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UNRELIEVED DESIRE AND PROTRACTED FANTASY IN HANIF KUREISHI'S *INTIMACY*

Abstract: *This study investigates the relationship between Lacan's theory of desire and Jay's questing character in Hanif Kureishi's novella,* Intimacy. *The paper argues that* Intimacy *explores the passionate desire hardly satisfied through social and familial relationships. When it is read in Lacanian terms, the narrative reveals that the protagonist's unrelieved desire is fuelled by prolonged dissatisfaction. As the present paper will show,* Intimacy *portrays the protagonist as constantly fleeing from any kind of attachment. Presented as a self-producing motive, Jay's desire acts in relation to the other, beyond language, law, and reality. Even though the desiring subject in* Intimacy *nearly achieves his demanded object, his ultimate satisfaction seems possible only in protracted fantasy.*
Key Words: *desire, lack, relationship, intimacy, fantasy.*

Desire is the relation of being to lack—
Lacan, "Seminar II"

Introduction

Critical readings of Hanif Kureishi so far have been primarily concerned with social identity, but some of his works deal with "intimate secrets of desire" (Boucher 17). His *Intimacy,* for example, explores relationships "not marked by the kind of excitement and passion" but by "ambivalence" that concerns him even "sexually" (Dunning 160). The character's unrelieved boredom "erodes life's pleasures" (Buchanan 69), turning his familial relationships into "a kind of protracted torture" (Dunning 160). This paper examines *Intimacy* in terms of Lacanian desire since it reveals the protagonist's prolonged sense of dissatisfaction. The main character's revolutionary action in leaving the familial social context and pursuing "love" outside that context causes him to flee from any kind of attachment recurrently. Therefore, this paper focuses on the insatiable nature of desire, which acts beyond law and reality, in the reconstruction of relationships as represented in *Intimacy*.

Desire in *Intimacy* appears to be the original stimulator and controller of the first-person homodiegetic narrator's actions. Jay, the protagonist, abandons his familial life in order to be with his beloved Nina. From the beginning of the novel, Jay desires her and, in order to justify this desire, he re-examines his past from his childhood to the moment of narration which is concurrent with his home-leaving too. Jay is delineated in a conflict between his desires and his obligations. Through his re-examination of the past and sharing his justifications for his present

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actions with the implied reader, Jay critically scrutinizes his ten-year marriage with Susan, his wife, whom he has ostensibly replaced with Nina, his desired beloved. He has discovered that Susan is not a good match for him. Therefore, to have just "more life," Jay decides to overcome his doubts and, at last, he is convinced to leave home. Jay's personality can be defined by the object of his search—the other. He does not tolerate any limitation imposed on him by the laws of marriage; above that, he is frustrated to discover that Susan neither approves his actions nor recognizes his individuality. He feels alienated by Susan, whose love no longer fills the "lack" in his "self." Jay, therefore, pursues the lost object—love—which, from his perspective, stands for wholeness. He hopes intimacy with Nina will satisfy his lack, therefore he leaves Susan. However, his desire never ends in satisfaction; instead, he frequently craves for something beyond what he has already achieved. Thus, replacement of Susan with Nina can be read symbolically as being a sign of his endless desire, which is insatiable and self-producing. It is, additionally, a desire for something which is only possible in what Lacan calls the realm of the real.

Jacques Lacan's Concept of Desire

Desire, from Lacan's perspective, primarily refers to the infantile phases of personality development, which Lacan discusses within "three grand terms [...]—the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real" (Lacan 73). As Lacan proceeds, desire is both preverbal and related to the other:

> At first, before language, desire exists solely in the single plane of the imaginary relation of the specular stage, projected, alienated in the other. The tension it provokes is then deprived of an outcome. That is to say that it has no other outcome—Hegel teaches us this—than the destruction of the other. (170)

The imaginary stage deals with the infantile experiences having no boundaries, it is beyond language. Desire begins to act at this level first. This is the case with the protagonist in *Intimacy* who—more than anything else in his life—constantly craves for recognition and identification on the part of the other. The imaginary stage is preverbal; it is "the level of the model image of the original form" (Lacan 59); it is a period in which the infant has a "joyful fusion with mother's body" and its identity is "inherently fluid, and strict boundaries between self and other have yet to be established" (Booker 35-36). Similarly, as the upcoming argument will show, *Intimacy* demonstrates how the main character searches for the "model image of the original form" (Lacan 59) escaping from boundaries.

The mirror-stage takes place when an infant begins to "gain a sense of her own existence as a separate entity and to establish an awareness of the boundaries of her own body through its literal mirror image or through outside objects" (Booker 36). Its effects are permanent on the subject since, as Lacan states, "the mirror-stage is not simply a moment in development. It also has an exemplary function, because it reveals some of the subject's relations to his image" (74). In *Intimacy*, Jay's backward references reveal that his present suffering mainly goes back to the time he entered the mirror-stage. Re-experiencing the imaginary remains impossible; however, Jay continuously attempts to achieve identification beyond the mirror-stage. Lacan's concept of "mirror" can be taken as both literal and metaphorical. The child, as Jay, looks through the mirror and "is confronted with her or his own image in the mirror; that image provides both an illusion of a complete and controllable being that is the "self" [Nina], and also sense of irresolvable tension given the infant's continuing experience of its body as always fragmented and incomplete

[Susan]" (Hall 80). Moreover, for Lacan, "to *find* the self in the mirror is simultaneously to 'lose' it as object of desire" (Parkin-Gounelas 30) because "each time that the subject is captivated by one of his fellow beings, well, then the desire revives in the subject. But it is revived verbally" (Lacan 171). Accordingly, a tension arises in the developing "subject": a tension between the ability to control the self in its ideal state, the Ideal-I as it appears in the mirror, and its already fragmented, disconnected self. The tension, which "is only imperfectly assuaged by our subsequent developmental encounter with language" (Hall 80), is more enhanced as a result of the child's entrance into the symbolic stage, which accounts for the split of the subject.

Lacan suggests that we "identify the symbolic with language" (74). During the symbolic stage, a child enters the language system, where social and cultural codes prevail over the mindset of the developing (or split) subject. S/he is made to use signs, which rather intensifies her/his sense of lack. As stated by Lacan, language brings about nothing but anxiety:

> That is when desire is sensed by the subject—which cannot happen without the conjunction of speech. And it is a moment of pure anxiety, and nothing but. Desire emerges in a confrontation with the image. Once this image which had been rendered incomplete is completed, once the imaginary facet which was non-integrated, suppressed, repressed, looms up, anxiety then makes its appearance. That is the fertile moment. (188)

Therefore, "it would be wrong to think we experience lack and then language comes along and tries to make up for it. Language produces the very lack it tries to make good" (Easthope 92), in other words "It is only once it is formulated, named in the presence of the other, that desire, whatever it is, is recognised in the full sense of the term" (Lacan 183). Similarly, the narrator-character in *Intimacy* cannot promote his relationships because he is unable to build up communication by the use of language, which, being a "fertile moment" (Lacan 188), creates new holes because it is not the object it signifies but a substitution. The split subject, as the main character of Kureishi's *Intimacy,* still feels more distanced from the real as he passes through the mirror-stage to the symbolic-stage. In Lacan's terms—as the realm of the real is beyond articulated language, spoken or written—the split subject craves the real closely associated with desire, which is the gap between the expressed wishes articulated by signifiers and received answers (Meese 486). For the most part of the narrative, Kureishi's protagonist is portrayed to be in search of this state (of the real) by shifting from one phase of relationship to the other. The character's quest in the narrative is not fuelled by his biological need or spoken demand recurrently represented by any object of verbal expression but rather by unspoken demand—desire which goes beyond expressed demands. It is "both present and inexpressible" (Lacan 188) which is "realised in the other, by the other" (177). As Easthope suggests, Lacan's statement that "desire is the desire of the other" can be in the following sense:

> First, we desire because we are first desired—by the mother, by those whose image of us we internalise; second, it can only emerge out there in the signifiers of the symbolic order; third, desire is never for the same but always *desire for something else* […] Desire is "an unconscious search for a lost object, lost not because it is *in front of* desire waiting to be refound but because it is already *behind* desire and producing it in the first place. (97)

This nature of desire is "revived" in both Jay's verbal expressions and his non-verbal behaviours.

The Role of 'Desire' in Jay's Relationships

From Jay's point of view, everything in life seems to solicit human being's desire—the central motive in a subject's life. One's (un)conscious and recurrent orientation to satisfy desire stimulates individual action in a way that the subjects "continually change objects of goals in their Desiring quest, […] but no object—be it person, thing, sexual activity or belief—will finally and permanently quell desire" (Ragland-Sullivan 81). Interestingly enough, Jay is aware of this nature of desire:

> What makes me think I should have what I want? Surely you can't constantly be replacing people who don't provide what you need? There must be other opportunities for sustenance—in pictures, books, and dance—even within. Yet all these forms are recaptured by love and desire, and created for them. (Kureishi 52)

Jay verbally expresses in agony how he is infected with his uncontrollable desire or, as Lacan says, with "reintrojection of [his] desire" (179). He acknowledges that his leaving is out of his demanding desires: "In the morning I will be gone. It is my yearning of more life that has done this, and we are yearning creatures, a bag of insistent wants" (Kureishi 61). Here the word "go" lies at the centre of Jay's manifestation of his desires, revealed in his loose connection with the symbolic-stage. He is always in want of going and reorienting himself. This reveals his constant denial of any formal convention of everyday life. He is also aware of his wanting, having or doing and even experiencing "more" in order to satisfy his wishes and desires, but he is not sure whether he can imagine any end for his desires. His internal monologue on desire is not only self-expressive but is also indicative of his intellectual capabilities that cannot be satisfied with mere institutions and outworn concepts of humanity:

> How unsettling is desire! That devil never sleeps or keeps still. Desire is naughty and doesn't conform to our ideals, which is why we have such a need of them. Desire mocks all human endeavor and makes it worthwhile. Desire is the original anarchist and undercover agent – no wonder people want it arrested and kept in a safe place. And just when we think we've got desire under control it lets us down or fills us with hope. Desire makes me laugh because it makes fools of us all. Still, rather a fool than a fascist. (34)

As discussed above, the protagonist is portrayed on-the-go, and his unsettling condition is a representation of the "unsettling desire." He cannot soothe "the devil" which, in turn, disappoints the expectations of institutionalized society. This is obvious from his continuous derisions of so-called ideals. On the one hand, he is shown to acknowledge the all-emancipating nature of desire (desire as anarchist), and on the other he admits how it grips the control of human being (desire as fascist). Jay does not believe in "human endeavour" to repress it. He seems to go along with desire itself as he knows "it makes fools of" those who do not recognize its superior role in life. One lives either through it or out of it. None of them would bring about satisfaction as one can never quench desire.

In another scene at the therapist's, Jay describes his "desire for more" as the main source of conflict between himself and Susan:

> I argued that unrest, disquiet, curiosity and the desire for more was at the root of life—you could see it in children. I said I had lost my curiosity about Susan. I said I had no passion

> to know her soul. She bores me; or I bore myself when I am with her […] I fell back in the chair, ashamed of my desire, of all I wanted. (74)

Here Jay is revealed as making an implicit reference to Lacanian terminology of infantile development, in which the child's life is mostly accompanied with "unrest, disquiet," and "curiosity." Considering his own situation, it seems that he is weary of his having entered into the symbolic. Saying he has "lost his curiosity" shows that he is aware of the impossibility of satisfaction through "demanded objects", that is, women. Therefore, he cannot linger in a fixed connection with anything or anyone. He no longer has passion for Susan because he realizes that what he has long desired is beyond her. That he "falls back in the chair" reveals the pain of recognition which, in Jay's case, is always, in part, a form of misrecognition by the other. He is exhausted because he is unable to overcome his "shameful wants." Nevertheless, as an adult, he has no other choice too because "the adult, in fact, has to search out his desires" (Lacan 167).

Jay's desire is directed towards women. Jay thinks that he is not completely loved by his wife, Susan, because "one wants to be loved for everything […] for the colour of one's hair, for one's idiosyncrasies, for one's weaknesses, for everything" (Lacan 276). His desire to be loved forces him to leave Susan for Nina, whose love, Jay thinks, will bring order, comfort and happiness. This attitude of Jay reminds the reader that man's desire towards woman, according to Lacan, is due to "the (false) beliefs that she will be able to complete him, that she is his Other (all that he is not) and that union with her is a union with all he is not" (Meese 485). Jay's main attempt to satisfy his fervent desires is in his relationships with women. He is portrayed as being always interested in women: "From the beginning, starting with the girls at school, and the teachers in particular, I have looked at women in shops, on the street, in the bus, at parties" (15). Moreover, Jay's painful recognition of his (un)spoken demands reveals the incarnation of desire in his thoughts and actions. Not having attached to any social bond or any entity of the objective world, Jay enjoys freedom because he is not in search of any "thing": "Perhaps I should be impressed by the fact that I haven't attached myself to things, that I am loose and free enough to walk away in the morning" (10-11). He is bored, bothered, even irritated and frustrated with the trifles and customs of life that try to entrap him. This turns out to be a "wound compelling him" just to go on (31). He is "asking for more" (62), his "feelings are strong" and his "wishes imposing" (62); however he knows very well that he cannot go along with them when he is about to get a "thing." He states that "this is typical of me—to be so close to something, and then flee" (111). Jay admits that he wants women; he lets them fall in love with him but once he gets them, he immediately loses interest (62). In a confessional mode, he acknowledges: "I never rang back, or explained. Whenever I was with a woman, I considered leaving her. I didn't want what I wanted. I found their passion repellent, or it amused me" (62). "Fleeing" in Jay's life is of great significance as the act of fleeing represents his constant dissatisfaction and prolonged (and possibly desired) disorientation in life:

> Later, I imagined that with each woman I could start afresh. There was no past, I could be a different person, if one a new, for a time. Also I used women to protect me from other people. Wherever I might be, if I were huddled up with a whispering woman who wanted me, I could keep the world outside my skin. I could stop wanting other women. At the same time I liked to keep my options open; desiring other women kept me from the exposure and susceptibility of loving just one. (15)

No one can provide Jay with the thing he really needs. It can be said that *Intimacy* is Jay's portrait of inconsistency in both the inside and outside world. In any case, he is captivated by his "outlawed" desires. The novella, therefore, can be read as a portrait of "outlawed desire" that "can exist, but play an unthreatening, fantasized alternative to heterosexuality" (Aldama 1100). Jay's desire is for something beyond reality, as Lacan states desire is beyond the law and beyond any boundaries, lost in the subject's early infantile life. Jay's annoying desire is, in part, a legacy of his infantile life. It is seen in his tireless interest in various fantasies with women, he "wonder[s] what it would be like to be with them, and what pleasures we might kindle" (15). In the course of the narrative, Jay experiences different love/sexual affairs with different women but, longing for true fusion and intimacy, he still wants more than any kind of relationship though he does not have any idea as to what intimacy is like: "I didn't know what I wanted" (82). In other words, he dubiously gropes for intimacy without having any idea. He is aware of his dilemma; at the same time, he cannot stop his fumbling move. Particularly when he falls into the frame of marriage, Jay cannot persist in his relationships that he regards as "weakness," "failure" and "responsibility" (47). While in pain, he asks: "what is the point of leaving if this failure reproduces itself with every woman?" (47)

Susan and Nina can be taken as the representations of Jay's controlled and uncontrolled desires. The borderless sphere of desire in Jay's life is more reflected in Nina, to whom Jay is restlessly driven. If Susan is law, Nina is what stands beyond law. Unlike Susan, Nina is primarily a deferred object of Jay's desire, which stimulates his actions, particularly his decision to leave his family; she "seems to mirror Jay's own ambivalence about desire itself" (Buchanan 84). Jay finds pleasure in her pleasure: "I took pleasure in her pleasure as I led her around London. I would not have gone out otherwise" (95). This pleasure would not be permanent at all.

Jay's desire for something beyond law and circumstances is evident from his comments on his parents, love, and sexual pleasure. Jay's relationship with his father and mother has been a turbulent one and hence a stimulator for his insatiable desire. He admires his father: "he, more than anyone, was the person I wanted to marry" (42). However, he is still not at all satisfied with his mother: "Inside her was on the run—from me; from all of us" (56). His mother has already repelled him being restless like him: "Having had a mother who had little use for me, a woman I could neither cure nor distract, I have liked being a necessity" (24). Though, unlike Jay, she did not break her marriage, still Jay thinks: "Both he [father] and mother were frustrated. Neither being able to find a way to get what they wanted, whatever that was. Nevertheless they were loyal and faithful to one another. Disloyal and unfaithful to themselves. Or, do I misunderstand?" (44)

Jay's search for ideal love is a kind of retaliation for his childhood deprivation from that love or his "primitive alienation" (Lacan 170) even though he does not have a clear concept of it. As he remembers: "mother was only partially there […] Hating herself and all of us. For a long time I had the strange feeling that she reminded me of someone I used to know" (Kureishi 45). Jay's present "disturbance" stems from his past life: "My existence was a disturbance… But if she didn't like me, I did cause her to worry. And I worried about her worrying. Anxiety handcuffed us to one another. At least we had something in common" (4). Reminiscences of his parents' marriage have him thinking "there is little pleasure in marriage" (44); therefore, he goes to seek that pleasure in the others beyond the marriage bond.

Moreover, Jay's concept of love surpasses the limits of any institutional pattern. This sense of love trespasses any borders—like marriage—in order to be fulfilled. In this sense Jay is confused, as love in his eyes is a mingling of familial and sexual affection or "the line between sexual and familial love has been blurred" (Buchanan 83). Jay exploits sexual love so as to make

up for the lack in the familial relationship. Jay's sexual pleasure plays an important role in his attempts to curb his desire, although it cannot extinguish it. His cold-natured wife has disappointed him. His longing for her body has been ignored, and they rarely go to bed: "If she lets me fuck her here, now, on the floor I won't leave. I will put my straight shoulder to the wheel and accept my responsibilities for another year" (103). He yearns "for contract and nourishment" (41) and he interprets every chance he finds at home in these terms: "She says 'are you coming upstairs?' I look at her searchingly and with interest, wondering if she means sex—it must be more than a month since we've fucked" (29). Further, "It's been weeks since we fucked. I've stopped approaching Susan in that way, to see whether, by any chance, she desires me" (59). His sexual pleasure is for the sake of release from desire: "I drop Susan's pants into the basket, reminded of D.H. Lawrence's remark that even animals feel sad after ejaculation. I wonder what observation could have led Lawrence to this knowledge. Still, I feel better, as if I wanted to rid myself of desire" (85). He admits to having a pleasure seeking nature: "I am all for passion, frivolity, childish pleasures! Yes, it is an adolescent cry. I want more" (75). Jay is offended by the ways society ignores or represses his desire for sexual pleasure: "People don't want you to have too much pleasure; they think it's bad for you. You might start wanting it all the time" (34). Therefore, Jay's sexual pleasure can be taken as a desire to be free from the social constraints.

Jay is looking for unconditional love, which is the most important purpose in his life: "life without love is a long boredom" (11). He knows "love is a dark work" (71), but still "without love, most of life remains concealed. Nothing is as fascinating as love, unfortunately" (71). He is concerned about whether he is loved or not. About Susan he says: "I wonder if she does somehow, somewhere, love me" (19). He considers love as a necessity for flourishing: "We begin in love and go to some trouble to remain in that condition for the rest of our lives. Isn't it the condition in which men and women are mostly likely to flourish?" (77). Therefore love, like desire, is the wish to be loved, as stated earlier by Lacan: "For Lacan to love is 'essentially, to wish to be loved'. It is not something you can do for yourself because it depends on another to see you as you would like to be seen—or rather imagining such an other" (Easthope 67). This is the reason why Jay, pulling away from Susan, is driven towards Nina. He says: "I've never met anyone who so much wanted the best for me" (68). Susan is an organized and introvert woman: "The range of her feeling is narrow; she would consider it shameful to give way to her moods" (23). Conversely, Nina is an extroverted woman who acknowledges her feelings for Jay: "Nina always said that I am kind; she said I was the perfect man for her, and that I had everything she could want" (42). To Jay, Susan is a woman like his mother: "Susan is the one woman, apart from Mother, with whom I can do practically nothing" (15).

Although Nina seems an unchanging emblem of Jay's concept of love, their reunification is more like a dream and illusion than it would be in reality. Jay is aware of this, he states: "No one else is as good as she is […] our love is more important that everything else. Yet I am aware how susceptible to illusion we all are" (84). He acknowledges that his desires can only be satisfied through illusions, not in reality. Yet, these illusions turn into passionate convictions: "How disturbing it is that our illusions are often our most important beliefs" (84). An ideal love remains only ideal, existing beyond reality only in the real. This is evident from the last part of novel; when Jay leaves home, Victor says:

> 'By the way, that girl rang.'
> 'Which girl?'
> 'Nina. She heard you were looking for her. … I've written her number down in case you've forgotten it.'

> ‘Thank you.’
> He hands me the slip of paper. I pick up the phone and push the buttons; then I replace the receiver.
> ‘Later,’ I say. ‘There will be time.’ (123)

Jay’s final utterance “there will be time” signals his ephemeral recognition of the endlessness of his desire. After this moment, his blissful state of fantasy starts. As an escape from the mundane aspects and irritations of life, the fantasy is also a make up for the darker side in him. In the last imaginary scene, the reader penetrates into Jay’s consciousness, through which his last fantasy is flowing:

> We walked together, lost in our own thoughts. I forget where we were, or even when it was. Then you moved closer, stroke my hair and took my hand. I know you were holding my hand and talking to me softly. Suddenly I had the feeling that everything was as it should be and nothing could add to this happiness and contentment. This was all that there was, and all that could be. The best of everything had accumulated in this moment. It could only have been love. (123)

Here, Jay’s fantasy seemingly helps him satisfy his desire through daydreaming. As Lacan states, fantasy is “an imagined scene in which the subject is a protagonist [Jay], and always represents the fulfilment of a wish [desire]” (Homer 85). Jay’s unconscious desire manifests itself in a manner that might be intermingled to some extent with the social constraints and his unrelieved sexuality. The “love,” in the last sentence, suggests Jay’s unfulfilled sexual desire, as well as his dreaming of intimacy associated with affection and understanding.

Conclusion

Hanif Kureishi’s *Intimacy* explores the passionate desire that cannot be satisfied through social and familial relationships. When it is read in Lacanian terms, the narrative reveals the protagonist’s protracted sense of dissatisfaction. As the present paper has argued, *Intimacy* portrays the protagonist as constantly fleeing from any kind of attachment. Presented as a self-producing motive, Jay’s insatiable desire gives rise to his acts beyond law and reality. It surpasses social constraints, as can be seen in the protagonist’s matrimonial life. However, Jay’s desire never sticks permanently to any object of demand and it seems possible only in fantasy. His desire for complete gratification is caused by the permanent relation of his being to lack. Jay’s narration of his autobiography shows he eventually grows to recognize the unsatisfied nature of his desire in reality; hence, he lingers to get in touch with Nina, who once stood as the ultimate object of his desire. Jay’s narrative of desire continues without conclusion.

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