

Midlife Identity Crisis in *Midnight All Day* (1999) By Hanif Kureishi

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Abstract

This essay explores the concept of midlife identity crisis in Hanif Kureishi's short story collection Midnight All Day. Kureishi is a British Pakistani writer. The themes of his writing especially, in the collection under study is about British Post Second World War society. He attempts to highlight the dilemma that people face in the aftermath of World War II in Britain. His treatment of characters in all the short stories in the collection, underscores the dislocations that was apparent in family and other social and political milieu in British society. Usually, the characters are middle-aged and have been estranged from their spouses. As a result of this, there is anger, depression, grief and deep psychological problems in the lives of all the characters. In a way, Kureishi is highlighting the erosion of core family values in British Post Second World War society.

Keywords: Midlife, Identity Crisis, Depression, British Society, Sexuality

I. Introduction

Anyone who intends to study British fiction of the 1990s will necessarily take into consideration two points: The First is that, this period witnessed publishing of a great number of fiction in Britain during the past decade (Todd, 1996). The second is that this period is described as a period of survival for British fiction on the grounds that the post- world war two was a period of decline in publishing. (Morrison 2003:3).

Traditionally, British fiction is a social fiction that aims at documenting the social values of the British society. In contrast, the modern fiction in Britain does not show a great attention to the social values. More clearly, the new British fiction presents new themes and these themes are more individual not societal. It is clear that the British fiction during this period has moved from social concerns into individual experiences. For the authors of new fiction, individual ideas are priority.

When it comes to the individual themes that shape the fiction of 1990s, the issue of identity becomes a dominant theme. Identity is used to show how the individuals are connected to their society. In other words the identity became a mirror to reflect the relationship between the individual and his society. In fact, such writing creates a space in which the author can construct his identity. The individual identity has become more central than the others. Identity, Race, nation, gender, sexuality have emerged as pressing issues.

Identity as a theme in the 1990s fiction has an influential effect on the authors in choosing their literary technique and forms for their writing. According to Bentley, the abundant use of self-reflexive narratives in contemporary fiction reveals a concern to question the relationship between fiction and the writing (or construction) of identity. The role of storytelling and narrative thereby becomes crucial in how an identity is discussed (2005: 2).

The 1990s saw a number of fictions that were concerned with individual identity issues and anxieties about the effect of the age, sexuality and drugs on the stability of identity. In relating to the problematic effect of the middle age on identity, Hanif Kureishi, the British Pakistani writer addresses this impact in his collections of short stories *Midnight All Day* (1999). This collection can be considered as a semi-autobiographical narrative.

This article observes that Kureishi's writing witnessed a thematic shift. In more details, it is noticed that Kureishi's writing until 1990s focused on racism, ethnicity, politics and the formation of identity. Later, he turned to write about private and introspective issues showing unusual interest in talking about the individual ideas, feelings and anxieties.

In short, this article intends to tackle the identity midlife crisis in the protagonists of *Midnight All Day* to show how it may re-occur at any course of time in adult years (even in the middle-aged) when one is faced with a challenge to her/his sense of self.

II. The concept of identity Crisis

No one can deny that the formation of identity is considered as one of the most important aspects of an individual's life because identity, according to Hogg and Abrams, represents "an individual's concepts of whom s/he is, of what sort of persons he is, and the way s/he has connection to other ones" (1988). As for Hall, human studies are divided into several academic fields, social sciences and humanities are among these fields. However, identity as an issue has got an exceptional attention from both these two fields. (1996).

The concept of identity crisis, a term that is coined by psychologist Erik Erikson in 1968, emerges as a significant critical issue in the course of formation of identity. For Erikson, This concept refers to an individual who has experienced losing a sense of sameness or continuity of the self across time and space (Erikson, 1968). In other words, identity crisis reflects a condition in which a person feels lost not only in his personal appearance but also importance of existence. In fact, the confusion of such people lies into their questions about the aim of their being in this world as well as the role they should take.

According to Erikson identity develops and progresses through these crises and contradictions that a person copes and s/he has to master them so as to promote to her/his next developmental phase. Erikson suggests that there are eight identity crises divide over lifespan. Five of them occurs in the ages of childhood and youth, while the rest occur in three in the adulthood (Cole, M. & Cole, S.R., 1989).

In fact, identity crises are not restricted to a specific period of lifespan. But, there is another set of identity crises which may occur not only in adolescence age but also at midlife (Levinson, 1975). It should be mentioned that the concept of midlife crisis was originally coined by the social scientist and psychoanalyst Elliott Jacques in his 1965 seminal article "Death and the Midlife Crisis". He argues that a period of personal emotional turmoil and coping challenges that some people encounter when they reach the forties, haunted by a desire for modifying in their lifestyles, brought on by fears and anxieties about growing older.

In literature, the midlife crisis of identity has demonstrated that it is one of the main thematic concerns in literature. Tragedy becomes unavoidable when characters are unable to stay away from the point in which the desirable identity and current identity are in conflict. Conversely, characters' awareness of their true identity is necessary because it contributes to achieve the identity that the individual is looking for.

In *Midnight All Day*, the main characters are presented at the age of forties. They suffer from what is usually referred to as mid-life crisis. Most of them feel dissatisfied with their emotional and sexual experiences. Under this sense of dissatisfaction, they decide to end their marriage or long-term relationships. They decided also to leave their partners and children in order to regain their identities which they believe they have somehow lost in the passionless and dull domesticity of family life.

III. Analysis of Midlife Identity Crisis in *Midnight All Day*

Researchers have noticed that the midlife period is often a time for reflection and assessment of the previous life. When individuals feel that they have not achieved their basic goals in life, they start to re-adjust their life putting their personal needs in priority. In *Strangers When We meet*, Florence, the main character, has discovered that she is not satisfied with her marriage so she tries to re-arrange her life priorities. The result was her renewal of an old relationship with Robe.

This situation is a clear-cut evidence of Florence's midlife identity crisis. People usually have an inclination to raise questions about their personal priority. They try to mend their manners in life; their way of thinking and attitudes towards life and people. It is an attempt to cope with their emotional demands. She expresses remorseful feelings as she says "I hate to admit, but I imagined in some superstitious way that marriage would solve my problems and make me feel secure" (Kureishi: 47). This reflects Nutty's claim that:

people who experience midlife crisis suffer from a combination of feelings like the search for an indefinite aim, sense of bitterness for lost goals, sense of retard comparing to others, eagerness to remain youthful as well as the will to be left alone or to be with some friends (2012: 180). In other words, people who undergo the experience of midlife crisis incline to show a set of behaviours related to regret of unsuccessful decisions (308).

According to Shellenbarger, it is noteworthy that when someone experiences a midlife crisis, they develop symptoms of depression. These depressed feeling may have a negative impact on mood or relationship. As a result there will be neglecting to; family, friends and work (2005: 105). In *Sucking Stones*, Marcia who is described by her mother as "sullen like a teenager again" (Kureishi: 134), burns her stories, the play and the first novel. That shows how depressed she is. She has lost her interest in writing "she lost desire, which was also her desire for life" (Kureishi: 134). Shellenbarger suggests that there are other signs of depression through midlife; losing desire to eat, sleep disorder, losing eagerness to practice enjoyable activities, being absent-minded as well as hesitation in making a decision (2005:106).

Each of the stories in Hanif Kureishi's collection has treated, in one way or the other, issues that point to midlife identity crisis in the individual lives of the characters. In the title story *Midnight All Day* (157) we

see an example of midlife identity crisis in the lives of the key characters. Ian is middle aged. He left his wife for a younger woman – Marina who is in her late twenties. Ian took this course of action because he was attempting to run away from a relationship that has become quite non-viable to him. He felt that leaving his wife of many years can give him the peace, comfort, and happiness that he is craving for. To him, a new relationship with a younger, more vibrant woman can free him from the ‘grip’ of responsibility in a more formal marriage. Unfortunately for him, he could not get what he was looking for. He was still dissatisfied with his current life.

Now, as he got up to play the CD, he glimpsed himself in the wardrobe mirror and saw himself as a character in a Lucien Freud painting: a middle-aged man in a thin, tan raincoat, ashen-faced, standing beside a dying pot plant, overweight and with, to his surprise, an absurd expression of hope, or the desire to please, in his eyes. He would have laughed, had he not lost his sense of humor (157).

The quotation above further highlights the dilemma of middle age. Ian viewed his physical profile as a macabre specimen. He seems to be saying: ‘there is nothing beautiful or handsome about my current life’. My desire for ‘life’ and dreams are all no more. Kureishi, may well be making a categorical statement about contemporary post Second World War British society. The aftermath of the war brought about disillusionment to the citizens of Britain. There are personal privations occasioned by political and social policies as a fallout of post war rebuilding. People who are facing issues of midlife identity crisis often feel that things have not turned out the way they had envisioned them. They come to realize that the goals that have guided them are not going to be reached or, if they do reach them, this will not bring satisfaction or fulfillment thus, they tend to discard, downplay, or reject this goals hence, and identity deficit is the final result. In midlife, human beings tend to look both inwards and outwards. Inwards, through asking deep personal questions regarding their life’s guiding principles – have things turned out the way they have been earlier envisioned or not? Outwards, through a critical appraisal of surroundings and other intimate relationships at work and at the home setting. These two perspectives tend to determine the next line of action for the individual in this stage of life. A further example in the story *Midlife All Day* can be seen in how Ian rejected his salaried position in a company he jointly managed with his close friend.

However, Ian had not been to work for almost three months. He had instructed Anthony to freeze his salary and had walked about the city drunk, talking only to the mad and derelict, people who did not know him. (161)

Another aspect to the concept of midlife identity crisis can be viewed through the lens of observing what people in this condition suffers. There is loneliness and seeming aimlessness. Another example in the story *Midnight All Day* will suffice:

As he walked, Ian saw a smartly dressed, middle-aged man coming towards him, holding the hand of a girl about the same age as his daughter. They were talking and laughing. Ian presumed the girl was late for school, and her father was taking her; there was nothing more important for the man to do (164).

Most of the characters in Kureishi's stories are facing midlife identity crisis. They are involved in family separations caused by marriage difficulties. These characters are also struggling with psychological and financial problems. They usually have close acquaintances who are wealthier and more stable psychologically. In another story, *The Umbrella* (180) we see other issues that are closely related to the concept of midlife identity crisis: *anguish* and *irreconcilable differences*. "For more than a year he had not gone out socially, fearing that people would see his anguish" (185). Roger has been living a life of pain after he separated from his wife and two children. He avoids people so that they will not see the extent of his suffering. In this story however, the deep crisis between Roger and his wife was exacerbated by the attitude of his spouse. His wife was rigid in her attitude towards him. Indeed, he virtually lives in constant fear of her.

Everyone was entitled to some pride and vanity. However, this whole business with his wife had stripped him of his moral certainties. There was no just or objective way to resolve competing claims: those of freedom - his freedom – to live and develop as he liked, against the right of his family to have his dependable presence. But no amount of conscience or morality would make him go back. He had not missed his wife for a moment (186).

The above tended to highlight the deep and irreconcilable differences between Roger and his wife. Despite the family's right to have him around as a dependable presence he would not contemplate going back to his wife and children. It is also critical to note that this story is in some way drawing attention to a hardened attitude by Kureishi's female characters towards their male counterparts. In this particular story we see how the husband lives in virtual fear of his wife: "His confused and frightened him. But he would greet her civilly, send the children into the house and say goodbye". This attitude shows the man's desire to run away from a kind of 'beast' that he is staying with. Other examples of the wife's heartlessness can be seen in the way she locked up the house not minding how it would affect the children:

It was not until he had taken out his key that he remembered his wife had changed the lock last week. What she had done was illegal: he owned the house; but he had laughed at the idea she thought he would intrude, when he wanted to be as far away as possible. He told the boys they would have to wait. They sheltered in the little porch where water dripped on their heads. ... It was dark. People were coming home from work. The next-door neighbor passed by. 'Locked out?' he said. "Fraid so." (186)

Roger's wife is also portrayed to be a tigress who is ready to attack and inflict physical pain and damage on her husband. The simple request for an umbrella led to a physical altercation between husband and wife. She refused to give him an umbrella.

He had hated before, his parents and brother, at certain times. But it was a fury, not deep, intellectual and emotional hatred like this. He had had psychotherapy; he took tranquilizers, but still he wanted to pulverize his wife. None of the ideas he had about life would make this feeling go away. (190)

Roger possess more self-control than his wife. In spite of his deep hatred of her and wanting to hit her; yet, he refrained from doing so. It is however, the wife who ended up pulverizing him over a mere umbrella:

As he passed her she snatched it. Her strength surprised him, but he yanked the umbrella back and went to move away. She raised her hand. He thought she would slap him. It would be the first time. But she made a fist. As she punched him in the face she continued to look at him. . . . The boys were screaming. Roger had dropped the umbrella. His mouth throbbed; his lip was bleeding. He must have staggered and lost his balance for she was able to push him outside (192).

Depression is another debilitating condition that Kureishi's characters are battling with. In the story *Sucking Stones* (110) Marcia, the main character, is described by her mother as: "sullen like a teenager again" (134), burned her stories, play and her first novel. This indicates her depression thus leading to a loss of interest in writing. "She lost desire, which was also her desire for life" (134). Depression is an indication of midlife identity crisis. It tends to affect a person's mood and relationships negatively. This may result in neglecting work, family and friends. Marcia lost interest and focus on the activity she love doing most – writing. Her relationship with the writer Aurelia affected her negatively. She was hoping the established writer would help her in her own struggle to be a published writer. Unfortunately, Aurelia simply wanted to use Marcia as a subject for her next novel. Apart from her feeling of disappointment with Aurelia; Marcia was a single parent who is struggling to make ends meet for her and her son when her marriage collapsed:

Marcia didn't become a teacher until she was almost thirty. She and her husband had started wanting to smash at one another's faces. She had, literally, kicked him out of bed; he ran into the street wearing a pyjamas and slippers. Without him, she had a child, a mortgage and only a nugatory income, working in a bar and writing in the mornings. The first day at teacher training college had been awful. She had believed she would wear scarves like Aurelia Broughton and write with a gold fountain pen (120).

The stresses in Marcia's life is enough for her to experience a depressed existence. Thus, as a result of all these her lack of focus and indecisiveness are apparent. In addition to a feeling of depression and grief, Kureishi's characters are prone to drinking habits. Alan is a character in the story *Morning in the Bowl of Night* (193). He had left his wife Anne, and little son Mickey for another woman, Melanie. "Alan finished both drinks and got up to go. It would be the first time he, his wife and their son had been out together as a family since he had left, eighteen months ago" (194).

But despite leaving his wife for another woman in search of 'happiness' Alan felt only grief. "It was grief; a packed, undigested lump of grief in his chest" (194).

Kureishi's post war British characters are victims of a harsh society in the grip of mid twentieth century economic, social and political turmoil. These ills did not spare families, but has permeated every facet of British society and life. The disillusionment of his characters is indicative of the general feelings of an age.

Another core issue that Kureishi dealt with in his collection is the issue of male sexuality as a critical concern of people suffering from midlife identity crisis. In the story *Penis* (206) Doug loses Long Dong – his penis. He went around town looking for it. Sexuality is at the core of middle aged men’s psyche. When a man loses his sexual potency (his sexuality) and his life virtually depends on it, he goes in search of it. His self-esteem, worth, and sustenance all hinge on it.

Doug went to the bars and clubs he had visited the previous night. They were being cleaned; the chairs were upended on the tables and the light was bright. Someone had left behind a shoe, a shotgun, a pair of false eye lashes and a map of China. No penis had been handed in (211).

Doug continued to search for his missing penis (sexuality and potency).

Bewildered, he was standing outside on the street when, across the road, he saw his penis coming out of a coffee shop accompanied by a couple of young women. The penis, tall, erect and wearing dark glasses and a fine black jacket, was smiling (211).

Sexual identity and midlife identity crisis are closely related and more so in Hanif Kureishi’s collection of short stories. His major characters who are middle aged usually, abandons their wives who are also middle aged, in favor of women who are young. In a way, his characters could be searching for their lost youth and vitality. They could also be chasing after the very essence of their masculinity which they might have lost in the drudgery of their previous lives.

IV. Conclusion

The problem of identity crisis is not restricted to teenage as has been shown in Kureishi’s collection of short stories, but it can be found in middle age. If it recurs in adulthood, it can create chaos and disorientation in the person’s life. Identity crisis can upset the person’s career or even relationships as such people cannot take the right decision and are incapable of trusting others due to lack of confidence in themselves. Whenever an individual loses sense or feeling attached to personal similarity or historical continuity, he is affected by identity crisis. Kureishi’s characters are victims of societal pressures borne out of policies both social, economic and political in post Second World War Britain. The rapid changes in the political climate in Britain tend to affect the social milieu in the decades after the chaos of the war. Post war British writers such Kureishi are highlighting the societal ills prevalent in British society. In essence, he is positing that the aftermath of any major conflict such as the Second World War can have a monumental effect on family life and the core values upon which humanity depends on for its very survival.

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