



Caught between Two Worlds: The Liminality of Asian Women in Kureishi's the Buddha of Suburbia and the Black Album

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ABSTRACT

The works of Hanif Kureishi have generally been examined in light of Postcolonial notions especially the notion of "identity" of male figures. However, critics have rarely paid tribute attention to the life and experiences of female migrants in diaspora. Regarding this, this article begins with a discussion of Kureishi's portrayal of hybrid Asian women in Britain and sheds light on opportunities that liminality and hybridity opens for them in their new country. The discussion then turns to the role played by Asian women as agents of resistance in England. It also examines diasporic life as an empowering element that assists female migrants in opposing both the imperial power and the patriarchal rules of their communities. This research indicates that although Asian women are generally marginalized in the west and their ethnicity makes them voiceless in their adapted country and reinforces their subordination, Kureishi's works privilege the prominent role of migrant females in diaspora and bring them form margins of their cultures to the center in a way that their voices are heard.

Key words: south Asian diaspora, liminality, hybridity, agency, resistance.

Introduction

As a British -Asian writer, Hanif Kureishi has always paid continual attention to the life of Asian immigrants in England. Generally centering his stories on male Asian protagonists, Kureishi's narratives touch the issue of gender as well. Unlike first generation of females, women of the second generation are given major roles to play in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*. The mentioned works highlight diasporic experiences of those Asian females who are marginalized and silenced in England's white society. Asian women dwell between two distinct spaces, between assumptions of the British culture and traditional values of their own homeland. Such in-betweenness helps these women to gain agency and independence in their new home and enables them to cross borders and oppose traditional binaries and hierarchies that seek to confine and limit them.

Hybrid Females

Just like their fathers or husbands, Asian women occupy a liminal space that renders them a non-fixed floating identity. Moving between two different cultures, they adapt several features of both. Female migrants are cultural hybrids with no sense of a fixed, homogeneous identity, they fashion their identities in an in-between space that is shaped through cultural negotiations with the white society. Zulma, Tahira, and Jamila are all representatives of second generation females who enjoy a liminal position that provides them with opportunities for freedom and agency and enables them to challenge existing binaries and hierarchies that are prevalent in their diasporic communities and their new land.

Cultural hybridity entails border crossing and create new space for liberation and independence for women. Jamila's hybridity makes her an educated Indian Woman who is independent and can manage her own life. She "was educating herself. She knew what she wanted to learn and she knew where it was; she just had to shovel it all into her head." (B.S 95) Jamila is a strong woman with definite ideas and opinions. Unlike male migrants, Jamila does not identify with the British culture, instead like most Asian women she articulates a multi-faceted and heterogeneous identity that is negotiated and renegotiated in daily interactions with the west. Born and breed in England and fashioned by British culture, Tahira cannot leave his own people behind. She is a strong will Pakistani Muslim who believes firmly in ideas of Islam and is ready to fight for her religion and her people at all cost. Kureishi's portrayal of second generation females shatter the monolithic singular image of the third world woman and instead proposes a plural and multi-faceted image that shows their identities in the process of negotiation and becoming.

Cultural hybridity is also a source of power for Asian females. It gives them a chance to go beyond forces that endeavor to confine them within the policed borders of definition of their ethnic and cultural belonging that is carefully mapped out for them. They embrace a liminal space somewhere in-between identities they are imposed to assume. They are portrayed as fusion of cultures, of coming together of differences and such fusion opens for them spaces of agency and liberation. Jamila and Tahira earn independence in their adapted country. They benefits this liminality in that it helps them to survive in England. Thanks to living in England they are free to do what they are prevented from due to their subordinate position in their communities. Not only does Jamila defends her people, but as a feminist she also fights for women's rights. Jamila lives a useful life in Britain and this is exactly the thing Karim observes in Jamila, something that he is prevented from, "Her feminism, the sense of self and flight it engendered, the schemes and plans she had, the relationships... the things she had made herself know, and all the understanding this gave, seemed to illuminate her tonight as she went forward, an Indian woman, to live a useful life in the white England." (B.S 216)

Thus, life in Britain enable Asian women to challenge binaries and hierarchies that tend to limit and confine them. Hybridity becomes a source of empowering for these women and opens for them "new roles and demands, new political spaces". (Clifford 314) Attached to a "'home' culture and a tradition" and drawing on English culture, Asian women in Kureishi's work are granted with the ability to gain agency and liberation in Britain and to resist the powers that aim to restrict them and reinforce their subordinate position.

Agents of Resistance

According to James Clifford "life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful". (314) on the one hand they struggle "with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile" on the other hand, with the claims of old and new patriarchies" (ibid). Forcibly uprooted, Kureishi's females cannot enjoy the same degree of liberty in England. Emigration and their subordinate position as woman in their south Asian communities make female migrants disempowered. As an Asian Jamila and Tahira contend with racial violence in England and as a woman they should cope with the patriarchal structures of their communities "that have remained patriarchal despite being transplanted to Britain". (Maxey 17)

While Asian men perpetuate "unbending patriarchy" as a way to "cling increasingly to the security of perceived homeland" (Maxey 18), female migrants are brave enough to rebel against them and to challenge the patriarchal rules. Life in England enable Jamila to rebel against the arranged marriage that is stressed by Anwar as a tradition. She accepts to marry Changez, the man from India that her father choses, but in her mind she never think of Changez as her husband as Karim declares, "Marrying Changez would be, in her mind, a rebellion against rebellion, creative novelty itself. Everything in her life would be disrupted, experimented with. She claimed to be doing it only for Jeeta, but there was real, wilful contraries in it, I suspected." (B.S 82) thanks to life in diaspora and the new spaces and liberation that it offers, Jamila resists the patriarchy through which Anwar aimed to manage her life. Like Jamila, Tahira in *The Black Album* benefits from diasporic life. Tahira is a Muslim and believes firmly in her religion and ideas of Islam. Wearing hijab is the matter for which she is forced to leave her home, "this great sister here, Tahira, she been with us from day one. Riaz like a father to her. Her old man threw her out because she wanted her mum and sisters to cover up." (B.A 48) cultural and religious practices make Jamila and Tahira agents of resistance. The mentioned practices equip them to rebel against the patriarchy that their fathers accentuate in their South Asian diasporic communities. Thus, while their communities tend to marginalize women and make them voiceless, Kureishi's narratives stress the role of Asian women in diaspora and highlight the room that diasporic life gives these women for agency

Female migrants are not only oppressed by male members of their communities, but as a colonized subject they have to resist the imperial power. As Asians Jamila and Tahira face extreme racism in Britain, and their lives are "pervaded by fear of violence." (B.S 56) As the racialized other Asian women encounter discrimination in their new country. They are foreigners that the white society cast as outsiders. Indian by blood and color, they cannot enjoy the same degree of liberty as their white counterparts, but life in diaspora enable these colored women to make their voice heard. Remaining "attached to, and empowered by, a 'home' culture and a tradition" (Clifford 314) they do everything they can to protect and support their peoples. They participate in rallies held

against racism and do their best to advocate their people. In so doing, cultural and religious practices assist them to resist the imperial power. Clinging to their ethnic identity helps female migrants to resist the dominant power. Speaking Urdu, wearing traditional clothes, and eating habits enable these women to transform the established social order and its structures of power. Diasporic life renders Jamila and Tahira and the other Asian females with opportunities for liberation and growth. It enables them to integrate into the white society, to negotiate and renegotiate their identities in their cultural encounters with the whites. Inhabiting an in-between space contributes to gaining voice and agency in England. Subordinated in their communities, life in diaspora becomes a source of power for Jamila and Tahira. It offers them new opportunities, new spaces for freedom. London's heterogeneous character makes Jamila able to resist Anwar's patriarchal decisions and contributes to her role in resisting the dominant power. England's democracy assists Tahira to freely challenge "the colonial mentality" (B.A 79) she claims that "our voices suppressed by Osgood types with the colonial mentality. To her we not cool, we coolies." (ibid) along with Riaz's group she longs for free speech of Asians and that their voices must not be "muzzled by the authorities" (81) As Asian females Jamila and Tahira successfully find their place in their adapted land and make their voice heard by the authorities. By giving Asian women major roles to play, Kureishi's narratives highlight the statue of female migrants in the Britain. In so doing, this representation helps the author to question the stereotypical portrayal of Asian woman as well.

Conclusion

Asian women are generally marginalized in the west. Their ethnicity makes them voiceless in their adapted country and reinforces their subordination. Yet, Kureishi's works privilege the prominent role of migrant females in diaspora and bring them form margins of their cultures to the center. First and second generation Asian women are no longer marginalized and voiceless in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*. The mentioned works give Jeeta, Jamila, Tahira, and Zulma apt platforms to challenge the powers that underpin their subordinate position. They use their diasporic experience as an empowering effect that fortifies their ability in resisting the powers that reduced them to the other both as a woman and as an Asian. In doing so, they question stereotypes that strengthen their subordination. Postcolonial women are generally portrayed as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bounded, domesticated, family-oriented, and victimized." (Mishra 4) but Kureishi's works narrate stories of educated, determined, subversive, and independent Asian women who gain agency and freedom in their adapted land.

Along with male protagonists, female migrants have important roles to perform in Kureishi's works. These works draw special attention to Asian women and try to underline the stature of women in Asian diaspora. In depicting them Kureishi challenges the monolithic singular portrayal of third world woman. Asian woman are not a homogeneous group with fixed identities, instead they are granted with the ability to dwell in an in-between space that enable them to negotiate their floating identities through cultural interactions with the white society they live in. Kureishi's female protagonists are oppressed and reduced to the other both as a woman and as an Asian, but life in diaspora renders them with positions and new spaces that assist them in finding agency in Britain. In fact diasporic life is seen by Kureishi as an empowering factor that lead Asian women to resist the patriarchy and to subvert the structures of the dominant power. *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* pay tribute attention to silenced and marginalized Asian women. They stress the statues of Asian women in diaspora and by shedding light on their diasporic opportunities, the abovementioned works question the stereotypical portrayal of Asian woman in the west.

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