

Gender Identity in British Postcolonial Novel: Hanif Kureishi's "The Buddha of Suburbia"

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Abstract: The study deals with problems of gender identity and their reflection in one of the most popular and prominent trends of contemporary British fiction-postcolonial literature. In general, the gender problematic has become one of current interest at the turn of the 20th-21st centuries. It is among the most topical questions not only for social and psychologist studies but also for literature ones. As a part of world culture and art, literature has been always inseparably bound with all of the processes and phenomena taking place in the society. That's why, the way how postcolonialism and gender issues interact within the confines of modern British literature can be rather versatile field for the research. So that the debut novel of one of the most famous representatives of the English authors with non-British roots. "The Buddha of Suburbia" by half-English half-Pakistani Hanif Kureishi-becomes a very interesting example of gender, cultural and national discourses' combination that in its own turn reveals the hybrid, heterogeneous and pluralistic character of multicultural prose.

Key words: Hanif Kureishi, gender identity, multiculturalism, contemporary British fiction, postcolonial discourse, cross-cultural English literature

INTRODUCTION

The notion of "gender", taking its roots from Latin word "genus" appeared in the middle of the 20th century when in 1955 sexologist John Money had borrowed the term "gender role" from grammar and brought it into behavioral studies. Hence, it became one of the most widely-spread concepts in various spheres of natural and social sciences, diverse trends of feminist studies, mass-media and culture in general. Gender can be generally defined as the social sex role which determines the person's model of behavior and the way how it's treated in society. As for psychologists and sexologists, it's more common to identify this notion with any particular attributes of human mind and behavior, traditionally associated with masculinity or femininity, thus applying it to differentiate males from females. Having argued that congruence of gender characteristics with biological or passport sex of an individual or the way he/she has been brought up is not obligatory, modern scholars claim that obvious personal or behavioral divergences between men and women are not directly connected with biological factors but are the result of social reciprocity's specifics.

Heterogeneous, pluralistic world of the turn of the 20th to 21st centuries applies to diffusive and borderline phenomena of human being. Due to the context it would be interesting to appeal to the following observation

of A.R. Usmanova: "Cultural Studies" are based on the perception of contemporary world as an absolute plurality class, racial, ethnic, cultural. This research trend includes the variety of such unexplored marginal objects and phenomena as TV news, ethnic minorities, pop music, divergent types of sexual behavior and identity, etc. in its circle" (Usmanova, 2001). So that the problems of gender, especially these of gender identity can be referred to the ambiguous phenomena mentioned above. They have become one of the most controversial and topical issues of contemporary scientific research. It has had ponderable resonance not only in the terms of global social evolutionary process but it also may be considered as an influential factor of modern fiction development. The process of gender identity as one of the many parts of self-determination tends to be proclaimed as one of the central themes of contemporary world literature.

If we speak about the major tendencies in British literature of the end of the 20th the beginning of the 21st centuries we must not forget to pay due attention to the works of modern authors of multicultural or polyethnic origin.

For many years, Great Britain had been one of the most powerful colonial empires whereas London was a pillar of this imperious metropolis. In 1950s, the situation on the world arena had changed dramatically the former British patrials from India, Pakistan, Caribbean islands, Asia and Africa gained independence that provoked a

huge immigrants' inflow onto the lands of the British Isles, especially, onto the territory of London.

The new social and political background has become very productive for the development of English literature. A great amount of truly talented writers appeared and the main vector of their creativity was formed first and foremost by postcolonial discourse (Nayar, 2008). For instance, Nick Bentley admits that "one of the most important contexts for contemporary British fiction is postcolonialism, a term that encompasses a range of discourses and issues that relate to the construction of national identity, race, immigration and multiculturalism" (Bentley, 2008). They can be contingently divided into two groups or to be more precise, generations immigrant-writers themselves and those whose parents belong to that immigrated part of ex-colonies' citizens but who were born and bred Englishmen.

The works of immigrant-writers have become the so called cross-cultural narratives in which the core themes are the adaptation to drastically changed circumstances and preservation of the natural and native bond with the roots; the collision and even fight of the opposite cultures or, vice versa, coalescence and mutual integration of them. Postcolonial theoretician and philosopher. Bhaba (1994) defines the immigrant's place in the society and its literary reflection as "the third place" or in-between space which demonstrates both inter and disconnection of multicultural writers with the new social and cultural realia. If we speak about the second generation of authors with non-British roots it's necessary to quote Tolkachev (2013)'s "Multiculturalism in Post-colonial Space and Cross-cultural English Literature": "those who were born by non-English parents on the territory of the British Isles perceive their own hybridity as a new reality initiating power and ascendancy and explore the ways of turning out their community into a culturally significant social layer. This mental search is inseparable from the process of transforming into "English" which goes in parallel with the emergence of something new or "hybrid".

Therefore, it should be added that for multicultural (or postcolonial) British writers the self-identification discourse with all of the identifying processes derivative from it (f. i. national, ethnic, cultural, sexual, gender, etc.) is quite prominent.

Due to the context Hanif Kureishi is necessarily worth mentioning as one of the representatives of "new English literature". He's famous not only for his fiction but also for being one of the most prominent playwrights, screenwriters and film directors of the modernity. The fact of being half-English half-Pakistani played a leading role in choosing of his creativity's direction. Naming himself "a hybrid of two cultures" (Tolkachev, 2013).

Kureishi has assuredly experienced duality and ambiguity of double-oriented personality's position who on the one hand has become a part of modern European civilization and its values and on the other, simultaneously, feels his own clanship and propensity to the culture of the ancestors. This complicated problem can be defined as a primary one in the majority of the researchers works.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study deals with Hanif Kureishi's debut novel "The Buddha of Suburbia" in 1990. Being honored of the Whitbread award and translated into twenty languages, it has been acknowledged as one of the most successful Kureishi's works. In spite of the fact that the fiction of H. Kureishi's well-known around the world and it was studied according to cross-cultural, national and ethnic discourses by such foreign scholars as N. Bentley, B. Moore-Gilbert, etc. and such home ones as S. Tolkachev, B. Proskurnin, etc. we decided to choose the gender discourse for the analysis of the novel "The Buddha of Suburbia". The direction of our research is motivated by the recency of gender approach to the debut novel of the author. The work presents itself a combination of new and traditional methods of analyzing the postcolonial novel of the turn of the 20th to 21st centuries.

RESULTS

At the centre of the narration is seventeen years old Karim Amir, the son of suburbanites Haroon and Margaret, half-English and half-Indian teenager, "a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were having emerged from two old histories" (Kureishi, 2000). Whose image is an autobiographical one to some extent. The life in South London suburbs is routine and gloomy: "In the suburbs people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness. It was all familiarity and endurance: security and safety were the reward of dullness" (Kureishi, 2000). Ergo, it's not surprising that the only dream of ready for all kinds of experiment and charmed by the mass culture of 1970s youngster becomes "the city, London where life was bottomless in its temptations" (Kureishi, 2000). An unfolding family drama divorce of the main hero's parents turns into a background for the crucial moments of Karim Amir's life: the dreams come true and Karim becomes a true Londoner who finds himself at the thick of events he turns out to be an actor of an experimental theatre company, surrounded not by provincial rebels but an English bohemia. Not with standing the fact that he gains a priceless life experience of being a part of absolutely

new environment not only such as the biggest multicultural centre of Great Britain but also a dream city of millions of people New York, the protagonist suffers from spiritual crisis. His stereotypes about vibrant life style in magnetizing megalopolises clash with harsh reality of human relationship and as a matter of fact, become self-destroyed. Thus, Karim Amir comes back to his family circle in South London which has stayed the only native place for him. By the way, according to the typical principles of British postcolonial fiction the protagonist usually stays in cross-cultural intermediate space which deliberately complicated by the researchers, turns itself into the border between various worldviews, its perception and existence in it.

The peculiar patchiness and diversity of multicultural literature gives an impulse to such a narrative technique as fragmentation which is skillfully combined with the first person narrative in Kureishi (2000)'s novel "The Buddha of Suburbia". By the way, Karasik *et al.* (2014) define fragmental narrative as one of the characteristic features of modern world literature that in this or that way tends to postmodernist methods and techniques. Such a mode of narration explains the self-searching process of the protagonist his attempt to find his own lifeway or in a word to complete the process of self-identification: "Englishman, I am and going somewhere. Perhaps, it is the odd mixture of continents and blood of here and there of belonging and not that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps, it was being brought up in the suburbs that I did. Anyway, it's enough to say that I was looking for trouble any kind of movement action and sexual interest I could find. I was ready for anything" (Kureishi, 2000). Karim Amir at the same time feels both in and out-sider in the native space of suburbia actually, this feeling of him explains the principle of binary oppositions, according to which his image is constructed. Also, it can be claimed that the conception of "metis type of personality" Tolkachev (2013)'s term is revealed in the image of Karim that contemporaneously reflects the new phenomena of social and cultural reality and the dubious nature of multicultural fiction's character foremost.

For instance, the way Karim dresses to a party where his father Haroon is going to give meditation lessons is a bright example of his desire not only to attract attention to his unusual appearance but also to appeal to the Indian roots: "I wore turquoise flared trousers, a blue and white flower-patterned see-through shirt, blue suede boots with Cuban heels and a scarlet Indian waistcoat with gold stitching around the edges. I'd pulled on a headband to control my shoulder-length frizzy hair. I'd washed my face in Old Spice" (Kureishi, 2000). At the same time his life ideal is the culture of hippies, thundered in Europe and

USA as a proclamation of total freedom and overall protest which drastically differs from cultural and religious values and customs of Pakistan Indians: "I wanted to live always this intensely: mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs. I hadn't come upon it all like this before, and now I wanted nothing else. The door to the future had opened: I could see which way to go" (Kureishi, 2000).

The so-called "hyphenated-self" (Tolkachev, 2013) of the protagonist is also vastly revealed on the level of gender identification. Appositely, Bart Moore-Gilbert has noticed that "gender, sexuality and ethnicity are the main categories for Kureishi's heroes to identify themselves" (Moore-Gilbert, 2001) that's why Hanif Kureishi complicates the postcolonial discourse of "The Buddha of Suburbia" with the gender one. Also, it can be explained by Tolkachev (2013)'s theory that "the determination of hybridity lays in between such notions as "split (disunity, fragmentation)" and "reduplication (iteration, doubling)" that may explicate indeterminate sexual preference of the protagonist. Karim Amir himself explains his dubious nature in the following way: "It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls. I felt it would be heart-breaking to have to choose one or the other, like having to decide between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones" (Kureishi, 2000). So that it's not occasional that his sexual experiences are both connected with women and men but if some of them are justified by physical attraction, others can be connected with the tendency of postcolonial heroes to the process of mimicry. For instance, Karim Amir's incestual relations with his cousin Jamila are motivated by adolescent desire of experiment and epatage; his affection to Terry, a member of theatre company where Karim first tried himself as an actor is also more physical than mental: "I liked him instantly, especially as he was a fitness fanatic and his body was so solid and taut. I decided to seduce him but without much hope of success" (Kureishi, 2000).

If we speak about the so-called "second type" of protagonist's relationships, we should not forget that according to the plot of the novel Karim had the strongest feelings to two characters Charlie, the informal son of Haroon's mistress, obsessed with the idea of becoming a rock-star and a disciple of youth subcultural movements and Eleanor, Karim's colleague in London theatre cast of Mathew Pyke, capricious and labile daughter of wealthy parents. It's interesting how the protagonist reflects on his attitude to both of them f. i. he describes his affection to Charlie as following: "My love for him was unusual as love goes: it was not generous. I admired him more than anyone but I didn't wish him well. It was that I preferred

him to me and wanted to be him. I coveted his talents, face, style. I wanted to wake up with them all transferred to me" (Kureishi, 2000). Though, Karim's passion to Charlie doesn't disturb him in falling in love with Eleanor on the hand, it looks like the other side of the hero's nature has been opened when he starts calling a girl his "main love" or "baby". On the other one he again not only odors her physical attractiveness or charisma but becomes enchanted with the lifestyle she kept to the bohemian circles she belonged to and their differences in social and cultural levels: "now I was among people who wrote books as naturally as we played football. The easy talk of art, theatre, architecture, travel, the languages, the vocabulary, knowing the way round a whole culture it was invaluable and irreplaceable capital For Eleanor's crowd hard words and sophisticated ideas were in the air they breathed from birth and this language was the currency that bought you the best of what the world could offer" (Kureishi, 2000). This influence of a new passion to the process of the main hero's self-identification is so strong that even when Eleanor just noticed his accent Karim again would be ready to change himself, to adjust to a new circumstance or, in other words to mimic: "At that moment I resolved to lose my accent: whatever it was it would go. I would speak like her. It wasn't difficult" (Kureishi, 2000). Hence, we can state that the so-called hyphenated-self of the protagonist is doubled by the author not only according to the general principles of post colonial hero's hybrid identity connected with the national and ethnic self-identification but also due to the shift between the gender roles and sexual indeterminacy.

Moreover, some scholars argue that the fiction of Hanif Kureishi is not only determined by multicultural discourse. For example, Proskurnin (2012), claiming that "practically all Kureishi's main characters are notable for their deviation from the norm in both social, national, sexual aspects" relates a certain ambiguity of Hanif Kureishi's heroes to peculiarities of the researchers style and creative approach. Besides that Bentley (2008) called Kureishi "a writer of cultural identity" what explains the fact that sometimes this "deviation from norm" and replacement of some certain social and psychological values can be analyzed only through the complex or inseparable unity of national, gender and cultural discourses and not in separate. Furthermore, it is also interesting to refer to the following opinion of one of the Indian writers R. Rao, who compares the specifics of multicultural researchers craft with an image of "bifacial Janus who always looks at the opposite sides". He calls such kind of a writer "a modern ethnographer of his own culture and at the same time-its exegete" (Tolkachev,

2013). What lets us to combine the gender discourse of the novel not only with the postcolonial one but also with the cultural.

In this case an image of Jamila, Karim's paternal cousin is worth of paying attention to. She is presented to the readers as a young and furious revolutionary, a kind of fighter for justice who "got this thing about wanting to be Simone de Beauvoir" (Kureishi, 2000) and being brought up on feminist works with which her "guru" Miss Cutmor, a schoolteacher of French origin provided her. Her character is a garish collage based on all the vast variety of social, political and cultural phenomena and clichés of 1970s' reality "Jammie always carried a photograph of Angela Davis and she wore black clothes and had a truculent attitude to schoolteachers Jamila had a PhD in physical retribution" (Kureishi, 2000). So that it's not surprising that she rejects a marriage with Changez which has been arranged by her Muslim parents. Their family couple becomes a collision of opposite life views, turning into eternal irreconcilable fight: "Changez, being at heart a traditional Muslim, explained the teachings of the Koran on this subject to her and then when the words were not sufficient to convince her, he tried to give her a whack. But Jamila was not whackable. She gave Changez a considerable backhander across his wobbling chops which shut his mouth for a fortnight, during which he miserably carried his bruised jaw to his camp-bed that raft in a storm and didn't speak" (Kureishi, 2000). Jamila refuses from traditional role of an Indian woman or a Muslim wife, propagandizing free love and sexual relations, having a daughter Leila Kollontai named after Russian Revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai from her lover Simon and becoming a lesbian to the end of the novel. Her husband Changez, who actually accepts the role of "he-wife" in their family, performing all the household duties and looking after a child also undergoes a certain type of gender roles exchanging in spite of his discontent: "It's unusual for me, an Indian man, vis-a-vis the things that go around my wife" (Kureishi, 2000). So that the shifting of gender roles within the couple described drives us to the conclusion that the reserachers deliberately combines gender, cultural and national discourses in structuring the main conflicts of the novel that in its own turn reveals the hybrid and pluralistic character of multicultural fiction.

Therefore, the way the central heroes of the novel identify themselves on the level of nationality and ethnicity as well as on the gender one can be defined as "an embodiment of characteristic for postcolonial novel figure of trickster: "neither male nor female, neither black nor white" (citation from "Encyclopedic dictionary of the 20th century English literature") (Sarukhanyan, 2005).

Also, the title of the novel, "The Buddha of Suburbia", is significant. What lies on the surface is that it has become Haroon's nickname given him by his son Karim because of his father's devotion to Buddhism and the lessons and trainings which he started to give to a wide audience of his followers. However, it is a weighty detail of the plot, we may guess that if the novel has got a protagonist and all the plot lines are concentrated around the figure of Karim as a central hero, it's quite acceptable to draw a parallel between the meaning of the title and his image. According to the Buddhist doctrine, every person who has managed to achieve spiritual enlightenment and discover the truth can call himself Buddha. It may signify either some concrete figures of the religion mentioned above (Sakyamuni Buddha, f. i.) or the highest step of spiritual perfection or sometimes it can even be a name of myriad mentally enlightened creatures which due to the Buddhist cosmology can be both of male and female nature (as if it is in tantric Buddhism where Buddhas are female ghosts, bearers of the secret dharma). In other words, Buddha is a kind of an androgynous or even sexless creature, the significance of which is not in the role it plays in the "earthy world" but in its spiritual and mental destiny. So that through this metaphor we might understand that the processes of self-identification of the protagonist, be they connected with different types of identity-national, psychological or even gender-are in a way represented through the prism of Buddhist philosophy which is to some extent leitmotiv in the novel.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it's possible to refer to one of S. Tolkachev's statements: "The immigrants, reforming their own ideology during the process of mastering the peregrinate space form new type of identities in their private and social life" (Tolkachev, 2013). So that in general multiculturalism as one of the characteristic features of modern civilization lets contemporary writers with non-British roots create not only mixture of different types of discourses and problematic as national, cultural, historical, ethnic social etc. but also combine various kinds of the processes of self-identification, bringing cross-cultural English literature to a new level and alternative ways of its studying and interpretation. Thus, life and spiritual range of Hanif Kureishi's debut novel's heroes still remains hybrid and it turns out from the joint

of two cultures into the border between different ways of personal identity-ethnic, national, cultural and gender as well.

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