

# **E - CONTENT**

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**TOPIC OF THE E-CONTENT**

**Hanif Kureshi : My Beautiful Laundrette**

## **RACIAL BIAS AND CONCEPT OF HYBRIDITY IN MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE**

*My Beautiful Laundrette* is a new type of cinematographic product, very different from the so-called “third world cinema.” Even though it is completely opposed to racism and colonialism, it has to be included as a part of the Western cinema. It is a cosmopolitan film intending to portray the racial conflicts of the outskirts of London during the 1980s. But it is mainly a film that reflects the postmodern urban perspective of its creators because this film is the perfect synthesis of the aesthetic, social and cultural concerns of both the director and the scriptwriter of the film: Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi.

*My Beautiful Laundrette* tells the story of Omar, an English boy of Pakistani origin who tries to plunge into the context he lives in. Trapped in this situation, the boy struggles between the need to be faithful to his family tradition and the difficulty of living in England, the country where he was born but which also denies him the possibility of feeling at home. Omar, who has rented his uncle’s laundrette, will be able to face racism and other types of difficulties that prevent him from finding his own identity, with the help of his friend/lover Johnny. *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a hybrid film, where different discourses interact and reformulate one another. As Homi Bhabha says, “Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. (...)”

One of the important issues to bear in mind when we analyze *My Beautiful Laundrette* is the historical context in which it takes place. The country shown in the film is Margaret Thatcher’s England, where the official political agenda had a clear colonial nostalgia. References to the Prime Minister are constant in the film, for Thatcher’s moral values and personality conditioned the nation for over ten years. The victory of the Conservative Party in 1979 meant a step back towards the British imperial rhetoric. There was a break of the so-called “war consensus,” and the post-conflict solidarity, which had been crucial in the creation of the welfare state, was re-interpreted in terms of social paralysis: lazy citizens living at the expenses of the state who caused national decadence. Thatcher’s policy led to a new narrative of the nation which intended to return to Britain the former imperial greatness.<sup>1</sup> Thus, “in the Falkland’s/Malvinas” war of 1982, which Thatcher deliberately presented in Churchillian terms, as a revival of the spirit of 1940 (...) she declared ‘we have ceased to be a nation in retreat’” (Borgmann 19). All this was combined with a very conservative social and economic policy which was exclusively based on capitalist individualism.

The way *My Beautiful Laundrette* parodies some of the aspects of Thatcherism is a clear example of hybridity as a means of questioning discourses. Hybridity denies in the film the concept of the nation that Thatcher tried to project and also mocks and manipulates the political and economic discourses of the conservatives. The narrative of the nation and its way back to traditional values tried to reinforce the role of the white middle-class within a society ruled by law and order. However, what we find in *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a chaotic portrait of society that differs a lot from the idea attached to Thatcherism. Besides, the only instances of social progress that appear in the film are carried out by Pakistani

businessmen and not by white people. In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Pakistanis enjoy their luxury whereas the white characters are shown wandering around the urban landscape and involved in violent acts. When Johnny asks Omar, “Who does your uncle think he is, the Great Gatsby?” he does nothing but reflect a sort of role inversion in social structure.

Hybridity can also be understood as a way to overcome social problems. This is the case that takes place in the relationship between Omar and Johnny. From the beginning, Omar finds himself between two discourses about reality. On the one hand, he is rejected by the colonial/racist discourse. On the other hand, he is also determined by the immigrant community. But Omar’s character undergoes a clear evolution throughout the film. At the beginning, he detaches from his father’s sceptical and negative vision of reality. He places himself next to his uncle’s materialistic point of view. But as time goes on, he abandons his uncle’s materialism and makes up his own vital project, characterised by love and cultural re-negotiation. This idealistic aim materializes in two ways: first, in his relationship with Johnny. Hybridity also projects in sexual terms. It suggests the end of frontiers —something poststructuralism adores to posit. Second, in the laundry, which is the perfect hybrid metaphor: “the intelligent metaphor of the laundry seen as a means of cleaning up the dirt of filthy society” (Oliva 147).

The laundry represents a decentred space which tries to go beyond the historical contingencies of colonialism. In this schizophrenic context —in terms of breaking the significant chain— the colonial discourse loses its status as a metanarrative. This discursive decentring becomes the perfect context for the emergence of cultural difference as a solid constituent of postmodern society. In this stage, the epistemological structures based on the existence of “the other” are finally modified by cultural forms introduced by the “diaspora:” “The newness of migrant or minority discourse has to be discovered in medias res: a newness that is not part of the progressivist division between past and present, or the archaic and the modern” (Bhabha 227). It is a new historical moment which opens the path to multiple voices and cultural hybridity. This is exactly what the laundry represents: a break with the dialects of “the other,” a metaphor for novelty and different forms of relationship. The last scene of the film clearly portrays this image: the two characters washing each other, a form of baptism which pertains to the announcement of a hybrid future.

To sum up, we could say that *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a good representation of the hybridity process. On the one hand, it shows how hybridity determines discourse strategies of both, the colonizer and the colonized. On the other hand, the film proves that hybridity can be an important emancipating resource from some old repressive discourses. But *My Beautiful Laundrette* is also an example of how racial and class discourses affect each other. It is difficult to talk about hybridity without paying attention to social class issues. In the last chapter of *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha criticizes Fredric Jameson for his tendency to analyze the problem of ethnic minorities in class terms. Bhabha thinks that this theoretical view puts us back into a conceptual frame that Postmodernism has modified. From my point of view, the colonial problem cannot be separated from a class dialectics. Any emancipating discourse is essentially social and economic. Otherwise, it becomes an ethereal process which turns multiculturalism into an appendix of capitalism logics.

## Various Ways of Love

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The film presents various kinds of love, starting with family gatherings and support of family members. Furthermore it shows two kinds of friendship: one which suppresses one's own individuality and the other which helps regaining it. Equally, the movies pays attention to deep emotional bonding that arises from true commitment and sincere partnership, regardless of the status or origin of the partner.

Family commitment is shown in an opposite way, depending on the cultural background. The representation exaggerates a cliché by showing strong family bonding on the Pakistani side and no family bonds at all on the British side. The viewer gets thrown into the action in the very first scene, when Johnny is caught squatting and has to escape. The cross-cutting between the “removers” and Johnny and his sleeping friend shows the unstable situation they are in. Fast cuts increase the feeling of tension inside the viewer. As soon as they leave the building, soft music is employed to indicate to the viewer that better times are to come. The harmonic music and the following opening credits (which are made of words spinning like a laundrette and are underlined with bubble-like sounding noises) help define the genre as an optimistic approach to a serious issue rather than a gloomy and violent one.

In the subsequent scene the plot switches to Omar's story to indicate that there are two strands of the plot. The main strand is definitely Omar's story which will be enriched by and combined with Johnny's presence later on. The first shot in Omar's apartment includes the view out of his bathroom window while he is attending to the household. This medium shot includes the view of trains running past the window in a distance of several metres. The “train” symbolises lower class and industrialized urban lifestyle. It reappears throughout the whole movie as a constant reminder of the working class situation. The close-up shot, which follows and shows a hand pouring alcohol into a glass, is meant to characterize Omar's father, who seems to have given up on his own life but not on Omar's. The only thing he can do to help his son is to ask his brother Nasser to supply him with a steady work until he returns to college. The stable family bond between father and son becomes evident in this scene. Omar takes care of his father by keeping their apartment in order and cooking him meals and Omar's father helps him by using his connections.

Johnny confirms the viewer's expectations when he admits that he has left home because he did not get along with his family any longer. His new home becomes an empty house and his new family a group of other lost street kids. Through Omar's family he finally gets a new, permanent place to live which is the first step into a return to a steady life for him. The advantages that Omar receives through his family support improve Johnny's situation as well. It can almost be seen as an integration into a new family.

## Friendship

Johnny's right-winged circle of friends is introduced for the first time in the scene when Omar drives Salim and his wife home and they almost get attacked by them. The sombre music already indicates that a dangerous scene is to follow. While the fascists molest and insult Salim and his wife, who are sitting in the car, the lighting is dark with flashing

bright light which comes from the railroad crossing. This lighting underlines the atmosphere of not knowing what is going to happen by showing the steady mixture of sudden white faces and darkness. Although the situation seems dangerous, Omar steps out of the car, eager to talk to his former friend Johnny. He seems to be leading the group but at the same time he is not actively involved in their doings. Again the background music underlines the mood and enlightens the atmosphere during Omar's approach. Johnny is standing further off on a platform which causes a lower angle from Omar's view. Even though Johnny avoids direct eye contact with Omar at first, the deep emotional bonding and their mutual sympathy becomes evident to the viewer. The direct eye contact with the viewer in the close up shots of Omar's and later also Johnny's face enables to recognize their deep feelings. This scene is significant for the whole plot development as it presents Johnny's and Omar's meeting after several years. The viewer does not know what kind of relationship they have had, but can assume that they were at least close friends who even knew the families of each other.

It is obvious that Omar still trusts Johnny as he asks him to come into business with him. Johnny sees this as a chance to find his way back into a regular life and also to be together with the one he loves. By these means they help each other to achieve a better situation, both financially and emotionally. This friendship, which develops into a homosexual love-relationship, clearly supports their aims to find the right path, whereas Johnny's fascist friends rather throw him off the track. The fascist group tries to talk Johnny out of working for Omar by claiming that he is not supposed to be working for a "Paki".

