

The Identity of “Paki” versus “Pakistani” Engendering Power Boundaries in Hanif Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Launderette*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the identity of “Paki” versus “Pakistani” engendering power boundaries in the screenplay of *My Beautiful Launderette* by Hanif Kureishi. The aim is to study the power dynamics as they operate within the linguistic structure of the screenplay, whilst locating its corresponding relation to the socio-political structures. My reading of the text informs that the screenplay focuses on strategies of survival within the migrant, the previously colonized population of Great Britain, as well as the indigenous English populace. These strategies related to conflicting power struggle in the screenplay tend to evoke a politics of identities seen with the social and linguistic order. Thus, Kureishi’s screenplay mainly summons the theme of socio-political strife where language and in particular identity markers, “Paki” versus “Pakistani”, become a site for re-construction of hierarchies to correspond to pluralistic identities of the migrant and the local. Within the scope of the linguistic power dynamics, this paper specifically focuses on the word “Paki” and the socio-political enervation of power attached to it as opposed to the constant struggle of affirmation of reallocation of the word “Pakistani” by the second generation migrant. The paper aims to depict crisis within the socio-economic identities attached to each word leading to inversion of power attached to the word.

In this context, Michel Foucault’s work on Power along with John McLeod’s work on Diaspora and Displacement would be used as research tools to investigate the dynamics of the words “Paki” and “Pakistani” as used in *My Beautiful Launderette*. Theories on Linguistics would be used to elucidate the power of words in a written text. This paper may open a debate on the effects of words like “Paki” and “Pakistani” in the construction or deconstruction of identities. Future studies on the hierarchal order, dynamics of the word associated with political identities can be carried out to determine how hierarchies are constructed and displaced by words.

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In the essay, “The Rainbow Sign”, which can be considered a prologue to the screenplay, Kureishi, states his position in the socio-political order through the word, “Pakistani”. He says, “The word ‘Pakistani’ had been made into an insult. It was the word I didn’t want to use about myself. I couldn’t tolerate being myself” (Kureishi “Rainbow Sign” 12). This word becomes the point of dislocation for Kureishi and his Pakistani characters, as he asserts, “I couldn’t rightfully lay claim to either place” (17). The two words Paki and Pakistani demarcate borders between two identities. However, Hanif Kureishi feels he belongs to neither at the same time being both. The border between the two words is drawn through social, economic and political power structure of two locales, Pakistan and Britain. Kureishi could not rightfully lay claim to either place, hence, he moved across the boundaries of one social, economic, and political order to another.

It is this movement across boundaries of one order to the other that Kureishi focuses on in his screenplay, *My Beautiful Launderette*. Hence, the economic order destabilizes the political power structures of the colonizer ruling the colonized which is further deconstructed by the social order of both Pakistan and Britain. Consequently, power becomes the driving force behind borders, boundaries and margins. In this case, therefore, the word ‘Paki’ delineates the empowered colonized across the geographical borders.

In his screenplay, Kureishi reverses the role of the colonizer and the colonized, through the dynamics of monetary and romantic power; however, it is language that is the major tool that shifts within the site of contestation. The Pakistanis in their homeland proclaim that, “we are Pakistanis” but the Pakistanis that migrated “will always be Paki”(17), a term, that places another order within the Pakistani local and the Pakistani diaspora. The word ‘Paki’ being in the lowest strata on the hierarchical order. The characters in the play strive to counter the dynamics of the word ‘Paki’ through establishing another order, within the structure of English-Pakistani pluralistic living, the economic order. The economic order destabilizes the linguistic order, empowering the word ‘Paki’ through the forces of monetary empowerment.

Michel Foucault defines power as “the way in which relations of forces are deployed and given concrete expression”, where power is “essentially that which represses...nature, the instincts, a class, individuals”. He further elaborates that the “role of political power ...is perpetually to re-inscribe...it in social institutions, in economic inequalities, in language, in the bodies themselves of each and everyone of us” (Foucault “ Two Lectures:Lecture One” 3). This implies that power is understood in terms of economics, which Foucault reprimands. According to him, “theories of power are guilty of certain economism”(2) at the same time relevant to language inequalities. It is therefore, inherent to the nature and characteristic of power to function in accordance with economy and linguistic structure that resides within the English themselves,

'Paki' and English, and 'Paki' Englishmen like Omar. Kureishi's depiction of a power struggle within the characters in an era of economic 'no growth', is eminent to the understanding of the dynamics of 'Paki'- English linguistic and socio-economic order in their 'homeland' Great Britain.

The characters that Kureishi creates within this order "cannot make up their minds where they are"(Kureishi *My Beautiful Launderette* 60), yet claiming Great Britain their home. The same home that Odysseus in Derek Walcott's *Odyssey*, wishes to arrive at, when he says, "I am trying to get home"(Walcott 69), yet, he "drift(s), homeless, down there"(101). Odysseus's state of being "down there", is the state of the diaspora. However, Kureishi's characters try to lay claim to the colonizer's land through socio-economic valorization, and strive to lift rather than "drift" above the position of being "down there"(101).

The English bring the 'Paki' to work for them, as Genghis proclaims, "that's why we brought them over"(78). However, the 'Pakis' start taking over businesses, and acquire a new place on the social order as well as a new identity for the 'Pakistanis'. Nasser highlights the position by stating, "But we're professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis" (82). Nasser disrupts the roles and the positions on the power structure through empowering himself with a collection of wealth. He shifts the scale when he says, " I am the law! You see, I make wealth, I create money" (77), creating a higher position for the same word 'Paki'.

Omar, apart from the economic empowerment, climbs the ladder on the hierarchical pyramid through a new language, that falls under the domain of "romantic love"(Pratt 97). Through Johnny and Omar's affiliation as partners, Kureishi shows how, " sex replaces slavery as the way others are seen to belong to the white man, in which romantic love rather than filial servitude or force, guarantees the willful submission of colonized" (97). However, Johnny's subjugation towards Omar is not dependent on monetary power structure. Within the relationship of Omar and Johnny, it is the discourse of "romantic love", that shifts roles on the power scale. For Johnny, Omar is no more a 'Paki', but the word he uses as a referent to Omar is 'Omo'. The shift in the referent shifts the forces within the relationship. When Johnny complains of the state he is in, Omar soothes him by saying " Where should you be. With me" and calls him "beautiful". Johnny, despite the plunge in the social order, washing floors and cleaning, (chores that the English had brought the 'Pakis' to do), uplifts himself and asks Omar to "Kiss" him. Johnny is "dirty" but "beautiful" and as Johnny washes floors, Omar wishes to "give" him "a wash"(Kureishi *MBL* 110). There is thus, a constant reversal of roles as well as power shifts. Kureishi's characters struggle for power, whether they are English or Pakis, yet, he shows that power resides within them. Kureishi once again blurs the boundaries of English Paki, colonizer, colonized and most importantly the gender boundaries through the homosexual love of Omar and Johnny. Once the boundaries are blurred, the power structure is disrupted; neither of the gender can exert power. Power is thus, deployed economically only in "romantic love".

As Foucault claims, "Power is everywhere, since discourse too is everywhere" (Rose 80), the resistance that is offered to power, is offered to discourse as well. The discourse of romantic love "is powerful because it is productive"(79), and this power "is not imposed from the top of the society down onto its lowest layer" but is "everywhere"(80). Kureishi's characters strive to locate the site of power, yet remain, clueless to its all-empowering nature.

In this context, the three constituents of power are "struggle, conflict, and war"(Foucault "Two Lectures: Lecture One" 3). These are prominent features of the screenplay. The title of the

screenplay, *My Beautiful Launderette*, becomes the voice of the 'Pakis', and a site of contestation for the English "white trash" (Kenneth 27). The ownership of a business organization through the word, "My", is a cause for conflict amongst the two communities. The transformation of the place from a "toilet" called "Churchills" (Kureishi MBL 66), to a "beautiful" place is significant of the struggle that is involved in re-making an image for the 'Pakis'. The re-naming of the place to "Powders" is a purifying, and cleansing act that involves waging "war" against the English identity of Churchills to a cleansed non-identity. The launderette, itself is a signifier of washing up the English "white trash". In this context of ownership, Nasser's attempt to show an affiliation between "Thatcher" and the "beautiful launderette" is a means of proclaiming the association of Margaret Thatcher's political strategies with the ownership of business organizations amongst the 'Pakis'. He calls the relationship as apt as "dall and chipatis" (77).

By referring to Margaret Thatcher within the screenplay, Kureishi, brings in another dynamic that is responsible for shifting of power. The Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher, endeavors to pull Great Britain out of the 'no growth' period that Europe is experiencing. In her bid to reclaim the worth of the employer, she reprimands employees for bankruptcy. She enforces economic reforms that brace and bolster Great Britain, however, lead to unemployment. The English employees lose jobs to the low-salary group of 'Pakis', and resentment towards 'Pakis' increases. Genghis's outcry towards the situation marks the reversal of roles in the power structure, he proclaims, "I don't like to see our men groveling to Pakis. They came here to work for us. That's why we brought them over. OK?" (78). The English fall prey to this shift due to the inherent nature of the colonizer, as Zaki points out that is " Typically English" of Omar hiring "someone else to do the work" (75). Omar, thence, adopts the role of the colonizer, within his own community, as he is considered English, as opposed to the first generation diaspora.

The second generation diaspora, is in a greater flux. John McLeod writes, " children born to migrant people in Britain may automatically qualify for a British Passport, but their sense of identity borne from living in a Diaspora community will be influenced by the past migration history of their parents or grandparents" (McLeod 207). However, due to the lack of "'interior knowledge' of a distant place" and the corresponding inability to comprehend Urdu, as their language, these "children of migrants"(212-13), disconnect from their past history. Omar "doesn't know his own language" (Kureishi MBL 75). This gap in communication allows "spaces", which are "dynamic and shifting to repeated construction and reconstruction" (McLeod 207). Reconstructing the word 'Paki' and the identity that is 'Paki'.

Thatcher's indirect strengthening of the 'Pakis' leads to the re-construction of identities within the English populace. These identities are a means of re-acquiring the lost role of the master, and the owner. Nationalist and Neo-Fascists groups are formed to counter the reversal of power, as well as acquiring power through force and aggression. Kureishi's works are representations of this turmoil and strife. He shows the English aggression in *Outskirts*, *My Beautiful Launderette*, and *Borderline*. The Neo-Fascist group believes that the 'Pakis' have come "to hustle other people's lives and jobs and houses" (Kureishi MBL 82). The fear that arises out of being enervated of power and strength, leads to a struggle of re-acquiring of power through violence. According to Genghis, "we've got to fight" (50).

On the other hand, Nasser learns the route to outsmart the English through the English themselves. He hires Johnny to clear the "trash". He provides opportunity to the pseudo-

English, Omar, to make "money " from " muck" (63). As opposed to the English, Nasser believes in "England". He knows "how to squeeze the tits of the system" (57), and keep the "country in the black"(55). Nasser is successful in attaining power, since, he knows how to exploit, and "squeeze", however, Papa is weak and fragile, since he relies on abstractions such as "education as power". He is still "under siege by the white man" (59). Papa is critical of Omar's ways of ascendancy, and yearns for Omar to start "reading in college...He must have knowledge. We all must, now. In order to see clearly what's being done and to whom in this country" (94). Omar, has gone far ahead in his stride to acquire strength to look back at studies. He wears expensive suits, and does not do menial jobs. He hires others to help him flourish. The traits that he exhibits are pertaining to his 'Paki' familial background as well as his pseudo-English ways.

In this way, Kureishi exhibits the hierarchies that are working within the English- Pakistani communities, within the Pakistani community itself as well as between the genders and shows same-gender politics. There are power structures amongst the wealthy, like Nasser and Salim, amongst the working class, like Genghis and Johnny, between genders, like Cherry and Salim, and Nasser and Bilquis. When Salim slaps Cherry, despite her upper class lineage, he imposes his power through gender. In the same way, Nasser subdues Bilquis through keeping a mistress, and the 'Pakistani' Nasser feeds the Englishwoman, Rachel. There are same-gender politics that are working too. Bilquis uses her "magical potions" (94) to overpower Rachel, and Omar uses the power of love to overwhelm Johnny. The power dynamics of the word 'Paki' and its corresponding influence on the pluralistic England's economy, society and structure maneuver the characters' lives in the screenplay. However, behind the word 'Paki', the association of strength and insult are incorporated through the reactions shown by both English and Pakistanis across the borders of pluralistic living.

It is fear that drives the Pakistani community towards emancipation through monetary gains, and economic strength. Salim states, "All over England, Asians, as you call us, are beaten, burnt to death. Always we are intimidated. What these scum need-(and he slams the car into gear and starts to drive forward fast)- is a taste of their own piss" (102), justifying his aggression and authority to try to take the lives of Moose and Genghis. As Salim "smashes the LAD's head on the side of the car", Genghis shouts, " Hey! Paki! Hey! Paki!"(107) and hits Salim with " the studded piece of wood, tearing Salim's face"(108). The white man has taken revenge for his loss of identity as the authority and the owner of the country. Yet, Johnny intervenes and helps the "Paki" Salim, showing his authority over the white trash. He draws lines between the white population as well.

The margin between the powerful and the subjugated is constantly shifting as the discourse of politics pertaining to power "is everywhere" because of its corresponding power manifestation being "everywhere" (qtd. in Rose 80). This promotes the 'work', *My Beautiful Launderette*, to become "a text" for exploration of these sites of struggle and force, allowing each word to hold its own dynamics of power. According to Julia Kristeva, "every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it" (Kristeva 105), this shapes the universe at large and its understanding accordingly. Kureishi's work shows the implications of usage of words in the context of socio-economic terrain. In Pakistan, the word Pakistani represents an identity, but in Great Britain 'Paki' stands for a role and an order. In Pakistan, Pakistanis "didn't understand the masses and they spoke in English to cut themselves off from the people", (Kureishi "Rainbow Sign" 26) and in Britain, "the British working class(and not only the working class, of course) used the same vocabulary of contempt about Pakistanis- the charges of ignorance, laziness, fecklessness, uncleanliness- that their own, British middle class used about them" (29). It is thence, a struggle between classes as much as races.

Despite the fact, that Nasser believes that race has no role to play in the “new enterprise culture”(Kureishi MBL 82), the reality is that “To the English all Pakistanis were the same; racists didn’t ask whether you had a chauffeur, TV and private education before they set fire to your house” (Kureishi “Rainbow Sign” 29). The problem lay with the hierarchical order and the Pakistanis believe, “it was their own poor who had brought this upon them” (29), depicting stratas within the marginalized. Kureishi claims that, “The Pakistani middle class shared the disdain of the British for the émigré, working class and peasantry of Pakistan”(Rainbow Sign 29). This layering within the structure of the word Pakistani and its subsequent degradation to ‘Paki’, is the cause of contestation among the same race. As, “Racism goes hand –in- hand with class inequality”, it becomes a source for “snobbery” and a “desire” arises to become “superior” even through “hostility and violence”(29). Salim indulges in such a desire. He looks down upon the lower class, whether they are English or Pakistani, however, to keep him powerful, he empowers Omar. Family is the binding and motivating force for Salim. In the course of acquiring economic strength he uses illegal ways. These ways allow him affinity to the aggressive and violent street criminals, whom he detests so fervently.

The poor emigrants that are the cause of British “disdain”, escape to England from the “rich in Pakistan” (“Rainbow Sign” 29). Hence, the rupture in the homogeneity of the race initiated from the home country, Pakistan. The gap widens with heterogeneous cultural integration. Despite, its pluralistic stance, Great Britain, belongs and functions for the Briton. In order to attempt at some form of assimilation, the Pakistanis use ways and means of acquiring economic worth to enforce their identity and uplift the degraded status of the word ‘Paki’. Zaki questions Nasser, “What chance has the racist Englishman given us that we haven’t torn from him with our own hands?”(Kureishi MBL 61). Nasser, who has acquired wealth through various means, agrees with Zaki and raises a toast to “that good point” (62). Even the Englishman, present at the party, resentfully accepts that Salim is five times richer than him and that too “In my country!”. He proclaims, “The only prejudice in England is against the useless”(62). The insult that is attached with the word ‘Paki’ deals directly with the traits of Pakistanis. The working class comes to Great Britain to work, then if the English are biased towards them, it is because of their uselessness, “laziness” and “fecklessness”(Kureishi “Rainbow Sign” 29).

Power relations become more problematic, in the case of those diaspora that are Englishmen, “born and bred almost...a new breed”(Kureishi Buddha of Suburbia 3). Kureishi, himself belongs to this breed, as his mother is white, so he finds “anti-British remarks” (“Rainbow Sign” 17) offensive. He wishes for unification, as he believes that when one finds the other different it leads to “denigration” (31) of the other. His plays and stories are an endeavor to show and to try to understand what “one’s own humanity consists in” (31) as humanity is the only way to ease “soul”, “to see both oneself and others as being ends not means” (31). Kureishi’s depiction of the power structures and the struggle that emanates from these is a means of showing that power envelops all, whereas, the soul frees all. The multi-strata society, induces further ruptures and schisms. Omar’s strength and climb on the ladder of success, plunges Genghis and Moose further down. It strengthens corrupt members like Salim further and weakens Socialist reformers like Papa.

England, within its capitalist parameters does not allow scope for Socialists like Papa, as it thrusts forth the “wogs of capitalism”(Kureishi MBL 49). Whether the Socialist is a Pakistani or an Englishman, there is no chance of success. Hence, it is within the socio-politic system that inequality breeds. If a businessman can keep workers off the “dole queue”, “Mrs. Thatcher” is

"pleased" (55), even if it keeps the "damn country in the black" (55). Power, according to Foucault functions through a tripartite relationship between " power, right, and truth" (Foucault "Two Lectures:Lecture Two" 3). The question that Foucault raises is " what rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourse of truth?"(4). Hence, there are types of power that are "susceptible of producing the discourse of truth", and these are "endowed with such potent effects"(4). Whoever possesses power has the "power to dictate what is held to be true" (4). Nasser and Salim, hold the power to dictate corruption, gambling and black money as fair and a "discourse of truth" (3). Their power has "potent effects" on the economy of Great Britain, and the condition of the 'white trash', as well as the 'Paki' entrepreneur. The discourse of truth is created "inverse[ly]"(4) through the discourse of right, leading to the enforcement of power. The 'Paki' is enthroned and valorized through the inversion of right by superimposing "domination" rather than "to efface domination intrinsic to power" (4).

The circumstances and conditions of the 'Paki's' in *My Beautiful Launderette* are the outcome of their struggle. They become "vehicles of power", allowing power to become " a chain", which " circulates" (4). Their language structure corresponds to their power structure, and the words within the screenplay adopt forceful qualities. These forceful qualities in turn, fortify the denigrated 'Pakis', weaken the degenerated English working class and refurbish businesses and economy. The boost in the economy further supports the "capitalist wog" and is sinuous in sapping the reformers, inducing further violence and aggression from the incompetent labor. The aggressive populace spins in the cycle of unemployment and resorts to denigrate further the word 'Paki'. This vicious cycle works along the tripartite relationship of "power, right and truth" (3) within the language framework as well as the economic power structure, leading to further, "struggle, conflict and war"(2). Hence, it is an inherent characteristic of power to enforce truth through fortifying a power order, drawing margins, borders and boundaries, and in *My Beautiful Launderette*, this order revolves around the dynamics of linguistic strategies of racism and economic policies of multi-decker class system.

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