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Queer National Romance and Diasporic Identity: An Analysis of Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Mikko Makela's *A Moment in the Reeds*

Abstract

One of the greatest concerns of today's world is working out a solution to the problem of identity. We can witness the growing conflicts between communities, religion, culture and ethnicity in the name of autochthonous identity. In such a conflict-ridden world the identity of the diasporic community forces us to rethink the monolithic concept of 'self' and identity. The idea of home, sexuality and marriage are reconsidered giving it a new definition. In the same manner, the idea of love and romance is subverted from the traditional view. The two films under consideration – *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Moment in the Reeds*, discuss the problem of identity, problems of adjustments and the problem of sexual identity in a homophobic world. It also shows how the traditional view of romance is subverted by the growing national roman between the native and the immigrants, which again is queered by the homosexual romance between an immigrant and a native.

The final part of the paper tries to indicate how the homosexual couples have to negotiate their presence in a heteronormative patriarchal society.

“Sexual topics of any kind are avoided in a polite conversation in India, and any talk concerning homosexuality is taboo”.

(Devi, *The World of Homosexuals* “Preface”)

The discourse of diaspora and identity revolve around the concepts of roots, routes, re-routing and re-rooting which carry a sense of nostalgia, trauma and a sense of loss. Eminent diasporic critic and scholar, Vijay Mishra opines, “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (*The Literature of Indian Diaspora* 1). Mishra’s observation points towards different experiences among people belonging to different national diasporas. For example, the experience of the indentured labourers who were transported from India to Surinam, Fiji and the Caribbean is different from the experience of the Chinese labourers who has immigrated to the U.S.A and the UK. Or for that matter the experience of a newly married girl who shifts to a new country is different from the experience of someone born to an immigrant family. For example, the protagonist Nazneen of Monica Ali’s novel, *Brick Lane*, struggles to have a voice of her own inside and outside her house. She resists the patriarchal authority by not joining her husband, Chanu to Bangladesh. She finds her freedom in the crooked lanes of the eponymous street the Brick Lane in the East End of London. The male protagonist, Karim Amir of *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi, on the other hand, struggles to carve out a place in the mainstream white society. There is another group of people in the diaspora who struggle for their identity in their new homeland. They are the LGBTQ community who struggle for their acceptance in their homes as well as in their homelands. The problem of identity of these people becomes acute as they are not only marginalised because of their race and gender, but they are also marginalised because of their sexuality.

This paper analyses this aspect of the struggle of these people in their new homeland – the problem of marginalised homosexual identity in a heteropatriarchal racist society and how

their presence queers the heterosexual national romance. To carry out my study, I have chosen two films on homosexual relationships and the issues of identity, root and route. The films under consideration are *My beautiful Laundrette* (1986) by Hanif Kureishi and *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017) by Mikko Makela. These two films are made in a gap of thirty-one years, but they raise the same issue of homophobia, heteronormativity, immigration, race and refugee crises. Both are London-based diasporic writers and filmmakers. Makela has immigrated to Britain from Finland, whereas Kureishi is born to a Pakistani father and an English mother in the suburb of Bromley. Despite dealing with the same issues, the reception of the two films is different. When *My Beautiful Laundrette* was released, there were huge protests among the Muslim communities in Britain followed by countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. However, the release of *A Moment in the Reeds* didn't attract such public protests which mark a change in thought in Finland and Britain too. In these two films, the homosexual couples queer the national romance between people of two opposing nations or races.

To begin, an understanding of national romance will be worthwhile. The national romance presents a romance between characters that belong to rival classes, nations or races. They symbolise the nation and their crises through star-crossed lovers. It is a literary genre which is built on an intimate, mutually constructive relationship between modern heterosexuality and patriotism. Alexandra Barron describes it as a “literary genre in which star-crossed lovers from opposing nations – usually an imperial power and its colony – marry, healing the conflict between their respective communities.... that found new life in queer post colonial fiction and films in late twentieth century” (“Fantasies of Union: Queering the national Romance in *My Beautiful Laundrette*”). For example, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), *Borstal Boy* (1958), *Veer Zaara* (2004), to name a few deal with the idea of national romance. These romances are queered by the homosexual romance between two men or boys and two women

or girls. For example, *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), *Tangerine* (2015), to name a few.

The main concern of these two films under consideration is the longing for a home, a better place somewhere else. In the globalised multicultural society, the concept of 'home' bears a problematic description, it is a space which becomes a centre of exit. Thus, the generic understanding of root, as autochthonous is challenged and is redefined as a point of exit in a multicultural world. As Homi K. Bhabha, opines that "Home may not be where the heart is, nor even the hearth... Home may be a mode of living made into metaphor of survival" (*Location of Culture*, 141). In the film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the protagonist Omar Ali leaves his home in order to work and establish himself as a businessman. He joins his uncle, Nasser Ali's business as a car washer, and later promoted as accountant. By dint of his hard work he manages to earn his uncle's permission to run a dilapidated laundrette on his own. In case of Tareq in *A Moment in the Reeds*, he has immigrated to Finland from the war-torn Syria as an asylum-seeker in search of a better place and a better future. He works as a daily waged mason, though by education he is an architect. Both of them are gays and prefer to remain in the closet for fear of losing their career prospects on account of their sexuality. For the diasporic immigrants, being a homosexual makes it all the more difficult in carving out a space for themselves in the new homeland where they are always cornered as outsiders. The ideal family values followed in a heteropatriarchy is that the man is the head of the family, the bread earner, who is in full control of the family. Nasser, for example, runs business and earns for his family, while his illiterate wife, Bilquis is rendered to the four wall of the house. There is no space for the social-deviants like the homosexuals, delinquents, and the minority races. As Radhika Mohanram observes that the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* is built on the exploration of the "relation between forms of sexuality and formation of the national subject" (qtd. in S. Thomas 37). Omar and Johnny's relationship contests the heteropatriarchal

constructs of a strong pure nation where minorities like homosexuals, ex-colonials and women are considered as social aberrants that weaken the foundations of a nation. Mohanram elaborates this by citing examples of German nationalism which believes and promotes heterosexuality as a symbol of a strong nation, while homosexuality as a symbol of aberrance and abjection, just like the racial minorities that threaten the ideals of national/racial purity (37). Omar is often made a butt of laughter for his unmanly attributes by his father and his uncle. His father, Hussain Ali, doubts his sexuality because of his non-involvement with any woman, and also because of his engagement with the household chores which makes the latter ask “[T]ry and fix him with a nice girl. I’m not sure if his penis is in full working order” (*My Beautiful Laundrette* 7). For Hussain and his brother, Nasser Ali, manliness is defined by the physical attributes and affairs with women. So, when Omar first visits his uncle’s party at the latter’s posh flat, Nasser introduces Omar to his cronies and asks one of them to “Make him a man first” (*My Beautiful Laundrette* 21). For them the men take care of the businesses and women are meant to take care of the household. Such gender roles marginalise women inside their own homes as one can witness that in Nasser’s house where men and women have separate rooms. Even Nasser’s decision of handing over his entire business to Omar, and not to his educated daughter, Tania is a distinct example of such gender performativity. And later in the film when Nasser has an inkling of Omar’s sexuality, he tries to force the latter to marry his daughter, Tania and asks “Your penis works, doesn’t it?” (*My Beautiful Laundrette* 58). Thus, though Omar is with his own people, he is relegated outside their space as he is yet to qualify the parameters set by the heterosexual patriarch of the family. In such a heteronormative patriarchal space, Omar’s sexuality is forced inside the closet for fear of exclusion from his family which he doesn’t want to lose as he wants to be a part of the family and the family business.

In case of Leevi, in *Moment in the Reeds*, he fights his father's homophobia and leaves Finland to pursue his graduation in Paris. To him Paris is home where he is accepted and free to be who he is. When he goes to Finland on a break, his father engages him in renovating their old house in order to sell it off. His father wants Leevi to join the compulsory military service and enquires about it. He wants him to finish his studies soon and return to Finland. And when he comes to learn about Leevi's topic for his thesis is on the comparative study of two poets – one Finnish, Kaarlo Sarkia and other French, Arthur Rimbaud, his father is distraught. So like Omar, Leevi has to prove his masculinity to his father and the people in his village by being manlier and act manly like joining the military service, efficient in wood works, maintaining affairs with girls. As a child his father tried to teach him to catch fish, but failed as the latter was least interested. Even asking Leevi to help him renovate the house is to engage him in manly works, which to him is much better than reading poetry and writing about gay poets and their perspective of love. He even states that to understand love, why must Leevi read gay writers like Sarkia instead of having an affair with a woman. That way he can understand love better. So, Leevi has to fight his own people at home to be who he is. The comfort of warmth and acceptance as expected in a home where one is born is absent. In such a system characters like Leevi, Omar, Johnny, Tareq, Tania, and Leevi's mother must abide by the rules set by the heteronormative patriarch or they do not have any place in such a system. Thus, Leevi leaves Finland, his home to a better home elsewhere. He chooses to settle in Paris to be free, and be who he is without being a victim of homophobia. However, his citizenship as a Parisian is uncertain for he has to complete his graduation to be eligible for citizenship. He hopes, though, of settling in Paris, a route to his new home.

In case of Tareq, in the film (*A Moment of the Reeds*), he cannot disclose his sexuality in front of his family members and his friends in Syria. To add to his predicament the political situation in Syria forces him like many of his countrymen to flee his country to begin a life

anew in Finland. He finds Finland as peaceful and a free country compared to his homeland. However, like any immigrant he has to struggle in the new homeland in order to fit in. First, he doesn't speak Finnish, and therefore loses out work opportunities. Though a graduate in Architecture, he works as a menial labourer in Finland and that is how Leevi's father hires him to renovate the house. In the new homeland, he adjusts with the new life, without any acquaintances and without his knowledge of Finnish. He knows well that in the new country he wouldn't land the kind of job he is trained for because of race and his situation. Every moment he faces racism and abuse. When Leevi's father finds out that Leevi and Tareq were spending more time together without working on the renovation, he chides Tareq and asks him to return to Syria and also questions his credibility as an Architect.

At home in Syria, Tareq relates to Leevi, they do not talk about homosexuality in the open, it is a taboo. He has to go to some other town to meet his online dating partner, away from the view of his relatives and friends. But in Finland he feels free, free from the ravages of war and free from homophobia. At Finland, nobody knows him and he doesn't know anybody. For Tareq, his emotions take a back seat when it comes to his survival in the new home. He focuses on his work to earn enough to live a secured and comfortable life in the new country. He leaves behind his relatives at Syria and for which he is often taunted by his mother for having left them in the war-ravaged country. He wants to forget the trauma of war, death and injury. It is very interesting to note that for both the lovers, home is not the place where they are born. For them home is where they have chosen to settle down like for Leevi it's Paris and for Tareq it's Finland.

Another important issue that both the films raise is the validity of marriage as the buttress of a perfect society. In the film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Nasser's marriage to Bilquis seems more like a sham. Their marriage is more of an arrangement than a relationship based on love and care. If the young homosexuals were cornered in the social structure, the

female characters in these two works are also manacled within the four walls of their homes. In the film, *My Beautiful Laundrette* Bilquis, Nasser's wife, is seen moving about the house, and never seen outside the house. Even in the social gatherings Nasser is accompanied by his mistress Rachel and not by his wife. She is illiterate and doesn't know English which stands on her way in assimilating with the new culture in Britain. As she is unable to fit in the neo-meritocratic society that her husband belong, she builds her own space within her home where she is closer to her roots in Pakistan. In the same line, Rachel, Nasser's mistress is nothing more than an arm-candy for him. She is beautiful, smart and mingles well with the male business partners of Nasser. Even though Nasser loves her, he cannot marry her due to the social obligations he has as a married man. In the film, *Moment in the Reeds*, Leevi's mother is referred in absentia by her husband as a bohemian who cared less for her family and child. But for Leevi, she was a free-spirited woman who loved art and was a great inspiration to him. It was this difference in their approaches to life that led to their separation, and later she dies in an accident. Though an absent character, Leevi's mother's influence is huge on Leevi who also loves art and questions the norms of a heteronormative patriarchy.

In the heterosexual world the homosexual couple has to renegotiate their presence either by silence or by taking the risk of social alienation. As Omar's relationship with Johnny doesn't have a place in the heterosexual patriarchal world of his family, they choose to remain in the closet with Omar's conflicting views on his own sexuality. They create their own space in the refurbished laundrette, a third space which stands parallel to the heterosexual patriarchal space of Nasser's house, challenging its phallogocentric norm. The laundrette is a symbol of queerness that stands against the homogenous idea of British identity as propounded by the Tory government in the 1980s. The film ends with Omar and Johnny in the laundrette washing the dirt and blood after the scuffle with the neo-fascists. This bath-tub scene quite importantly signifies the washing of the past hurt, hatred and dirt

around them. It is a route to a new beginning. In the same line, the lovers Leevi and Tareq in *Moment in the Reeds*, explore their love in the secluded reeds where they are away from the prying eyes of moral policing. They discover each other's past and their hopes for their future. But the film ends in separation of the lovers after Leevi's father repudiates them for having not completed the work assigned to them. Tareq in particular is reprimanded and is told to return to Syria. Failing to accept the hurt and humiliation, Tareq leaves as he doesn't want to change the view regarding Finland as a racist and a homophobic country. He wants to see it as an accommodative country, where immigrants and asylum seekers are sheltered, where there is love and compassion, unlike his homeland, Syria, ravaged by war and human rights violation.

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