

Queer Sexuality: A Critical Study of Karim Amir's Sex Life in *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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Abstract: In the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Hanif Kureishi has depicted a bisexual boy's life. Though sexuality is undoubtedly influenced by society and constructed by the environment still the society itself questions the person who is not having 'compulsory heteronormativity'. This paper gives us the impression of 1970s' sexual situation of British society focusing on the main character of the novel, Karim Amir and widely discusses the reason that has worked behind of his being bisexual. To get the answer it has focused on religion, society, identity crisis, family bondage, frustration, psychology and medical consequences of having homosex. It also talks about queer theory and the societal influences upon the construction of one's sexuality. The paper demanded a wider research of greatest theorists like, Freud, Kinsey, and Paul Cameron along with different magazines and research works. It analyzes the queer sexuality of Karim.

Keywords: sexuality (heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality), religion, society, identity crisis, family bondage, psychology.

The story of the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi presents a new lens through which to view the sexuality, sexual identity of a person. It is found that Karim Amir, the main hero of the story, having identity crisis in both nationality and sexuality. Karim has indeed an ambiguous sexual character. He is a bisexual man who says that he doesn't have any choice to sleep with. He can sleep with a man or a woman and he does not mind to do that. After going to London he also says that he does not care about morality, all he wants is pleasure. So he has sexual adventures with both the sexes. In Karim's life he has vast sex experience but for Charlie, he has a great fascination. He is rejected by Charlie at one point of their relationship. Though he is in fascination for Charlie, he also knows how Charlie is. Readers also understand that through the words of Karim: "Charlie was the cruelest and most lethal type of seducer. He extorted not only sex but love and loyalty, kindness and encouragement, before moving on." (119). Karim is eager to have all kind of pleasure in life. He strives to make his life exciting and for this he tries drugs, sexual experiments and adventures with both the sexes. So, obviously fascination and curiosity play a big role for his being bisexual. However, his queer movements towards sexuality make the reader disturbed but curious at the same time. It may come as a question in reader's mind that why a person will practice homosexuality and heterosexuality at the same time. Karim says that he does not mind to sleep with any of men or

women. All he is concerned about is getting pleasure and for that he can do all. He also does all the adventures possible to enjoy his life.

Bisexual identity in society has a difficult existence. Sexuality is basically constructed by society through practice. It is our environment that teaches us to be heterosexual. This paper will focus on the probable reasons of being a bisexual of Karim Amir, the hero of the novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Being more particular, it will discuss the difficulty in defining bisexual identity, the problems and reasons that has probably turned Karim Amir Bisexual. In this essay, I will analyze these in three parts-- **first**, the attitude to act of British Culture in the 1970s on Karim Amir, **second**, the family environment including the poor relationship within family members which plays a vital role in Karim's being a bisexual man, **third**, psychology which covers earlier experience, frustration, witnessing father's sexual life. **Finally**, I will outline an overall picture that may reveal the reasons which might have turned Karim Amir into a Bisexual and prove that he has a queer sexuality indeed.

Karim is a young boy of late 1970s' and early 1980's and has different sexual orientations and experiences. Here, though not directly, we find several things that become the main cause of Karim's continuous experiments and adventures on sex. In 1970s' which is the time of the novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, things happen around and throughout the western world concerning sex. The time was the time of "Sexual Revolution". Basically, 'Sexual Revolution' started in the late 1910s'. In late 1970s' and 1980s' sexual freedom, was already being practiced in a wider way in the society. Pornography became wide spread. Historian David Allyn says that the sexual revolution was a time of 'coming out': about premarital sex, erotic fallacies, pornography use and sexuality. At that time, people had the attitude of accepting sexual freedom and experimentations in a big way.

It may sound unusual that despite the sexual revolution took place in reality that prescribed confinement of women's sexual pleasure within the suburban walls of heterosexual marriage and the regulation of man's sexuality in the public. Karim, the protagonist and the narrator of the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, grows up in the suburbs of London. He later moves to London proper with his family. As the story goes forward in the novel we see the changes that happen to Karim while growing. His outlook for adventure and sexual possibilities and significantly changed worldview is also presented in the story.

As we see that he says, '...I am an English man born and bred almost' (3) as he is half Indian and half English. He possesses the qualities of both British and Indian. It seems that he has the qualities of British teenagers of that time. He is having the kind of London fashion and his views towards sex are like those of other London youths of that time.

Court records and vice investigation from the early 70's and late 70's says that the newly won sexual revolution had an ultimate effect on the young people in the society. Basically, if we look at our protagonist, we see that he does not get love from those he loves and we see that at the beginning

he does not distinguish between man and man relationship and man and woman relationship: "Helen loved me futilely, and I love Charlie futilely, and he loved Miss Patchouli futilely, and no doubt she loved some other fucker futilely (38)". He puts his desire for Charlie in the same category for Charlie's desire for Miss Patchouli and Helen's desire for him.

When he involves himself in an increasingly upwardly mobile social circle, associating with arts community and participating in theater, he starts to have a sexual relationship with Elanor, an actor. He is actually in love with her. He also expresses his love for her which we understand from his words 'I had never had such a strong emotional and psychical feeling before' (187). It is basically for the first time we get in our reading that his sexuality has gained an emotional component; but Elanor does not love him back. She has a relationship with Karim as Pyke, the director of the play, asks her to do so. Later she starts to have a relationship with Pyke and as a result Karim leaves Elanor.

Karim's poor relationship with his family plays a big role behind his queer activities. Though Karim is young, he understands the activities and the happenings of his surroundings; he knows very well that his family bondage is in a very bad stage. His father is not satisfied in his marriage. After knowing all these, he is supporting his father and does not try to stop his father from having illicit relationship. At the same time Karim regrets that his mother does not deserve the kind of behavior she gets from her husband. Karim is very conscious that all wrong has been done to his mother in the family. So he gets more frustrated: "It was talking about it now for the first time that made me realize how unhappy the whole thing was making me" (55). Being devastated by broken family and bad relationship with family he tried to cheer himself up following his unnatural or queer activities.

It is hard for a child to accept that any of his parents is having an extra marital affair. But for Karim it seems that he is not shocked being witness of his father's adultery. As readers we can assume that his bond with either of his parents has not been very strong. It is possible as he does not have a better bondage with his family that the scene of his father's adultery works on him like watching porn. He may have got excited and finding no other opposite sex partner, he ends up having sex with Charlie. The weak family bondage and father's adultery leads him to seek for carnal pleasure. As he does not have peace in his mind, as he sees that his father and mother does not have a normal relationship he may have started to believe that it is not possible to have satisfaction in normal steady relationship. We can also sense a sort of restlessness in him. This may originate from his not having a strong bond with either of his parents. This restlessness also forces him to experiment with his sexual behavior. Even though most people consider homosexuality abnormal, Freud has a different view:

...Freud believed that homosexuality ...could be the natural outcome of normal development in some people. ... However, did not view homosexuality as a sign of illness, by which he meant a symptom arising from psychic conflict. ...Freud believed in constitutional bisexuality: that in every individual there was a certain

component of masculine (active) as well as feminism (passive) tendencies. ... He believed in life experiences, particularly traumatic ones (environmental factors), could have an influence on the growth of one's instincts (biological factors). Under the normal circumstances, the component instincts that determine the sex of one's final object choice should be consistent with one's anatomical sex. That is to say an anatomic male should ideally express the masculine component instinct and obtain sexual satisfaction from women. However, Freud also believed that even adult heterosexuals retain the homosexual component, albeit in sublimated form. Freud saw adult homosexuality as a developmental arrest of childhood instincts which prevent the development of a more mature heterosexuality. (LGBT Issues Committee)

It is basically Karim's steps towards maturity that has stopped because of disturbed environment and frustration that has made his mind queer. Queer theory is grounded in gender and sexuality. Due to this association, a debate emerges as to whether sexual orientation is natural or essential to the person, as an essentialist believes, or if sexuality is a social construction and subject to change. (Barry 139-155) Queer theorists focus on problems in classifying individuals as either male or female, even on a strictly biological basis. For example, the sex chromosomes (X and Y) may exist in atypical combinations (as in Klinefelter syndrome [XXY]). This complicates the use of genotype as a means to define exactly two distinct sexes. Intersexes individuals may for many different biological reasons have ambiguous sexual characteristics.

Queer Theory has emerged in the West as one of the most provocative analytical tools in the humanities and social sciences. It scrutinizes identity and social structures that take heteronormativity for granted—that do not question the social construction of heterosexuality as normative in relation to its oppositional binary, homosexuality. At the same time, bisexuality is a practice, identity, and orientation that challenge the binary logic around which cultural notions of sexuality are organized. For everybody it may stand difficult to accept that homosexuality give pleasure. Some may think it can give pleasure. 'A recent survey indicates that only 14% of men and 10% of women imagined that such behavior could hold any “possibilities of enjoyment”' (Cameron, Family Research Institute).

In the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* we also find Karim as a boy struggling in between two binaries of identity. There is a link between National Identity and Sexual Identity in the novel that is by no means a new concept. An identity crisis is a time in life when an individual begins to seriously quest for answers about the nature of his or her being and the search for an identity. 20th century developmental psychologist Erik Erikson developed this term, which is used frequently. He used it mostly to apply to the period of transition in the teenage years when kids begin to define what they will do as adults, and what their values are. Kids can unfortunately wreck their futures if they push too far away from parental or societal law; they could end up addicted to drugs or parenting children

of their own far before they're ready(Slavin 38). In the novel we find Karim and Charlie both are taking drugs like heroin. Karim can not foresee where he is going, and he does not plan for his future. In most part of the novel he remains a drifter.

National identity is the person's identity and sense of belonging to one state or to one nation, a feeling one shares with a group of people, regardless of one's citizenship status. In the very beginning of the novel, we see Karim realizes he does not belong to any particular nationality. This becomes clear when he plays the part of Mowgli. Shadwell, the director of the play puts it beautifully: "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. Racism" (141). Karim got the role because his father is an Indian. It is Karim's jeopardized nationality that also contributes to his experimentation with sexuality.

Sexual identity is more closely related to sexual behavior than sexual orientation is. The survey of the Social Organization of Sexuality 1990 found that 96% of women and 87% of men with a homosexual or bisexual identity had participated in sex with someone of the same sex, as contrasted to 32% of women and 43% of men who had same-sex attractions. Upon reviewing the results, the organization commented "Development of self-identification as homosexual or gay is a psychological and socially complex state, something which, in this society, is achieved only over time, often with considerable personal struggle and self-doubt, not to mention social discomfort." (Laumann)

The same happens to Karim. He has a psychological problem because of his environment and identity crisis of both sex and nationality- he is having doubt in himself and struggling constantly to have a place in society. Karim is having both the crisis of national and sexual identity. And he ends up in drugs, sex and all queer adventures leaving morality and regular life behind. Sexuality is often an interesting topic to talk about or analyze. The reader of the novel is expected to have an understanding of the character of Karim Amir and external forces that shape 'Sexual Identity' of a person in society. It is said that society shapes the sexual identity of a person. Then again it is society that questions the underlying concepts of a person's sexual identity itself. Karim is bisexual and society plays a crucial role behind this. Again, it is society that looks at him in a different way and says that he has got a queer mentality of queer sexuality. In 1970 society in London was very conservative; but after the revolution as Governing and schooling system did not change, everyone started to live in their own way. Drop out of school was in high rate. Karim, Charlie and Jamila do not finish school. We also see that Karim's aunt is drinking as she is sad and frustrated. So it is society again from where Karim is learning and what his sexuality is shaped by.

The word "bisexuality" literally gives the meaning of feeling of desires for both the sexes, male and female. If we look at the society of any time we understand that society places a judgment that a person cannot actually

desire for both the sexes at the same time. As Karim says:

It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls. I liked strong bodies and the backs boys' necks. I like being handled by men, their fists pulling me; and liked objects...But I liked...all of women's softness...When I did think about it I considered myself lucky that I could go to parties and and go home with anyone from either sex..." (55)

In the novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim has various sexual practices. All sexual encounters of Karim in the novel did not happen according to his wish. Pyke and his wife is an example here. Karim is basically raped by Pyke and the sex he has with Pyke's wife is also by force. Pyke's wife likes Karim but he does not like Pyke's wife. As he is trapped he has to have sex. When Charlie has sex with a girl in presence of Karim, he is sad. These entire incidents make Karim realize the importance of will and the choice of sex partner.

Karim has different sexual tastes and he tries it all the way he can. While he is having relationship with Charlie, Charlie is playing the dominant role. Then when Karim has an affair with Elanor, he has to play the role of a man. He has to take care of Elanor. So, it is really difficult to distinguish Karim's sex observing his sexual practices and his sexual identity. Hence, Karim, a hybrid boy of an English mother and Indian father makes the reader feel a bit uneasy. Karim is having problems in his family life and in his own inner identity beside the social, racial ones. Socially he is neither English nor Indian. He is in between of the societal place because he could say himself neither English nor British. Like his ethnic identity, his sexual identity is also complex. He says that he has no objection to sleep with a male or a female. His fluid sexual positions make him in-between just like his Indian-British in-between identity. He does not claim himself a homosexual or heterosexual exclusively. So, he is struggling constantly in between two binaries.

The peculiar nature of homosexual desire has led some people to conclude that this urge must be innate: that a certain number of people are "born that way", that sexual preferences cannot be changed or even ended. According to Dr. Cameron, homosexual behavior is a bad habit that people fall into because they are sexually permissive and experimental. A number of psychoanalysts like Biber, Socarides say that homosexual behavior is mental illness. They also say that homosexuals have unnatural or perverse desires as a consequence of poor family bondage in childhood or some other trauma. There are some other biological points as well. From this point it can be considered that such desires are genetic or hormonal in origin, and that there is no choice involved and no childhood trauma necessary. Sometimes, it can be experimental as well or be fascinated by watching porn as they are available. Though sexual desire is natural, biological the outcome expressions can be learned sometimes. Two large studies asked homosexual respondents to explain the origins of their desires and behaviors. The first study which was done by Kinsey in 1940s involved 979 homosexuals says that homosexuals strongly believe that their

feelings and behaviors are the result of social and environmental influences (Cameron).

Kaim has early homosexual experience with Charlie which plays an influential role in his sex life. We find a similar pattern in the 1970s Kinesey's study which says that there was a strong relationship between those whose first experience was homosexual and those who practiced homosexuality in later life. Basically, it is really a child's first sexual experience which strongly associates with his later adult behavior (Cameron).

Karim is of course facing both inner and outer conflict. He has the sense probably that this kind of movement is not immoral or it can also be that he just does not bother to think about the morality or immorality. Karim is being peculiar because of his troublesome life and he is unaware at the same time that his activities are having impact on his life span as well. For example, smokers and drug addicts don't live as long as non-smokers or non addicts. So, we consider smoking and narcotics abuse harmful. The lifespan of homosexuals suggests that their activities are more destructive than these. Obituaries numbering 6,516 from 16 U.S. homosexual journals over the past 12 years were compared to large sample of obituaries from regular newspapers. (Cameron, P. Playfair, W. & Wellum, S.)

The obituaries from the regular newspapers were similar to U.S. averages for longevity; the medium age of death of married men was 75, and 80% of them died old. Married women averaged age 79 at death; 85% died old. Unmarried and divorced women average age 71 and 60% of them died old. The median age of death for homosexuals, however, was virtually the same nationwide and overall, less than 2% survived to old age. If AIDS was the cause of death, the median age was 42 and 9% died old. The 163 lesbians had a median age of death of 44, and 20% died old. Two and eight-tenths percent (2.8%) of gays died violently. They were 116 times more apt to commit suicide; and had a traffic-accident death-rate 18 times the rate of comparably-aged white males. Heart attacks, cancer and liver failure were exceptionally common. Twenty percent of lesbians died of murder, suicide or accident (Cameron, P et al).

Homosexuality is basically a disease that introduces other serious diseases in one's body. Karim, being homosexual, is a sexually troubled person, engaging in dangerous activities. He already has lots of problem in his life and these queer activities are bringing more trouble in his body and life.

Throughout the history the major civilizations and major religions condemned homosexuality. Although it isn't spoken of often, the core of almost every major religion claims homosexuality to be wrong.

- **Buddhism** – One of the Five Precepts of Buddhism condemns “sexual misconduct.” Traditionally, this included homosexuality, though in recent years, some Buddhists have changed their opinions on this issue and re-interpreted “sexual misconduct” to not include homosexual activity. In all, though, sexuality (and all

sensuality) is not supposed to be “attached” or “craved.”

- Christianity – Biblical Christianity rejects homosexuality as completely sinful.
- Islam – Islamic law condemns homosexuality and allows for the punishment of those who practice homosexual acts.
- Hinduism – Most Hindu cultures condemn homosexual sex (though this is usually for more cultural reasons than religious).
- Judaism – Jewish scripture condemns homosexuality. Orthodox and Conservative Jews stick to this view, while “reformed” Jews approve of committed gay unions.

We see that Karim is leading a life full of adventure to have pleasure but it is destructive for himself. He does not get peace anywhere and so he is running after constant experiments. We also see the involvement of Karim's father in Buddhism to earn money. He is accepted by people as well. In this novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, we actually find nothing spiritual. Actually, it is his pretention in the name of spiritual practice. The novel is spiritually empty which stands as a big irony of the title of the novel. All the characters here are more eager to have physical gratification and wealth. There are only physical desires and no spiritual desire. Karim, our hero of the novel, says that he does not think about morality. All he cares is about pleasure. He is basically like his father running after enjoyment and not concerned about religion or regular life.

In Buddhism it is said that the activity of sex will never ultimately satisfy the desire for sex. The Buddha said that there is general dissatisfaction with the world: just by the very nature of existing as a temporal being. We are generally dissatisfied because we have cravings that we cling to. There is a solution. The way to end suffering is following the Noble Eightfold Path. Being a Buddhist teacher, Haroon neither followed it nor did he try to make his son Karim understand the religious ways of leading life.

Though Haroon is not a Buddhist or something unique in front of Karim, still Karim calls his father God. It seems Karim has accepted Haroon, his father, as the God of love and sex. However, Haroon's happiness is also shaky. When Haroon learns that Karim's mother has also got a boyfriend he regrets his deeds. At this point, it is seen that to Karim, Haroon's place as 'God' becomes shaky because by idolizing Haroon, he is enjoying his own life. Now, in front of his eyes, when his father starts to regret, he also probably rethinks his past actions.

Karim, a boy in cross culture, is frustrated. He is living in a home where his parents do not have a good relationship. So, he could not have a full mental growth. Keeping in mind the theory of Freud, it can be said that for the unfavorable circumstances his normal developmental stages are stopped. As a result he becomes a homosexual and at the same time a heterosexual as well. Karim, being bored by the environment of home and school, tries to find out fun in terms of sex. He also has sex to satisfy his physical hunger. His sex life with Jamila is like that. His relationship is neither emotional nor moral, but mechanical. As if he is fulfilling his hunger by having sex with his childhood friend Jamila. Karim's problem is

also in his idealization that sex can give him some kind of excitement and fun. I think after witnessing his parent's bad marriage, he does not have enough courage to go for a disciplined life.

Karim is a rebellious character who refuses to live a normal mandate life, which revolts against the social authority that cannot protect souls like him from oppression of racial abuse and torment of seeing his home falling apart. His sexual life is a kind of silent revolt against society. Throughout the novel he maintains his originality and keeps true to his own feelings and at the end he becomes successful in his own way by getting a role in a TV serial.

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