

Culture, Society and Identity in Hanif Kureishi's 'My Beautiful Laundrette'

Aishwarya Puri
Student of Dept. of English
University of Delhi

This paper throws light on the cultural dynamics of Hanif Kureishi's London, which is undergoing tremendous changes in the wake of economic liberalization and globalization. Identity is no longer a closed system of homogenous characteristics but interplay of different cultural identities in a globalized world, presenting new challenges to the existing models of belonging and ethnic uniqueness. This phenomenon is comprehensively explored by Kureishi in his popular screenplay of *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Hanif Kureishi explores the lives of the "nouveau riche Pakistanis thriving in South London" during Margaret Thatcher's reign. The ever increasing hybridization and heterogeneity of England, due to mass immigration, in 1960s led to the development of complex identity crisis among the native British and the immigrant Pakistanis. London forms the space-the liberal plural public sphere- where heterogeneous identities exist and interact; it is going through tremendous hybridization in its racial-ethnic construct. The interplay, intermingling and consequent hybridization of post-colonial identities lead to a sense of ambivalence, complexity and breakdown of functional identity. Besides, Kureishi also examines how hybridization leads to a sense of nostalgia of one's cultural past and glorious national history and "the limits of hybridization".

Keywords: Hanif Kureishi's, My Beautiful Laundrette, economic liberalization, London, hybridization.

Hanif Kureishi brings forth the tale of "nouveau riche Pakistanis thriving in South London" (Barber 209) in his much acclaimed screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette*. An Anglo-Pakistani screenwriter and dramatist, Kureishi celebrates, or perhaps satirizes, the spirit of cultural hybridity and free economy in an era when the government of Margaret Thatcher had validated the culture of free entrepreneurial spirit in England. The interplay or

cross-over of culture, identity, gender and class makes the screenplay an active piece of art rather than a dull-linear narrative. Hence, themes of cultural nostalgia, racism, identity crisis and limits of cultural hybridity are also explored dynamically in the paper. All the aforementioned themes are linked together by the over-arching aspiration of “pursuit of happiness” that drives each character into particular dramatic predicaments. The biggest commonality, nonetheless, among all the characters, actions and situations of the play is the city of London. Not only the characters but also the contemporary London, which has been turned from a socialist state to a capitalist state post-war, forms an important feature of the screenplay.

While reading the screenplay what caught my attention is the gravity of the statement, “In this damn country, which we love and hate, you can get anything you want. It’s all spread out and available. That’s why I believe in England...” (Kureishi). In my opinion, the essence of *My Beautiful Laundrette* resides in the aforementioned line; what Kureishi focuses on is not only London or the spirit of capitalistic enterprise but both intertwined essentially and structurally.

In an interview with Colin MacCabe, Kureishi candidly calls London a kind of “pleasure” and “inferno”. On being asked by the interviewer about the city and how it affected his writing Kureishi answers by taking the reader back into his childhood days when the city of London fascinated him because he lived in the suburbs. He would look at the river, the trains, the “incredible people”, and feel awestruck by their liveliness. Therefore, the city had always been, to quote Kureishi, a “playground”; a place for “imagination” where play of ideas and thoughts took place. No wonder, in his stories London forms home to multitudes of people.

There reside in the city the original inhabitants of England, the immigrants from various nations, the over-enthusiastic entrepreneurs, the drug dealers, the squatters and the hippies, the socialists and the fascists, etc. The city is not only a place to live; it is also a platform where various opportunities, possibilities and self-realizations take place.

Kureishi's "playground" sounds synonymous to V.S. Naipaul's "center", about which he talks about in his much celebrated speech/essay 'Our Universal Civilization'. Naipaul recounts his literary journey in a semi-nostalgic and autobiographical tone in the essay. His ancestry is Hindu, although he is born and brought up in the "agricultural immigrant" (Naipaul 505) colony of Trinidad. Hence, Naipaul carries the double baggage of Hindu ancestry and a colonized-subject identity as he goes to the United Kingdom to study, and eventually to settle. What is peculiar is that he describes his journey from Trinidad to London as a movement from the "periphery" to the "center":

I was travelling from the periphery, the margin, to what to me was the center, and it was my hope that, at the center, room would be made for me. (Naipaul 506)

In order to understand Naipaul's statement it is necessary to read about his experience in London and what London had to offer to him in terms of occupation, monetary opportunities and career aspirations. Naipaul distinguishes London from Trinidad or from Java for that matter, in that London offers interplay of "cultural or imaginative needs" for writing a book and the "commercial organization" for getting a book published. The physical and romantic aspects of the journey of becoming a writer come full circle in the globalized environment of London. London, hence, becomes a pseudonym for Naipaul's Universal Civilization which

he describes as follows, "...it is the civilization that both gave the prompting and the idea of a literary vocation; and also gave the means to fulfill that prompting; the civilization that enabled me to make that journey from the periphery to the center; the civilization that links me not only to this audience but also to that now not-so-young man in Java whose background was as ritualized as my own, and on whom-as on me- the outer world had worked and given the ambition to write." (Naipaul 507).

The London that is described in *My Beautiful Laundrette* becomes more accessible and comprehensive when read in light of Naipaul's idea of "center". Kureishi's London, like Naipaul's, gave him both- the prompting to write stories about the London and Londoners he saw around him in the form of imaginative awakening and creative sense-perception; and also the means to fulfill that desire in the form of multitudes of people to write about and the career opportunities that he eventually availed. Not only Kureishi himself but his characters also seem to participate in the interplay of "prompting" and "enabling" that London offered as the playground of imagination and opportunities.

Omar and Nasser are the classic examples of beneficiaries of the various opportunities that London offered. They profit from the prevalent streak of capitalist culture and monetarist economy. Nasser's family lives in a traditional Pakistani-family setup with the gender roles well specified. Omar's father is a socialist-in-exile who believes that gaining education and knowledge is a better way of life as opposed to gaining monetary prowess. Salim is also one of those who benefit from the capitalist economy as he indulges in drug smuggling. Johnny, Genghis and Moose are the authentic English people who engage with the "outsiders" in daily life, sometimes peacefully and sometimes in violent defiance. Hence, London forms

the playground where not only imagination but also various social classes and cultural groups interact.

Historically, the London that Kureishi writes about in *My Beautiful Laundrette* is popularly known as the London of the Thatcher Era. Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of England from 1975 to 1990. She expounded upon the idea of bringing back “Great” to Britain while speaking at a conservative rally in 1982; she believed that the contemporary generation’s courage could match with the mettle and nationalist marvel of its fathers and forefathers. Hence, the phenomenon called “Thatcherism”- whose driving force was a sort of “moral crusade” (Pringle 3) that punished the “work-shy”. The economy that strived under Thatcher celebrated private capitalistic enterprise and expounded upon free entrepreneurial spirit. In economic terms it was known as “Monetarist Economy”- which created a distinct divide between the poorer, industrial North London and the affluent, modern South London.

Indubitably, most part of the screenplay addresses the prevalent spirit of free entrepreneurial opportunities and economic liberty. Nasser and Salim are affluent Pakistanis who hoard significant wealth from a chain of businesses, enterprises and other such activities as drug dealing. They essentially benefit from the surge of materialism that dominated the England of the 80s. A similar entrepreneurial spirit is noted in Omar who seeks to mint silver coins from various business opportunities. Kureishi traps the very essence of Thatcher economy, which rejected a sense of fixed identity and aided social mobility, in Omar’s character. He strives to climb the ladder of social mobility and self-fashion himself into a wealthy man. Omar and Johnny come together, both for business and for pleasure. They refurbish and run the launderette. Once renovated, the launderette becomes symbolic of the

Asian community's conformity to Thatcherism; since it is Omar who is making money from the launderette not Johnny.

While London forms the space where heterogeneous identities exist, the various social and ethnic groups that exist within it interact with each other a lot dynamically. The ever-increasing hybridization and heterogeneity of England in 1960s led to the development of an identity crisis. Hence, characters in Kureishi's novels and stories live in a world where they try to come in terms with the liberal-plural outer world. Such a nexus of identity and cultural background leads to a sense of nostalgia- of one's own cultural past and of one's glorious national history.

The nostalgia arises from conflict between a sense of identity that is uniform and permanent and the outside world that is constantly evolving into heterogeneity. Such a case can be noted in Omar's family and in Johnny's peers. Nasser indulges in the monetarist culture of England of the 80s and derives great benefit from it, however, his family lives with traditional Pakistani values and strict patriarchal code; the second generation of the family is also expected to do same. For example, Tania is an England born Anglo-Pakistani who is expected to live by her father's traditions and morals. Nasser seeks for a match between Omar and Tania in a quintessential Pakistani fashion and Tania is expected to abide by her father's decisions. Likewise, Papa advises Omar to get married to a "nice girl".

Similarly, Genghis and Moose do not like the fact that Johnny works for Omar, an immigrant, and is paid for his services in his own nation. They warn Johnny, "Don't cut yourself off from your own people. Because there's no one else who really wants you. Everyone has to

belong” (Kureishi 38). What further complicates the dynamics between the natives and the immigrants is the homosexual relationship between Omar and Johnny. The homosexual union of Omar and Johnny is significant not only in rejecting the universal normative of heterosexual relationships but also in limiting the sense of nostalgia that entails the characters.

The screenplay also touches upon the issue of racism. The statement that underscores the theme of racism in the story is, “I’m angry. I don’t like to see one of our men groveling to Pakis. They came here to work for us. That’s why we brought them over, OK?” (Kureishi 38). The Pakistani immigrants, however rich or influential they might have become, are referred to as “Pakis” in slang term. It is strongly suggested in the screenplay that while Hussein was a socialist, Johnny was a neo-Fascist. Johnny, along with his gang, used to protest against the increasing hybridization of the English society and the booming culture of free economy.

However, in spite of the nexus between racism and cultural nostalgia, Kureishi depicts the ‘Limits of Hybridity’ in his tale (Kuortti, Nyman 227). The screenplay marginalizes white characters and the focus of the story is determined on the Pakistani characters. Most of the scenes take place either in the immigrants’ domestic space- Nasser’s home or in Omar’s flat- or in the business establishments of the “Pakis”- the launderette, the car garage and the bar. Nasser, Salim and later Omar are the wealthy characters who are well-dressed for most part of the story and also economically sound. Ironically, the local inhabitants of London, like Johnny, Genghis and Moose, are shown as squatters who indulge in street vagaries and street wars.

Kureishi achieves the zenith of his literary genre in the screenplay's "controlled crossing of the frontiers between gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class" (Geraghty 23). All these genres are further kept together by the connecting link of a shared goal- "the pursuit of happiness". V.S. Naipaul in his essay 'Our Universal Civilization' describes his journey from Trinidad to London as a journey from the periphery to the center. In the earlier part of the essay Naipaul credits London with the power of prompting and enabling that makes it easier for an outsider, like Naipaul himself, to become a writer in the inner literary circle of England. However, he ends the essay on the account that what attracts outsiders to London, or the people at the periphery to the center, is the aspiration of pursuit of happiness. Rather, it forms "the heart of the attractiveness" of London (Naipaul 517). A similar aspiration seems to colour the psyche and actions of the characters in the screenplay.

All the characters in the story are in pursuit of something that shall offer them happiness. Omar, Nasser and Salim are in pursuit of money and financial transcendence. Their dialogues and actions reveal that their ultimate aspiration in life is to climb the ladder of social mobility; to benefit from the prevalent streak of free economy; and to mint as many silver coins as their efforts could make. Omar is further involved in a homosexual-love relationship with Johnny. They both seek for mutual companionship and sexual gratification. Their definition of happiness is beyond the normative since their union not only does break the glass of gender code but also creates racial complexities. Such a racial cross-over poses a threat to the grand narrative of the "Great Britain". This ignites the volatile national instincts of Johnny's friends Genghis and Moose. They seek happiness in protecting the grand aura of England's colonial past and its golden history. Tania finds a pursuit of happiness in her desire

to break free from the chains of conventional patriarchal setup at home. Nasser, without doubt, is the traditional patriarch who seeks to maintain order of the house in strict traditional Pakistani decorum. Omar's father has retired from most of the jobs in life; his only happiness now lies in getting Omar settled- domestically and financially. He pursues happiness in the pursuit of happiness of Omar, notwithstanding Omar's homosexual relationship with Johnny.

My Beautiful Laundrette portrays London as the free space for imagination, playfulness, opportunities and possibilities. The London of *My Beautiful Laundrette* is going through incredible hybridization in its society and enormous monetary proliferation in its economy. The effect of Thatcherism is very evident in the screenplay and in the lives of the various characters. On one hand, the free economic culture of the contemporary England celebrated social mobility and enterprise culture, on the other hand, the reminiscences of a glorious imperial past (for the Whites) and of traditional cultural heritage (for the Browns) endow a tone of nostalgia to the narrative. The complex network of racial identity, cultural heritage and class structure further complicates the dynamics of the screenplay. Nevertheless, *My Beautiful Laundrette* opens a window for immense possibilities. As in the union of Omar and Johnny; "new kinds of human unity [are possible] in the transforming experience of the city" (Williams 151).

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