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Occidental perception of the marginals as stereotypes in Hanif Kureishi's *Gabriel's Gift*

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Abstract---Marginalization is the cornering of individuals to the sidelines of life owing to their inability to belong to the center due to social and economic oppression. This paper aims to analyse the portrayal of various forms of marginalization- economic, gendered and social, as seen in Hanif Kureishi's *Gabriel's Gift* based on the theories of Marginalization and Orientalism.

Keywords---marginalization, orientalism, occident, otherness.

Introduction

Edward Said propounded the theory of Orientalism in which he categorized the world into two-the Orient and the Occident. While the Orient stood for the former colonies of the super powers, the east to be precise, the Occident stood for the super powers themselves, the west, who were colonizers in the past-England, France and the like. Said says that "the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is the relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony"(99). The Occident views the Orient as the 'Other', existing merely to enhance their own existence with no essential worth of their own.

Gabriel's Gift is the fourth authorial venture by Hanif Kureishi and much like its earlier counterparts *The Buddha of Suburbia*, this book too deals with issues of immigration and marginalization, but this time, from the point of view of the Occident. Instead of focusing on the sufferings of the Immigrants and the kind of treatment they meet with from their point of view directly, Kureishi casually narrates a story with shifting points of view- alternating between the third person narrative from the point of view of Gabriel, the fifteen year old narrator of British origin and that of the omniscient narrator Archie, brother of Gabriel.

“Marginalization comprises those processes by which individuals and groups are ignored or relegated to the sidelines of political debate, social negotiation, and economic bargaining—and kept there.”(*Encyclopaedia.com*). Marginalization can be of various forms- Economic, when the economically weaker section are subjugated and discriminated against as in the case of Gabriel’s father, Rex and his family when pit against Lester Jones and Hannah when pitted against Gabriel’s family;Social, when the socially inferior classes i.e. the working classes and middle classes, are treated with lesser respect as compared to the upper classes as is visible in the discriminatory treatment met out to Rex and Hannah;Gendered, when the female or any other gender apart from the male are treated as inferior as in the case of Gabriel’s mother, Hannah,Lester and Speedy; Lastly, racial marginalization where the people are discriminated against on the grounds of their race as is visible in the differential way in which Hannah is looked at by the White British male.

Edward Said, the father of Orientalism who brought to the fore the gaze of the occident, has claimed that “culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses, and along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture comes into forceful play”(237). Gabriel and his parents, Rex and Christine, belong to the fringes of the society in terms of financial stability. The failure faced by Gabriel’s father in his musical career has led him to take up a job in teaching that he does not love. Christine, fed up by his ways, throws him out of their house and takes the reigns of the household in her hands by choosing to work as a waitress. Their economic marginalization leads them to choose jobs they do not like. Further, Rex’s choice of stay after leaving his home, is highly pathetic. With a room so unorganized as to render it impossible to call it one belonging to a respectable person the loud neighbors who showed no element of etiquette or public decency, can be along with Rex were well categorized as the economically marginalized who in the Centre would not be willing to interact with. Rex’s attitude towards Lester is that of envy, presenting an obvious conflict of class and this conflict comes into play because of their differential economic standings in life. Hannah, being the maid of the economically marginalized family in England, is further marginalized in her being described as someone “To her, what people threw away would be a banquet.” (Kureishi 10).

Lester, with his successfully gifted musical career, is described as “the force at the centre of the world which made precious and important things happen” (Kureishi 44)The word ‘centre’, here, is attributed to Lester not just because he is gifted as Rex too is described as gifted but because his gift, due to his superior social status owing to his financial standing, gains more importance than that of Rex, who, with his failed musical career and lack of a strong economic background is ignored as irrelevant by the society. Gabriel and his family have been described from the beginning as having to work very hard to make their ends meet. However, despite their great financial difficulty, they could afford to hire a maid, Hannah.

Hannah, having immigrated from Eastern Europe, is in need of learning English to find new job opportunities. Although not treated badly by the family, Hannah is

definitely looked at as an outsider, someone who eats a lot and is consequently, an outsider who does not quite fit in to the social set up of London: "Hannah, whose only qualification with children was the possibility that she might once have been a child herself, at least knew how to eat." (Kureishi 9).

Rex and Christine are both equally responsible for raising their kids but it is found that it is ultimately Christine who has to sacrifice her dreams of living a peaceful middle class life to fulfil her children's dreams while Rex is given the provision to make choices for himself. Hannah is subject to multiple marginalization - on the grounds of race, and gender, economy and social status. Gabriel teases Hannah for her eating habits not just because she is socially inferior to him but also because she is a woman. Despite being substantially older than Gabriel and having been employed to look after him, Gabriel finds it well within his rights to joke with her and deny her the right of the respect her position deserves. Lester is a pop star who follows gender fluidity and does not view gender as something that is fixed: "Like most pop heroes, Lester contained the essential ingredients of both tenderness and violence, and was neither completely boy nor girl, changing continuously as he expressed and lost himself in various disguises." (Kureishi 38). However, what is noticeable here, is that he is described as being lost in 'disguises'. Judging his choice of gender as being a 'disguise', is an insult to his identity and a cementing of the belief that gender is fixed.

Another important aspect of the novel that deserves a special attention is that the ability to imagine and be optimistic is a quality associated with the men characters. Rex has freedom to keep dreaming about his rock star life and Lester too enjoys his liberty to live in an imaginary world "...I live twice. I live in the world, and then in memory and in imagination" (Kureishi 51) Gabriel lives in his own imagination with his unwavering belief in his calling to become a filmmaker and Speedy, who despite his unconventional sexual choices, is confident about his sexuality and goes on to relate his homosexuality with the presence of a true genius in him. Speedy's sexuality does not conform to the societal norms but he identifies with the male gender thereby automatically considers himself superior to Christine and Hannah who are treated differently and judged for their gender that does not conform to the dominant gender- male. Christine and Hannah are bereft of the ability to be creative and are in some moments either presented as dimwits or too practical lacking in imaginative powers. This lack of imagination in Christine and Hannah is not a result of their lack of inherent creativity but the result of having to take the onus of responsibility upon themselves.

The Occident view of the Eastern people is that of an exotic species, one that deserves to be gazed at and dissected instead of being looked at like normal human beings. This attitude is openly seen in Gabriel who describes Hannah thus:

"When she first arrived in England after spending three disoriented days in a coach admiring the motorways of Western Europe, she would walk around those heavens called supermarkets, twisting with desire and moaning under her breath like someone who had pushed a door marked Paradise rather than Tesco." (Kureishi 9-10).

Gabriel's views are representative of the British white male who finds it difficult to find anyone unlike him normal. He is further seen making comments on the immigrant situation: "every race was present, living side by side without, most of the time, killing one another"(Kureishi 8) . These comments reveal Gabriel's subconscious opinion about the immigrants who he initially believed did not have it in them to be civil and hence would probably end up killing each other and it came upon him as a surprise that they did not.

"Their neighborhood was changing. Only that morning a man had been walking down the road with a mouldy mattress on his head, which you knew he was going to sleep on; other men shoved supermarket trolleys up the street, looking for discarded junk to sell; and there were still those whose idea of dressing up was to shave or put their teeth in."(Kureishi 8).

The description of the immigrants in *Gabriel's Gift* are narrated from the point of view of the native British and Kureishi has effectively used this device to present the Occidental point of view of the orient.

With the presentation of four levels of marginalization- Economic, Social, Gendered and Racial, Hanif Kureishi holds a mirror up to the 21st Century British society. All the main characters of the novel are marginalized in one way or the other and Kureishi, with his silent expertise, manages to reveal the typical behavior of the British, in their opinions about immigrants, their attitude towards people economically, socially and financially inferior to them and their western gaze which looks at the East not as normal human beings but as types to be mocked and made fun at.

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