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Multiculturalism and Fractured White Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *Gabriel's Gift*

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to show that in Hanif Kureishi's novel *Gabriel's Gift*, the characters believe that race is an essential indicator which in essence delineates English identity. The paper uses Homi K. Bhabha's view that the concept of colonial "hybridity" distorted the state of power since it produced colonial "ambivalence" among colonial masters. If the colonizer and the colonized were to collide because of their cultural differences, the basis for the clash should be understood to be the identity space between these two groups. The paper argues that Race relations persist to have corporeal consequences in today's multi-ethnic British society and continue to be a significant factor in the wider discussions about immigration and multiculturalism.

Keywords: multiculturalism, immigration, xenophobia, identity.

On 22nd June 1948, the Empire *Windrush* landed at Tilbury, Great Britain, fetching with her 417 Jamaican immigrants from the West Indies, the foremost of many in the grand incursion of Commonwealth migrants to the mother country. Certainly, Britain has witnessed immigrants move towards her coast before however, this expedition indicated the commencement of a greatly outsized inflow of coloured immigrants than she and her indigenous citizens had ever experienced. As per the Communiqué of Heads of Government, Berlin Conference on Progressive Governance, June 2000:

At a time of great population movements we must have
clear policies for immigration and asylum. We are committed
to fostering social inclusion and respect for ethnic, cultural
and religious diversity, because they make our societies strong,
our economies more flexible and promote exchange of ideas and
knowledge. (Glover et al n.pag.)

By the closing stages of Second World War, manual labour demand skyrocketed as the United Kingdom was in awful necessity of restoration. Coloured immigrants from the Commonwealth states of the previous British Empire supplied this amplified requirement for low skilled and unskilled labour in post-war United Kingdom. From 1948 all the way through the 1970s, immigration from these previous Empire provinces, such as the Caribbean, India, Pakistan, Africa and the Far East, sustained to surge into Britain.

The unskilled labour deficiency that resulted in the years subsequent to the Second World War can be accredited both to Britain's want to rebuild and the reorganization of British labour to expert work. In the 1960s and '70s, the professed cultural gap among these

factions and the receiving society was considered to be great – regardless of a shared language and past association – and their incidence in Britain was exceedingly noticeable in a devastating white society. Migration from European countries, on the contrary, was seen to be not as much of a demand, irrespective of the educational, employment and demographic qualities of these assemblages.

Multiculturalism was initiated in Britain from the early 1970s, in reaction to cultural disparities, put into exercise mainly in educational and civil fields as an endeavour to surmount racism. One of the insinuations of multiculturalism was segregation as an outcome of guidelines that encouraged settlements on the basis of traditions, race and religion. In this perspective, the trouble of prejudiced conduct of historical elimination has forever been related to the questions of community, nationality and identity. In Britain the dealings with the new immigrants were composed within the framework of postcolonial discourses. Preceding colonial associations of enslavement and subordination were reshuffled. Anthias and Davis, in their work *Racialized Boundaries: race, nation, gender, colour, and class and anti-racist struggle* write:

Multi-culturalism constructs society as composed of a hegemonic homogeneous majority, and small unmeltable minorities with their own essentially different communities and cultures, which have to be understood, accepted, and basically left alone since their differences are incompatible with the hegemonic culture – in order for the society to have harmonious relations. (158)

Based on these incidents the British civilization has always been supposed as modern, therefore superior and the immigrants' way of life as inferior and antiquated. This binary positioning of the social order in finer and substandard sections was frequently uttered through the idea of a traditionally de-contextualised consistent society into which the immigrants were expected to assimilate. The appearance of multiculturalism in Britain transpired concurrently with these vague postcolonial renovations as the non-white immigration from the Commonwealth was going ahead. Panikos Panayi, in his article "Multicultural Britain: a very brief history", states:

In some contemporary British political discourse multiculturalism has come to symbolise the negative consequences of mass immigration. In such a situation hostile politicians believe ethnic minority communities develop lives of their own and separate themselves off from "mainstream" society with which they have no desire to integrate. (4)

The huge flood of coloured labours into principally white British cities, with severe housing inconveniences and already grave scarcities, ultimately began to escort to social

tension and at the same time, providing handy scapegoats to be held responsible for all the nuisances. In the eyes of many Whites, the fresh influx of coloured people was causing deficiency in resources and, at the outset, began to seize their jobs once the demand for unskilled labour began to collapse in the 1950s:

Hostility towards Jewish immigrants constructed a community of an alien nature, which threatened jobs and housing, had unsanitary habits and counted large numbers of people, who would threaten British values. (Panayi 4)

The 1960s, on the other hand, brought about controls to restrict the immigration of Commonwealth citizens for the first time. The 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act obligated any migrant to attain a voucher ahead of being given leave to penetrate. The 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Act distinguished those UK passport possessors who had a right of admission and dwelling in Britain and those who did not. In other words, a passport holder had to be born and naturalised in the United Kingdom or have a parent or grandparent who had been born, adopted or naturalised in the United Kingdom.

The 1971 Immigration Act constrained the prospects of entering Britain still more. Those who did not meet the wants of the 1968 Act now had to acquire a work permit every 12 months in order to stay on in Britain. In 1981, the Nationality Act affirmed all who had qualified for right of domicile as per the 1968 and 1971 Immigration Acts to be British citizens. Only British and European Union Citizens were liberated of immigration rule. B. Parekh, in his work entitled *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* writes:

The boundaries round a community can be quiet hard and fast, making it difficult to join or leave voluntarily. But often they are fluid, unfixed. It is in any case entirely possible for someone to be a member – a significant member – of several different communities at the same time; indeed, this is usual. (51)

This multi-ethnicity has been ascribed to causing the contemporary catastrophe of national identity in Britain. From 1948 upto 1962, Britain experienced substantial waves of immigration from Commonwealth states at the same time as the government retained a *laissez-faire* standpoint. Immigration has affected modern Britain in a number of ways. As an upshot of immigration, people who are dissimilar in considerable ways come together and these discrepancies generate both opportunities and disputes. The impacts of immigration have been experienced in areas ranging from employment, schooling and accommodation all the way through to language, diet and the arts. The collective social, economic, political and cultural connotations of immigration have repeatedly been calculated as a whole and also in their discrete parts.

At one stage, the impacts that have been felt in employment, public services and so on are inclined obliquely to tint the way in which individuals sense the consequences on the society where they live and work. This may possibly be felt by a few more than by others, depending

on whether immigrants are alleged to have brought antagonism or alternatives to local communities:

While the regular fighting which broke out in Liverpool, Glasgow and Manchester many have had social and economic causes, the anti-Catholicism which had characterised post-Reformation Britain, and immigrant Irish reactions towards it, fuelled the violence. (Panayi 4)

At this moment it is imperative to stress what sort of nation has Britain turned into; does multiculturalism improve or smash up its people's lives; and is English national identity a course to political advancement or a flight away from complete belonging? These issues are being recently created in a society looking for new frame works to comprehend itself and the most important forces – postcolonial unsettlement, neo-liberal globalization and dynamics of racism, communalism and immigration – that are coalescing to redesign it. In its last summing up of the state of inter-ethnic relations, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) UK declared:

Britain, despite its status as the fifth largest economy in the world, is still a place of inequality, exclusion and isolation. Segregation – residentially, socially and in the workplace – is growing. Extremism, both political and religious, is on the rise as people become disillusioned and disconnected from each other. Issues of identity have a new prominence in our social landscape and have a profound impact upon race relations in Britain. (16)

More broadly, in the United Kingdom miscellaneous and extremely strong types of racist aggression supply an unvarying cause of anxiety and divergence including anti-Gypsyism, “Islamophobia”, anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism. Notwithstanding noteworthy progress in procedure and measures across numerous establishments, there is a racial predicament where augmented indulgence and substantiation convoys unshakable racism. Sources of inter-ethnic and inter-cultural clashes in the United Kingdom are cultural, political and economic and comprise hostility to the acknowledgment of discrepancy and super-diversity, contested rule of land and property.

The drivers of racist antagonism incorporate “white” antipathy of “black” and minority ethnic families’ skill to access societal housing, covetousness of everyday life and assets and discernment of iniquitous privileged treatment. Strong local family/community set-up imposes resentment; harasses families out and upholds an ambience of terror and coercion. Poverty, desertion and disempowerment and related humiliation, fury and rage are time and again channelled into racist enmity and sadism:

Much of the initial post-War hostility focused upon West

Indian immigrants culminating in the Nottingham and Nottingham Hill riots in 1958 and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962. Anti-Black racism remained during the 1960s and 1970s. In the later decade and into the 1980s it focused upon Black youth as a threat. (Panayi 4)

Homi Bhabha, in his prominent essay, “Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, argues that nationalist’s depictions are unbalanced and brittle constructions, for they cannot generate the sense of national accord to counterfeit a shared national consciousness, owing to the ambivalence of national discourse. They are ambivalent for the reason that nationalism as a “pedagogic discourse” asserts a collective, incessant history which binds past and present as a linear succession of time. However, nationalist discourses are in addition “performative” since they are “repetitious” and “recursive” in the sense that they are open to subtle alterations in the course of time. Nations are created incessantly by national subjects through innovative ideas that modify their society as well:

We are confronted with nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-generation, become a luminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference. (Location 148)

Reactions to issues about national identity might be extremely legalistic, with countless respondents saying they are British purely because they have a British passport. One may possibly deduce this as saying that Britain has been comparatively victorious in making ethnic minorities feel a component of society or that Britain has been unsuccessful to protract an elevated sense of belonging amongst the mainstream white community. Whilst the multicultural plan may perhaps be the right approach to make minorities experience to be part of the wider social order, it pays diminutive or no consideration to white natives, taking their identity and ideals for granted. But it, moreover, specifies that sections of the white population have come to believe that they are ignored and discriminated against and do not think to be a fraction of British society.

Accordingly, the prevalent malfunction of multiculturalism is not that it has failed to generate a sense of belonging amongst minorities but that it has paid too slight attention to how to keep up support among divisions of the white population, who are incredulous about the capability to preserve a marginal ethnic or religious identity while being British and who observe variance over resources with immigrants and ethnic minorities.

Hanif Kureishi does not seek out to redefine Englishness in the novel *Gabriel's Gift*; certainly, he depicts a type of social realism which is no longer an absolutely white society, supporting a dramatic suggestion of a new manner of being British:

It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces. Much thought discussion and self-examination must go into what this "new way of being British" involves and how difficult it might be to attain.
(Kureishi, "Rainbow" 38)

With its background of multiracial and multicultural England, *Gabriel's Gift* enquires the genuineness of Englishness, as well as explores the premise of identity, wherein the white citizens endure alienation and meaninglessness in their lives because of the Commonwealth immigrants, "indeed, Kureishi implies that racism and xenophobia provide a last, shrunken focus of identity for many indigenous Britons, whose traditional culture has been swamped by globalised 'mass' media pap" (Moore 120).

In addition, the class system is also being rendered as having the ability to provoke sentiments of belonging and not belonging, identification and isolation, insertion and segregation, dispensation and discrimination. In the time period of this novel and shaping the surroundings to the central plot, the class struggle both on the macro level of the British society and the micro level of the characters' need of identification and authentic inclusion into the privileged world of art and pop, is an important analogous theme and an added facet concerning identity in *Gabriel's Gift*. In the words of Panayi:

These writers also point to another ways of measuring multicultural Britain in terms of impact, as the country would be inconceivable without migration. Apart from the importance of newcomers in the economy or sport and the development of new religions, for example, migration results in cultural transfer changing numerous aspects of the "British way of life". (5)

This novel is dedicated to the unvarying sense of estrangement, lack of direction, uselessness and coupled with it, the motif of an unending escape. It is an intermittent thematic aspect in Kureishi's works and it seems to be inseparably related to the characters' powerlessness to come to terms with their distressed identities. Kureishi's characters are integrated by emotional and physical disability to stay in one place. There are important incongruities between actual London and the imaginary London of the postcolonials. Salman Rushdie plainly defines this discrepancy in his work *Imaginary Homelands*:

We live in our pictures, our ideas. I mean this literally. We

first construct pictures of the world and then we step inside the frames. We come to equate the picture with the world, so that, in certain circumstances, we will even go to war because we find someone else's picture less pleasing than our own. (380)

Gabriel's Gift was first published in the year 2001. The protagonist of Kureishi's enchanting novel is Gabriel, a fifteen-year-old North London school boy trying to come to terms with a new life, after the stability of his family has been traumatized by the exile of his father, Rex. Kureishi has at all times been somewhat a hip humanist, the breed of writers who is more engrossed in his character's spikes and blotches than in anything so monotonous as flawlessness or even certainty and he brings that to accept here. Kenneth C. Kaleta writes:

Although racism, revisionism, liberalism, political paranoia, and fundamentalism share Kureishi's fictional universe with cross-dressing, gritty language, homoeroticism, urban crime, moral decay, and regionally distinct blow jobs, he roots today's sensitivity to multicultural traditions in a recognition of the contradictions of pluralism ... He respects the humanity of his characters as he accurately presents their qualities and shortcomings. His stories portray a dream born of disillusionment and make social commentary as immediate, inconstant, and disposable ... (225)

Gabriel has a gift of creative flair and imagination, yet he has to face inconveniences and struggles in his life relating to a chain of modern-day issues, such as the futility of existence experienced by his parents, wrecked family, pop music as a source of identity and living in a city of broken dreams and dilemmas like London. Gabriel's confusions are because of his father's absent mindedness and his mother's demands and over protectiveness.

Fending for himself and at the same time providing emotional support to his perplexed parents, Gabriel is required to grow up hastily, wherein he continuously draws upon help from his remembered twin brother, Archie. His neighbour, Harriet supposes that there are three predominantly widespread family crises: divorce, the death of a parent and poverty. These crises intensely affect millions of children in their personal, educational and social maturity. Moore-Gilbert observes:

... London again plays a determining role. It is once more simultaneously a site in which new forms of both individual and community identity can be worked out and a space in

which the dispiriting realities of ‘domestic colonialism’, together with the breakdown of traditional notions of national community, are all too manifest. (113)

Kureishi is trying to compare the two generations of characters, parents and children, where he exchanges the role of every character so that each character corresponds to the other. He reveals Gabriel as the one with profuse endowment and ingenuity and has extra sense than either of his parents. He is the category who has the compulsion to admit without the authority to amend, even though he has the right estimation. He has to tag on to the condition that the parents ought to be the monarchs of the universe. Consequently he is constrained to accept that his parents are the ultimate authority to choose what is best for him.

Rex has been leading a calm and unpretentious life without regular earnings together with his wife, Christine, Gabriel’s mother who, back in the fine old days, designed fashionable clothes for different rock stars. Rex played guitar in the ‘70s with rock idol, Lester Jones, until he knocked down from his vertiginous platform heels and fractured his ankle. Nowadays, he festers in a filthy room, while Christine waitresses and intertwines with an arrogant young artist, George:

Kureishi writes of the seventies having lived – and thought – through them. In his novel anticipation fills the air – sometimes holding promise, sometimes full of anxiety. A brooding sense of melancholy and nostalgia, too, underlies Kureishi’s fictional setting. As to how and why this is the case, it is so because Kureishi and his readers know what his characters don’t: they know that the novel is gliding toward Thatcherism; that punk music would fade fast. (Kaleta 81)

Gabriel’s twin Archie died while still little, and in numerous habits the family of three survive and think according to the unwritten rules of the late 1960s and 70s, promoting universal self-determination and smoking the sporadic joint. When Christine has had enough of Rex and his sluggish, good-for-nothing behaviour, she chucks him out of the house and for the first time in decades Rex has to work hard for himself. While Christine herself searches out a position in a bar and appoints a caretaker, Hannah from some Eastern European country to look after Gabriel, Rex, left to his own plans, ends up in a dilapidated flat a few blocks away from his previous abode; but even there he faces obscurity paying the rent. Rex loves Gabriel but, after years of being an unfortunate musician, is just beginning to feel discomfited and embarrassed that he cannot afford for the family financially:

... in *Gabriel’s Gift*, though issues of national identity and immigration are raised by the presence of Hannah, the repulsive family *au pair* ... in her selfishness, treacherous secrecy, repressive stupidity and greed, Hannah seems to embody the

invasive totalitarian Governments who ruled Eastern Europe for most of her life ... Hannah's grotesque appearance, outsized appetite for food, mangled English ... talent for spying makes her an ideal demonizing Eastern European new comers to Britain. In a particularly ugly movement that resonates unpleasantly with earlier depictions of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in Kureishi's fiction, Gabriel threatens to have Hannah deported back.

(Buchanan 93)

Gabriel has to face the reality that his parents' affiliation no longer works out, which truly perturbs his heart because he is extremely close to his father. His father generally converses the whole lot with Gabriel and even if he is only fifteen, his father judges him as a grownup, proficient enough to comprehend an adult's problem. Gabriel senses a huge loss in the absence of his father from the family. It makes him believe that he cannot count on anybody any longer for he only gets the sheltered feeling from his father. Though he has a mother, she is busy manipulating how to make her family live on when there is so much competition for even the menial jobs because of the immigrants, "The city was no longer home to immigrants only from the former colonies, plus a few others: every race was present, living side by side without, most of the time, killing one another" (8). Bradley Buchanan observes about the novel:

The humour here veils anti-immigrant stereotypes: Gabriel's otherwise sympathetic and open-minded father, Rex ... seems inclined to blame his own appetite for drugs on foreign pushers, and calls them 'madmen', predicting that '[t]hey're not going to last into the next century' ... The ethnic diversity that Kureishi once celebrated in his portraits of London has suddenly become grounds for curmudgeonly and xenophobic asides. (94)

An additional test that leads to Gabriel's puzzlement over his nuisances is the demands from his mother over his desire of becoming an artist like his father. As a child who has just lost his father that propped up his dream all the time, he has to deal with the uncertainties inside himself after his mother sets her future prospects for him. His mother does not like Gabriel to develop into an artist professionally for she thinks that being an artist like Rex does not assure an excellent future. It is associated to her experience of an artist husband who ends up as a letdown and has no optimism about his future. As Alamgir Hashmi in his review titled "Hanif Kureishi and the Tradition of the Novel", writes:

Much postwar English fiction has been concerned with the ennui, antics, and struggles of the underclass seeking to find

itself a personal paradise, and contributing to the serio-comic mix in a fairly reasonable if “slow” society, which is willing to accommodate an odd relation but is decidedly unwilling to change itself. (92)

The most formidable enemy Gabriel can face is his parents’ past, principally if that past involves wearing magnificent clothes and hanging out with legendary rock star Lester. Gabriel is not reluctant of his parents’ disinclination to let that go, but he has to get around it for his own self-protection. The charm of Rex and Christine’s past has not escaped Gabriel; he has wrapped it up by osmosis and he admits it to be something corporeal and precious. Unlike his parents, although Gabriel is not a detainee to that past, he takes the bits and pieces of their previous, extraordinary world and uses it to paint his own. But throughout the novel Kureishi demonstrates how Gabriel’s vision of the world has been fashioned or rather deformed by his parents’ throbbing reminiscence, disillusionment and fragmented identity:

As an author, it is Kureishi’s custom, if an unusual one, to observe cosmopolitan experience and to write with an awareness of the multiplicity of his interpretations ... The author not only sees a new society composed of individual characters; he relishes the contradictions of their cosmopolitan milieu ... Kureishi relentlessly criticizes London for its failures ... London is an apt metaphor for new national identity that Kureishi defines. It is both assimilation and separation, genesis and tradition.

(Kaleta 236-39)

One of the other existing questions dealt within the novel is pop music. Kureishi accepts that music is a vital ingredient of his writing as well as of his life. Pop is characterized as emblematic of a cultural rebellion which has helped drastically to democratize and inflate the perspectives of post-war British society. Pop music, in theory at least, endowed with the means towards more liberal and supple conceptions of identities:

As our world has expanded into a global society, so, ironically, the search for identity and individualism by every group or member of this society has become more pressing. Complicating this worldwide phenomenon, continuing gentrification has made some members of urban society grasp more tenaciously at their traditions. Progress has gone hand in hand with decay. Poverty, drug use, violence, and crime are rampant in our modern world ...

Kureishi continues to draw from the events/legends that make up contemporary experience. London has become the fiction's ironic microcosm of a global community, divided and overlapping.

(Kaleta 245)

A reunion with Lester renews Rex's anticipation of becoming a sought-after musician once more, but when Rex and Gabriel meet him at his hotel it shortly turns out that all Lester wants is sneak to Rex's recollection of their days together for his proposed memoir. To Rex's disappointment, he does not even recompense him for it however, on leaving he presents Gabriel with one of his paintings. A brilliant ingenious artist himself, Gabriel is bewildered by this gift, but it soon becomes lucid that both his parents are after the picture to be sold. In order to thwart yet another dispute between his parents, Gabriel clandestinely makes two copies of the painting and hands one copy to each of his parents whereas keeping the original for himself.

Unluckily, each parent separately has the similar idea of presenting the painting to Speedy, an old companion of theirs', who runs a hamburger restaurant bursting with 1970s memorabilia. But prior to the truth about Lester's fake painting is revealed, Gabriel smacks a compact with Speedy, recuperates ownership of the picture in exchange for a painting of Speedy he has to paint himself and demolishes the two copies. At Speedy's restaurant, a chance meeting with film producer Jake Ambler sets off Rex's career. Looking for somebody to give his spoiled teenage son private guitar classes, Jake proposes the job to Rex and in due course, he is training not just one but a number of kids:

Resulting from the acceptance of multiple realities, Kureishi is a contemporary author who gives his stories endings that are both happy and sad. He sees in each ending is a beginning, that success and failure are in constant flux. His characters redefine British national identity, in the context of an evolving world identity. (Kaleta 239)

Considering her ex-partner's transformation, Christine reassesses her resolution to splurge the rest of her life devoid of him and does not mind the end of her relationship with George. At the end of the novel Rex and Christine get married and in the subsequent summer, under Jake's management, Gabriel starts shooting his first film.

It becomes obvious that there are plentiful and different muddles certified to the alienated and disempowered white citizens of the British society. Mental deterioration, low self-respect, awkwardness or identity predicaments are just a few instances of neuroses associated with postcolonial Londoners. One doubts whether distinctive of Kureishi's characters' emotions ranging from depression and lowness of spirits to meek or usual hopelessness, nervous breakdowns and even suicides, bounce from the unchanged cause, namely colonial experience. Not shockingly Kureishi's protagonists are often prone to downheartedness and severe gloom, leading to psychiatric chaos. Apparently isolation, loneliness and prejudice they experience develop into the rationale for the glumness of postcolonials together with white members as well:

... if Kureishi's novels are hostile to cultural nationalism, whether this is expressed from within the majority or minority ethnicities, they are – perhaps more surprisingly, given each text's depiction of the grim realities of racism in contemporary England – also critical of a variety of metropolitan anti-racism. (Moore 137)

One may figure out that the postcolonial protagonists who, in addition, happen to be artists are prone to bear the burden of representation but furthermore to react very emotionally to exterior circumstances. Another ground for the profound wretchedness of characters repeatedly stated by Kureishi is problematic love, discontented marriages, betrayal or disability to place the feelings effectively. The most evident materialization of such inconveniences is plentiful divorces and inadvertent but palpable bereavement of love present in almost all Kureishi's works. It is a precursor of the century but for the postcolonials it means contravention with institution and inflowing into the world of some degree of regulations:

Kureishi brings the conflict between modernism, fundamentalism, and consumerism boldly to the center and proclaims that immigrant assimilation in the west and immigrant traditions from the east constitute an important English issue. (Kaleta 160)

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