"In this damn country, which we hate and love": The Pakistani-British Diaspora During the Thatcher Years in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985)

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Adopting Jacques Derrida's notion of conditional hospitality, this paper examines representations of Pakistani-British diaspora in Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears' 1985 film *My Beautiful Laundrette*.[1] Through textual analysis and critical discourse analysis methods, this paper examines the ways in which My Beautiful Laundrette depicts the Pakistani-British diaspora in Britain during the Thatcher years and explores the implications that such rules of Britain's conditional hospitality had on the agency and cultural identity of the three main characters: Nasser, Hussein, and Omar.

The film depicts the life of a British-Pakistani family in Britain during the Thatcher years and the narrative focuses on Omar who begins on the dole while living with his socialist father, Hussein. As Omar decides to adopt his uncle Nasser's Thatcherite guidance, he goes onto successfully manage a laundrette with the help of his employee. The film also considers the renewed British nationalism and fascist ideas that were growing in Britain in those years through a group of National Front members – an anti-immigrant and neofascist political party formed in the late 1960s – one of which is a white man named Johnny, who we discover was previously friends with Omar when they were both younger.[2] The two men manage to cross paths again when Omar drives his uncle's business associate Salim and his wife home and they are attacked by a group of fascist youths; one of which is Johnny. As Omar is shocked to discover his childhood friend is a member of a hate group, he offers Johnny a job working in his new laundrette which he accepts.

Omar's immersion into Thatcherism gives him agency that his father – who opposes Omar's individualistic lifestyle – never achieved during his time in Britain. However, unlike his uncle, Omar does not solely locate his British identity in Thatcherism. While he adopts an entrepreneurial way of life to counteract his experiences of racism by white Britons, he also rejects the Thatcherite nuclear family model as he engages in a gay relationship with white British man, Johnny.

The Pakistani protagonists navigate their Pakistani-British identities to gain agency in Britain in different ways and to varying degrees of success.

Theoretical Framework

During a Conservative Party rally in 1982, Thatcher made it apparent that her government's plan for Britain was to emphasise that 'Britishness' and Britain's identity as a nation are foregrounded in its colonial past. While reflecting on Britain's victory in the Falklands war, Thatcher declared that:

> [*People thought that*] *Britain was no longer the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world. Well they were wrong. The lesson of the Falklands is that Britain has not changed, and that this nation still has those sterling qualities which shine through our history.*[3]

On the surface, this statement functions as a reassurance to white British people that Britain's identity as a nation was not shifting away from what it was during its colonial period. Having said that, the repercussions of her statement go beyond merely reassuring her audience or warning those who plan to change what Britishness means. As Thatcher envisioned what she wanted Britain to be and symbolise, her statement works as – what spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre would call – a 'technological utopia', as it sedimented racist and exclusionary discourse in Britain.[4] Lefebvre argues that ideologies cannot be literally actualised as they function as 'a computer simulation of the (possible) future.'[5] However, he acknowledges that political ideologies have the power to dictate how tangible space is produced and experienced. Spatial organisation begins with an overarching ideology. According to which knowledge and information – like Thatcher's colonially nostalgic speech quoted above – can be 'integrated [...] within the framework of the real'.[6] Therefore, at the moment of suspension, an ideological vision produces knowledge which manifests itself into the real; this is known as 'discourse'.

Scriptwriter for *My Beautiful Laundrette* Hanif Kureishi discusses discourse in action in Thatcher's Britain when he says: 'The British complained incessantly that the Pakistanis wouldn't assimilate. This meant they wanted the Pakistanis to be exactly like them. But of course, even then they would have rejected them'.[7] In other words, Kureishi observes that some newly arrived Pakistani migrants – like many other migrant communities – were only welcomed into Britain according to a set of certain conditions. This phenomenon is what philosopher Jacques Derrida coined 'conditional hospitality'; where the 'other' is only welcomed into a space via a host/guest power dynamic.[8] Jonathan Darling reflects on this

phenomenon and argues that to be 'hospitable' is to 'claim a particular space as one's own [...] to assume that one has the right to both welcome a stranger and conversely reject such a stranger'.[9] For example, a migrant's ability to assimilate was of major concern to Thatcher and her government. In July 1979, during an informal discussion on Vietnamese refugees seeking refuge in the UK, Thatcher was quoted saying the following in meeting minutes:

> *The Prime Minister mentioned the problem which would face the UK over the refugees from Rhodesia, following independence, but said that she had less objection to refugees such as Rhodesians, Poles and Hungarians since they could more easily be assimilated into British society.*[10]

Consequently, in the Thatcher years, some newly arrived migrants were forced to occupy an ambivalent space in Britain; being simultaneously physically welcomed to live in Britain via Commonwealth and EEC rights, yet also having to resist imperial discourse that functioned to demonstrate that they did not belong there. As Rahul Gairola summarises:

> [*During the Thatcher years*] [*m*]*ass privatization of council housing estates, anti-black, anti-gay, and anti-immigrant sentiments, and the proliferation of free-market policies and ideologies made clear on the national stage which kinds of peoples were considered eligible to be 'British'.*[11]

In this sense, the rules of conditional hospitality in Thatcher's Britain shaped the way in which British people lived their lives. Therefore, such conditions impacted the formulation of British identities and diasporas. Although it is true that such 'conditions' encouraged those living in Britain to fit into this framework or standard, it also led to the creation of British identities that completely opposed the dominant model. The film exemplifies this phenomenon through the behaviours of its three main male characters: Nasser who adopts Thatcherism as much as possible; Hussein who attempts to challenge Thatcherite ideals; and Omar who has an ambivalent and selective relationship with Thatcherism.

Nasser and Colonial Mimicry

In the film, the character Nasser is not only aware of what the dominant idea of Britishness was under Thatcher, but also actively tries to fulfil said model as much as possible. When he gives a Thatcherite pep-talk to his nephew Omar, Nasser demonstrates that his observance of the white dominant powers is the source of his power. Nasser states to Omar:

> *In this damn country, which we hate and love, you can get anything you want. It's all spread out and available. That's why I believe in England. Only, you need to know how to squeeze the tits of the system.*[12]

Due to the Conservative Party government's constant reiteration of what is accepted as 'British', Nasser understands and manipulates Britain's imperial power structures. While he hates the oppression that he receives as a Pakistani subject, he loves the fact that he can gain agency in Britain by adopting the government's idea of 'Britishness'. In Homi Bhabha's words, this 'double gaze' – being both oppressed but also aware of the systems in place which oppress him – allows Nasser to prosper in Thatcher's Britain as a successful businessman.[13] The Conservative Party's concerns for Britain exceeded a desire for imperial control as they also incorporated middle-class values as a marker for British identity. In doing so, newly arrived Pakistani migrants were able to fulfil the criteria to become what Thatcher's government considered 'British' which then enabled them to gain agency in Britain. Ymitri Mathison observes that:

> *Having attained a veneer of cultural whiteness, the assimilated middle-class immigrant British Asians consider themselves to be "British" culturally having attained an Englishness-therefore, racially not "black." They distance themselves from the lower class "peasant" immigrants, who, having created an India-in-England and maintained their Indianness, are on the frontlines of white British racism.*[14]

Nasser and the other businessmen are no different as they also did not adopt British cultural habits to undermine or overthrow the middle-class white subjects in power. Rather, they tried to blend in with middle-class Britons and differentiate themselves from lower-class Asians in the UK.

Hussein and Anticolonial Discourse

Hussein, on the other hand, engages in a counter-discursive approach to living in the UK as he attempts to resist Britain's imperial discourse altogether. Being both metaphorically on the peripheries of Thatcher's neoliberal Britain (being unemployed) and literally on the peripheries of the plot in the film (as he is predominantly alone in his flat), the film emphasises his lack of agency in Britain and ostracization from his family and society. Crucially, Ashcroft et al. argue that counter-discourse is an 'examination of the ways in which [discourse] operates as naturalized controls' which exposes their 'contingency and permeability'.[15] In other words, discourse is the political framework through which knowledge

and power relations are produced. However, throughout the film, it becomes apparent that Hussein's counter-discursive approach to oppression negatively impacts his life in Thatcher's Britain. When talking to his son Omar about working in Britain, Hussein reveals his strategy for resisting imperial legacies whilst living in Britain. The discussion goes as follows:

> *Omar: Going to Uncle's house, Papa. He's given me a car.*
> [...]
> *Hussein: Don't get too involved with that crook. You've got to study. We are under siege by the white man. For us education is power.*
> [*Omar shakes his head at his father*]
> *Hussein: Don't let me down.*[16]

Having been a journalist and government advisor in Pakistan, he claims that 'education is power'. Indeed, Hussein's educational background served him well in Pakistan as it enabled him to access powerful positions such as working for the Prime Minister Bhutto. However, Hussein's educational background does not provide him with same positions of power when living in Britain. Consequently, it is no surprise that Omar does not follow his father's advice to invest in his education as opposed to following in the footsteps of his successful uncle Nasser. While Hussein is aware that Thatcher's plans for Britain are rooted in imperial discourse, his recognition of this fact and his warning to others (like his son Omar) are not enough to challenge the powers of the imperial centre. Rather, his resistance to adopt a Thatcherite way of life in Britain causes him to become static and powerless over his career, his son, and his life overall. This is evident in Hussein's position in the film, as he is mainly depicted in bed drinking vodka from the bottle and smoking a cigarette, as pictured in **Figures 1 and 2**.

Salim – one of Nasser's business associates – makes it apparent that Hussein's powerlessness is due to his educational skills and experiences which have no worth in Thatcher's neoliberalised Britain. For example, when Salim is in conversation with Omar, he puts it bluntly:

> *Salim* [*to Omar*]*: How's your Papa? So many books written and read. Politicians sought him out. Bhutto was his close friend. But we're nothing in England without money.*[17]

Crucially, the film demonstrates that the statement above is a reality as it depicts Hussein as someone who is wasting away in Britain. In this sense, Hussein's powerlessness in Britain provides a visible representation of socialism and social solidarity in Thatcher's Britain. During an interview in 1987, Thatcher made such desires for British people clear as she stated: 'who is society? There

Figures 1 and 2. Both are screen captures from *My Beautiful Laundrette*. **Figure 1** depicts a shot of Hussein drinking and smoking in bed in his apartment while he speaks to his son, Omar, about education and power in Britain. **Figure 2** depicts a later scene in which Hussein remains in the same position as before, having not left his bedroom.

is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first'.[18] Read through Thatcher's rhetoric on society and individuals, the Pakistani businessmen in the film understood and adopted Britain's rule of conditional hospitality to avoid such neglect from Britain. Hussein, on the other hand, did not construct his British identity to emulate Thatcher's ideal 'Britishness', and therefore, is left powerless in a perceived individualistic and colonially nostalgic Britain.

Omar and Colonial Ambivalence

Having received advice on living in Britain as a Pakistani man from both his father Hussein and his uncle Nasser, Omar decides to adopt his uncle's Thatcherite approach to life and soon becomes an owner of a successful laundrette. However, Omar's British identity is not as straightforwardly Thatcherite as his uncle's way of life. Instead, in Daniela Berghahn's words, Omar is 'doubly different and doubly marginalized'.[19] Omar resists oppression as an Asian subject by adopting his uncle's celebration of entrepreneurs and individual success, yet he also resists his uncle's heteronormativity as he engages in a gay relationship with Johnny, a white ex-National Front member. Unlike Nasser, Omar profits both from the opportunities produced by neoliberalism, while also resisting the expectations of his gender set out by his family and Thatcher's notion of the 'ideal' British family as heteronormative, traditional and white. Omar's relationship with white subject Johnny goes totally against this ideal, as Berghahn summarises: 'The Tory government discriminated as much against family diversity (in the shape of single mothers, and other non-traditional family types) as it did against ethnic and sexual diversity'.[20]

Therefore, Omar's selective engagement with Thatcherism demonstrates a completely different way of living in Britain as a diasporic subject than his uncle and father. Rather, Omar publicly works from within the power dynamic in Britain to overthrow his experiences of racism yet also does not abide by Thatcher's framework for Britishness in his private life. The scene in which Omar and Johnny have sexual intercourse at the back of the laundrette demonstrates his ambivalent engagement in Thatcherite Britishness.

Adding to Berghahn's claim that '[t]he moment of seduction crystallizes into a moment during which Omar reassesses his ethnic and familial loyalties', this scene is a crucial moment in which Omar's reassessment and navigations of his loyalties to Thatcherism become clear.[21] The window in this scene divides the two couples yet is blacked out from Nasser's side and transparent from the view of Omar and Johnny. This window functions to illustrate Omar's ambivalent

Figure 3. Screen capture from *My Beautiful Laundrette* which depicts Omar and Johnny having sex in the back of the laundrette while his uncle Nasser and his mistress dance the waltz on the main floor of the laundrette.

and fluid relationship with Thatcherism. As observed by Kenneth Kaleta, the film sets up a symbolic association with Nasser and his mistress Rachel, and black, prison-like grid lines. Kaleta writes that:

> *Both the scene in which Rachel and Nasser make love and the one in which they break up are shot through a grille of black square bars that simultaneously imprisons and visually fragments the couple. These rigid rectangular bars stand in stark contrast to the permeable* [...] *'liquid window.'*[22]

This moment seen from Omar and Johnny's perspective (see Fig 3) shows Nasser and Rachel (Nasser's mistress) behind a bar-like beaded curtain, emphasising the imprisoning effects of Thatcher's standards for British families. The frame above in particular depicts a striking image of Thatcher's heteronormative ideal family as something which is unattainable for all subjects as Rachel fades ghostly into the background as though Nasser is dancing alone. Her silhouette flickers from visible to invisible throughout the dancing scene, suggesting that Thatcher's heteronormative and white vision for British families was merely an unattainable desire. Jacques Lacan's observations of desires are helpful to consider in this context, as he puts it:

> *The enigmas that desire* [...] *poses for any sort of "natural philosophy" are based on no other derangement of instinct than the fact that it is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else.*[23]

Thatcher's ideal for British families is no different. Although Nasser tries to divert from his Pakistani family to a more Thatcherite ideal by engaging in a relationship with a white middle-class woman, the depiction of Rachel in the scene demonstrates that Thatcher's notion of the heteronormative white British family is unattainable. This ghostliness of Rachel in the scene emphasises her instability and uncertainty in Nasser's life, as if she is merely a desire. As Berghahn acknowledges: '*My Beautiful Laundrette* challenges this homogenizing fantasy by making the point that there are no families that come even close to this ideal'.[24] Following Berghahn's framing, Nasser's desire to fulfil Thatcher's ideal forces him onto 'the rails of metonymy' as he is locked behind metaphorical bars which restrict his relationships in Britain.[25] Comparatively, Omar's identity – like the window between them – is more fluid. Omar crosses over to his uncle Nasser's Thatcherite and neoliberal way of life in order to avoid the effects of racism. However, Omar is also able to resist the familial expectations of his gender both as a Pakistani subject and as a Briton living under Thatcher's government. In this sense, the window in the scene above represents Omar's navigation of his diasporic identity in Britain.

Conclusion

My Beautiful Laundrette suggests that Thatcher's colonially nostalgic, individualistic, and heteronormative vision for Britain shaped the way in which some Pakistani-British people constructed their Britishness. Whether that be through an attempt to fulfil those conditions fully or partially, or by rejecting the 'rules' entirely, the main diasporic characters in the text are given no choice but to engage with Thatcher's conditions for welcome in Britain in order to gain agency. Nasser adopts an absolutist approach to Thatcherite Britishness and succeeds financially in doing so, yet cracks in his relationship with Rachel and their break-up shows that Thatcher's model of Britishness was an unattainable goal. Hussein, on the other hand, is isolated and neglected by Britain as he rejects Thatcher's notion of Britishness altogether. As Hussein decides to return to Pakistan as a result of his treatment in Britain, the film emphasises why many other Pakistanis in the film adopted a Thatcherite lifestyle. Omar's character – being somewhere in between and being a second-generation migrant – functions to illustrate how power dynamics in Britain were negotiated to create a coexisting ethnically diverse society under the complex oppression produced by Thatcherite neoliberalism and colonial nostalgia. In this sense, Omar's success in the film suggests that adopting Thatcherite Britishness was a mandatory move for some newly arrived Pakistani-Britons to have agency and avoid ostracization. Having said that, Nasser's failure to become the ideal Thatcherite model shows

that Britishness or any cultural identity cannot be as fixed and rigid as Margaret Thatcher and her government hoped. Additionally, *My Beautiful Laundrette* suggests that Thatcherite discourse did not produce her ideological vision for Britain in exactitude. Rather, the film proposes that Thatcher's anti-immigrant and heteronormative definitions of Britishness heavily shaped the ways in which some newly arrived Pakistani migrants spatially experienced Britain and constructed their British identity. In this sense, the film supports Henri Lefebvre's understanding that overarching ideologies – like that of Thatcher and her government – are 'integrated [...] within the framework of the real' and determine how people live their lives within a particular space.[26]

1 Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to respond*. Translated: Rachel Bowlby. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

2 As concerns grew about the possible loss of British identity because of the rise in migration, the 30s saw the rise of far-right nationalist parties in the country starting with Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1931. Around 20 years later, Britain saw another insurgence of far-right nationalism due to fears about the growth of immigration from Commonwealth nations to the UK. In line with such continually growing concerns, 1967 saw the rise of The National Front Party which was 'formed as a coalition of tiny parties which had existed on the extreme right fringe of politics for some time' (Fielding 1981: 19). Nigel Fielding summarises the ideology of the party as being 'firmly traditionalist, emphasizing imperialism and militarism and a heavily dated view of great power relations' (85). The party used the terms nation and race interchangeably (86), meaning that their aim to maintain Britain's identity meant preserving its whiteness. Only a year after the birth of the National Front, Conservative MP Enoch Powell delivered his 'Rivers of Blood' speech in which he spoke of Britain "heaping up its own funeral pyre' whilst referring to black children as 'wide-grinning piccaninnies' and warned of the 'national danger' of the growth of a population descended from immigrants" (Taylor 2018: 386). This speech enabled racially divisive language in political addresses to the public, and consequently, gave the National Front party a chance to build on such fearmongering (Taylor 2018). When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1975, her focus on hardening immigration laws demonstrated a desire to win back the National Front voters to the Conservative Party, and thus, Britain saw another rise in anti-immigrant policy and sentiment during her 10-year premiership.

3 Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to Conservative Rally at Cheltenham.' (1982) https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989 [Date Accessed: 23/03/2021].

4 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). p. 9.

5 Ibid., p. 10.

6 Ibid., p. 9.

7 Hanif Kureishi, 'The Rainbow Sign.' *Hanif Kureishi Collected Essays*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2011). p. 7.

8 In "Of Hospitality" (2002), Jacques Derrida coined the term 'conditional hospitality' to refer to the rules which a nation-state set to welcome someone into Britain. The nation-state does not welcome the subject based on them being a stranger seeking to enter Britain, but rather, a welcome is granted only if the subject meets certain conditions; thus, the name 'conditional hospitality'. Such rules go far beyond the border and stretch nationwide and can be evident through hostility from both authorities and the public. The rules of conditional hospitality may be visible in things such as policies and statements from politicians but may also be present in less tangible acts like microaggressions and other more subtle anti-migrant sentiments which contribute to a sense of hostility.

9 Jonathan Darling, 'From Hospitality to Presence'. *Peace Review*, 26:2, (2014) pp. 162–169. (p. 163).

10 The National Archive, Kew, *PREM 19 – Records of the Prime Minister's Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1979–1997*, 'VIETNAM. Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong; resettlement in UK; part 2. 1979 Jun 15 – 1979 Jul 19.' <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C11522097> [Date Accessed: 02/05/2021]. p. 59.

11 Rahul K. Gairola, 'Capitalist Houses, Queer Homes: National Belonging and Transgressive Erotics in *My Beautiful Laundrette.' South Asian Popular Culture*, 7:1. pp. 37–54 (p. 38).

12 *My Beautiful Laundrette*, dir. Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi (Channel Four Television Corporation, 1985).

13 Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse'. *The Location of Culture.* (London: Routledge, 2004) pp. 121–31.

14 Ymitri Mathison, 'The Second-Generation British Asian's Search for an Interstitial Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Farrukh Dhondy's *The Bride and Romance, Romance.' South Asian Review*, 27:1. (2016), pp. 233–248 (p. 244).

15 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures.* (London: Routledge, 2002). p. 50.

16 *My Beautiful Laundrette*, (1985).

17 Ibid.

18 Margaret Thatcher. 'Interview for Woman's Own ("no such thing as society").' (1987) <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689> [Date Accessed: 23/03/2021].

19 Daniela Berghahn, 'Queering the family of nation: Reassessing fantasies of purity, celebrating hybridity in diasporic cinema.' *Transnational Cinemas*, 2:2. (2012), pp. 129–146 (p. 132).

20 Ibid., p. 140.

21 Ibid., p. 138.

22 Kenneth C. Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller.* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1998). p. 11.

23 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1977). p. 518.

24 Berghahn, 'Queering the family of nation.' p. 140.

25 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. p. 518.

26 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). p. 9.