

BETWEEN THE NATIVE AND THE FOREIGN: INDIVIDUALS SEEKING IDENTITY IN  
HANIF KUREISHI'S *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDERETTE*

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ABSTRACT

In the recent decades, South Asian films and literature have been found to project a rising trend of conveying a serious discussion dealing with the themes of diasporic and transnational identity. The present research aims to interpret Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), directed by Stephen Frears, as a hybrid film that explores the quest for diasporic identity in the light of class, race and gender. Set in South London during the Thatcher years, the narrative focuses on the lives of the resident South Asian community who attempt to simultaneously tackle issues such as identity, racism, and homosexuality, as well as Britain's economic and political policies during the 1980's. Within the context of Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity with relation to the diasporic experience, the paper tries to dissect the multifaceted diasporic experience which intricately comprises the tropes of displacement, nostalgia and a web of complex relationships within the family and with the society at large.

**Keywords:** diasporic experience, cultural identity, homosexuality, racism, diasporic hybridity

Introduction

A rising trend can be observed in South Asian films and literatures to deal with the themes of diasporic and transnational identity. Hanif Kureishi's film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), directed by Stephen Frears, serves a dynamic and hybrid artistic example that explores the quest for diasporic identity in the light of class, race and gender. *My Beautiful Laundrette* finds as its setting, the resident Asian community in South London during the reign of the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. It tackles with many issues such as identity, racism and homosexuality as well as Britain's economic and political policies during the 1980's. The story focuses on Omar, a young Pakistani man living in London, and his endeavor to become successful in the business world. Much of the Pakistani Hussein family has settled already in London though is striving for the riches promised by Thatcherism. Nasser and his right-hand man, Salim, have a number of small, shady businesses, without any botherations whether that brings them to illegal activities. Meanwhile, his alcoholic brother, Ali, once a famous journalist in Pakistan, lives in a seedy flat with his son, Omar. He is unable to assimilate into the life of London because of his left leaning politics, which does not mesh with the ideals of Thatcherism. Nasser gives Omar a job of washing cars with an intention of helping his brother. Omar, having bigger plans in mind, tries to persuade

Nasser into letting him manage his run-down launderette. He offers a former friend, Johnny, to help him with the launderette. At this juncture the plot begins to revolve around their complex relationship and that of other characters within the narrative. Thus, it is a rich and complex film that examines Pakistani life in London, complete with issues of prejudice, assimilation, and class struggles.

A diasporic experience comprises the tropes of displacement, nostalgia and a web of complex relationships within the family and with the society at large. It is possible to explore the analysis of these various characters in the film and see how they try to deal with their identity crisis.

### **Displacement**

The most significant theme is of displacement that prevails throughout the narrative. The characters who are either geographically or psychologically displaced, grapple with the sense of displacement on both levels. The film explores how immigrants identify with their host country. It throws light on how the younger generation immigrants adapt very differently from their parents' ancestral community into their host country.

Omar's father, Hussain is displaced geographically when he migrates from Pakistan to England. He is also displaced at the ideological level in a sense that he is a left-wing socialist but is unable to cope up with the capitalist economy of Thatcherite England. This ideological conflict leaves him unemployed as he is not ready to comply with the requirements of the capitalist regime. Thus, he resents Britain and its politics, preferring to drink himself into oblivion. On the other hand, his brother, Nasser, a successful businessman, tries to acquire a sense of belonging in Britain. He is split between the two cultures. He has both a loving, traditional Pakistani family at home, but also has a glamorous, white mistress, Rachel. It is through this woman for Nasser an en-route to acceptance in the white community is attempted. This ideological conflict between his father and his uncle leaves Omar in no-man's land between staying true to his Pakistani roots and settling down in Britain.

The film presents the idea of displacement right in the opening scene where Johnny, a squatter, is thrown out of the house, by Salim. He is deprived of his fundamental rights as a citizen and is a destitute living off the city of London. This could be interpreted to suggest that despite his white privilege, he belongs neither to his white community nor can he be a part of Omar's adopted social life.

Omar and Jonny are further displaced from the social constructs of hegemonic order of masculinity. They are ostracized for their alternative sexuality. The taboo of their homosexual relationship is further heightened by the fact that it is also inter-racial, on the backdrop of racially conscious conformist society.

Furthermore, through Tania, the film questions whether or not one can belong to a culture that they are not born with. She is British with her claim of every right to share in the freedoms that her British origin entails, while the culture to which her family is bound, negates all these freedoms. Thus, she remains bound to her Pakistani identity. An emphasis on this dilemma as shown in the film also problematizes the prominent postcolonial issue of integration. The fact ironically arrives at the situation where despite her language, accent and cultural belonging, she is still considered a "Paki". One can perceive through Tania the family unit in a different light, which she rebelliously surmises thus: "Families. I hate families" (22). Her hatred undoubtedly stems from the cultural conflict she is facing, a conflict that finally culminates in her eloping from the family.

### **Nostalgia**

For the first generation British-Asians nostalgia for the homeland makes adjustment and identity formation even more problematic and painful; they are mentally "caught between two [...] worlds" the gone and the living (Ilona 98). The theme of nostalgia is prevalent throughout the film. The characters in the film try to deal with the sense of longing in their own way. For Omar, Pakistan is, in Salman Rushdie's words, an "imaginary homeland", a place he has never been to, but is eager to know about. His past, is full of unforgettable experiences what Stuart Hall describes as, "constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (226).

Omar's desire to understand what is native and to know the native country is exceedingly strong. When introduced to Cherry who assures him that she knows all his "gorgeous family in Karachi", his face lights up and he asks in eagerness "you've been there?" (19). Omar's longing for the native country is articulated in the scene

where he ardently asks his uncle, Nasser, “[T]ell me about the beach at Bombay, uncle. Juhu beach...or the house at Lahore. When Auntie Nina put the garden hose in the window of my father’s bedroom because he wouldn’t get up. And papa’s bed started to float” (33).

Nasser reply seems to overlook Omar’s eagerness as he reluctantly says “damn these stories about a place you’ve never been” (34). The longing for the unknown native land is subconsciously known through a lack of acceptance or even acknowledgement. This is underlined in Hemalatha Chari’s seminal essay “Decentred on the (a) Isle of the Post-Colonial” where she observes, that. “[t]he nostalgia of the émigré is a belief in belonging, in home, and in a cultural node” (38). An argument can be made that Hussain thinks of himself as an exile as well. He is hoping and waiting to return to his native homeland where he dreams to be accepted and belong. As he puts it: “[T]his damn country has done us in. That’s why I am like this. We should be there. Home” (66).

There is very much discontent and disillusionment in the journey back home because diasporic immigrants are deeply formed and influenced by England and are strongly attached to the coloniser’s country. When his brother suggests that they should all be at home, Nasser answers “but that country has been sodomised by religion [...] Compared with everywhere, it is a little heaven here” (66).

Nasser tries to assimilate into the white community through Rachel, but in the process, he also completely disconnects himself from his Pakistani roots. It is only when his relationship with Rachel breaks up that he returns to Hussain. The key of his brother’s flat was always with him so far but, he did not bother to visit the place even once. Probably he was avoiding simply to forget about his Pakistani roots. In such painful event when he visits that place, this return can be seen as arising from the longing for his native identity. Nasser comes to terms with his identity with the reunion with his brother when he accepts his past which he had been deliberately trying to repress.

### Relationships

The complicated area of human relationships is another interesting dimension the film deals with, through various characters. Hussain and Nasser are real brothers, though their relation is somewhat formal. This formality inevitably has been the result of their class divide as well as the ideological discrepancy between them. Nasser, on account of his newly gained economic independence, feels uncomfortable to be associated with his poor unemployed brother. Hussain, on the other hand disapproves of his brother’s capitalist way of life. In his disapproval he advises Omar: “Don’t get too involved with that crook [Nasser]. You’ve got to study” (18).

The father-son relationship between Hussain and Omar gives us the sense that this is a strong family unit, one that relies on each individual to support the other. At first, one might think the converse, seeing how reliable Hussain is on Omar’s care, but the relationship in fact is far more symbiotic in nature. Omar is caught in an acute dilemma between going back to college and making some fast money. Thus, he is dependent on his father to ensure that he does not fall victim to the popular philistinism by which he is surrounded.

The relationship between Nasser and Omar is more of an employer and an employee than of family members. Nasser and Salim as highlighted in the film, often and again make Omar realise that he belongs to a lower economic class. Nasser, taking Omar to an expensive club ridicule him saying, “have you been to a high-class place like this before? I suppose you stay in that black-hole flat all the time” (16). Gradually, as Omar assimilates into the class of entrepreneurs by opening his own laundrette, their relationship transforms into a filial relationship. It finally reaches to the point where Nasser even considers Omar to be his son-in-law. Tania, aware of this, points out to Omar that “[Nasser] adores you. I expect he wants you to take over the businesses” (22).

One can gauge the psyche of the upcoming diasporic working class in England through the character of Nasser, an entrepreneur whose primary goal in life is wealth and affluence. He is so preoccupied with Mammon’s bliss that he rates it above his native culture and original identity. He states, “that country [Pakistan] has been sodomised by religion [...] its beginning to interfere with the making of money” (66).

Nasser loves the British culture but doesn't think of it as his true home either. He keeps making declamatory statements like: "In this damn country, which we hate and love, you can get anything you want. It's all spread out and available [...] you have to know how to squeeze the tits of the system" (17). The anger of an outsider struggling for a sense of identity is conveyed through the irritating language of Nasser.

Historically, it is observed by theorists that the positions of colonisers and the colonised may interchange according to the dominant class culture. Homi K. Bhabha draws on Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial power on the oppressors and the oppressed. He maintains that

"[d]ue to mimicry and ambivalence in colonial power, the authorised version of otherness uses the methods of the oppressor and adopts the psyche of the oppressor. The natives accept the coloniser's system of values, attitudes, institutions and even strategies of colonial power, control and knowledge" (Qtd. In Chari 25).

As the film progresses, Nasser takes on the role of a shrewd entrepreneur. This can be seen when he ousts a poet, also belonging to Pakistani roots, who has been living in Nasser's rented room. He finds justification for his action by uttering "but we are professional businessmen not professional Pakistanis. There's no race question in the new enterprise culture" (41). Nasser after employing Johnny feels the need to employ many other people like him. He wants to make the most of the local labour that Britain can offer. Nasser's capitalist mindset can be observed in yet another scene where he tells Rachel that "I wish I could do something more to help the other deadbeat children like him. They hang out the road like pigeons, making a mess doing nothing" (44). Nasser, in this way can be seen as assuming the role of a patron and a civilizer; he is actually unknowingly stepping into the historical 'White man's burden'. As Rachel mockingly says, he wants to become the "Sadhu of South London" (44).

The film goes on showing Nasser's desperate attempts to be assimilated into the white community. Despite being married, he has a white mistress, Rachel whom he flaunts and thinks of his route to acceptance in the local community. Rachel's acceptance of Nasser, on the other hand, arises from her poor economic condition. The relationship is built on mutual needs rather than mutual fondness or liking.

The film centrally focuses the relationship between Omar and Johnny. Russell Redman borrows from Stuart Hall's *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, implying that "cultural identity is not just rooted but *en route*, since it is constantly being transformed or becoming something new or different" (1). This is clearly applicable to Omar's relationship with Johnny. Initially Johnny, being a white man, gets privilege in the white society while Omar is looked down upon.

Omar's economic condition gradually seems to improve as the film moves on. This economic independence overturns the power relations between them as Omar starts referring Johnny as a member of 'lower class'. Omar here seems to have assumed the identity of the British imperialist, reversing his colonised past. This is displayed when he hires Johnny to do the work and the rejuvenation of the laundrette for him. His Pakistani family describes this attitude as 'typically English'.

It is clearly visible in this shifting position from the colonised to the coloniser, oppressed to the oppressor, that the western society has developed a constant xenophobia in the minds of people like Johnny's fascist friends who are often seen engaged in street violence. According to Jamie Steele, the "troubled relationship with the host nation is articulated through the National Front's violence towards Omar and Salim in order to preserve monolithic Britishness" (Exp13 L42). These aggressive actions signify resistance to merging of different cultures and to a creation of a postcolonial Britain.

The laundrette is an 'in between place', a place in which all the in-between characters like Omar, Johnny, Nasser, Tania struggle to acknowledge their quest for identity. They belong neither to their native culture nor to the adopted one. The laundrette opened by Omar and Johnny serves as a "third space, a space which transcends race, class and sexuality, thus allowing plurality of identities". The location of the laundrette symbolically holds the centre of all controversies in the story created around class, race and gender. It is this place where Omar and Johnny find space for themselves along with Nasser who in his own way tries to create his British world

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there. The laundrette, thus, functions as a hybrid space where the presence of the Asians and the English are juxtaposed and waiting to be accepted. It is a site that creates the possibility of an enriching life in a tolerant host country.

### Conclusion

Thus, the film arrives at a possibility of transnational understanding, only after a series of conflicts and episodic crisis. The trope of identity in *My Beautiful Laundrette* is seen as the amalgamation of native cultural roots and the acquired Britishness and what happens on humanitarian grounds is the constitution of identity as transnational, interracial and interclass bonding along with the alternative possibilities.

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