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Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia": Post-Imperial Vacuity and Quest for Identity

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to depict in Hanif Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia" a sense of post-imperial vacuity and quest for identity. The paper takes into account the ethno-English identity, the prevalence of racial prejudices, class distinction and cultural incompatibility among the characters which in turn are the determining factors for the contemporary plight for the natives as well as for the immigrants. This paper shall strive to unravel the questions like:-How and why are the ethnic minorities in Britain presumed to be rootless, subcultural pawns? Is it xenophobia of the British natives or something else? How are they portrayed in a negative manner as homosexuals and drug addicted? How does Kureishi depict the harsher realities of racism and class divisions? How did he depict the psychology and mindset of the immigrants? How are the non-white, middle class immigrants, though economically secured, are socially and culturally marginalized? Why the protagonist, Haroon, masquerade as a Buddhist in the novel?

Key Words:- Post-Imperial Vacuity, Identity, Buddha, Ethno-English.

Immigrants in alien countries are supposed to be the wretched of the earth. In the host countries they feel a sense of dislocation, disintegration, disorientation and dispossession. A sense of alienation comes to prevail over their life. They undergo psychological, political, existential and metaphysical unstable in the newly adopted country. They, being uprooted from their native culture try to be accepted by the natives of the host country, but they are utterly shocked by the incompatible culture, way of life and ill treatment and racial slurs at the hands of the inhabitants of the host country. They become the victims of racial discrimination and gender issues. They belong to minority community which is culturally and ethnically marginalized. Culturally they are nowhere men and yearn for their self-identity. Many writers, especially diaspora and expatriate writers, deal in their writings with the sad plight of the immigrants in the host country.

Over the last two decades Kureishi has established himself as a cultural spokesperson of the immigrants in England, especially Asian community there. As a novelist, playwright and author of screenplays he has recurrently tackled the problems of racial prejudice and ethnic identity. His vivid portrayals of contemporary Britain explore the irresolvable tensions between the non-white, middle class immigrants who are socially and culturally fragmented and the British natives who see their socio-economic status, cultural prestige and national identity challenged by immigrant populations from the British ex-colonies, who gradually ascend the social ladder to further equality and sameness. However, Kureishi differs from the postcolonial writers in certain

respects. On one hand, the postcolonial writers celebrate the ‘otherness’ of the marginalized sections while on the other hand, it unconsciously accelerates the harmful aspect of ethnocentric fear of sameness. Unlike Rushdie, Kureishi doesn’t write back to the empire but from within. □□

Hanif Kureishi’s first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* deals with the issues and problems of class, race and identity among the immigrants and post-imperial vacuity among the natives. According to John Osmond the contemporary English people experience the sense of vacuity ‘being forced by circumstances to make a choice between who they think they are, perhaps even between who they would like to be, and who they really are.’ In England it’s not only the Asian Immigrants who are on the verge of identity crisis but the colonizers as well on other way round. The Buddha, Haroon, felt superior to the British in his childhood. British, for him, in India were ridiculous, stiff, and unconfident. They were ousted and exhausted; their empire was gone; their day was done and it was our turn then.

The English characters in this novel like Eva and her son Charlie are worth mentioning who demonstrate a sense of post-imperial void and try to it overcome by intermingling with the Asian immigrants like Haroon’s family. Eva is the best example of social climber: “From oppressed Orpington housewife to self-empowered London Socialite and country-designer” (Moore-Gilbert 2001: P.128). In the absence of any concrete and legitimate identity Eva goes to the extent of getting into relationship with Haroon. Haroon becomes an exotic Buddha figure (The Ideal of Eastern Ideology and Philosophy) adored among the English people. Haroon himself expresses this sense of void among the suburban English people as “this great hole in your way of life”(P.264). But in reality Haroon is a cheat, “a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist” (P.16). His so called knowledge of Buddhism has been acquired from “books on Buddhism, Sufism, Confucianism and Zen which he had bought at the Oriental bookshop in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road” (p.5). Like Eva, Charlie’s inter-racial homosexual relationship with Karim is an instance of cultural assimilation in contemporary England in the absence of any authentic cultural identity. Charlie just cares about himself, and is indifferent towards others: an introvert, a kind of millionaire recluse. One way or other way, the native characters like Uncle Ted, Auntie Jean and Helen are also trapped into the same crisis. Karim heard an American commenting: “These English are animals. Their whole culture has fallen through the floor”(P.245). Karim defines his classmates as “These women were middle class but they’d broken away from their families”(P.94). Their discussion is about abortions, heroin, Sylvia Plath, prostitution. They are drug addicted, aimless and living in a waste land.

Haroon, a settled immigrant England for the last twenty years is continuously oscillating from one personae to another to fit into the English stereotype“..guru business would eventually fall off in London, but it was clear now that he would never lack employment while the city is full of lonely, unhappy, unconfident people who required guidance, support and pity (P.279). Throughout the novel he feels insecure, alienated and fragmented. His situation is ironical as he claims-“I have lived in the west for most of my life, and I will die here, yet I remain to all intents and purposes an Indian man. I will never be anything but an Indian. When I was young we saw the Englishman as a superior being”(P.263). Although, he is a source of spirituality for the natives in the garb of Buddha but he isn’t contented with himself till the end.

Anwar, another contemporary immigrant, has led his life of an Englishman throughout the novel but ultimately loses his faith in the hollow ethnic community and forces his daughter Jamila to marry a little unsophisticated Changez, who has been deliberately called from India. His sense for his own cultural dislocation attains to the height. He is a puzzling character and full of

complexities, in one way, he follows Gandhian Principle to starve to death to get his family to obey his irrational wish but in other way, he hates to return to India. He says “India’s a rotten place. Why should I want to go there again? It’s filthy and hot... If I went anywhere it would be to Florida and Las Vegas for gambling”(P.64).

The immaculate portrayal of the relationship between Changez and Jamila is another authentic example of subcultural pawn. This innocent uncouth Changez is not directly victimized by the English culture but he is totally unfit to the prevailing culture of his own community that is neither purely occidental nor oriental. In Karim’s words- “Maybe he’d never used a knife and fork...Changez looked so alone- and close up I could see bits of bristle sticking out of his badly shaved face-“(P.82). He is tired running after his wife Jamila for seeking her legal, legitimate love. A recently married man is living completely in celibacy. Before his face expressionless with grave and vacant eyes he sees his wife lying naked with his friend Karim. Lastly, Changez finds his relief in Shinko, a Japanese whore, another subcultural pawn in England. He struggles with the challenges in an alien land to fulfill his cherished dreams and aspirations under the aegis of cultural diversity.

Jamila, other way opposite, born and bred in England with liberal English outlook and ultimately forced to accept Changez- an irritating and disgusting guy unsuitable to her taste. For her, he is just “..parasitical, sexually frustrated man”(P.108). Here, she becomes a victim of patriarchal norms. In order to overcome her Psychological frustration, Jamila, seeks comfort into illegitimate relationship with Karim. However, her consciousness for English racial prejudices becomes prominent when she expresses her concern to Karim “..this world is full of people needing sympathy and care, oppressed people, like our people in this racist country, who face violence every day”(P.108).

The most affluent, vibrant, main protagonist and the narrator of this novel, Karim, is a teenager of two cultures “the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there..”(P.3). He is a combination of half Indian and half English looking for his self and fulfillment in the 1970s London: “I always wanted to be somewhere else, I don’t know why”(P.5). Against a backdrop of class and racial tension, Karim tries to discover who he is, and what he wants while also discovering the true meaning of home and family. The novel begins with a sense of void and frustration in Karim He describes himself as follows: “My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don’t care-Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere”(P.3). He has been torn between his past and present; between father and mother; between his conscious and subconscious; between successful Charlie and his own failures. He describes himself as –“I was lonely for the first time in life, and an itinerant”. He has been offered the role of Mowgli (A character from Kipling’s The Jungle Book) by Shadwell, director of the London’s theatre society, because of his skin color and he can fake an Indian accent. In Shadwell’s word: “Karim, you have been cast for authenticity and not for experience”(P.147). He has no way out but to accept this role to ridicule his own culture, his own people. Shadwell also ridicules him:“In fact, you are Mowgli. You’re dark-skinned, you’re small and wiry, and you’ll be sweet but wholesome in the costume”(P.142). Under the pressure of racial circumstances, Karim has no other option but to accept the role of Mowgli (a typical black, dwarf, Indian character) in a play. His fate is such that he is happy and miserable at the same time.

Although, Karim starts to win the sort of attention he has been craving for but at the cost some raucous and unexpected results. The novel ends with Karim sitting in a party and the entire universe circling him. He is experiencing an unstable situation, still in search of something to be achieved.

Conclusion:

The attempt of this paper was to disclose elements of post-imperial vacuity and quest for identity in Kureishi's novel "The Buddha of Suburbia". So far as post-imperial vacuity is concerned it is more a political issue than an individualistic aspect of the natives. After the downfall of the British Empire, the changes in the British social set up like division of classes have played havoc in the lives of the middle class English people. The characters like Eva and her son Charlie are in midst of such crisis. They are unable to celebrate their Englishness in truer aspects. Eva's desperate wish to "scour the suburban stigma right off her body" reveals her sense of insecurity and loss of her Englishness. Charlie, in the process of shifting his personae from one to another, becomes a 'punk hero' in New York for his cockney rhyming slang-"He was selling Englishness, and getting a lot of money for it"(P.247). He is too left with hollow Englishness.

On the other side, the quest for identity among the immigrants is the outcome of cultural fragmentation, racial prejudices, and ethnicity. Haroon, the Buddha here, an insatiable character is in search of something unknown, even at the age of forty. Postcolonial London is a far cry from the England of his youth. He doesn't feel regret to make his family deprived of their legitimate rights while he is desperate to live with his English mistress, Eva.

The character like Changez is a symbol of general psychology of Asian immigrant towards the West. West gives him a sense of privilege although he seems to be victimized by cultural shocks and failures. The impetus behind his relationship with his interracial lover, Shinko, is his frustration and depression. The fate of Jamila is nearly as same as of Changez but for quite opposite reasons.

Anwar is, Kureishi's typical depiction of Asian Muslim Immigrant, a character who we understand to have been with different facets but fitting to none. In one side, he eats pork, drinks wine and performs other forbidden activities in Islam to prove his loyalty towards British culture. While on other side, he is an irrational, staunch conservative Pakistani father, forcing his daughter to marry a person against her choice, to save his religious blood line.

Karim, an innovative creation by Kureishi, becomes a "herald of hybridity". Kureishi explores the issue inherent of different facets of British-Asian identity. He depicts a clear gap between the first generation Asian immigrants like Haroon and Anwar (born in India but brought up among English people) & the second generation Asian immigrants like Karim and Jamila (born and bred in England). He also intends to create complex and contradictory hybridized citizens whose cultural and racial identities are inextricably linked with the class politics.

Kureishi's works incorporate a large vista wherein he doesn't ignore the larger British context. He has stated that: "If contemporary writing which emerges from oppressed groups ignores the central concerns and major conflicts of the larger society, it will automatically designate itself as minor, as a sub-genre. And it must not allow itself to be rendered invisible and marginalised in this way." This kind of attempt on Kureishi's part would enable the marginalization of racism as a problem to be tackled by white British society. Kureishi is not biased in blaming only the

English people for the sad plights of the Asian immigrants but the immigrants themselves are responsible for their inability to separate from their past legacy.

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