

IN-BETWEEN SPACES: CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AMONG FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION DIASPORICS IN MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDERETTE

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Abstract

Diasporic literature suggests an individual's linkage to the former home and the present one, to a culture left behind and to a culture now adopted. The first generation of a Diasporic community persists in attaching itself to its old homeland's traditions and values while the second generation tries to adapt to the culture of the country they are living in. My Beautiful Launderette, a screenplay written by Hanif Kureishi, has explored issues like diasporic consciousness of home, identity, first and second generation diasporics, racial and cultural clashes.

Keywords: Diaspora, Postcolonial, Ethnicity, Identity, Gender, Race.

1. Introduction

Diasporic literature suggests an individual's linkage to the former home and the present one, to a culture left behind and to a culture now adopted. Assimilation and acculturation are crucial moments in postcolonial diaspora narratives.

The first generation of a Diasporic community persists in attaching itself to its old homeland's traditions and values, the second generation tries to adapt to the culture of the country they are living in. As Bhabha has put it, Diasporics sometimes live in the 'third space', neither the old nor the new, but yet another one they create for themselves (Bhabha, 1994).

My Beautiful Launderette (Kureishi, 1986), a screenplay written by Hanif Kureishi, has explored issues like diasporic consciousness of home, identity, family values, morality, hybridity, sexuality, first and second generation diasporics, racial and cultural clashes. About this film Monica Calvo-Pascual has pointed out, "Some members of minority groups felt responsible for their respective communities and their 'common interests'" (Calvo-Pascual, 2002: 59-60). Jorge Berástegui Wood

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says *My Beautiful Launderette* is a new type of cinematographic product, very different from the so-called “third world cinema” (Berástegui Wood, 2014: 140).

My Beautiful Launderette projects the theme of a young Pakistani immigrant who opens a Launderette with his friend, Johnny, who is his white lover. Critics from both sides of the Atlantic praised Kureishi as Ian Jack said, “here at last is a story about immigrants which shows them neither as victims nor tradition-bound aliens. They’re comprehensible, modern people with an eye to the main chance, no better or worse than the rest of us” (Jack, 2014). Despite the admiring reviews, some Pakistani organizations felt that they were being portrayed in a negative manner as homosexuals and drug dealers. To them, a character of Pakistani origin represented the entire Pakistani community, and should display a positive stereotype to American and British audiences. Kureishi rejects the politics of representation; he does not take this role of an ambassador representing his minority, preferring to depict the harsher realities of racism and class divisions. This reveals postmodern approach of the writer who doesn't judge characters, he just represents the encounters of the characters. *My Beautiful Launderette* was shot in 1985 when Margaret Thatcher got her second term in office and is thus also a mirror of “Thatcherism”. This period was considered as a reversion of the trends of the 60s, return to traditional moral values and financial reward were given for hard work and enterprise in which ‘Making money became a virtue’. During the 70s to 90s Pakistanis, Indians and other Asian immigrants launched small businesses like shops, launderettes, kiosks.

2. Identity and Postcolonial Perspective

My Beautiful Launderette's spotlight on the representation of Omar illustrates the various threads of his identity. His formation of mixed identity is a product of an interracial marriage between a Pakistani immigrant and an English woman. His father wants to arrange his marriage within their ethnic community. But he finds his own space by choosing to be with Johnny and develops relations with him as a homosexual. His relationship with Johnny discards the ideas of arranged marriage of Pakistani tradition within his ethnic group. According to Monica Calvo-Pascual, “Omar's attitude at the level of emotional relations therefore defines him more clearly as being “English” rather than “Asian” since according to Felicity Hand, the deliberate choice of one's partner is “one of the sure signs of integration into English life” (Calvo-Pascual, 2002: 64). Another aspect of homosexuality can be seen through the painting of the launderette. They paint the façade of the launderette pale blue – the “gay colour” par excellence. And the pastel colours inside and on the washing machines are conventionally associated with male homosexuality.

My Beautiful Launderette can be examined through Postcolonial perspectives. Kureishi has portrayed the lives of individuals who were once the people of a colonized state but presently living as immigrants. Bharucha has pointed out that “living in diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusion and problems of identification with and alienation from the old and new cultures and homelands” (Bharucha, 2014: 12). The greatest demonstration of the contradiction that an immigrant experiences in his feelings towards his homeland as against those for his land of adoption comes through in the perplexed feelings. But the second and third generations feel more at home, for them the countries from where their previous generations moved have a dreamy association, something mysterious, for them it is the place which their fore fathers are linked with and they are just remotely connected with them. An important element of diasporic works is the quest for selfhood in the twilight domain among two cultures, that of the homeland and of the accepted land. The notion of ‘Home’ in Diasporic writings is complex and debatable. There are various perceptions on the notion of home and locations. The character Cherry says, “You stupid, what a stupid, it’s my home. Could anyone in their right mind call this silly little island off Europe their home? Every day in Karachi... I am so sick of hearing about these in-betweens. People should make up their minds where they are”. Uma Parameswaran an Indo-Canadian scholar says, “home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too” (Jain, 1998: 30). Another Diasporic scholar and critic Avatar Brah says, “where is home? On the one hand, Home is a mystic place of desire in the Diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality” (Brah, 1998: 192). It relates to the complex political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’. The idea of home and identity is contradictory among first generation Pakistani immigrants. Omar’s Papa, who seems to be frustrated, says, “This damn country has done us in. That’s why I am like this. We should be there. Home”. For Nasir, who is a business minded Pakistani immigrant, his perception of home is different from Omar’s Papa. He says, “But that country has been sodomized by religion. It is beginning to interfere with the making of Money. Compared with everywhere, it is a little heaven here” (Kureishi, 1986: 66). Even though the characters Omar’s Papa and Nasir may encounter many kinds of insecurity in Britain, the country offers them something that Pakistan cannot, which is the choice to reinvent themselves. Nasir feels that immigrants have a privilege of not only inventing their history, but also deciding for themselves and selecting their homelands. In this regard Ali Rattansi has pointed out: “Identities are the outcome of processes of power relations and are located in structures of authority” (Rattansi, 2007: 116). An individual or group identity is only partly a matter of self-identification. Identities are also assigned by others or created by the state and civic institution.

My Beautiful Launderette deals with the complexity of the second generation of the Asian Diaspora whose hybridity always makes a sense of non-belonging to the old homeland but does not lead to total acceptance by the new homeland. There is a conflict of ethnicity and identity. There is a focus on cultural difference. The problematic around the idea of 'race' has led us to think about identity in terms of ethnicity.

As Simon Clarke pointed out, members of ethnic groups are "people who are conscious of themselves as in some way united or at least related because of a common origin and a shared destiny". Stuart Hall has argued for the notion of "new ethnicities": "a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture... We are all, in that sense, ethnically located and our identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. Everyone has some form of cultural identity based in the notion of ethnicity, thus we get away from the idea that ethnicity only applies to non-white people and at the same time the concept of ethnicity is disengaged from ideas of 'race' and nation" (Clarke, 2008: 519). The characters like Omar's father and Nasir uncle are of an older generation diaspora and are strongly attached to the culture from which they came and want to fix the marriage of Omar with Tania, whereas younger generation like Omar and Tania locates themselves as hybrid and are a combination of more than one culture. They are trying to struggle to self-define in terms of their new culture, not in terms of the old culture. The development of recognition in this conceptualization of identity takes place across cultures, places, spaces, and colonial histories of oppressors and oppressed. It is an inexplicable blend of several influences – a shifting hybrid undertaking. The identification process is not about clear desires to be in one "world" or another. The hybrid subject undergoes identifications that might be contradictory, or as Homi Bhabha says, *ambivalent*. The several spaces of diaspora and homeland are believed in this process of re/associations of identity in sometimes conflicting ways. Perhaps a denial to be located in one space or another creates third space for diaspora community.

From the beginning of the film, Kureishi has depicted the central characters very carefully. Omar's father, Hussain previously an esteemed journalist in Bombay, is now an unemployed alcoholic. As Nasser puts it: "What chance would an Englishman give a leftist communist Pakistani on newspapers?" His feeling is repeated by Zaki: "What chance a racist Englishman has given us that we haven't taken it from him with our hands?" (Kureishi, 1986: 21). Omar's father is perchance the very noteworthy representation of the cultural effects which stemmed from the economic policies of the time.

The film not only focuses on racial strains, but also on the various aspects of traditional cultural values and ethnicity of Diaspora family. In the Diasporic community, general prototype of parental outlook for their children, parents seems

to be partial to their ethnic cultural inheritance and are very hopeful or protective and transferring it to the subsequent generation. As Omar's Papa asks to Nasir, "try and fix him with a nice girl". Marriage within the ethnic community is an instance of preserving their identity. Another representation of the family unit is Omar's bed ridden father, whose ambition is to find work for Omar with his uncle Nasir and who reminds his son that he will send him to college in the autumn and also Papa reiterates the importance of education for Omar to Johnny. "You tell him: you go to college. He must have knowledge. We all must, now. In order to see clearly what's being done and to whom in this Country, right?" (Kureishi, 1986: 53). This reveals a strong sense of family unit, one that depends on each individual to support the other.

The socio-cultural treatment of women in the world varies from community to community and even from region to region because the situation of women is determined by many factors and some of them are invisible like traditions or conventions. Traditions and customs determined by a particular ethnic group can be considered as a code of conduct which determines women's mind, psychology and identity in a particular culture. In traditional Pakistani society, women are expected to obey the rules laid down by men. There is also a strict patriarchal division of gender roles which limits women to domesticity as caregivers, living subordinate to their fathers, brothers and husbands and with no independence. Tania, a second generation girl whose father wants to marry her off to Omar, wears Jeans and T-shirts and is not like other women who are in saris or salwar kamiz. For her family represents the burdens of obedience to the principles of the old beliefs and culture. This exposes Tania's resistance and transformation of new identity in the new land. This remaking or reshaping of identities is an important concept in the Asian-Pakistani origins that reject traditional values by choice.

3. Conclusions

My Beautiful Launderette thus projects paradoxical relations between ethnicity and race issues. There is no watertight compartment for sexual freedom among ethnic groups. As Amitava Kumar says, Hanif Kureishi's writing represents a "whole new world of migration and sexual freedom. The romance between Omar and Johnny supplements additional layer of complexity to the race-sexuality theme. It also indicates a new component of diaspora culture- that of the queer diasporic immigrant from Third World nations in First World cities" (Nayar, 2010: 131). This indicates a new axis: of race and sexuality but within the context of migrant cultures, a raced queer diaspora. The characters like Cherry and Salim, Nasir and Rachel, Omar and Johnny desire sexual freedom in spite of gender differences and racial difference.

The film also displays postcolonial identity of the characters. The homosexual relationship between Omar and Johnny is cross-cultural and interracial which

challenges the stereotypical norms of their specific ethnic groups represented as liberating, borderless, crossing the parameters in terms of culture and sexual preference. In every culture, there are strict social norms for sexual behavior for men and women but Omar and Johnny are not observing the standards of this society. As Monica Calvo-Pascual puts it, “There is an element of individual freedom of choice implicit in this view of the (re)construction of one’s hybrid “identity” that is perfectly illustrated by Iain Chambers’ statement that “diverse roots are now displaced and transformed into particular routes through the present.” (Calvo-Pascual, 2002:62). Omar identifies with both his Pakistani and English heritage and undergoes a process of continuous negotiation until the limits between both dissolve into his particular individualistic route. Thus, the identities of Omar and Johnny are not fixed. As Rattansi puts it, “identities as bounded entities are not permanently fixed. Individual identities, including racist identities, are also relatively provisional and open to transformation. They are not completely frozen in time and space” (Rattansi, 2007: 116). Therefore, identities are rarely coherent and integrated. These characters are an outcome of diasporic consciousness where identity is constantly under construction, multifaceted and open.

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