

# THE ANALYSIS OF HYBRIDITY IN *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE*\*

Jorge Berástegui Wood  
Universidad de Alcalá

## ABSTRACT

Postcolonial criticism includes several artistic works bearing different origins and goals. In this article, I have selected a very well-known British film, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1984). The aim of this essay is to analyze how Director Stephen Frears' and scriptwriter Hanif Kureishi's film portrays some of consequences of the "diaspora" in Great Britain, paying special attention to cultural hybridity and to the different ways in which characters adapt themselves to a frequently hostile social environment.

KEY WORDS: Hanif Kureishi, Stephen Frears, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, cinema, Colonialism, Thatcherism, racism, hybridity, social class, Postmodernism, parody.

## RESUMEN

Los estudios que realiza la crítica postcolonial incluyen una gran cantidad de trabajos artísticos con orígenes y objetivos muy diferentes. En este artículo, he elegido una obra de gran importancia para el cine británico, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1984). El objetivo del ensayo es analizar de qué modo la película, que dirige Stephen Frears y cuyo guionista es Hanif Kureishi, refleja algunas de las consecuencias que "la diáspora" ha tenido en Gran Bretaña, prestando especial atención a los procesos de hibridación y de adaptación de los personajes a un medio social frecuentemente hostil.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Hanif Kureishi, Stephen Frears, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, cine, colonialismo, thatcherismo, racismo, hibridación, clase social, postmodernismo, parodia.

The anti-colonial struggle, intensified during the second half of the 20th century, opened up a new type of radical left-wing cinema eager to confront Western domination and able to break away from the imperialist view that cinematographic art had contributed to sustain. Hundreds of artists and intellectuals started defending a new model of film-making, new aesthetic proposals capable of withstanding Western discourse. "Within the spirit of a politicized austerism, [Glauber] Rocha called for a "hungry" cinema of "sad, ugly films," [Fernando] Solanas and [Octavio] Getino for militant guerrilla documentaries, and [Julio García] Espinosa

for an “imperfect” cinema energized by the “low” forms of popular culture (Shohat & Stam 248).

However, there has been a significant change in cultural and political perspectives in the last decades. The fact that decolonization has not reached its main targets—in terms of social, political and economic welfare—, together with the loss of influence of Marxism have finally had an influence in the way cinema approaches racism and postcolonial problems. It is important to mention the “diaspora” as a significant cause of the change of cultural and political paradigms. The process of decolonization often led to a massive migration of people from the former colonies to the older metropolis of the empire. I am not going to comment here on the different reasons that explain this migration—neocolonialism, frequent corruption and self-indulgent native elites; in other words, the collapse of emancipating utopias— but the fact is that cities like London started receiving hundreds of immigrants every day, former colonial subjects looking for a new life in the West. Films started shooting stories in which the colonial discourse was not only visualised through the relationship between the metropolis and the colony, but also through the representation of immigrants’ life in big Western cities. We could possibly talk about the emergence of a new type of cinema focused on showing the lives of those who arrived and settled down in Europe. These films reflect the different problems—mainly related to racial discrimination—that protagonists have to face in the process of social integration. It is within these parameters that we have to analyse *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. And I say “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.

Stephen Frears is one of the most productive and well-known film directors of the last decades. He started working as an assistant for some famous “Free cinema” directors like Lindsay Anderson. Though he was initially linked to this cinematographic wave—characterised by a strong social and political commitment— Frears has been able to develop his own artistic personality. “La producción de Stephen Frears ha ofrecido una síntesis, con frecuencia afortunada, entre la tradición social realista, pero sin su usual moralismo, y la irreverencia y el desenfado posmodernos” (Gubern 500). Apart from historical films like *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) or *Mary Reilly* (1996), Frears’ filmography is made up of several works in which the leading

---

\* This work has been possible thanks to a FPU grant from the Spanish Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, ref. AP-2004-1034.

characters try to find their own identity in an increasingly plural, complex and sometimes hostile world. As examples of this we can mention *The Grifters* (1990), *The Snapper* (1993), *High Fidelity* (2000) and also the film we are analysing in this essay, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1984), the first Frears' great cinematographic hit. Moreover, it was the beginning of Frears's and Kureishi's work together. Any critical approach made must acknowledge the important contribution of the latter to this film.

Hanif Kureishi is an outstanding artist who has developed his production in different fields, writing an important number of novels and various scripts for cinema and television. He is the author of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) —which he later adapted for a television series— and *The Black Album* (1995), relevant novels in contemporary British literature. He has also worked as a film director in the film *London Kills Me* (1991) and he has adapted theatre plays such as *Mother's Courage and Her Sons* by Bertold Brecht. In most of his production, Kureishi deals with the problems of identity of his protagonists, just as Frears has done in his work; his characters are very often second and third generation immigrants who have to adapt to a situation in which racism goes together with new cultural paradigms that emerge from the diaspora process. Within this context, London becomes the perfect setting to perform the characteristics of a changing world.

*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 reevaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. (...) It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but re-implicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory —or, in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency. (112)

Hybridity is a key concept in this essay —and in postcolonial theory. Firstly, because it confirms what I have already said: colonialism is not only linked to the first —and the third— world relationship but is also reproduced in the multiethnic confrontation that exists in Western cities. In reference to this, I could say that the relationship between *My Beautiful Laundrette* and the anti-colonial cinema of the 1960s and 1970s is parallel to postcolonial theory's own development. A contrastive analysis between the first important works of postcolonial theory, e.g. Said's *Orientalism* and more recent publications like Bhabha's, will reveal significant changes:



Bhabha's approach to colonial discourse is dissimilar to Said's, which Bhabha sees as too reliant on over-simplifying binaries such as East and West, colonizer and colonized, latent and manifest Orientalism. (...) While Said discusses the differences and oppositions between colonizer and colonized, Bhabha often examines their points of similarity... (Childs & Williams 122)

Secondly, hybridity is important in this essay because it reflects that the strategies and discursive practices of colonialism can be reformulated and used by its victims as a weapon against those who have made them. In the following pages we will observe how the contact between the different discourses and cultural practices leads to the emergency of a new cultural subject. However, we will also analyze the problems of hybridity, for it is a concept in which the social, political and cultural dimensions are highly related. Due to the multiple effects caused by this phenomenon, two main stages in this process should be established: on the one hand, we will talk of hybridity as a form of putting the attitudes and discourses of the protagonists of this story into question. On the other hand, we will show hybridity as a step forward in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

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,

---

<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie gives a very good description of conservatives' racial and neo-imperial policy in some of the articles that are included in his book, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*.

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.

In this film, Pakistani characters re-interpret Thatcherism’s economic ideology for their own benefit. When Omar’s uncle says “In this bloody country you can get anything: You only need to know how to use the system,” he shows his capacity to adapt the conservative ideology to his own interests. The lack of a powerful state control —as the neoliberal economic and political models defend— is the perfect excuse for any kind of business. Omar’s uncle and his colleague Salim take advantage of this context to establish a set of legally doubtful activities, or, on some occasions, completely illegal.

Nevertheless, Pakistani characters combine the capacity to profit from liberal ideology with a strong family/group consciousness. In a scene of the film, Salim says to Omar: “Your uncle helped me when I was in need. Now I want to help you.” Cooperation among members of the same ethnic group is a relevant aspect in the film. All of them meet periodically in different celebrations where they openly speak about their business problems. There is a solid social structure which gives support to its members. We can observe here a clear contrast with the Anglo-Saxon family, which is more vulnerable to the social fragmentation produced by capitalism.

One of the bizarre paradoxes of Thatcherism was its commitment to impose a narrative of the nation —with its rigid social and economic implications— to a country that was becoming increasingly hybrid. On some occasions, this led to illogical situations:

When Margaret Thatcher invoked the spirit to bolster the British nation in its conflict with Argentina, she was addressing a “nation” containing several million people whose families were at conflict with that empire —(past) nation was at conflict with the (present) nation. In post-colonial space, the cultural threat of difference shifts from the nation’s exteriorities to its interiorities because the unified people invoked by the narrative differ from the diverse people addressed by it. (Childs & Williams 129)

This extract portrays the ambivalence of the colonial discourse, its epistemological incoherence and multiple conceptual cracks which end up turning it into a parody of itself.

The narrative of the nation has to face its own internal contradictions throughout the film. The task of reassuring the great “values” of the traditional Great Britain lies upon gangs of lazy white people who carry out racist and xenophobic acts. They are portrayed as threatening beings constantly bothering Pakistani characters, placing themselves in front of the laundry that Johnny and Omar try to turn into a profitable business. It looks like a struggle for space, as if the white man rejected the possibility of negotiating a spot for the immigrant and its descendants.



To represent white characters as violent subjects leads to a complex situation in which postcolonial problems merge with social class reality. Colonial discourse has the need to produce stereotype, as Homi Bhabha says,

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of “fixity” in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always “in place,” already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no Prof., can never really, in discourse, be proved. (66)

The stereotype is used in the colonial discourse in order to assure its stability. Bhabha analyzes this characteristic in Freudian terms: in the same way the child needs his mother’s foot as a substitute for the penis, the colonizer needs the stereotype to reaffirm his identity and finally be able to dominate “the other.”

However, things work differently in the hybrid social structure that is portrayed in the film. Stereotype does not work as a way of dominating “the other.” The white characters use it as their last resort to find internal stability. The skin-heads gang needs stereotypes in order to resist the emotional shock that comes out of seeing that immigrants improve their conditions while they remain at the bottom of the social structure. They need symbols and tokens to define their identity and “confront” the threat inspired by “the other.” When Johnny starts working for Omar, people from the gang ask him: “Aren’t you going to support The Palace? Aren’t you going to support England?” as if such idle things could act as a way to define their identity.

This situation provokes paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, it goes against the colonial discourse produced at institutional levels; the racist and colonial discourse which is carefully hidden behind neutral masks is then projected on the street through rows and insults. Therefore, we rapidly realize the perversity that lies behind the colonial discourse, even though it is usually disguised in more polite terms. On the other hand, this situation shows one of the most impressive characteristics of racist discourse: those who are more fanatic in its defence are normally part of the poorest groups of society. In Great Britain, for instance, racism often nourishes from people who inhabit deprived areas and who have been victims of industrial reorganization. This is one of the greatest goals of the right wing political agenda, stimulating ethnic confrontation in order to break possible social cooperation among those who suffer from oppressive situations. It may be the reason why Frears and Kureishi have represented skin heads as threatening beings as well as victims of their ignorance, a surreal and despaired existence which contrasts with the dynamism shown by Pakistani characters.

Hybridity also affects the family structure of immigrant families. In general terms it can be said that the film is quite faithful when representing certain traditions of Pakistani people. There is a clear patriarchal hierarchy, with Omar’s uncle



at the head of it. He reproduces the contractual forms of marriage typical of certain Islamic traditions, offering Omar his daughter as a wife. Nevertheless, this structure, at the same time, has its cracks. Omar's uncle, for example, has an extramarital affair with a Western woman. It is not a case of polygamy—as we can see in Islamic tradition—but we should speak of an illicit relationship that takes place outside the family tradition. Omar's uncle experiences a certain form of duplicity. He wants to be one and the other at the same time, being inside and outside tradition. This duplicity detaches the subject from his own reality and finally affects the whole community. That is why Tania leaves her home, incapable of bearing this situation that moves from tradition to modernity.

Hybridity is also present in the approach to the characters' relationship with the "diaspora." There are two different attitudes towards this phenomenon in the film. One of them is the pragmatic view represented by Omar's uncle, who symbolizes the capacity to adapt to the context in which he lives. For him, England is the main psychological reference. He rejects any nostalgic feeling for his native country. He says things like "At least, we can get money here" or "Our country has been sodomised by religion." However, Omar's father's attitude is very different. He represents the emotional problems that result from the "diaspora," the problems of hybridity. He does not like England and looks back to his tradition: "This country has cheated us. We should go back there, with our families. That's our real home." These sentences hide a complete disappointment. Omar's father symbolizes the failure of humanistic utopia. He is a defender of internationalism. He sees culture as part of an emancipating process. He insists on encouraging his son to study. He is a socialist who has always believed in fighting against oppression. He has worked to help white working-class kids as a teacher. But he finally discovers that traditional dialectics between the rich and the poor has lost its sense in an increasingly problematic world. That is what explains his disenchantment. As he tells us in the film, the same kids he has helped are now demanding his eviction from Great Britain. Therefore, he can only grasp certain things, such as the power of wisdom or the value of tradition, in order to feel safe. Hybridity, again, dismantles fixed discourses of reality and puts characters into difficult situations.

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 postructuralism 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).



Nevertheless, this metaphor has many more theoretical implications. To illustrate this point of view, let me recall Fredric Jameson in his reflection upon postmodern space:

I take such spatial peculiarities as symptoms and expressions of a new historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radical discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentring of global capital itself... the fragmented and schizophrenic decentring (of the Self). (qtd. Bhabha 216)

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 meta-narrative. 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. As Slavoj Žižek says,

El multiculturalismo es un racismo que vacía su propia posición de todo contenido positivo (el multiculturalista no es un racista directo; no le opone al Otro los valores de su propia cultura); sin embargo, retiene su posición de “punto de universalidad vacío” y privilegiado [su posición de burgués occidental, sujeto favorecido en el capitalismo global], desde el cual se pueden apreciar (y despreciar) adecuadamente





las otras cosas particulares; el respeto multiculturalista a la especificidad del Otro es la forma de afirmar la superioridad. (235)

The laundry is a metaphor for hope. But outside it, there is still a multiethnic working-class structure which is completely fragmented, each element fighting against the others. In such context, cultural negotiation is simply a discursive strategy, the nice idea of an exotic bourgeoisie. But still, there will be social confrontation. We only need to have a look at Paris *banlieux* to understand it and ask ourselves if we can really talk about a multicultural society.

## WORKS CITED

- BHABHA, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- BORGMANN, Ulrike. *From Empire to Multicultural Society: Cultural and Institutional Changes in Britain*. Würzburg: Wissenschaftlicher, 1998.
- CHILDS, Peter & R.J. Patrick WILLIAMS. *An Introduction to Post-colonial Theory*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- OLIVA, Juan Ignacio. "Literary Identity and Social Criticism in Hanif Kureishi." *On Writing (and) Race in Contemporary Britain*. Ed. Fernando Galván & Mercedes Bengoechea. Alcalá: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá, 1999. 147-152.
- GUBERN, Román. *Historia del cine*. Barcelona: Lumen, 2000.
- RUSHDIE, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. London: Granta/Penguin, 1991.
- SHOHAT, Ella & Robert STAM. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- ŽIŽEK, Slavoj. *El espinoso sujeto*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2001.

