



**VISION OF UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD IN HANIFKUREISHI'S
BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE**

Dr. Sant Kumar
Assistant Professor of English.

ABSTRACT

In the Post-war period, with the influx of migrants from the erstwhile colonized countries, Britain faced the problems of housing, employment and cultural conflict. In the eighties with new socio-economic policies of Margaret Thatcher, these problems assumed new dimensions with other issues in trail. The conflict between the native habitants and migrants became the characteristic feature of British life. Hanif Qureishi's screen's screen My Beautiful Laundrette (1985) foregrounds the problems as confronted by the South-Asian migrants in Britain. The play depicts a faithful and realistic account of South Asian migrants in the face of racism, violence and unemployment. In the play, friendship between Omar Ali, the son of Pakistani migrant father, and Johnny, a white boy, is symbolic of the integration of two polar apart worldviews in the face of racism. The playwright uses a laundrette as metaphor to chart the life journey of Omar Ali and his friendship with Johnny. Their relationship challenges the stereotypical and oppressive aspects of both the cultures— Eastern and Western. Through Omar-Johnny relationship the author illustrates his vision of universal brotherhood to make the world better place. The play underscores the view that the prospects and possibilities of a better world order reside in a harmonious cultural compromise, not in conflict and confrontation.

KEY WORDS: Racism, Cultural Conflict, Worldviews, Integration, Universal Brotherhood.

INTRODUCTION :

Hanif Qureishi's screen play *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) is set in the Britain of 1980s during the reign of Margaret Thatcher. The play foregrounds the problems as confronted by the South-Asian migrants in Britain. The play marks the rejection of the "Raj Revival" films as sub-genre of the "Heritage" films which tend to celebrate colonial legacy, thereby grossly overlooking such issues as violence against migrants, socio-cultural conflicts, increasing unemployment among youth and socio-cultural prejudices against sexual minorities. The play depicts a faithful and realistic account of South Asian migrants in the face of racism, violence and unemployment. It foregrounds the issues which are spoiling the prospects of peace, progress and harmony in the world. As an insider-outsider, Qureishi is able to see "the social facts the way we live

more accurately than the social statisticians" (Ward). The play evinces a discernible and remarkable departure from the subject matter and style of the mainstream British literature. This departure can be clearly viewed in the selection of setting, characterization, point of view, style and costumes in the play.

Setting of the play in a dismal and dilapidated place in London draws our attention to the filthy conditions common people in Britain are living in the contemporary times. The setting also falsifies the oft-professed view of Margaret Thatcher that the country is moving towards



the unprecedented prosperity and progress. The rejection of the exotic settings of the mainstream literature amounts to the rejection of the view of Margaret Thatcher as well as the view propagated by mass media. Besides, the playwright also casts non-white characters in the lead roles against the marginal and minor roles as assigned to the non-whites in the contemporary mainstream plays, films and novels. Thus, the play decolonizes the subject matter, point of view and techniques as used in the hegemonic discourses. But it does not mean that he condemns the white value system and appreciates the ethnic values, rather he looks at both of the viewpoints from a critical perspective. The author makes the point, "Indian should be depicted like someone else. They're not saints or sinners either" (*Sunday Times*).

The play dramatizes how common people, especially ethnic minorities face the problem of unemployment and identity in the new settings. They find it rather difficult to identify themselves with the almost alien system of social and cultural interaction. Considered as unintelligent, passive, dirty and nuisance, the South Asian migrants are struggling for good jobs and meaningful life. The plight and predicament of the migrants is shown through the character of young Pakistani boy, Omar Ali who moves from the rags to the riches while confronting the violent anger and ire of the white people and opposition from his own relatives. In the course of life journey, Omar befriends a white boy who helps him rise above the narrow considerations of race, religion, region and nation.

Omar Ali, born to a Pakistani father and an English mother faces identity crisis in two ways. The first, it becomes rather difficult for him to identify himself with either of the parents at the same time as far as the race is concerned. The second, the different ideological stances of the mother and the father leave him without any value system to survive in the alien land. His mother stands for Western ways of life whereas his father is symbolic of the Oriental ways of life. Thus Omar is caught between two opposing viewpoints—materialism and socialism. In the beginning, he faces "an increasingly plural, complex and sometimes hostile world" (Pascual 141). But with the passage of time, he succeeds in overcoming the identity crisis by dint of hard work and positive thinking and amiable behaviour. He succeeds in assimilating the two ideologies in his character by following the ideals of social responsibility and individual materialism as professed by his father and uncle respectively. Two stages in Omar's life are illustrated through the two stages of launderette where he works. On a broader level, the launderette becomes a 'melting pot' where all the narrow concerns of gender, race and sex disappear in the face of success.

Omar with an alcoholic, frustrated socialist father lives in a dreary and dilapidated suburb of London. The very setting suggests the social condition of the people living here. The father of Omar Ali, father, Hussein Ali, still rooted in the Eastern tradition, does not accept the Western value system that prioritizes individual concerns over social responsibility and moral obligations. Hussein keeps an ardent desire to educate Omar in college but the circumstances go against his wishes as the acute pecuniary conditions come in the way of his desire to send him for higher education. The highly adverse circumstances force the father to discard his values in favour of the agenda of monetarism. In this context, Ambler, John S. Ambler's observation is quite apt, "The traditional values he holds in high esteem are in opposition to those of the Thatcher administration" (Ambler 87).

Initially, Omar without any job lives on the dole like other young boys from the working class. After a prolonged wait, he is given a job of car washing in the garage of his uncle, Nasser Ali. In the garage, Omar struggles hard to eke out his livelihood because in the face of the New Economic Order developed by Margaret Thatcher he is left with almost no opportunity to survive meaningfully with meager wages in the world where money rules the roost. On the other hand, his uncle flourishes in business largely through illegal activities. As Salim remarks, "Life is nothing in England without money" (Kureishi 48). Omar carries out illegal activities, rejecting the ideals of social responsibility. This suggests that in the New Economic Order human values keep no place in professional as well as personal relations.

Nasser rejects his family life and social responsibility, turning into a capitalist and opportunist. He misuses the opportunities offered by the 'New Economic Order' and carries out illegal activities to flourish in business in the name of individual freedom. He becomes a successful business man by "squeezing the tits of the system" (Kureishi 17). Nasser flourishes as a business man but fails as a family man. His extra-marital relation with a white woman spoils his marital, familial and social relations. "Nasser is unfaithful to his Pakistani wife—as many Pakistani men are, given their double standard of morality" (Hand 10). It is because

of the unseemly ways and habits he is deserted by everyone in the family. Tired of his extra-marital affairs, his wife intends to go back to the native country and his daughter leaves the place.

In the beginning, Omar, like his uncle, pretends to be in love with his cousin Tania pretends that he wants to marry her but he does so only to grab the business of his uncle through deceit and dishonesty. At last he succeeds in his unseemly mission but refuses to marry Tania once he becomes the owner of uncle's run-down launderette. Now he needs money to renovate the launderette but without any means and money he plans to ply illegal activities to earn money. He joins hands with drug traffickers like his uncle and his business partner, Salim to have an access to easy money. In a way, he becomes a drug-trafficker to survive in life as well as business. By doing so he, in a way, rejects the ideals and ideas of his socialist father.

Omar finds it rather difficult to survive through fair and honest means and ways in the face of racial violence and cut-throat competition as backed by the New Economic Order. He lives under the constant threat to life from the white boys, members of The National Front. The Front combines "revisionist neo-fascism and racial populist politics" (Thurlow 245). One day, Omar is attacked by the gang of white boys headed by his childhood friend Johnny while travelling in a car with his family. The attack serves as a reminder of the challenges that immigrants face in the face of violent racism. But Johnny comes forward to protect them from the attack of the white boys. It suggests that migrants attempt to ascend the ladder of social hierarchy in the face of "racism, unemployment and Thatcherism in the contemporary England" (Kureishi "Introduction" 5). With the influx of several ethnic groups, Britain became a place of cultural diversity and an arena of socio-cultural tensions and conflicts. The migrants grab the opportunity to look for "a better life in the West" (Wood 140). But it is difficult for them to succeed and survive meaningfully in the hostile country where money is more important than social relations. "The focus in Thatcher's England was on entrepreneurship, influenced by the Prime Minister's monetarist thinking" (Childs 185).

At last, it is Omar and Johnny's joint efforts and friendship lead to renovation of the run-down launderette. While staying together through thick and thin they come closer to each other and understand their mutual needs. This relationship binds them together on various levels-- physical, mental and emotional. In a way, the close friendship serves as a symbol of cultural integration and assimilation. Their relationship challenges the stereotypical and oppressive aspects of both the cultures—Eastern and Western. With new selves and new identities they come forward to defy the stereotypes of both Asian and English cultures.

In the final stage, Omar and Johnny jointly renovate the launderette through hard work and honest means, discarding the illegal activities of the earlier stage. Now they are totally changed in their attitude and behavior and nurture the plant of launderette with the fertilizer of hard work, trust, tolerance, love and support. Omar embraces the ideals of social responsibility as professed by his father, and Johnny follows him in this respect, rejecting racism. **Their relationship, like the launderette, demands hard work and commitment through adversity.** Apart from managing his business in collaboration with Johnny, Omar takes care of his old and alcoholic father. He succeeds in integrating two polar opposite viewpoints in his character or in his relationship with Johnny.

In the end, both the friends get integrated in one entity not only in business but also in carrying out social relationships and responsibilities. Omar washes off blood and dirt from Johnny's face when the latter gets wounded while protecting Omar and Salim from the racist attack. Thus the launderette becomes a melting pot where race and gender become inconsequential in human relationships. Their relationship defies the authority of both the cultures—Eastern and Western. In the end, the two friends are shirtless and playfully splashing water on one another from the sink. The way they enjoy the moments signifies that they continue their friendship despite the adverse and hostile atmosphere. The play gives the message that individual enterprise without human dimension and social concerns brings nothing but tragic breakdown of social and familial relationships as happens in the care of Nasser. In the end, both the friends wash their hands clean of "the dirt of filthy society" (Kureishi 147).

The foregoing discussion highlights the view that the prospects and possibilities of a better world order reside in a harmonious cultural compromise, not in conflict and confrontation. The way Omar and Johnny come closer to each other provides the possibility of better world order. Their relationship is a fine blend of both the Western and Eastern viewpoints. It is their friendship that provides them with

opportunities to make their lives better in every walk of life. Through Omar-Johnny relationship the author illustrates his vision of universal brotherhood to make the world better place.

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