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HYBRIDITY AND DIVERSITY IN *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE*¹

Abstract: As one of the fiercest critiques of Thatcherite regime, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986) vividly portrays the economic and social issues of the 1980s Britain: poverty, unemployment, free-market philosophy, enterprise culture and racial conflicts. Within this context, scriptwriter Hanif Kureishi and director Stephan Frears introduce hybridity as an inevitable consequence of the collision of the white British and the Asian-British who belong to the second generation of immigrants. Kureishi and Frears constantly refer to the omnipresent state of hybridity and diversity as a new sense of belonging in post-colonial Britain, while ridiculing monoculturalist and essentialist points of view. Moreover, their characters are devoid of any sharp divisions and represent various hybrid forms within the same parameters: British and Asian. These in-betweens introduce a new way of being British without any possibility of returning to clear-cut ethnic identities. Seeing that it is impossible to resist the influence that both the white British and the second generation of immigrants exert on each other, the characters must learn how to embrace hybridity and diversity in order to live and survive in modern British society.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most disputed Asian-British writers, who initiated ethnic diversity in both written and visual arts, is undoubtedly Hanif Kureishi. As a son of a Pakistani man and a British woman, Kureishi belongs to the first generation of New Commonwealth families, or the second generation of immigrants that experienced harsh discrimination in post-war Britain (Hammond, 2007). Since he was exposed to overt racism at an early age at school and while growing up, it is no wonder he has immersed himself in depicting the Pakistani diaspora (Hammond, 2007). However, his sole aim has not been to describe the oppressed minorities, but to stress hybridity and diversity in the contact zone between the white British and Asian cultures.

Since Kureishi has centered his works on hybrid forms, in-betweens, immigrant stories and his own personal experience regarding race and culture, his writing is driven by the constant and repetitive demonstration and extension of conventional notions of *Englishness* (Moore-Gilbert, 2001: 31). Moreover, the author has surprised the majority of critics with his outstanding *British* characters. Instead of writing about stereotypical, dissatisfied, unemployed and discriminated Asian immigrants, the writer has selected an array of characters who are completely dissimilar from each other. Some of them put in their effort so as to fit into British society, e.g. Omar from *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986), whereas others strive to preserve their heritage, even though their parents have accepted and integrated into British society, e.g. Farid in *My Son the Fanatic* (1997). What Omar and Farid have in common is the state of being under the influence of diverse cultures in modern British society. The author's purpose is not to present *the* hybrid form, but the possibility of the emergence of various hybrid identities within the same parameters: British and Asian.

In his storytelling, Kureishi also questions the concept of a unique nation, since today it is impossible to speak of a clearly defined British nation. What we seem to be witnessing are separate, yet interdependent groups, intermingled together so as to create a new British nation. For that reason, his works are devoid of any exclusive communities or sharp cultural divisions. In his autobiographical essays "The Rainbow Sign" (1986), he declares that he is not caught between two cultures as critics have written, and he adds, "I'm British. I can make it in England" (Needham, 2000: 118).

In that sense, the author introduces "a new way of being British", an intermixture of the white British and diasporic cultures, which reinforces the notion of hybridity. Hybridity, which defies any possibility of either/or choices, joins both

“difference and sameness in apparently impossible simultaneity” (Young, 1995: 25). It is thus contrary to the notion of essentialism and suggests connecting different parts, but also dismantling seemingly one-dimensional entities (Young, 1995: 25).

Thatcherite Britain appears ideal for portraying the hybrid and diverse British society in film, inasmuch as Mrs. Margaret Thatcher was “trying to destroy television because television embraces the concept of social criticism” (Frears cited in Friedman & Stewart, 2004: 199). Set in Thatcherite Britain, Kureishi’s script *My Beautiful Laundrette* had an “overwhelming” impact on director Stephen Frears, because “nobody had ever written from that perspective before. It was astonishing because he [Kureishi] got it so right” (Frears cited in Friedman & Stewart, 2004: 207). Having an identical point of view on 1980s Britain, the writer and the director collaborated closely in order to give the fiercest critique of the social and political issues in their film.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE*

My Beautiful Laundrette marked a new era in British film; it introduced a post-national cinema which prompted a considerable change in the representation of the nation-state. Andrew Higson (2000: 37) claims that “the shift from homogeneity to heterogeneity seems inevitable, given the dramatic changes in the economic, political, social, and cultural landscape of postwar Britain”. As opposed to a national cinema which used to envisage a nation as “a singular, consensual and organic community”, the British post-national cinema introduced the notions of “travel and mobility, liminality and the diasporic, marginality and the hybrid” (Higson, 2000: 38). To make this issue even more complex, Higson (2000: 40) expresses John Hill’s viewpoint regarding nation states, who believes that it is impossible to completely eliminate the national because “it is so deeply entrenched at the level of policy and legality”. In other words, a national television channel may play a key role in triggering the post-national film; Channel 4 funded *My Beautiful Laundrette* and thus made it accessible to a wider audience (Higson, 2000: 40). In this way a national body supported the representation of a diverse and complex *British* national identity.

British homogeneity in film prevailed until the 1980s, when different diasporas began to intersperse with the notions of the white British identity and nation in film. The economic, political, social and cultural landscape of Britain altered due to three facts: the appearance of the second generation of immigrants (or the diaspora), Thatcherism, and Channel 4.

The second generation of immigrants or Asian-British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other Asian who are historically connected to Britain’s colonial past) received their education mostly at British schools, and therefore they experienced *the*

culture clash (Brah, 1996: 40). For this generation the culture clash was inevitable since “a young Asian in Britain is exposed to two cultures, one at home and the other at school, and, as a result, the young person experiences the stress and identity conflicts” (Brah, 1996: 40). The direct consequence of the culture clash was the emergence of non-essentialised identities and the complete disappearance of clear-cut ethnic identities and racial categories.

Additionally, during the eleven turbulent years, from 1979 to 1990, Margaret Thatcher’s politics deepened inequalities, not only in the distribution of wealth, but also among different groups. After becoming the leader of the opposition in 1975, Thatcher initiated a neo-conservative policy named Thatcherism. Her policy was based on Victorian values of her upbringing in the country: “self-reliance, family discipline, self-control, patriotism and individual duty” (Friedman, 2006: xiii). The opposition leader reopened the immigration debate so as to solve the problem of “dole cheaters” and “undesirable elements”, i.e. new immigrants who were accountable for “misuse of the welfare system, mugging, inner-city crimes, and the spread of alien culture” (Jones & Welhengama, 2000: 17). Moreover, her supporters claimed that “black immigration had broken down the social order established during the Victorian period and was therefore a threat to the way of the majority population” (Jones & Welhengama, 2000: 18). Furthermore, one of Thatcher’s most adherent followers Norman Tebbit sought to create a “xenophobic ‘assimilationist project’” in order to prevent the possible disintegration of British culture (Hammond, 2007: 224). Thus, institutional racism, individualism and nationalism fostered the notion of cultural essentialism to which many scriptwriters and filmmakers opposed in the 1980s.

Had it not been for Thatcherism and its strict policy, there would have been no “revival of the British cinema” in the 1980s (Street, 2009: 115). Thatcherism prompted the films which are not at all similar to “the tastefully tedious adaptations that so many of us associate with the British cinema” (Friedman, 2006: xvii). In other words, the British post-national film replaced Thatcherite beliefs based on Victorian values, as well as the rural setting and upper-class frivolities, with urban surroundings and lower-class difficulties. More importantly, the films at the time were made by those filmmakers who were able to “at least offer a viable alternative to officially-sanctioned versions of the truth” (Friedman, 2006: xvii).

In order to freely display their perspective on the time, filmmakers had to look for an alternative film industry and television, because the existing programmes (BBC, BBC2 and ITV) did not seem to satisfy viewers’ needs entirely. Arnold Smith, the director of the British Film Institute, who afterwards became one of the directors on the board of Channel 4, suggested “buying in programmes from independent programme makers and being accessible to minority groups with something to communicate”

(Nicholas & Price, 1998: 24). In 1982 Channel 4 began broadcasting its controversial programmes, i.e. minority shows whose target groups were ethnic and sexual minorities. Nevertheless, Channel 4 managed to resist the pressures of the regime and continued funding and supporting minority filmmakers, one of whom was Stephen Frears.

MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE AS A HALLMARK OF THE BRITISH POST-NATIONAL FILM

Since *My Beautiful Laundrette* was made on a low budget and in only six weeks in February (Stephen Frears often made films in February, because then “England looked especially unpleasant” /Frears cited in Hunter, 2010: 5/), it came as a complete surprise when it became a “runaway success” at the Edinburgh Film Festival and “one of Britain’s most commercially and critically successful films of 1986” (Thomas, 2005: 26). Hanif Kureishi, who wrote the script and modified it during its filming *ad hoc* was nominated for an Oscar for the best screenplay in 1987 (Moore-Gilbert, 2001). At the time the film was often criticised for its lack of positive images of the Asian-British and for presenting them “as drug dealers, sodomites and mad landlords” (Thomas, 2005: 26). Moreover, it was criticised for being too centred on the Thatcherite regime. Norman Stone, a right-wing historian and *The Sunday Times* columnist, attacked *My Beautiful Laundrette* saying that “the done thing is to run down Mrs Thatcher” and claiming that the only films of quality in those days were *A Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1985) and *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984) (Stone cited in Thomas, 2005: 35). Being one of the most renowned heritage films, *A Room with a View* emphasises homogenous and monocultural England, whereas *A Passage to India*, which belongs to the Raj cinema, glorifies Britain’s imperial past and neglects contemporary issues (Thomas, 2005). Moore-Gilbert (2001) also states that *A Passage to India* offers moral criticism of Britain’s presence in India, rather than social and political criticism (as the one expressed in *My Beautiful Laundrette*). In his response to Stone’s criticism, Kureishi openly attacked the heritage and Raj films saying that those films were “the sort of meaningless soft-core saccharine confection that Tory ladies and gentlemen think is Art” (Kureishi cited in Thomas, 2005: 36).

My Beautiful Laundrette was a counter-reaction to heritage and Raj films, as it critiqued its striking similarity to Thatcher’s regime: “an essentialist, white vision that draws on a sense of imperial greatness and a narrow concept of a cosy English heritage culture” (Pirker, 2007: 54). Kureishi and Frears negate any kind of monoculturalism, purism or essentialism, and as Pirker (2007: 54) points out they display the state of ambiguity and in-betweens in the film, while providing a new concept of contemporary British identity within the parameters that are thought to be stable and permanent, such as “nationality, sex and culture”. Pirker (2007: 53) also concludes:

Despite the conflicts that the characters accumulate due to their often ambiguous emotional states or actions, they are generally constructed as one-dimensional characters; as such they serve the function of representing and satirising the demeanour and attitudes of certain social groups that are, despite their diversity, all recognizably British.

My Beautiful Laundrette was often disapproved of in the public eye and among Asian community because of Omar and Johnny's homosexual relationship. At the time it was unspeakable to display homosexual relationships in film, let alone one between a British-born Pakistani and a white Briton. Yet, Kureshi did not want to focus on homosexual issues, but on social and political ones. He explained that his aim was not to explore issues about homosexuality, but rather present the two sides of himself – Pakistani and English – “I got the two parts of myself together... kissing... It seemed perfectly natural, not strange or even particularly interesting” (Kureishi cited in Thomas, 2005: 30).

REVEALING HYBRIDITY AND DIVERSITY IN THATCHERITE BRITAIN

Set in London in the late 1980s, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (*MBL*) depicts Thatcherite Britain in detail: the economic and political situation, the position of Asian-British people and race conflicts. The opening scene portraying white British lower class members, Johnny and Genghis, being driven out of their temporary house, alludes to widespread poverty in urban surroundings. Apart from poverty, the issue of unemployment is raised, as we learn that Omar is “on dole like everybody else in England” (*MBL*). The film is not only the critique of poverty and unemployment in Thatcher's Britain, but also of the way one was able to earn for a living at the time. In order to escape poverty and unemployment, many people resorted to drug dealing, and for that reason in *My Beautiful Laundrette* drug dealing is the means of acquiring wealth and starting one's own business; ironically the name of the laundrette is *Powders* which directly refers to drug dealing (Thomas, 2005).

When Salim says that “we (the Pakistani) are nothing in England without money” (*MBL*), he confirms that the only way to become accepted and appreciated in society is by becoming well-off and running a successful business. Thanks to the new enterprise culture, Kureishi's characters are truly British, and not misfits. As Nasser says “I'm a professional businessman, not professional Pakistani, and there's no question of race in the new enterprise culture” (*MBL*). Kureishi focuses on the enterprise culture alluding to Mrs Thatcher's attempts to quell inner-city riots by introducing “business in community” (Moore-Gilbert, 2001: 102). For that reason, the

laundrette, as Moore-Gilbert (2001) points out, an embodiment of Thatcher's service industry, is the perfect setting for this kind of film.

Thatcherite as it may be, the laundrette symbolises hybrid Britain, especially during the scene of the laundrette's opening (Hammond, 2007). Here Stephen Frears perfectly manoeuvres the camera – as the scene is shot from the rear of the office, we are able to see Omar and Johnny making love and through a two way mirror Nasser and Rachel dancing. Hammond (2007) notices that the two couples, the former being young mixed-race homosexual and the latter older mixed-race heterosexual, epitomize an impeccable hybridity of class, race, sexuality and generation in an instant. The author also adds that this scene is often considered utopian, without any racial and capitalistic pressures of the time, inasmuch as the laundrette is “a place of cleansing, where the two couples seem to be purified from racial and sexual prejudice” (Hammond, 2007: 234).

Throughout the film Stephen Frears mesmerizes the spectators with his incredible window shots that capture the “crossing over and integration through separation” (Frears cited in Friedman & Stewart, 2004: 201). Frears has said that the shot showing Johnny getting out of the car and walking over to Omar clearly demonstrates a person “crossing over from alienation to being white, in a scene written by someone with a white English mother and a Pakistani father”, which of course, refers to Kureishi (Frears cited in Friedman & Stewart, 2004: 201).

Kureishi openly opposes the Thatcherite regime through the character of Hussein, Omar's Papa – as Nasser says, Papa is “a lefty's communist socialist Pakistani” (*MBL*), who does not seem to have any chances of succeeding in Thatcher's England. Papa is openly against the New Right regime as “he never visits laundrettes” (*MBL*), a Thatcherite symbol. But when he finally comes to the laundrette, he expresses his disappointment in the working class to Johnny:

Papa: You'd better get on and do something. [pause] Help me. I don't want my son in this underpants-cleaning condition. I want him reading in college. You tell him “you go to college”. He must have knowledge. We all must now. ... If we are to see clearly what is being done to whom in this country.

Unlike Nasser and Salim who are immersed with the new enterprise culture and are only concerned with making more money and “squeezing the tits of the system” (*MBL*), Papa is the only one who is genuinely interested in racial issues and education. Even though it is not overtly expressed, we may assume that he often suffered racial harassment, as his wife, whose picture we see at the beginning of the film, was a white British woman (Moore-Gilbert 2001). He also remembers the time when Johnny used to dress as a fascist and participated in ultra-right political activities (Kureishi wanted to

begin the film in this way, turning to the past, Omar and Johnny's childhood and the massive violent riots raging in the streets of London (Thomas, 2005/). These memories haunt Omar during the grand opening of the laundrette and for that reason Johnny says, "There ain't nothing I can say to make it up to you. There's only things I can do to show you... that I'm with you" (*MBL*). This is followed by Omar and Johnny's lovemaking, which implies that once hybridity is formed, any possibility of (re)establishing racism is precluded.

Even though Omar is presented as a hardworking young man and a disinterested observer seemingly not involved in social and political conflicts, he does not manage to stand aside and avoid the impact of Thatcher's racist and entrepreneurial Britain. In trying to sound severe and firm, Omar fails to sound sincere, as the spectators cannot associate this new covetous yuppie with the honest thoughtful young man from the beginning of the film:

Johnny: You are getting greedy.

Omar: I want big money. I'm not gonna be beat down by this country. When we were at school, you and your lot kicked me all round the place. And what are you doing now? Washing my floor. That's how I like it. Now get to work. Get to work I said. Or you're fired!

The up-and-coming members of Pakistani minority, Nasser, Salim and Omar, who run profitable businesses, are constantly contrasted with the poor white British lower class, Johnny and his friends, who are either unemployed or work for the Pakistani nouveau riche. Johnny's friend Genghis disapproves of Johnny working for "Pakis", because "they came over to work for us (the white British)" (*MBL*). In the same manner that Salim advises Omar to stay close to his community, Genghis stresses the importance of belonging to a certain group, "Don't cut yourself off from your own people, there's no one else who really wants you. Everyone has to belong" (*MBL*). The relationship between Omar and Johnny prevents either of them from belonging to a certain group and therefore a new hybrid British nation emerges, which is neither monoculturalist nor purist.

The sense of belonging is precisely what determines one group and culture and it is contrary to the notion of in-betweens. Kureishi and Frears constantly refer to the omnipresent state of hybridity and diversity as a new sense of belonging, while ridiculing monoculturalist and essentialist points of view. The most exemplary character who defies hybridity and diversity is Salim's wife Cherry, who is "sick of hearing about these in-betweens" and who strongly believes that "people should make up their mind what they are" (*MBL*). Moreover, she talks about Karachi, her native home and does not understand "how anyone in their right mind can call this silly little island of Europe

their home” (*MBL*). As Pirker (2007: 52) says, she is “a type, an overdrawn, even comic figure who represents a certain group of people and their attitudes”. Those characters that cling to their groups, such as Cherry, Salim and Genghis, are not able to show either understanding or tolerance for one another, and they are continuously trapped in violence and racism.

Omar and Johnny are negotiators in all racial conflicts; when Genghis and his friends harass Salim and his wife in the car, Omar approaches Johnny and resolves the potential conflict. In the same way Johnny will defend Salim from Genghis and his friends in front of the laundrette. Kureishi and Frears subtly make their point: the only way to live and survive in contemporary British society is by accepting and embracing hybridity and diversity, which are covert and yet deeply rooted among people. Apart from Omar and Johnny, Nasser is the only one who has tried, but finally failed to negotiate between the two worlds (the one being his traditional life with his family and the other his entrepreneurial life with his white British mistress Rachel). His denial of his Pakistani self while he was with the white British and his denial of a new British entrepreneurial self with his family, led him to lose both his daughter Tania and his mistress Rachel. Nasser is the character who proves what Kureishi believes, as he wrote in “The Rainbow Sign” (1986) – it is necessary to join all the elements of ourselves and never to deny any of them.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION: IS THERE A PLACE FOR HYBRIDITY AND DIVERSITY IN POST-POST NATIONAL BRITAIN?

My Beautiful Laundrette introduced a post-national British identity which is hybrid and heterogeneous, including both the white and Asian-British, as opposed to the (white) national British identity shown in idealistic stories of heritage and Raj films with reference to Britain’s colonial past. Over 30 years have passed since the first film reviews and critiques, but *My Beautiful Laundrette* has not ceased to amaze the audience, renowned scholars and writers with its presentation of in-betweens, misfits, hybrids and a new British identity. The new British identity is fluid, elusive, complex, diverse, with no fixed boundaries, and most of all hybrid and blended, because neither the white British people nor the diasporic people (or the second generation of immigrants) can resist the influence that they exert on each other. Thus, they become in-betweens for whom it is impossible to “make up their mind what they are” (*MBL*), because they can only be British and there is no other alternative to choose. However, for those who cannot accept the in-betweens and the fact that “diasporas and nations produce each other” (Denison, 2004: 20), they will continue trying to create an artificial boundary, as it is the case with Cherry, Salim or Genghis.

Today it appears that there is a dire need to revise the notions of hybridity, diversity and in-betweens seeing that current socio-political circumstances in modern Britain oddly resemble the ones of Thatcherite Britain due to constant (social) media disputes over immigration and economic stability. The second generation immigrants and their descendants are no longer in focus, but the immigrants and refugees who are not connected to Britain's colonial past and who have come from Eastern Europe and Syria. Immigration has attracted extensive media coverage and as a result "a new attribute of being a source of immigration" has been attached to Europe (Todd 2014: 84). This has led to creating a further division among the British between those who are in favour of the UK's membership of the EU and those who are against it. The final outcome is yet to be seen and the (new) British identity is to be revised.

Nevertheless, the open-endedness of *My Beautiful Laundrette* suggests hope that both the white British and the diasporic are truly British and can make it in England. The same hope remains today amidst new social and political circumstances – hybridity and diversity will continue existing, though modifying and adjusting themselves to new circumstances. As Robert Young (1994: 25) notices, "There is no single, or correct, concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes."

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My Beautiful Laundrette (film directed by Stephen Frears, 1986)

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ТИЈАНА М. РАБРЕНОВИЋ

ХИБРИДНОСТ И РАЗНОВРСНОСТ У ФИЛМУ „МОЈА ЛЕПА ПЕРИОНИЦА“

Резиме: Филм „Моја лепа перионица“, као један од контроверзнијих филмова британског редитеља Стивена Фирса, а који је снимљен по сценарију писца пакистанског порекла Ханифа Курејшија, оштро критикује политички режим

Маргарет Тачер током осамдесетих година прошлог века. Овај период који карактерише култура предузетништва и слобода тржишта, али уједно и немири због расних конфликта, немаштине и незапослености, омогућио је повољне услове за настанак пост-националног филма у Британији. За разлику од националног филма који је приказивао хомогено британско друштво, пост-национални филм уводи хетерогеност и хибридноћ као неизбежну последицу контакта Британаца и припадника друге генерације имиграната који потичу из некадашњих британских колонија. Док Ханиф Курејши бира ликове који попут њега самог не могу да се сврстају у одређену категорију ни групу, већ представљају пресек британске и азијске културе, Стивен Фрирс вешто дочарава прелазе из хомогеног у хибридног у најупечатљивијим кадровима филма „Моја лепа перионица“. На тај начин писац и режисер указују на немогућност постојања засебних етничких група и дочаравају нови британски идентитет који је настао као последица мешања етничких група. Такође, публици стављају до знања да је без обзира на порекло и расу могуће пронаћи спокој и остварити успех у Британији уколико се прихвати хибридноћ и разноликост и уколико се одустане од стварања вештачких подела.

Кључне речи: филм „Моја лепа перионица“, Ханиф Курејши, Стивен Фрирс, пост-национални филм, хибридноћ, разноликост, несврстани, режим Маргарет Тачер

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