

Something to Tell You: Spaces for Dialogue in Postcolonial London

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Abstract

*This paper discusses Hanif Kureishi's latest novel, *Something to Tell You* (Kureishi 2008), arguing that in it London is represented as a space for encounter between different inter-cultural identities. Among these identities, the interactions between white and British Muslim characters will be our main focus. Utilizing theories of postcolonial London by such scholars as John McLeod (McLeod 2004) and Sukhdev Sandhu (Sandhu 2003), and theories of bodily encounter by thinkers such as Sara Ahmed, we suggest that in this novel London appears as a locus where various bodies come together to explore their hyphenated identities. We contend that spaces where sexual acts take place transmute into spaces for dialogue. Despite the British Asian characters' attempts to distance themselves from London, by traveling to other cities such as Karachi, New York and Bombay, they always return to London as "home." We will focus in particular on the novel's ending, set in Britain just after the 7/7 terrorist attacks on the public transportation network. In this post-7/7 world, the Islamic religion becomes a central marker of identity for Kureishi's previously secular characters. London as a space becomes increasingly compartmentalized and possibilities for dialogue are limited.*

Something to Tell You, Kureishi's flawed but enjoyable fifth novel, centers around the attempts of the mixed-race character Jamal to prevent the coming to light of a violent act of his youth. The novel flashes back to the "mid-1970s" (Kureishi 2008: 31) to recount Jamal's relationship with Ajita, a wealthy Indian student, who

eventually confesses to her sexual abuse at the hands of her father. So angered is Jamal by her story that he enlists the help of two friends, Wolf and Valentin, and they resolve to rough up the father. Things do not go according to plan, however, as Ajita's father assumes the three are trade union activists angry at his draconian behavior as a factory boss, and he dies of a heart attack in the middle of the altercation. Wolf and Valentin flee to France, while Ajita, distraught about her father's death, relocates to Bombay; and Jamal spends the next few decades living in fear of his "murder" being exposed. Flash forward to the early 2000s, and Jamal is now a successful psychoanalyst and writer with a pre-teenage son, Rafi, from a failed marriage.

An important sub-plot is summarized in Jamal's statement: "My older sister, Miriam, and my best friend, Henry, have conceived a passion for each other" (Kureishi 2008: 4). This unlikely couple consists of the defiantly working-class, new-agey, tattooed mother of countless children, Miriam, and Henry, a renowned theatre and film director. We watch the couple engage in some typically Kureishian sexual play, before discovering the charms of London's fetish clubs, such as the Kama Sutra club, known as the "Caramel Sootie." At a Rolling Stones backstage party attended by Jamal, Miriam and Henry, Jamal is accosted by Ajita's brother Mustaq (now a famous pop musician) who recognizes a watch that he stole from his father at the time of the attack. Mustaq invites Jamal to a hedonistic weekend party at his extravagant country pile, which is attended by such intertextual celebrities as the actor Karim Amir and punk idol Charlie Hero (both characters from Kureishi's first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*), and the Muslim peer Lord Omar Ali (from Kureishi's 1985 film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*). Here Mustaq has arranged for Jamal to meet his sister, Ajita, for the first time since the murder. To put the siblings off the scent, Jamal explains that he acquired their father's watch when the latter sexually abused him in the 1970s. This justification passes muster, and Ajita and he re-embark upon an emotional but this time curiously asexual relationship. Their growing closeness is ruptured when Wolf reappears on the scene. He tries to blackmail Jamal about

the part he played in Ajita's father's murder, claiming that the incident ruined both his and Valentin's lives (the latter has committed suicide). He also becomes Ajita's lover, much to Jamal's jealousy, and is employed as a bouncer and some time drug-dealer at Jamal's regular haunt, the strip pub The Cross Keys. It is only after Wolf's convenient death, also of a heart attack, that Jamal admits to the remarkably forgiving Ajita what happened to her father. The novel concludes in shell-shocked post-7/7 London where Jamal rather solipsistically considers his future:

I am no longer young, and not yet old. I have reached the age of wondering how I will live, and what I will do, with my remaining time and desire. I know at least that I need to work, that I want to read and think and write, and to eat and talk with friends and colleagues. (Kureishi 2008: 345)

This paper addresses three over-arching issues from Hanif Kureishi's novel. Firstly, we discuss Kureishi's male protagonist, Jamal's, loving relationship with the Indian girl Ajita as compared to his psychological identification with the white, non-Muslim women, Josephine, Karen and the Goddess. We discuss his "encounters" with these women through the lens of Sara Ahmed's theories of bodily encounters. Secondly, we discuss the strange or failed relationships between inter-cultural couples in the novel as their desire to create a space for dialogue with other cultures. Finally, we suggest that London, despite being a place with which these characters try to identify, confounds their desire to "fit in" after they return from Karachi, Bombay, New York, Paris and Venice, particularly after 7/7.

As a teenager, Jamal falls for his course-mate Ajita whose family had moved into his neighborhood after migrating from Uganda. Kureishi, however, keeps Ajita's religious identity ambiguously secret by introducing her as "an Indian" (Kureishi 2008: 34) who has a house with "ethnic fittings" (Kureishi 2008: 35). Her name does not indicate whether she belongs to a Hindu or a Muslim family and her father's name is kept secret. The sole indication that she might be a Muslim is

her brother's name being Mustaq. Only towards the end of the novel does Kureishi reveal Ajita's Muslim identity and, in fact, after 7/7 she seems to be trying to reorient herself in London by acquiring knowledge of the Qur'an and wearing the *burqa*. Arguably, Jamal's relationship with Ajita represents his struggle to cling to his subcontinental origins and it affects his emotional attachment with the city of London. The incident of 7/7 results in a dual realization for Jamal: firstly, the Indian girl that he had always loved has left him for good by transforming into a staunch Muslim and, secondly, despite being born and brought up in and around London, his skin color prevents him from blending into its culture. Jamal describes how people regard his dark skin nervously on Underground trains after the July bombings, especially when he reaches in his rucksack to take out a book; he also briefly refers to the killing on the Underground of the innocent Jean-Charles de Menezes (Kureishi 2008: 315) (see Vaughan-Williams). Until 7/7 Jamal, as a British-Pakistani, has tried to create space for himself in British society, but now these realizations suggest that he can only do so by expunging his hyphenated identity.

Ajita and Jamal's relationship, more than their sexual experience, turns into a means of communication in private locations where they are away from the mixed influences of all the cultures residing within London. For instance, their first sexual encounter is in the woods (Kureishi 2008: 39), they occasionally also meet in the privacy of Ajita's back garden. Their final reunion after prolonged separation following Ajita's father's murder takes place in Mustaq's country farmhouse. Only by physically or metaphorically distancing themselves from the overall impact of London, do they manage to focus on their personal lives and create a clandestine intimacy. Kureishi presents the city of London as Ajita and Jamal's favorite space in which they have shared and buried many secrets and engaged in a psychological dialogue with its inter-cultural and white community. The psychological dialogues are symbolized through Jamal's profession as a psychoanalyst who has access to the minds and bodies of so many Londoners.

Apart from Ajita, the only other Asian woman who temporarily enters Jamal's life is Najma, the female cousin that he meets during his brief trip to Pakistan. His encounter with Najma figures as Jamal's experiment in understanding a woman belonging to the Muslim society of Pakistan. Jamal describes "the broad sensuality" of Pakistani culture, with its homoerotic body language (see Schmidke), and remembers "many of my favourite writers had gone to Muslim countries to get laid" (Kureishi 2008: 134). His rejection of Najma is mostly due to the fact that she wants to use him as her passport to *Inglesstan* (Britain) if she manages to get him to marry her (Kureishi 2008: 136). In contrast, the white women in Britain with whom he associates are all independent, confident and working women who do not rely on a man like him for happiness. He says of one girlfriend, "I asked for no power over Karen; her life and body were her own" (Kureishi 2008: 173).

Ajita's return to Bombay after the murder shatters Jamal's dream of remaining close to his Indian/Pakistani origins. At this point, Jamal's identity concerns shift from his Asian origins towards his efforts to identify himself with white women. He marries a white British woman called Josephine and from then on Jamal transforms himself into "Jammie" (Kureishi 2008: 242). Josephine's body, during her married life, remains in perpetual state of illness which, despite her love for Jamal, symbolizes her failing relationship with someone who is culturally distant from her. The divorced Josephine introduced by Kureishi at the beginning of the novel doesn't seem to have any medical problems after leaving her British-Pakistani husband (Kureishi 2008: 13). Jamal, however, is unable to get over what he describes as his obsession with her (Kureishi 2008: 241). His experiences with Josephine suggest the sexual cachet he has as an exotic Other:

she liked sex in front of a mirror, with one leg up on a chair; little of me would be visible, just my dark hands moving over her fair skin as she watched herself.
(Kureishi 2008: 276)

This may be read as an instance of “[neo]-colonial desire” (Young)¹, as Josephine narcissistically gazes at her own body being touched by the almost-erased “dark hands.”

At various other occasions in the novel, Jamal tries to camouflage the color of his skin and immerse himself in the white society that surrounds him:

When I was with my grandfather I more or less passed for a white. Sometimes people asked if I were “Mediterranean”; otherwise, there were few Asian people where we lived. 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 are 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. (Kureishi 2008: 36 – 37)

As well as discussing his attempts at “passing” (see Larsen 1929; Ahmed 2000 125–33), this quotation also indicates changing attitudes towards Muslims in Britain, tracing shifting monikers, from “blacks” to “Asians” and now “Muslims” (see Modood 2005: 3–7). Elsewhere, Kureishi explores increasing Islamophobia in a Britain where Muslims’ “fortunes and fears rose and fell according to the daily news” (Kureishi 2008: 14), and where “Mussie,” “ham-head” and “allahAllah-bomb” (Kureishi 2008: 320) are new insults (see also Runnymede Trust 1997).

Apart from Josephine, he also has a relationship with Karen Pearl, “the TV Bitch” (Kureishi 2008: 171), who becomes pregnant with his child but has to abort it due to Jamal’s disapproval. Despite being comfortable with his relationship with Karen, this relationship

1 Colonial desire is also indicated in the exoticized name of the fetish club “The Kama Sutra.”

lacks “passion” (Kureishi 2008: 173). It is merely based on the fact that she is a prominent media figure and he enjoys accompanying her to various fashionable restaurants, clubs and shopping malls. Despite having a legal marriage with Josephine and an affair with Karen, Jamal also fulfils his urgent desire to have sex with a prostitute nicknamed the Goddess who “would offer her body but not the intimacy of her name to anyone” (Kureishi 2008: 270).

For Jamal, associating with the bodies of white women turns into a way of developing intimacy with white society, sneaking into its skin and maintaining a dialogue with it. His sexual adventures with white women, in addition to helping him overcome loneliness, also represent his efforts to avoid the realization that, despite having a British passport, he remains a “Paki, wog, curry-face” (Kureishi 2008: 320) in Britain. In order to resist these labels his dialogue with the white society develops on the basis of relationships. For him, the bodily space of these women represents the social space of London (Ahmed 2000: 15). While he belongs to the “other” and “strange” culture which has stereotypically been associated with the immigrant and refugee community in Britain, it is also this “otherness” which makes him attractive to white women (Ahmed 2000: 12). As Sara Ahmed suggests, this otherness can also tag him as a “stranger” in British society² (Ahmed 2000: 37). Ahmed argues that strangers are those that are already recognized through techniques of differentiating between the familiar and the strange in discourses such as that produced by the British crime prevention group, Neighbourhood Watch. Jamal is most of the time on the outside observing other bodies; for instance, at the party in Mustaq’s farm house, Jamal observes “Those vile bodies [...] cost a fortune to maintain and were

2 Indeed, Kureishi himself recognizes the figuring of the racial or religious Other as a “stranger” in his collection of essays, *The Word and the Bomb*:

In the post-war period, race—and now religion—have become subjects around which we discuss what is most important to us as individuals and as a society, and what scares us about others. Race is a reason to think about free speech and “hate” speech; about integration, or what we have to be in order for society to work, and about the notion of the “stranger” (Kureishi, 2005: 3 – 4).

made to be exhibited.” (Kureishi 2008: 198), while he depicts himself “falling into a pit of bodies” (Kureishi 2008: 208–209). However, for the Londoners who visit Mustaq’s house, or at the social gatherings at Henry’s ex-wife Valerie’s house, Jamal’s presence is non-existent until he emphasizes his profession or publications.

Just as Jamal tries to identify with white women as representatives of white society, various males and females through intercultural relationships indicate their desire to initiate a dialogue and associate themselves with the “other” culture. For instance, even after separating from her Pakistani husband, Jamal’s mother remains a passionate admirer and collector of Eastern art and antiques (Kureishi 2008: 51). Her husband, who has returned to his home country, hankers for corned beef which is smuggled into Karachi by Jamal and his sister on their visit to Pakistan (Kureishi 2008: 126 – 127). Similarly, Jamal’s sister Miriam, who is sometimes regarded as being “Half-Indian, half-idiot” (Kureishi 2008: 15), like her brother is in a constant state of dialogue with white society. She conducts this dialogue either by physically fighting back (for example, she rushes into the street to confront associates of the political Right [Kureishi 2008: 15]), or by liaising with white men and then leaving them. Jamal writes of Miriam:

Long before we got to Pakistan, like a lot of other “ethnics” 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, which was spiritual, even Sufi. To prepare for the trip, she’d joined a group of whirling dervishes in Notting Hill. When she demonstrated the “whirling” to me, at Heathrow, it was pretty gentle, a tea-dance version. Still, we’d see just how spiritual the place was. So far we’d had a gun at our heads (Kureishi, 2008: p. 127).

This passage neatly encapsulates Miriam’s dual identity as a British Muslim. Her romanticized view of Pakistani spirituality is refracted

through British culture (the “tea-dance” whirling in Notting Hill), and is bathetically juxtaposed with the reality of deprivation and violence she experiences in Karachi.

Most of Kureishi’s characters are immigrants like Wolf, Ajita, Mustaq and Jamal, and for them London is a space where they can move about and communicate easily as compared to any other place. As John McLeod has written:

“postcolonial London” does not factually denote a given place or mark a stable location on a map. It emerges at the intersection of the concrete and the noumenal, between the material conditions of metropolitan life and the imaginative representations made of it. (McLeod 2004: 7)

London offers Jamal (like *The Buddha of Suburbia*’s Karim) “new kinds of community and ways of living” (Moore-Gilbert 2001: 125). The freedom of choice, expression, and encounters that they experience in London can never be imagined in Karachi for Jamal or Miriam, in Bombay for Ajita and in Germany and Syria for Wolf. All of them therefore return to London considering it as their “home” and settling there. What appeals to them about London is its multiculturalism. From the start of the novel we see its polyvocality, with its eastern European community (Kureishi 2008: 9), “young and old, black, Indian, Chinese” strippers (Kureishi 2008: 244), African club toilet attendants (Kureishi 2008: 297), and so on. Jamal’s friend Henry is described as a *flâneur*, walking the streets of London “like it was a village,” and learning new languages, so that he can communicate with recent arrivals to the city (9). We are introduced to many specific localities within the capital, such as Baron’s Court Road where Jamal lives in a flat with “lefties” (Kureishi 2008: 171); Mustaq’s opulent Soho pad (Kureishi 2008: 157); and Miriam’s home in the outskirts of Middlesex, where binge-drinking teens compete for space with racist British National Party (BNP) activists, and Muslim women hurry through the streets with their heads down (Kureishi 2008: 14). Despite evident Islamophobia in the city, the novel also

celebrates London's status as "one of the great Muslim cities" (Kureishi 2008: 272), which is particularly evident in the following passage:

When I had [...] time, I liked to walk up through Shepherd's Bush market, with its rows of chauffeur-driven cars parked alongside Goldhawk Road Station. Hijabed Middle Eastern women shopped in the market, where you could buy massive bolts of vivid cloth, crocodile-skin shoes, scratchy underwear and jewellery, "snide" CDs and DVDs, parrots and luggage, as well as illuminated 3-D pictures of Mecca and of Jesus. (One time, in the old city in Marrakech, I was asked if I'd seen anything like it before. I could only reply that I'd come all this way only to be reminded of Shepherd's Bush market.)

(Kureishi 2008: 10).

Here Christianity rubs shoulders with Islam, and Morocco, the Middle East and Europe coalesce in the pursuit of commerce.

It is only after the 7/7 incident that the characters realize that it is not the same place which they had always idealized. The dialogue that they had hoped to maintain with each other has ended after the bombing of London. The deaths of anonymous people in these bombings and Jamal's friend and Ajita's newly-found love Wolf's death symbolizes the end of this dialogue. The characters have to relocate their identities in relation to London which transforms into a city with compartmentalized spatial and social boundaries. Us/them binaries become more prominent and their insecurities take over their ambitions. For example towards the end of the novel Ajita realizes:

"But this is what my father predicted. We would be victims, cattle, rounded up. We were never safe here. Now they have found good reason to hate us, to persecute us. I want to know what my people have to go through^{3/4}" (Kureishi 2008: 320).

However, despite Ajita's alarmist predictions, Jamal more calmly observes that after the attacks:

Mosques were not torched, though they were protected by the police; Muslims were not attacked. Nor were there any flags, as there would have been in the US. Being bombed didn't stimulate British patriotism. The city was neither united nor disunited. Londoners were intelligently cynical and were quite aware—they always had been—that Blair's deadly passion for Bush would cost them (Kureishi, 2008: 315).

Notwithstanding this approbatory description of Londoners' stoicism, after 7/7 Jamal leaves behind all the memories of identifying with his Indian self (Ajita) whom he loved for her color and not religion (Kureishi 2008: 320), and returns to his white wife and "mixed" son and his profession as a psychoanalyst in London. He realizes that this is not the London that he had always imagined:

I don't think I've ever stopped seeing London like a small boy. The London I liked was the city of exiles, refugees and immigrants, those for whom the metropolis was extraterrestrial and the English codes unbreakable, people who didn't have a place and didn't know who they were. The city from the point of view of my father. (Kureishi 2008: 40).

This passage is reminiscent of Sara Ahmed's vision of strange[r]ness, but from the other side: the point of view of "exiles, refugees and immigrants" seeing the city as "extraterrestrial." At the end of the novel, there is a sense that, just as working-class culture in London is being eroded ^¾ with authentic pubs being turned into chain bars and places to buy "basil risotto" (Kureishi 2008: 298) ^¾ so too the multicultural city of Jamal's youth is becoming polarized.

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