

DEPICTION OF GENDER POLITICS AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY IN HANIF KUREISHI'S AND STEPHEN FREARS' *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE*

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Abstract: The study deals with problems of gender politics and postcolonial identity in Hanif Kureishi's and Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). Like most of the other works of the writer, Kureishi has given an authentic insight to the readers about the gender identity and postcolonial identity in the screenplay. Later on, Stephen Frears has chosen the story of the play as the script for making film and he left no stone unturned to do justice to the purpose of the author. Frears has maintained the storyline in the film version without making much change in the script. However, the director has depicted the story of the screenplay in the film in an innovative manner. In fact the gender issue and its related problems have become a burning issue in recent time. The art and prevailing culture of the society has always been a part of literature and in this case it's not exceptional. Like his first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi has presented an appealing illustration of gender and cultural aspects in addition to the revelation of the postcolonial identity highlighting the mix and varied nature of multicultural fiction.

Key Word: Gender, postcolonial, film, cultural, multicultural.

Introduction: Hanif Kureishi, who was born on December 5, 1954 in Bromley, England and grew up there, is well aware about the ethnic and cultural conflicts experienced by immigrants that he dealt with as the subject matter in his major works. In fact, his works are marked by great cultural and ideological diversity. This paper focuses on the depiction of the gender and postcolonial identity with reference to Kureishi's screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985).

Hanif Kureishi attempts to explain the topic of gender identity and racism in the light of his own worrying experiences in London in an essay entitled "The Rainbow Sign" published in 1986. The conflict is vividly depicted in his play *My Beautiful Laundrette*. However,

Kureishi avers that notions of Asian and British cannot be defined separately. His protagonists live the potentials and experience the pitfalls of mixing and metissage, emphasising the precarious ambivalent nature of all cultural translation. His work parodies the idea of homogeneous, distinct, racially distinct communities. (Ranasinha 122)

In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi has shown the tension between the British and the Pakistani immigrants in modern London. This screenplay is essentially not fundamental in nature but the cultural conflict is obvious in it. The main plot focuses on the character named Omar, a young immigrant from Pakistan who starts laundry business in London with his gay British lover and sells drugs so as to earn money to support his other business. Most of the characters in *My Beautiful Laundrette* are the immigrants from Pakistan and all of them belong to the Muslim community. In spite of the problem of racial prejudices, many of them are attracted to the

West and their own culture becomes unfamiliar to them.

Omar, the protagonist of the screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* is influenced greatly by the pop culture of the West. He is born of Pakistani parents and lived in a flat in South London. He is a frequent visitor of the club/bar owned by Anwar and "of course a table is always here for you" (Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* 33). He enjoys the music and drinks "champagne" there at the bar. He assists Salim in the illegal business of "powder". He is "greedy" (36) like his uncle, who would like to accumulate more and more money. It leads him to commit a theft in a house along with his friend Johnny. Omar becomes so much engrossed by the Western culture.

Moreover, in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi has shown the protagonist's involvement in homosexual relationship with Johnny, his co-worker in the laundrette business. Omar's attraction to the West, Europe, or the Enlightenment is obvious. While returning home from Nasser's house, they have come to the laundrette first and from there they part with each other with a warm hug and an obsessive kiss: "Johnny puts his arm round Omar. Omar turns to him and they kiss on the mouth. They kiss passionately and hold each other" (Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* 37). Then, again during the day of the inauguration of the laundrette "Omar touches him, asking him to hold" (43) and "... starts to unbutton Johnny's shirt" (44) at the back room of the laundrette.

Kureishi has depicted Omar's Papa 'the leftist communist socialist', who was once "a famous journalist", as a "great drinker" (Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* 21) in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. He develops the habit of drinking "vodka" routinely. In the past when he was young, he used to visit the

bar and sometimes he comes back home along “with some women” (20). Omar’s uncle Nasser, too, drinks wine and has love for music. He has a “mistress” (22) named Rachel, though he has introduced her as his “old friend” (16). Nasser’s daughter Tania too treads the same path. During her visit at the laundrette on the day of the inauguration of the same, she is welcomed by Johnny by a kiss and she reciprocates without any hesitation. These mannerisms are the result of the influences of the Western culture on the girl.

Salim, another character of *My Beautiful Laundrette* has also come from Pakistan and lives along with his Anglo-Indian wife in their “large detached house” in South London. He, too, very often, utters the name of “Christ” (Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* 30) instead of Allah. He not only drinks wine but also “carries a bottle of whisky” (34) sometime during his visit to Nasser’s house. There, he plays “cards” (54) in the company of Nasser, Omar and Johnny. Salim too, uses abusive language. He mocks at Omar using the American slang saying the latter not to “fuck your uncle’s business” (35). He is a frequent visitor to the bar owned by Anwar where the latter’s son Tariq serve wine and other things to the customers.

What characterizes Hanif Kureishi’s approaches is his belief in the power of literature as a social and cultural force. A thorough study of the author’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* reveals that there are options for the characters to choose to fit themselves in the society. Omar, the protagonist of *My Beautiful Laundrette* is involved in trivial things and the flexibility of his character weakens the main plot and structure of the screenplay to a certain extent.

The concepts of sacred and profane apply very much to the use of language even in day to day life. It can also be said that the cultural clash as depicted in Kureishi’s play *My Beautiful Laundrette* is his response to the changing times. The world after the fall of communism is not the same it was earlier. The force of competing ideologies is pulling people in different directions. Kureishi succeeds in opening up the debate. And he does it convincingly. So far as the making of the screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* as a film is concerned, Stephen Frears adopts the

postmodernist approach to look at the social setup and cultural distinctiveness in a manner which was prevalent during the time of Thatcher in England. The director deals with problems of gender politics and postcolonial identity as it is there in the screenplay of Hanif Kureishi. Frear has left no stone unturned to do justice to the purpose of the author. He has maintained the storyline in the film version without making much change in the script. However, the director has depicted the story of the screenplay in the film in an innovative manner. In fact the gender issue and its related problems have been focused carefully and appropriately. The art and prevailing culture of the society which has been a part of literature is also handled exceptionally well. Frear’s presentation of gender and cultural aspects in addition to the revelation of the postcolonial identity is appealing.

While dealing with the film version of the screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette*, it reminds us about Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* where the film deals with the aftermath of empire. Similarly, in Frear’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* the depiction of the political climate in which the film is set is given emphasis, showing the quick fall of Thatcher’s England which was very powerful in the past.

The family and the related tensions are primarily focused rather than paying much attention to the racial issues in the film version of the screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Frear has especially highlighted it through Omar’s seriousness in attending to his father who is bed ridden and unable to work. Likewise the opening scene reflects Hussain’s attempt to protect Omar’s service with his uncle. Hussain’s decision of sending his son to college also indicates towards the same. This is how the strong family bond is maintained throughout. However, Tania’s role in the family is different who tries to maintain the standards of a culture to which she has never acquainted. In fact, Frears is very successful at depicting different point of views in the film. The major postcolonial subject matter of amalgamation and the fact that, regardless of her language, pronunciation and cultural root, Tania is, in fact, a “Paki”.

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