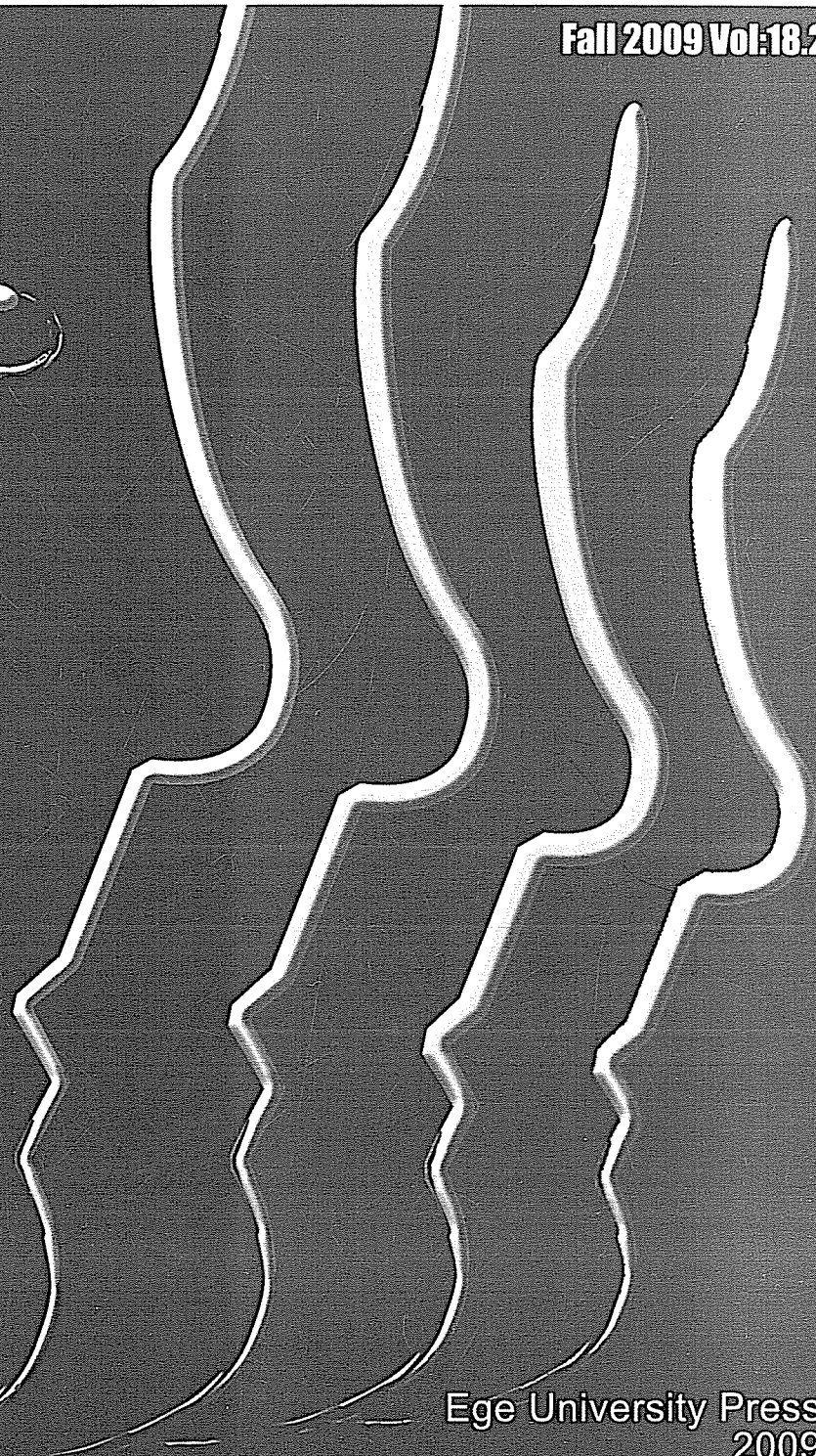


INTERACTIONS

Fall 2009 Vol:18.2



Ege University Press
2009

Ege Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları

Ege İngiliz ve Amerikan İncelemeleri Dergisi
Ege Journal of British and American Studies

INTERACTIONS

Fall Issue

Volume/*Cilt*: 18.2

Year/*Yıl*: 2009

EGE UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING HOUSE
Bornova-İZMİR
2009

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Representation of Body and Identity in Kureishi's "The Body"¹

Mehmet Ali Çelikel

Abstract: Hanif Kureishi's novella "The Body" follows the story of a playwright in his sixties whose old body becomes the cause of his attempts to avoid mortality. The premise of the novella is the playwright's phantasmagorical decision to have his brain transplanted to a male body in his early twenties. With its semi-science fictional and reincarnational references, "The Body" presents the protagonist's discontent with his former body and his admiration for a young, fit and sexually desirable one. Within the story, the body, as a tool of representation, becomes a trading commodity to be sold in exchange of a younger one. However, the selection of a new body to try on brings up questions of coming back whether as a woman or a black man, suggesting a gender choice and racial re-orientation to understand the world and society. The body, therefore, does not only represent one's identity, but also determines one's personality and place in society, which influences the way of understanding and perceiving the world. The body shapes thoughts and distinctively divides itself into political, vocational, emotional and sexual parts. This article attempts to question whether or not the body and the self should match each other, since the playwright's new body becomes the representative of two different identities. It will also be argued within the contemporary cultural theories that the body likewise occupies a cultural space by shaping one's attitude towards culture and identity.

Keywords: Hanif Kureishi, Body, gender, race, identity, culture

Hanif Kureishi began his career in the late 1970s as a playwright and afterwards wrote several film scripts. Despite the appraisals he received from theatre critics, as Bart Moore-Gilbert suggests, Kureishi disregarded his career as a playwright and showed his disappointment at script writing as well, (33, 107) since he was not entirely satisfied with the repercussions of his film scripts. The title story of his short story collection *The Body*, published in 2002, which centres on a playwright who has left behind his successful career, may be regarded as a reference to Kureishi's own past. "The Body", differs from Kureishi's other prose works that centre on characters drawn from ethnic minorities.

Although the protagonist is English, "The Body" deals with a protagonist who has problems with this body. Kureishi always regards it important to foreground the cultural significance of the body and its role in representing identity. His non-white characters like Karim and Changez in *The Buddha of Suburbia* or Shahid in *The Black Album*, as the representatives of the second generation of post-colonial immigrants, are all presented through their body ornamentation, mutilation or deformity. Karim and Shahid decorate their bodies by devoting special attention to elaborate hairstyle and clothes. Their body decoration, in most cases, functions to cover their cultural identity rather than emphasising it. Changez's body in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, on the other hand, is not decorated with fashionable hairstyle and famous brands of clothing, but it is mutilated. One of his arms is disabled and he is overweight. His body, unlike Karim's and Shahid's, does not attempt to

¹ This article is a revised version of "Body and Identity: Trading Bodies in Kureishi's 'The Body'" presented at the 4th International IDEA Conference on 15 April 2009.

cover his ethnicity, but foregrounds it. These body representations in Kureishi's works not only point out the relationship between the characters and their cultural identity, but also point out the author's interest in the relationship between body, personality and culture.

"The Body", which directly refers to the author's interest in the body as the indication of individual personality and culture, is the story of a playwright in his sixties who wants to avoid mortality. Unlike his earlier works dealing with the issues of post-colonial immigrants and their problems of cultural identity, Kureishi questions the relationship between one's body and identity, rather than focusing on multicultural post-colonial characters. Using London as the background of his novella, Kureishi bases the story on the plurality of the metropolis relying on the diversity of gender roles, identified by body representations in the city. As John Clement Ball points out, Kureishi's use of London in his work reflects the text's "overlaying of analogous global space on local metropolitan space" (21). By writing about culturally diverse characters and their stories, he not only embodies the local space as the reflection of the globalised cultural condition, but also internalizes the cultural diversity as the core of his characters' identity. Being one of the largest metropolises in the world, London centralizes the ethnicities due to its function as the former imperial centre, and popular cultural elements stripping them off their local identities and marginalities. By doing so, London globalizes the ethnicities and popular culture as well as being the home of high culture in venues like Royal Opera House and National Theatre. Most Kureishi characters like Adam in "The Body" and Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia* are local Londoners who enjoy the global multiplicity of London as their local atmosphere, because, as John Storey argues, "globalisation can be experienced by simply walking down your 'local' high street, where 'local' gods and services are displayed alongside 'global' goods and services" (152). In a sense, the global space becomes the local space in London, under the influence of popular culture which Kureishi is acquainted with.

Using his knowledge of with popular culture and the media, he utilises significant pop music references to point out the alienation of his ageing protagonist from the contemporary cultural scene. In *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*, there are references to pop idols of the seventies and eighties like Prince and David Bowie. In *The Body*, the musical references to 1950s and 1960s are used to point out the protagonist's age. Adam describes the contemporary music scene as the "assault of loud music", although the 1950s 1960s were his "heyday" (3). Thus, Kureishi brings 'pop to the centre' and he uses pop music to indicate how important it was to him in order to turn the cultural milestones of his generation into founding materials of his texts as Sukhdev Sandhu comments (135). They serve to urge not only his characters, but also his readers "to be free, mobile, and to escape from the shackles of domesticity" (Sandhu 135). Kureishi's characters, in addition, decorate their bodies to represent the popular cultural symbols of their generation through fashionable clothing and accessories. He seeks to identify the uses of these references to popular culture, which cannot be devoid of a culturally located body. Adam lacks the cultural location of his body, the shape of which cannot be analogous with the popular global representations, and it becomes the major reason for him to have his brain transplanted.

Although most of Kureishi's fictions use the conventions of realism, the premise of the novella is the protagonist's phantasmagorical decision to have his brain transplanted to a male body in his early twenties. With its semi-science fictional features and allusions to reincarnation, "The Body" presents the protagonist's discontent with his former body and his admiration for a young, fit and sexually desirable one. A newly developed medical surgery technique enables people to hire or buy the bodies of dead people to have a fresh

start in life. The brain of an individual may be transplanted to a healthier and younger body so that they can continue their lives in a new one. However, this new medical invention is not known around the world, and kept as a secret among the ones who undergo such an operation. Therefore, those with a new body call themselves “Newbodies” as a code understandable only among them, while the ordinary ageing individuals are called “Oldbodies”.

Adam, the narrator, is an ageing playwright in his sixties with “veiny” legs and “left-leaning posture” (17) who gradually begins to lose his productivity and reputation. He realises that the outside world, designed for the younger bodies, excludes the ageing ones like him. He suffers from being alienated by new ways of presentation, fashion and popular culture. In fact, he is aware of the fact that the older and sicker people get “the less. [their] body is a fashion item, the less people want to touch [them]” (34). In a sense, it is not only his body that is ailing, but also is his ability to catch up with novel ideas and experiences: “The elderly seem to have been swept from the streets; the young appear to have wires coming out of their heads, supplying either music, voices on the phone or the electricity which makes them move” (7).

As Chris Barker asserts, categorisations like “elderly” or “disabled” are not only the “descriptions of a biological process and deficiency”, but also social and cultural definitions (130). Adam’s body destabilizes his existence on the streets where he idles like a foreign body that does not belong there. His body becomes Kureishi’s “exploration of identity as a performance”, in Susie Thomas’s terms (160). Adam can neither identify himself with the streets of London, nor can he explore an identity in the present state of his body.

At a party on one of his idling days, he meets a young man named Ralph who claims to have followed Adam’s whole career since its beginning. Ralph, a confident, well-read and rather handsome man in his twenties, turns out to be a “Newbody” with a brain the same age as Adam’s experience and intelligence. Offering Adam to have his brain transplanted to a new body, he becomes the playwright’s mentor in his new life. The novella opens with Ralph’s first attempt to convince Adam to trade his body to get a new one:

He said, “Listen: you say you can’t hear well and your back hurts. Your body won’t stop reminding you of ailing existence. Would you like to do something about it?”

“This half-dead old carcass?” I said. “Sure. What?”

“How about trading it in and getting something new?” (3)

The body becomes trading goods in exchange of a younger one. With the idea of discarding an ailing body, Kureishi pursues the universal desire for a second chance through the transformation of one’s body, which has been one of the most favourite themes in literature and cinema. Mary Shelley’s short story “Transformation”, in which Guido, the narrator, exchanges his body with a “misshapen dwarf”; Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*, in which Faustus offers his soul to the devil and loses the deal at the end, deal with the idea of transformation.²

² Some Hollywood blockbuster films, which deal with body transformation might be cited as examples here: Walter Hill’s 1989 crime film *Johnny Handsome*, starring Mickey Rourke, follows a similar story of transformation of a criminal who is paroled from prison with a new appearance and given a new chance. John Woo’s 1997 action film *Face/Off*, starring John Travolta and Nicholas Cage, also covers the concept of transformation in a come-back story in cinema. Similarly, another

The novella draws a line between the self presentation of the body and its perception in society. Adam thinks that politicians and clergymen tell people what to do with their bodies, suggesting that the body is a political, vocational and a professional medium as well as being the medium of self presentation. Michel Foucault focuses on the social construction of body as a sign of power, stating that “[t]he classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body – to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces” (1978, 136). However, Adam is initially suspicious about such a transformation: “At home, I looked at myself in the mirror. [...] with my rotund stomach, veiny, spindly legs and left-leaning posture I was beginning to resemble my father just before his death. Did that matter? What did I think a younger body would bring me? More love?” (17). Yet, “Adam is disturbed by the sense that his life had passed too quickly”, and he hopes to renew himself through a body transformation which he expects to involve a deepening “sense of inner life” (Thomas 159) even though he knows that it is not always the individual self which determines the way a body is perceived, but also the societal conditions: “Priests and politicians tell people what to do with their bodies. People always choose their work according to their preferences about their bodies” (34).

Adam, whose name is a direct reference to the myth of Adam and Eve in all monotheist religions, is tempted by Ralph’s proposal to be given a second chance. In a sense, he yields to the temptation like his divine namesake. He realizes that the contemporary presentation of one’s identity is only made possible by fashion and body decoration. It is not sufficient to have a healthy body, because the body becomes the presentation of the self not only in a “tasteful and pleasing appearance”, but also inasmuch as it is the site of “moral virtue” (Barker 130). Therefore, body decoration and clothing represent one’s lifestyle, moral values and identity:

I couldn’t help noticing how well groomed everyone seemed, particularly the pierced, tattooed young men, as decorated as a jeweller’s window, with their hair dyed in contrasting colours. Apart from the gym, these boys must have kept fit twisting and untwisting numerous jars, tubs and bottles. They dressed to show off their bodies rather than their clothes. (9)

After considering Ralph’s suggestion, Adam decides to have the operation and wants to try on a new body for a temporary period of six months. Although the doctors tell him that those who tried on new bodies temporarily never wanted to come back, he insists on the temporary option. However, before the operation, the selection of a new body, in a cooled room full of dead bodies to try on, raises questions of coming back whether as a woman or a black man, suggesting a gender choice and racial re-orientation to understand the world and society: “Suspended in harnesses, there were rows and rows of bodies: the pale, the dark and the in-between; the mottled, the clear-skinned, the hairy and the hairless, the bearded and the large-breasted; the tall, the broad and the squat” (23-4). Changing one’s body does not only alter one’s self-presentation, but also determines a shift in personality and place in society. Faced with the choice between “a black body” and a “woman”, Adam realizes that his body also determines the way he understands or perceives world and society. Therefore, as in Chris Barker’s assumption, Kureishi’s novella treats the body as

film that focuses on body renewal is Michael Bay’s *Island*, produced in 2005, in which a tropical island is the last uncontaminated spot on earth where only the human clones live.

“not simply a biological given of nature” since it is “constructed by the forces of culture” (130). In this sense, the above example signifies the assumption that “a sense of self, traditionally based on the solidity of body, has given way to fragmented, plural and shifting identities” (Barker 130). Selecting a new body for himself while inhabiting the present, Adam is faced with the reality of occupying a foreign body which has its own past, different from his own. The shift in Adam’s identity immediately recalls Judith Butler’s argument that the body seems to be “a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body” (129). In this context, Adam’s body is inscribed by external forces that influence its representation, through which he shifts his identity.

Patricia Waugh regards the idea of a foreign body as “a ghost” in Gothic fiction “wherein the body is seen as continuously inhabited both by its own past memories and by an ineluctable pre-vision of its future fate” (523):

“You might, for a change, want to come back as a woman ... Some men want to give birth ... Or you could choose a black body ... The race, gender, size and age you prefer can only be your choice. I would say that in my view people aren’t able to give these things enough thought ... Still, you could give another body a run-out for six months. Or are you particularly attached to your identity?” (24)

Adam has now the power to make his own choice to determine his future fate. Although he has never spared enough time for these thoughts, he realizes that his place in society is determined by his appearance. As an intellectual, the only thing that Adam wishes is to have a fresh beginning to make further use of his experiences and intelligence in a healthier body. Nevertheless, as Thomas argues (158), after selecting the powerful, perfectly shaped body of a young man for his brain to be transplanted, he is transformed from an intellectual to a hedonist. Like Adam who becomes a sinner after yielding to the temptation, Adam, our protagonist, also becomes a sinner after his submission to temptation. Rather than being the symbol of youth and health, his new appearance transforms him into a male sex object. Butler defines gender not as a noun or a “set of free-floating attributes” because “within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative” (24-5). In a sense, in his new appearance, he begins to perform his powerful gender image.

In this new body, which he calls a “vessel” (38), an unexpected reality strikes him: he will “need a new name” since he is not “really Adam anymore” (39). His identity changes totally when he adopts the name Leo Raphael Adams. The Leo part of his name indicates the grandness of his body; Raphael refers to Ralph who has introduced him to a new life, and Adam functions not only as the remaining part of his former self, but also and more importantly as the representative of Adam, the first man. Thus, adoption of a new name raises even more questions as to whether or not the body and the self should match each other, since Adam’s new body now becomes the representative of two different identities. Nonetheless, he enjoys this multiplicity of identities: “I loved this multiplicity of lives; I was delighted with the compliments about my manner and appearance, loved being told I was handsome, beautiful, good-looking ... I had intelligence, money, some maturity and physical energy. Wasn’t this human perfection? Why hadn’t anyone thought of putting them together before? (56).

At first, the result of the operation looks so perfect that Ralph compares the outcome to Michelangelo’s David, whereas Adam, in the beginning, likens his situation to the monster created by Dr. Frankenstein referring to Mary Shelley’s Gothic work (35-6). While the reference to Michelangelo’s David indicates that Adam’s new appearance recalls the

excellence of mythic bodies, the reference to *Frankenstein* implies that the brain transplantation will lead to the creation of a body that will go out of control.

In his former, but own body, he always dissociates himself from his body, "as if it were an embarrassing friend [he] no longer wanted to know" (29). After his initial happiness with his new vessel that brings his self esteem back, - women begin to turn their heads to see him - he soon understands how much he is unable to control this vessel. His body feels like the uncontrollable monster that Frankenstein created:

There I was, walking in the street, shopping for the trip I had finally decided to take, when two gay men in their thirties started waving and shouting from across the road.

"Mark, Mark!" they called, straight at me. "It's you! How are you! We've missed you!" (43)

The uncontrollability of his new self indicates that the body also occupies a cultural space by shaping one's attitude towards private and public space. When he thinks that his new body brings him masculine power, it also reveals that the owner of his new body used to be a homosexual, pulling Adam into a gender conflict. Therefore, Adam's private and public identity is not only transformed, but also fragmented. Kureishi uses the body as the context of the self. If the self functions as text, the body functions as context. Accordingly, Adam's self is fragmented by the fragmentation of his body. The self and the body, in Adam's case, do not match, which invites an immediate fragmentation. While the intellectual beauty described by Plotinus belongs to the one "who has grasped the beauty of the Authentic Intellect" and a beautiful stone is such by "virtue of the Form or Idea introduced by the art" (174), the beauty of Adam's new body does not bear a similar relationship. Being a foreign body, Adam's new "vessel" is beautiful as a stone which lacks the virtue of Idea.

Having realized the fragmentation of his identity after the initial enjoyment of his sexual power, Adam concludes that he is not the person he wishes to be anymore. As Michel Foucault asserts, sex is "not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality", and it is "useful for the greatest number of manoeuvres and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies" (1990, 103). As a form of power, sex does not appear to be a satisfying power for Adam. At least, it is not what he initially expected, despite his enjoyment at the beginning. He "sounds like the descendant of Wilde's Dorian Gray", in the sense that although he loves his appearance and lustfully enjoys his young body, he still loves his "wrinkled and sagging wife" (Thomas 158). Similarly, while Dorian Gray falls in love with his portrait and never ages, his face and body in the portrait get old. In Adam's situation, he still feels like an ageing man, despite his healthy reflection in the mirrors and in other people's perception. As a result, he realises that "his body should have been a source of affection rather than the cause of his desperate attempt to avoid mortality" (Thomas 159). When he sees his wife as she returns from shopping, and offers her help to carry her shopping bags, she treats him like a foreigner. He, then, realizes his lack of identity. He means no one special to her: "I was neither an Oldbody nor a Newbody. I was a nobody" (64).

The operation that he consents to have despite his initial suspicions, turns out to be a failure and strips him off of his identity, failing to give him a deepening sense of an inner life contrary to his expectations in the beginning. Adam is a typical Kureishi character who is obsessed with his appearance, like Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia* who tries on

various clothes to impress Charlie, or Shahid in *The Black Album* who elaborates his appearance with his brother's designer clothes. However, Kureishi formulates an identity quest different from those in his earlier works in which his protagonists are the representatives of post-colonial immigrants who allegorize themselves culturally to be integrated into the host culture by changing their clothes, their language and eating habits to adapt their identity to their new home. In their situation, their body as the context of their identity is a cultural one alluding to historical and political ontology. On the other hand, Adam is not a post-colonial immigrant, but an Englishman. His identity quest stems not from his desire to be integrated into a society, but from his personal desires to renew his identity. All Kureishi characters long for transformation to have a deeper inner sense, but their allegorical transformations do not deepen their inner life, but turn them into translations which do not make sense in the target language.

Adam's body shapes his thoughts and distinctively divides itself into political, vocational, emotional and sexual parts. His appearance determines his attitudes towards his private space as well as the public space. The space he occupies in the public differs intensively after transformation, since he attracts more attention from others than he used to receive in his former body. He realizes that his private space also alters when he visits his own house in the form of a Newbody, since he is treated like a stranger in his own house. His ailing wife offers Leo, Adam's new self, tea after he helps her carry the shopping bags as a good-hearted stranger only wishing to be closer to his wife. However, instead of being the host in his own private space, he becomes a stranger trying to peek into the inner rooms and glance at the photos of his former self and his son.

Adam notices after the operation that they were "making a society in which everyone would be the same age" (37), which indicates Kureishi's references to globalisation. Kureishi visualises a society in which everybody is the same age and all individuals share a common culture. The story is concluded by Adam's escape from this uniform society. Unlike Kureishi's earlier works in which cultural multiplicity is celebrated with people from different races and gender orientations, "The Body" involves no multicultural characters. The only black bodies in the story are the deceased bodies suspended on harnesses to be tried on. Apart from that, all differences are minimalised into fashionable body presentations, turning the bodies into commodities.

With its references to globalisation, Kureishi creates a postmodern allegory of fragmented identities in a globalised setting, rather than in a multicultural one. By doing so, he attempts at contextualising the body of his characters whose identities are manipulated by the form of their body. While his post-colonial characters have mutilated bodies, Adam acquires a perfect body. However, in both cases, the body as the context of identities neither functions to reveal the inner selves of the souls that they carry, nor gives them a deepening sense of inner life. Global culture, as one of the major concerns of Kureishi's fiction, brings about not only the multiple forms of cultural multiplicity in the themes that it focuses on, but also in the ways characters are shaped. However, the characters that Kureishi describes, despite being analogous with the multiplicity of the global cultural representation in a local setting, appear to be similar to each other in that they all reflect consumerism by their clothes, each of them being global fashionable brands. In Adam's body, the body which he desires to adopt himself to the contemporary globalised setting, we are introduced with a fragmented body identity: lack of gender differences, devoid of culture and ethnicity, replete with the icons of pop music, fashion and sexuality. As they all seem to be very similar to each other, Kureishi deliberately attempts to use this lack of identity as the context of his story that reflects the senselessness and deculturalisation of the global singularity of identities.

"The Body", therefore, is a story of dislocation: the dislocation of personal identity in a new body; the dislocation of cultural values in a fragmented body; the loss of intellectual power and essence; and a move from uniqueness and authenticity. It is a story of global fragmentation and multiplicity in a local setting. However, it is not the story that reflects this multiplicity in individual identities and cultural representations. It is the story of the creation of uniform identities in the global consumerism in which bodies can be sold, hired, mutilated, stripped of their unique identities and become mere "vessels". Bodies are designed to embody class, race and identity. They are removed away from their natural functions and they become signifiers of ethnicity, class, sexual preferences, profession and even globalisation by foregrounding their individual images through international brands. Despite its claims to be multicultural, globalisation creates uniform identities by, as Ruth Holliday and John Hassard argue, "the coding of particular bodies" such as "working-class, female, black and disabled bodies, and bodies configured as queer" that are all coded and read as inferior (3). Adam's new body, thus, turns out to be a manufactured identity, which reduces his multi-vocal intellectuality to a sex icon.

Within these tensions, Kureishi constructs Adam's identity that struggles to understand and re-explore the world and society, because, while the world becomes smaller as the result of globalisation, it creates new forms of cultural hybridity. Within this new cultural identity, one may observe that individuals all around the world share and consume the same commodities in the name of multiplicity. Adam is trapped in multicultural London in which the streets are designed for the young, and he is stuck in the middle of elaborated bodies that stand out as markers of so-called global identities. However, as Storey asserts, while local is dominated by the "imported" global and the concept of foreign is welcomed as long as it is in the form of commodity, differences of class, gender, race, ethnicity and generation still continue to raise conflicts, since the "imported" foreign stands out as being less striking and problematic than the differences caused by the local varieties (156-7).

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Özet

Kureishi'nin "The Body" Adlı Eserinde Beden ve Kimlik Temsili

Hanif Kureishi'nin romanı "Beden", yaşlı gövdesi nedeniyle ölümden kaçan altmışlı yaşlarındaki bir oyun yazarını konu edinmektedir. Roman, yazarın beynini yirmili yaşlarındaki bir bedene naklettirme kararı üzerine kuruludur. Reenkarnasyon ve bilim kurgusal göndermeleriyle "Beden"; kahramanının eski bedenine duyduğu hoşnutsuzluğunun ve genç, güçlü ve cinsel olarak arzu duyulan bir bedene duyduğu özlemin öyküsüdür. Öyküde, kendini sunma aracı olarak beden ticari bir metaya, daha genç bir bedenle değiştirilebilecek bir mala dönüşür. Fakat yeni bir beden seçimi; kadın, erkek, zenci ya da beyaz beden seçenekleri karşısında, yeni sorunları beraberinde getirir; cinsel ve ırksal tercihleri yeniden gözden geçirerek dünyayı ve toplumu yeniden anlamamanın bir yolu haline gelir. Böylelikle beden, yalnızca bireyin kimliğini değil, aynı zamanda bireyin dünyadaki ve toplumdaki yerini belirleyen, onun dünyayı algılayışını etkileyen bir olguya dönüşür. Beden düşünceleri biçimlendirir ve politik, mesleki, duygusal ve cinsel parçalara bölünür. Bu makale, bedenin ve bireyin birbiriyle uyum içinde olup olmadığını sorgulamaktadır, çünkü yazarın yeni bedeni iki ayrı kimliğin taşıyıcısı haline gelir. Çağdaş kültür kuramları çerçevesinde, bedenin aynı zamanda kültürel bir mekân oluşturduğu ve bireyin kültür ve kimliğe karşı tavrını belirlediği de makalenin tartışma konusunu oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Hanif Kureishi, beden, ırk, sosyal cinsiyet, kimlik, kültür