

## Displacement and Dilemma of Identity in the novel *Something to Tell You* by Hanif Kureishi



### Literature

**KEYWORDS :** identity, immigration, rootlessness, ambivalence.

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### ABSTRACT

*Hanif Kureishi is an English novelist, screen-writer, filmmaker, playwright and short story writer. He is known for his contentious, soul-baring and highly sexed-up prose. Critics have attributed his choice of themes to his own life. But this paper posits the view that Kureishi's choice of themes surpasses his biographical origins. This paper explores to what degree does Kureishi place and alleviate the transnational identity in the novel *Something to Tell You*. Do the immigrants in the novel subsist in a land of nowhere, ensuing from their endeavour to rise above cultural concerns and confer assorted racial identities.*

The postcolonial discussion of recent years has accentuated the dualism of Western thinking as a foremost reason for the coloniser's want of the "other", of the object through which it composes and regurgitates the conception of one's own subjectivity. It is the colonised who accomplishes this purpose. Nineteenth century European colonial authority wielded its dominance not merely by way of material, military and scientific pre-eminence but also by means of the manoeuvring of the colonial subject's descriptions and depictions in discourse:

Epistemologically the subject is constructed

as a knowing subject, in opposition to or before

an 'object' that is to be known and controlled.

The subject is also considered to be a casual and

responsible agent, the 'ego' or 'self' that is

supposed to be the centre and source of the

world and his/her actions ... At once a legal,

philosophical, and a psychic conceptual unity,

the ego or subject finds its full meaning in

this assumption of *autonomy*. (Ye\_eno\_lu 4-5)

The control of the colonial subject's images comprised an efficient mechanism of oppression; in fact, the ideological illustration of the colonial subject as an abnormal "other" was a key stratagem of colonial dialogue. Homi Bhabha states that, "the objective of colonial discourse [was] to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (*Location* 70). The stereotypes subjugated by colonial discourse were inclined to correlate the concepts of dissoluteness, savagery and backwardness with skin colour:

... skin, as the signifier of cultural and racial

difference in the stereotype, is the most visible

of fetishes, recognised as 'common knowledge'

in a range of cultural, political and historical

discourses, and plays a public part in the racial

drama that is enacted everyday in colonial

societies. (*Location* 78)

The issue of identity is always a complex one, and particularly for those who are culturally expatriated, that is, the immigrants. Immigrants are those who are raised in two worlds and for them, the dispute of exile, the isolation, the unvarying sense

of alienation, the awareness of and craving for a lost world are more precise and painful than for their children. As acknowledged, identity is a social construct and chiefly concluded by the connection between self and other. It is through our sense of identity that we identify ourselves as components of diverse ethnic factions or countries as well as social groups which grant us with a sense of belonging.

The indeterminacy and ambivalence of identity, the vacillation between similarity and dissimilarity, spring from the insufficiency of any effort to espouse only one particular identity. The innate multiplicity of the self, places identity in an in-between gap, a third space, for Bhabha who, in assuming a policy of the in-between, opens the possibility for exploration into the prolific interstitial space of identity. The first and second generation immigrants are expected to experience a feeling of identity predicament as well as homelessness; symbolically rather than factually.

This sentiment of homelessness or rootlessness is introspective of the displacement from the governing culture of the host nation. In addition, the in-betweenness or liminality involves a position on the limits of cultures, and the gaps between cultures that are liable to be occupied by migrant communities. An individual portrayed as being in a state of liminality is generally not completely acknowledged in either of the two (or more) cultures they are allied with. In *Melancholic Travelers*, Katarzyna Nowak writes:

the migrant is neither here nor there, speaks neither

the language she [he] was born into, nor the language

of an adopted new homeland, and belongs neither

to the past nor to the future. She [he] is neither whole

nor fragmented. (Nowak 14)

Abounding with a cast of vibrantly drawn characters Hanif Kureishi's novel *Something to Tell You* investigates early 21<sup>st</sup> century London through the voice of Jamal Khan, the protagonist, taking unlawfully mocking sideswipes at modern life, searching racial identity, middle-aged sexuality and parental relationships, all while narrating the story of his missing love, Ajita, and his part in her father's death.

In other words, the novel illustrates how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system besides that the immigrants in their eagerness to attach to their cultural values and traditions progressively absorb the cultural conducts of the host country as well. Their own children, groomed to be "bilingual" and "bicultural" face identity predicament and dislocation more.

The tendency of the immigrants to indulge into current identity politics and then relapse into a life of drugs and sexual pleasures involves serious dialectics. The characters seem to be vacillating between two identities – one their cultural identity of the place from which they have migrated and the other, a new hy-

brid identity which they are bound to acquire in the country in which they have settled.

With *Something to Tell You* and the character of Dr. Jamal Khan, a middle-aged man of Pakistani-English inheritance, Kureishi persists to survey the bizarre half-life experienced by the children of immigrants to the West from India and Pakistan. Although several of Jamal's troubles are of his own making, it is apparent that he has been influenced by his parents' and their contemporaries' sense of displacement. The mysterious humour that saturates the novel is in its own way a means of camouflaging the profundity of Jamal's anxiety. It is those instants when Kureishi has Jamal drag back the shutter to explain to us what lies behind the docile periphery, that confer the novel its true power:

Most whites considered Asians to be 'inferior',  
less intelligent, less everything good. Not that  
we were called Asian then. Officially, as it were,  
we were called immigrants, I think. Later for  
political reasons, we were 'blacks'. But we always  
considered ourselves to be Indians. In Britain we  
were still called Asians, though we're no more  
Asian than the English are European. It was a long  
time before we became known as Muslims, a new  
imprimatur, and then for political reasons. (55)

Unquestionably, there are some exceptionally hilarious things that take place in the novel but it does not counteract the awareness that a life has been deprived of the prospect to live up to its full potential. Dr. Jamal Khan is a psychoanalyst, divorced from his wife Josephine, the father of a son Rafi on the cusp of youth, and in determined refutation of his own middle age. By contrasting the present (2005) with the past (the 1970s and '80s), the novel presents a candid manifestation of the extensive alterations throughout London over the past numerous decades, together with the colossal incursion of new immigrants and their experiences in their new homeland.

Their inimitable location of "in-betweeners" permits the author to take up the idea of ambivalence in relation to cross-cultural and cross-historical experiences of the characters. In such a way, though Kureishi uses the phrase defined by Homi Bhabha and drawing from psychoanalysis, he describes its relevance in modern multicultural Britain. Correspondingly, Kureishi's foremost thematic obsession with Edward Said's thoughts of oriental structures, subaltern positioning and "the other" facilitate him to redefine and redraw the asserted but clichéd and old-fashioned questions of hetero-sex relationships, wholesome-ness of culture and ethnicity and, already subjugated, hetero-normative values.

Jamal's exploration for identity derives in his cultural background and further, it is delineated by the surroundings and customs he was raised up in. He is of Anglo-Pakistani origin nurtured by a deserted English mother in England, who embodies the Western culture. His Pakistani father characterizes the Eastern culture with the male dominance and stringent family traditions. However, thanks to the absent father Jamal was brought up as an Englishman; he has English friends, attended English schools, his etiquettes, education and mother tongue is English and apart from his darker skin and half-Pakistani origin, he is English:

Father hadn't protected me. He'd lived with  
his English wife, our mother, and us – his two

half-and-half kids – for only a short time,  
eventually returning to the subcontinent where  
he'd been born, settling down in Karachi,  
Pakistan, which he called 'the new country'.  
There, briefly, he found a new wife, though  
much of the time he was travelling as a journalist  
in China, America or Mexico. (30)

Jamal spends the days holed up in his west London flat-cum-office, dealing with the secrets, secrets of other people although he has an entire wardrobe packed with secrets himself. He is telling the tale of his adolescence, his teenage love and his present life in his fifties, when he is all of a sudden preoccupied by his past and when his long-sought ultimate decision is about to come. Jamal is nurturing a culpable secret about a bit of imprudence of his own. In his youth he had been conscientious for the death of a man – demanding vicious justice on the father of his girlfriend, Ajita, who had been sexually exploiting her. Accordingly, Jamal has to deal with the difficulty of discovering his own course. The path is not as much, in his case, in continuous collide of diverse cultures as it is an internal struggle about what to do with himself, what his fate is, as well as about making harmony with his teenage past:

My mind had begun to feel like an alien object  
within my skull: I wanted to pluck it out and  
throw it from a bridge. Books couldn't help me;  
nor could drugs or alcohol. I couldn't free my  
mind by working on my mind with my mind. I  
thought: light the touch paper and see. Will it  
blow up my life or ignite a depth charge in my  
frozen history? Could I rely on another person.  
(100-01)

The middle-aged separation continues to be preoccupied with thoughts of his first love. He met Ajita at university, and no woman since, including his ex-wife Josephine, has possessed her prettiness, intelligence and smartness. But lost love is not the nastiest of Jamal's dilemmas. He has never admitted to the assassination he and his two dappled friends, Valentine and Wolf, committed at some point in their student years. Most of Jamal's indecisions in his formative years are rooted in this misdeed only.

Miriam is an older sister of Jamal, who is reputable in her locality on her own terms. She has five children of three men she has never married, is overconfident of her entirely tattooed body and runs a flourishing smuggling trade. She starts a relationship with her polar contrary, Jamal's prissy yet feral rational friend, Henry, a renowned one-time theatre director. From one point of view, she is the ultimate embodiment of a mixture of trademarks of awful news into a solo prospective spouse, "Long before we got to Pakistan, like a lot of other 'ethics' she'd been getting into the roots thing. She was a Pakistani, a minority in Britain, but there was this other place where she had a deep connection ..." (193)

The missing father is the cause of Miriam's defiant conduct. To make issues worse, their father visits London every year, but on these exceptional visits he pays attention mainly Jamal, which toughens Miriam's emotions about his lack of attention towards her. Her revolt is a frantic cry for consideration as well for a

sense of identity.

Neither Jamal nor his sister Miriam has ever wholly convalesced from their childhood. Since their father was a Muslim born in colonial Bombay and their mother was a suburban girl from London, when they broke up it was for the reason that Jamal's father wished to go home where he believed he belonged, and left for Pakistan. In "The Road Exactly" Kureishi asserts, "belonging, which means, in a sense, not having to notice where you are, and, more importantly, not being seen as different, would happen eventually ... The 'West' was a dream that didn't come true" (Kureishi 219). Jamal constantly feels like he has to live up to and astonish his father. He is everything Jamal supposes he wants to be; self-assured, sharp and always encircled by gorgeous and intellectual women:

During this time, although Dad was living in London suburbs with the family he had made, he began to feel he had no home, as well as no vocation. As Mum said, 'The suburbs weren't to be his place. We were living in my parents' house; we'd got engaged; we were married; we made babies. But he was still in transit' ... He realised he had to be there, that he wanted to be involved ... So he went back to the sub-continent. There was no official parting but mum suspected 'something had upset him'. (65)

One of the things which shape an individual throughout his/her life is the professional status because through it one could be well thought-out in society, feel secure with one self and moreover apply one's competence and aptitude for self-fulfilment and a sense of identity. This is one of the most vital problems young Jamal has to face himself and that is, how to decide his profession. Even if he studies philosophy, which fascinates him enormously, he never has too much information about what to do in future. In a way he anticipates his father to furnish him an inspiration.

Jamal slips-up and as a substitute of thoroughly working on his career he somewhat lingers for any indication from his father's side. Conversely, the most significant impact on his professional life comes to Jamal from within, from his internal desire to belong to his ancestors and from the necessity not to disgrace his family and have an imperative and valuable occupation. In addition, carried away by his passionate perceptions of love, it is during this period that Jamal gets caught up in killing Ajita's father. As a result of his deeds, Ajita leaves for India to join her mother who, like Jamal's father, had been disillusioned by the West:

Ajita's mother hadn't approved of England, which she considered a 'dirty place', sexually obsessed, corrupt, drug-ridden, the families broken. Six months ago she had packed her numerous trunks

and gone to Bombay, my father's original home, leaving her husband and two children to be looked after by an aunt, the father's eldest sister. Ajita's mother didn't like living in the white suburbs without servants or friends. (51)

It is whilst pinning for his vanished love, Jamal and Miriam are sent off to their father in Pakistan to discern their roots. But what Jamal uncovers is that his father is not the monster of his infancy and everything about Pakistan is absolutely strange. Pooled with his lost love, and the hush-hush of his horrifying act, he collapses into a condition close to catatonic upon his homecoming to England:

Miriam and I had returned, not long before, from our 'roots' visit to father in Pakistan hating each other, hating everything. Not only did I not know what I was going to do, I was in bad mental trouble. I was beginning to realise that I'd thought, after the Ajita catastrophe, that the Pakistan trip would be a turning point. If I couldn't find Ajita there – how could I? – I would at least find my father, along with a sense of direction, some strength and my best self. What Miriam and I did in fact return with would take years to absorb. (87)

It must be noted that Kureishi's characters positioned in Western culture but entrenched in Eastern do not understand the multi-facetedness of their identity. In order to draw near and make possible the procedure of perception, they take a trip psychologically and sometimes actually to India or Pakistan, only to realize that the culture goes beyond them as well. The peregrination from routes – their unbalanced, fickle and displaced situation in Britain, to roots – phantasmagorical and unfamiliar traditions, does not fetch rescue or revelation. The sadistic and deceitful city, religion which becomes an obstruction rather than resolution and the materialistic Western civilization, let the protagonists to move en route for the moment of use of diverse approaches of assimilation.

Their self-discovery turns out to be an excruciating besides an exhilarating knowledge as they recognize that to deconstruct the established social and cultural order they have to cross the limitations of two worlds. Deterioration of inflexible notions of identity, racial and religious belonging and ethnicity in general prompt the protagonists to choose mimicry and other categories of figuration of identities.

**Primary Source:** Kureishi, Hanif. *Something to Tell You*. London: Faber and Faber, 2008. Print.

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