

Thatcher Dönemi Britanyası'nın Sorunlarının Benim Güzel Çamaşırhanem'e Yansımaları

Reflections of Thatcherite Britain on My Beautiful Laundrette*

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ÖZET

Margaret Thatcher/Demir Leydi Britanya'nın önde gelen politikacılarından/Başbakanlarından biridir ve bu nedenden dolayı ki iktidarda olduğu dönem de onun ismiyle anılmakta ve o dönemin Britanya'sı Thatcher Britanyası olarak anılmaktadır. Thatcher politikaları, özellikle de özelleştirme politikaları çok tartışılmalı da, onun sadece Britanya tarihine değil, ayrıca Britanya edebiyatına da damgasını vurduğu tartışma götürmez bir gerçektir. Hanif Kureishi de eserlerine Thatcher dönemi Britanya'sının sorunlarını yansıtan yazarlardan biridir. Bu bağlamda, makalemizde Thatcher Dönemi Britanyası'nın sorunlarının *Benim Güzel Çamaşırhanem'e* yansımaları incelenecektir. Ayrıca, Thatcher politikalarının anakarakter/Ömer ve diğer göçmen karakterler üzerindeki etkileri de irdelenecektir. Kureishi'nin eserinde Thatcher'in ırkçılığa, kapitalizme ve göç sorununa olan tutumu da anlatılmakta ve bu konular farklı bakış açılarından değerlendirilmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Hanif Kureishi, *Benim Güzel Çamaşırhanem*, Irkçılık, Thatcher politikaları, Göçmenler, Özelleştirme .
Çalışmanın türü: Araştırma

ABSTRACT

Margaret Thatcher/Iron Lady is one of the most remarkable politicians/Prime Ministers in Britain and accordingly gives her name to a decade in Britain known as Thatcherite Britain. Her politics (especially her policies about privatization) is discussed a lot, yet it is inarguable that she makes her mark not only in British history, but also in British literature. Hanif Kureishi is one of the writers, who reflects the problems of Thatcherite Britain into his works of art. Hence, in this paper, reflections of Thatcherite Britain on Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* will closely be studied. Furthermore, the influence of Thatcherite policies on the protagonist/Omar and other immigrants will also be scrutinised with regard to *My Beautiful Laundrette*. In this work, the Thatcherite attitude towards racism, capitalism and immigration is illustrated and evaluated from different perspectives.

Keywords: Hanif Kureishi , *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Racism, Thatcherite policies, Immigrants.

The type of research: Research

Becoming Britain's first female Prime Minister in 1979, Margaret Thatcher is one of the most remarkable politicians/Prime Ministers in Britain and accordingly gives her name to a decade in Britain known as Thatcherite Britain. Her politics is discussed a lot, yet it is inarguable that she makes her mark not only in British history¹, but also in British literature. In Patricia Hodge's *The Falklands Play* (2002) and Lindsay Duncan's *Margaret* (2009), her policies are put under close scrutiny. Hanif Kureishi is also one of the writers who reflects the problems of Thatcherite Britain in his works of art. His screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) is chosen as the best screenplay by New York film critics. In 1990, his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* is honoured with the Whitbread Award for the best first novel. In his works, he usually deals with issues such as racism, nationalism, immigration and sexuality (see Moore-Gilbert *Hanif Kureishi*). Main focus of this paper will be on *My Beautiful Laundrette* and reflections of Thatcherite Britain in it will closely be studied. Furthermore, the influence of Thatcherite policies on the protagonist/Omar and other immigrants will also be scrutinised through the examples from *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

Kureishi's work explores Thatcherite policies and marginalised cultures in Britain, especially in London. The events in the screenplay develop in the Pakistani community of South London in the 1980s and the events are mainly narrated through the relationship between two young boys, namely Omar and

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¹ In 1999 Thatcher was among 18 included in Gallup's List of Widely Admired People of the 20th century, from a poll conducted of Americans. In a 2006 list compiled by *New Statesman*, she was voted 5th in the list of "Heroes of our time". She was also named a "Hero of Freedom" by the libertarian magazine *Reason*. ("35 Heroes of Freedom," *Reason*, December 2003. Retrieved 10 April 2007).

Johnny. The former is a Pakistani, the latter is an English boy and they attend the same school and they are childhood friends. However, later on, Johnny becomes friends with the boys from the National Front, which is a fascist group (“*My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985)”) and whose members are racists and believers of the superiority of the English race. Therefore, they do not hesitate to use violence against the immigrants in Britain.

The Pakistani boy, Omar lives with his father in London. His father, being a leftist journalist, is unable to find a proper job in Thatcherite Britain and eventually becomes an alcohol addict. The exclusion of the socialist people from working life is discussed in the following conversation among the Pakistani characters in the text:

Nasser: ... What chance would the Englishman give a leftist communist Pakistani on newspapers?

Omar: Socialist

Nasser: What chance would the Englishman give a leftist communist socialist?

Zaki: What chance has the racist Englishman given us that we haven't torn from him with our hands? Let's face up to it. (61)

Omar's father, being both a socialist and a Pakistani, is doomed to suffer a lot in Britain due to the racist statements made by Thatcher and her followers. In an interview, Thatcher declares that the number of Pakistani and Commonwealth Britons may double to four million by the end of the century, and adds that "people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture." After this statement, Thatcher is accused of increasing the racist tendencies in Britain (“Margaret Thatcher”).

Thus, the scene mentioned above is significant in illustrating capitalist and racist Thatcherite policies and it is also underlined that in Thatcher's days “among the middle-class, thinking and argument are almost entirely taboo[es]” (*Laundrette* “Introduction” 33) and as a result, there are no proper jobs for a journalist, especially if s/he has opposing socialist views. Thatcher's negative stance against socialism is clearly expressed in one of her speeches made in 1990. She declares that,

Eleven years ago we rescued Britain from the parlous state to which socialism had brought it. Once again Britain stands tall in the councils of Europe and of the world. Over the last decade, we have given power back to the people on an unprecedented scale. We have given back control to people over their own lives and over their livelihoods, over the decisions that matter most to them and their families. We have done it by curbing the monopoly power of trade unions to control, even victimize the individual worker.

(“Margaret Thatcher”)

She believes that socialism does not let people take responsibility for their own lives and prevents the developments of the individuals. For her, not the state, but individuals have the capacity to change their lives. With regard to this, her remarks to the reporter Douglas Keay, for *Woman's Own* magazine on 23 September 1987 shed light on her views on individual and society in Britain. She says,

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand "I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!" or "I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!" "I am homeless, the Government must house me!" and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour and life is a reciprocal business and people have got the entitlements too much in mind without the obligations.... ("No such thing as society")

Similarly, in the screenplay, Uncle Nasser² explains to Omar that everything is possible in Britain, if the person is able to see the opportunities around himself, given by the British administrative system. In Nasser's own words: “In this damn country which we hate and love, you can get anything you want. It's all spread out and available. That's why I believe in England. You just have to know how to squeeze the tits of the system” (*Laundrette* 57). In other words, everything depends on the individual's capacity to realise his/her dreams. Regardless of one's race, class and gender, one can make his/her dreams come true in Britain thanks to the practice of the free-market economy. The following conversation among the

² Nasser is also interested in horse races (*Laundrette* 90), and gets very excited in the betting shop, which shows his desire for having more and more money.

English and Pakistani characters in *My Beautiful Laundrette* is also used to show the ideas of the people, who are the believers of free-market economy and capitalist system, rather than socialism:

Englishman: Maybe Omar's father didn't make chances for himself. Look at you, Salim, five times richer and more powerful than me.

Salim: Five times? Ten, at least.

Englishman: In my country! The only prejudice in England is against the useless.

Salim: It's rather tilted in favour of the useless I would think. The only positive discrimination they have here. (Laundrette 62)

Thus, the statements of Thatcher and these scenes from the screenplay give us a chance to draw a picture of what life is like in Britain in the 1980s. Briefly, housing, unemployment, education and maintenance of the social services are the main problems of Britain in the 1980s. Accordingly, the screenplay starts with the request of Omar's father for a job from his brother Nasser, who is a money-oriented and well-to-do man in London, for his son/Omar. The father says to Nasser that, "[Omar] is on dole like everyone else in England" (*Laundrette* 52). With this statement, readers' attention is attracted to the problem of unemployment in Britain. In many records, it is also stated that "[b]y 1983... unemployment had more than doubled to 3.6 million ("Consumer Price Inflation:1947 to 2004"). Upon his brother's request, Nasser gives a job to his nephew at a garage by saying, "[y]our uncle can't pay you much. But you'll be able to afford a decent shirt and you'll be with your own people. Not in a dole queue. Mrs. Thatcher will be pleased with me" (*Laundrette* 55).

Nasser, as a provider of jobs for many people in service sectors such as the ones in laundrettes and in garages would certainly make Mrs. Thatcher happy since the Thatcher government encourages the growth of the financial and service sectors. In Kureishi's work, Nasser is drawn as an individualistic man, whose type is recommended by Thatcher. He is the ideal type of man for Thatcher as he can give a direction to his life without the state help by being a self-employed man. In addition, he has many houses and provides houses to his tenants. He knows how to earn money and takes all the advantages of living in Britain and British economy.

With regard to her state policies, it is declared that the policy of privatisation has been called "a crucial ingredient of Thatcherism". Accordingly, by the mid 1980s, Thatcher government had sold publicly owned housing units to their tenants ("Margaret Thatcher" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*). As a result of these policies, Nasser is shown to have many tenants after the privatisation of these state houses. Thatcherite policies and Nasser's business principles go hand in hand. Having similar attitudes (with Thatcher) and following free-market principles, Nasser is insulted for being a "[c]ollaborator with the white man!" (91) by a Pakistani student. About these self-employed, well-to-do Pakistani men in the "Introduction" to *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi also expresses that

Those Pakistanis who have worked hard to establish businesses, now vote Tory and give money to the Conservative Party. Their interests are the same as those of middle-class business people everywhere, though they are subject to more jealousy and violence. They have wanted to elevate themselves out of maelstrom and by gaining economic power and the opportunity and dignity in it brings, they have made themselves safe – safer. They have taken advantage of England. (Laundrette 30)

Nasser's utterance of the following words "[...] in my street I am the law! You see, I make wealth, I create money" (*Laundrette* 77) becomes a good example of the above statement.

The power of pen and money is compared in another Pakistani character's/Salim's words. He says, "So many books written and read. Politicians sought [Omar's father] out. Bhutto was his close friend. But we're nothing in England without money" (*Laundrette* 89). Hence, during these times, the ultimate goal for British people is to make money, rather than getting a proper education, just like Omar does in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Instead of going to college, he prefers to run a laundrette.

The juxtaposition of books and money, in this passage, can also be a reference to the financial cuts, made by Thatcher on the public libraries, to increase the national budget. These financial cuts on the budgets of public libraries and higher education later create discontent among the British people.

As illustrated in the screenplay, unemployment is a big problem not only for black people, but also for white people in the 1980s. Therefore, there are many young English citizens who wander all day, doing nothing in the streets but joining youth gangs. Yet, the situation of old English people is not better, either. Most of them have financial problems and their only hope to get out is to play betting games. In the

screenplay, there are a lot of people in the betting shops (*Laundrette* 80), who want to become rich without turning an honest penny. Thus, everyone wants to turn the corner, which is the dream of many English people in the 1980s. Under these socio-economic circumstances, Nasser feels himself very useful to British society. After having employed Johnny, Nasser suggests that he likes helping unemployed people and he wishes he “could do something more to help the other deadbeat children like [Johnny]. They hang about the road like pigeons, making a mess, doing nothing” (85). On the other hand, the scene in the Betting Shop reveals the situation of old Englishmen, who are jobless and on the dole:

And the men are mostly old, in slippers and filthy suits; with bandaged legs and stained shirts and unshaven milk-bottle-white faces and National Health glasses. NASSER looks confident and powerful beside them. He knows them. There's a good sense of camaraderie amongst them (89).

In this scene, there is a reversal of the roles since usually it is the white men who employ, while the black men are the employees. However, in this scene, Nasser is shown in good clothes, whereas old Englishmen are in dirty suits. What is more, they all wear the same kind of National Health glasses, which shows that they do not have enough money to buy their own glasses and they are in need of state help. Perceiving these people as a burden on the national budget, despite the severe criticisms, Thatcher puts also some restrictions on the expenses of National Health Organisation (Erol “Course Notes”). And the same, old looking glasses can be a reference to this cut on the health services.

This is the socio-political atmosphere in Britain and the Pakistanis try to find a way for themselves to survive. In the screenplay, after seeing Omar's curiosity for self-investment and for free-trade, Nasser hands over an unprofitable laundrette to Omar and wants him to turn it into a profitable one. With the same aim in mind - despite class, race and ethnic boundaries between Omar and Johnny - they decide to work together in the laundrette. The conversation below, in the opening day of the laundrette, is illustrative of the encouragement given to the entrepreneurship by Thatcher government:

Nasser: ... And we'll drink to Thatcher and your beautiful laundrette.

Johnny: Do they go together?

Nasser: Like dall and chapatis!

(Laundrette 77)

This laundrette is used functionally by Kureishi to show the way of things in Thatcher's period, especially to show the corruption in every field of life and thus, the problems of Londoners in 1980s. Omar and Johnny begin to sell drugs to find money for the restoration of the place and use this place in order to launder the money. In the screenplay, like Machiavelli, for Omar, the end justifies the means. Hence, he justifies the selling of drugs by arguing that it is necessary for expansion, for enlarging their business. This is expressed in the dialogue below:

Omar: ... You know where to sell this stuff [drugs]. Yes? Don't you?

Johnny: I wouldn't be working for you now if I wanted to go on being a bad boy.

Omar: This means more. Real work. Expansion. We'll re-sell it fast. Tonight.

(Laundrette 73)

Moreover, in the 1980s, Thatcher defends the free-market economy and therefore, during her reign, the gap between the classes becomes wider and wider. Thus, having or not having money gains the utmost importance, since in her reign, money-owners are the decision-makers. Yet, people avoid talking about these issues keeping the English dislike of talking about money in mind. It is considered as a very rude behaviour if somebody talk about money in public or among friends (see *Watching the English*). In reference to this, Kureishi explains that,

The other taboo... is money. As our society has become more divided, the acknowledgement of that division – which is a financial division, a matter of economic power – is out of question. So, money is not discussed. It is taken for granted that you have it: that you have means of obtaining it: that you are reasonably well off and gain status and influence over others because of it. (Laundrette 33)

In the screenplay, Johnny and Omar put lots of effort in order to fit to the norms of the capitalist society. For instance, Johnny works all day in the laundrette³, with all his heart since having the privilege of getting a job brings an order and meaning to his life. Yet, Omar perceives the laundrette just as a stepping-stone for getting richer and doing more profitable things, which may help him to turn the corner.

³ Interestingly enough, the name of the old laundrette is *Churchill* and this name may be chosen intentionally by Kureishi, since Sir Winston Churchill is known as one of Thatcher's political heroes and her predecessor. Then, Omar and Johnny change the name of the laundrette as *Powder* and they open a new page in their life.

And it is in these years, in the 1980s that the concept of turning the corner emerges. In the text, it is shown that Johnny works “full-time” and Omar does not “give [him] time off” (*Laundrette* 88). Day by day, Omar’s desire for being wealthy increases and this is illustrated in the dialogue between Johnny and Omar below:

Omar: Where did you go? You just disappeared!
 Johnny: Drinking, I went. With me old mates. It’s not illegal.
 Omar: Course it is. Laundrettes are a big commitment. Why aren’t you at work?
 Johnny: It’ll be closing time soon. You’ll be locking the place up, and coming to bed.
 Omar: No, it never closes. And one of us has got to be there. That way we begin to make money.
 Johnny: You’re getting greedy.
 Omar: I want big money. I’m not gonna be beat down by this country. When we were at school, you and your lot kicked me all round the place. And what are you doing now? Washing my floor. That’s how I like it. Now get to work. Get to work I said. Or you’re fired!

(92)

In the screenplay, Omar and Johnny are not only partners in business, but they are also domestic partners, that is they are a homosexual couple. Historically speaking, Thatcher is one of few Conservative MPs to support Leo Abse’s Bill to decriminalise male homosexuality (“Margaret Thatcher”). Yet, in the screenplay, Omar and Johnny still do not come out of the closet and have a hidden relationship. They cannot explicitly say that they are gays because the society is not ready yet.

Thatcher’s tolerant attitude towards gays does not mean that she could adopt a tolerant policy towards trade unions as well. On the contrary, she puts some legal restrictions on Trade unions. Moreover, she puts cuts on the budget for higher education. In addition to these, she increases the interest-rates (in order to decrease inflation). Eventually, Thatcher’s policies become the target of many critics. Yet, looking back on 2009, Thatcher says: “I regret nothing,” and insists that she “was right to introduce the poll tax and to close loss-making industries to end the country’s ‘dependency culture’” (*Sunday Times*).

Later on, paradoxically enough, her policies are adopted by the Labour party⁴, as well. Therefore, it is suggested that what mainly differentiates Margaret Thatcher from the previous politicians is that even her opponents adopt her policies. Regarding this, Geoffrey Howe, Lord Howe of Aberavon, expresses that “[Thatcher’s] real triumph was to have transformed not just one party but two, so that when Labour did eventually return, the great bulk of Thatcherism was accepted as irreversible” (“Margaret Thatcher”). For example, Thatcher’s programme of privatising state-owned enterprises has not been reversed and public ownership is encouraged by the successive governments in the following years.

Despite all the criticism both in the political and literary world, after the 1987 general election, Margaret Thatcher manages to become “the longest continuously serving Prime Minister of the United Kingdom” as well as being “the only Prime Minister of the 20th century [Britain] to serve three terms” (“Margaret Thatcher”). In conclusion, it can be suggested that having changed perspectives of people and the way of politics in Britain by introducing privatisation and free-entrepreneurship she becomes one of

⁴ Related to the Labour party politics, Kureishi also points out that

...racism is the Trojan Horse within the labour movement. The Labour Party has failed to show that it is serious about combating racism and serious in representing the black working class. There are few black councillors, few black parliamentary candidates, few blacks on the General Management Committees of constituency Labour Parties, no blacks on the NEC and so on, right through the Labour and trade union movement... I have seen blacks discouraged from joining the Labour Party, and when they have joined, actively discouraged from canvassing in case they discouraged white racists from voting Labour.

The Labour Party wishes to be egalitarian and liberal on the race issue but knows that vast numbers of its voters are neither... The party is afraid... that blacks and black issues are a vote loser... (*Laundrette* 32)

Having acknowledged that many of its supporters are racists, the Labour Party does not give the priority to the race issue:

...the party believe[s] that racism is a sub-issue which has to be subordinate to the class issues of the time: housing, unemployment, education, maintenance of the social services and so on. They believe that winning the elections and representing the mass of the working class in Parliament is more important than giving office or power to blacks. This is the choice it has made. This is the kind of party it is, and insofar as this is true, the Labour Party is a truly representative party, representing inequality and racism. (*Laundrette* 32-33)

As an extension of these policies, as it is shown in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, in Britain, there are many youth gangs, punks who use violence against the minorities and, therefore, the black immigrants get used to violence in their daily life and it becomes a part of their routine.

the most influential politicians in British history and not surprisingly puts her mark on British literature, as well.

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