhaps I was living out his dreams as I embraced Eleanor's flesh, as I ran the palms of my hands lightly over her whole body, then kissed her awake and popped my tongue into her cunt as she opened her eyes. (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 207)

Haroon is pretending to be the representative of the 'Orient' philosophy of the East. He always gives lectures to the people of suburbia. He also becomes the self-proclaimed sage among the white people and keeps narrating ways of living a good life. But he opposes Karim's sexual inclination, and he gets disappointment and anxious over his future. On the contrary, he allows him to go out with an English girl, but not with an Indian. Karim says that his father liked the girl named Helen with whom Karim is in a relationship. His father "liked her; but then, he was keen for me to go out with anyone, as long as they were not boys or Indians" (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 73).

Kureishi seems to break the hegemony of the normal pattern of heterosexuality with the portrayal of Karim's sexual orientations. He shows the changing nature of English society in the decades of 60s and the 70s. It was the time when Britain, accepting and welcoming migrants from all over the world. The English society was also witnessing the popularity of pop culture among the young generation. Kureishi's characterizations in the novel seem to destabilize the relationship and marriage's code and conduct. Sex becomes the common

phenomenon of life for Karim, and he appears to break the moral code of society. He does not take an interest in any political opinion in the matter of getting his sexual orientation. He is an independent person who does not take part in any political or social protests. He is a person of fluid sexuality.

There is another character named Jamila, with whom Karim is frequently having sex even though she is already married. Karim is a friend of her husband, Changez. Jamila is a character who lives up to the true nature of contemporary Western culture. She believes in the contemporary Western discourses on gender and sexuality. She also believes in the freedom of sexual orientations. Jamila's desire to live the life of her way compels her to read all French stuff like Baudelaire, Colette, and Radiguet at the age of thirteen. She is well- aware of racial and cultural clashes against Asian immigrants at the hands of English people.

Jamila believes in the narrative of one of the world's most famous feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir, the author of *The Second Sex*. She represents the generation of young women; who take control of their desire and sexuality and use it on their own terms. Jamila becomes so courageous and progressive in the matter of fulfilling her sexual orientation. Despite being married to Changez, she still in a relationship with Karim. She knows her limitations of being the daughter of Asian parents. She learns some physical exercises like Karate and Judo under the influence of Angela Davis.

Jamila's parents are not happy with the way she treats her own ethnic culture. Her parents run a sweet shop for livelihood, compel her to marry an Indian Muslim character named Changez. But her upbringing and reading radical literature are not allowed to accept the proposal of arranged marriage. She never thought of entering a marital alliance with a completely unknown person. Her parents want to settle her down with a boy of Indian descent. Her father, Anwar went on a hunger strike just after her protest for an arranged marriage. However, she plans to run away from home to save herself.

Although, Jamila convinces herself because she never wanted to expose her traditional cultural norms. Anwar too suggests her not, ' . . . to expose our culture as being ridiculous and our people as old-fashioned, extreme and narrow-minded (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 71). She does not want to endorse Western culture with her Eastern culture. She has to undermine the rigid patriarchal notion of her father because her father does not understand her. Anwar indulges himself in getting a livelihood because of that:

He really knew little about Jamila. If someone had asked him who she voted for, what the names of her women friends were, what she liked in life, he couldn't have answered. It was as if, in some strange way, it was beneath his dignity to take an interest in her. He didn't see her. There were just certain ways in which this woman who was his daughter had to behave. (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 81)

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In the end, Jamila decides to marry according to her father's wish. She fails to play the role of a political activist and becomes the victim of rigid social construction. Jamila, too like Karim, shows interest in bisexual orientation and comfortable with men and women alike. She wants to break the chain of age-old social ethos through her actions. As a protest, she refuses to consummate with Changez and continues having sex with Karim. Though Changez, who is physically weak, does not insist Jamila for sex. Consequently, he starts visiting a Japanese prostitute in the London suburbs.

Jamila is torn between the tradition of her conservative Muslim family and being a radical feminist who has a spirit of the time. When her husband accuses her of adultery, incest, whoredom, betrayal, and deceit then, she replies that 'her damn body' belongs to her. She feels free to do anything with it. Ironically, Karim understands Jamila better than Changez. When Changez blames Karim for betraying him, Karim says, "I've known Jammie all my life, yaar. Long-standing arrangement. She was always mine in so far as she was anyone's, and she's never been anyone's and never will be anyone's, you know. She's her own person." (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 135).

After her father's death, she decides to leave her house and settle down with one of her commune white friends named Simone. Jamila gets pregnant after having a physical relationship with Simone. Consequently, her sexual identity puts her in some political implications because the action of Jamila's giving birth to a mixed-race baby demolishes the categories of race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity have been dependant mainly on the reproductive power of the female sex. Arrange marriages within the same race are the ways to save or perpetuate the tradition of race and ethnicity. With this act of giving birth to a mixed-race baby, she proves herself being a radical feminist, who takes control of her reproductive power. Her sexual identity juggles a lot throughout the novel because she never finds stability in her relationships.

By the end of the novel, her journey to find sexual identity is still in jeopardy because of her free nature. Kureishi has created this character who never gets satisfaction with her desire and sexuality. Kureishi does not allow his female characters to compete with male characters. Jamila is not a happy character in the novel. While in a relationship with Simone, she gets involved in a lesbian relationship with a woman named Joanna. With this lesbian relationship, one can guess that her sexual identity is always on the journey. Changez feels offended by this lesbian relationship between Jamila and Joanna. He explains to Jamila that this is not a natural relation and regards it as the perversion of human sexuality. But Jamila responds with a positive note and says, 'I can't think that I've liked anyone as much for a long time. I'm sure you know how it is - you meet someone and you want to be with them, you want to know them deeply. It's passion, I suppose, and it's wonderful. That's how I feel,' (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 277).

Kureishi seems to break down the existing sexual stereotypes through the portrayals of his Asian ethnic characters. He does not present sex as taboo. Sex works as a driving force for Karim and Jamila to search for their true sexual identity in English society. However, Kureishi has been criticized by many for his explicit description of sex scenes in his novels. Sometimes his narrative of sex scenes comes close to pornography. In his works, sex seems to play an essential part in the development of the characters. Most of Kureishi's characters are preoccupied with sexual desires. Sexual fidelity does not exist in the domain of his liberal Western and Eastern characters.

We are already familiar with Karim's relationship with Charlie, but there is another English character named Helen with whom Karim is in a relationship. There appears to be a political angle behind Karim's desire for English lovers apart from Asian Jamila. Like Jamila, Karim is also facing racial violence now and then in the English suburbs. It might be a kind of Karim's tact to take revenge against racial violence from English people. Helen's father abuses Karim for going out with his daughter. Her father passes racial comments on Karim's and sets his huge dog on him. These whole racial attacks make Karim furious and revengeful at the same time. After having sex with Helen, Karim feels 'so ecstatic about my (his) triumph in seducing the dog owner's daughter. . . ' (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 82).

Eleanor is another girl with whom Karim is involved in a love relationship. She comes from an upper-middle-class family with a culturally cultivated and sophisticated English attitude. Both Karim and Eleanor are theatre artists and work under the supervision of Pyke. Eleanor is attracted to Karim for his look of exotic Asian, and Karim also feels attraction for Eleanor. Karim allures Eleanor by saying that ' . . . we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness, and beauty' (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 227). Eleanor, whose former boyfriend, Gene, was a black actor working with her in Pyke's theatre. She feels terrified by the suicide of Gene, whose color was an issue in the theatre community.

There is another episode that comes on the way of Karim's sexual journey to find his identity. The characters involved in this part are Pyke and his wife Marlene. Pyke belongs to the upper-middle class of England and runs a theatre company. This unexpected sexual encounter of Karim arrives when Pyke offers his wife to him for sex. Karim works in Pyke's theatre company with five other actors. All the actors have performed very well after the tiresome rehearsals for months. To Karim, Pyke and his wife Marlene seem to be very interesting characters because "...Pyke and Marlene seemed to me to be more like intrepid journalists than swimmers in the sensual. Their desire to snuggle up to real-life betrayed a basic separation from it. And their obsession with how the world worked just seemed another form of self-obsession." (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 191).

The gift which Pyke wants to give Karim is his wife. Both Pyke and his wife Marlene desire Karim as a bed mate to fulfill their sexual need. They showed the exploitative nature of

English masters with their use of hidden sexuality. Pyke seems to take advantage of Karim's helplessness because he wants to stay in Pyke's play. Karim notices how Pyke changes his behavior after getting negative responses from him. He wants to know the reaction after the sexual adventure between the three of them. Karim is desperate to get a part in Pyke's theatre. Karim understands the class position and political attitudes of Pyke. Consequently, he accepted Pyke and Marlene's sexual adventures with a positive note. Karim's exotic appearance of the East works for the English character to establish a sexual relationship. These sexual encounters of Karim in the novel with English characters, whether males or females show the historical importance of colonialism and the longing for mysterious other.

Kureishi does not moralize his characters based on sexuality. He sets free his characters from the social taboos. He lets his characters establish their sexual relations with both males and females. Kureishi's treatments of his characters are different on behalf of racial prejudices and belongingness. All the Asian characters have been exploited by the English characters on the matter of sexuality. Changez's sexual interest is presented absurdly because of his use of sex toys and his getting an erection at the time of Anwar's funeral. Kureishi portrayed Changez's sexual postures humorously and pathologically. Changez's views on sexuality germinate from the reading of cheap magazines and books. He also holds an old patriarchal view and wants to take full control over his wife Jamila.

Although all the English characters are sexually obsessed, they are not presented to be funny like Changez. English characters are much concerned about the black characters because of the longingness of the 'Others'. Kureishi has presented Karim's sexual orientations with the help of many sexual adventures. These adventures are the result of the accepted behaviour of homosexuality in the decade of the 1980s. At the end of the novel, after getting involved in many relationships, Karim comes to know the world order. His sexual orientation is not a single entity but is full of class and racial exploitation.

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