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THERE IS NO
ESCAPING
FROM OURSELVES
THE HUMAN
DILEMMA
IS AS IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN
AND WE SOLVE
NOTHING
FUNDAMENTAL
BY CELEBRATING
OURSELVES
IN TECHNOLOGICAL
GLORY.

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Transcending Binaries in Hanif Kureishi's *Goodbye, Mother's* Dichotomous Settings

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ABSTRACT

Hanif Kureishi is often noted for his tendency to pit his protagonist against the dichotomous setting around him. In one of Kureishi's short stories titled *Goodbye, Mother, Harry*, the protagonist is placed against the dichotomous physical and spatial settings in the story. This dichotomous physical setting reflects a long time conflict between the urban and the suburban, whereas the spatial one represents the past and the present on opposing sides. Accordingly, these opposing elements also come to represent equally conflicting connotations to the protagonist, in terms of (a) class difference (high class versus middle class), (b) female figures in life (mother versus wife), and (c) generational contrast (previous versus current generation). Thus, this paper intends to elucidate the struggle that Harry goes through as he confronts the three above said elements in relation to the physical and spatial settings in the story. Hence this paper focuses on the relationship between the motif of movement/leaving with freedom as well as looking at the form(s) of victory/freedom that Harry may obtain when (or if) he succeeds while moving between the binaries. The exploration of these themes is guided, primarily, by Raymond Williams's concept of 'social formula' and John Christman's extension of Isaiah Berlin's notion of positive/negative freedom. In short, this study proposes that Harry does transcend from one sphere of the binaries to the other, and his movement/leaving has helped to facilitate a positive freedom within him, which culminates, ultimately, in the discovery of his self-knowledge and identity.

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INTRODUCTION

In his attempt to deconstruct Hanif Kureishi as an individual and an author, Bradley Buchanan had commented on the "increasingly obvious uniqueness of Kureishi's cultural and political position as a fully Westernized child of an immigrant father" (p.13). What Buchanan had inexplicitly referred to is Kureishi's dual identity as a child born of a mixed parentage. Born in 1954 to a middle-class, white-collar family, Hanif Kureishi's parents are

Rafiushan Kureishi, a Pakistani, and Audrey Buss, an English woman. Kureishi is, then, the product of a dichotomous union of the East and the West.

Peter Hitchcock, in one of his articles, claims that Kureishi, as a second-generation immigrant in a Western country, appears to possess little to no nostalgic links to his ancestral homeland (qtd. in Buchanan 13-4). That does not, however, imply that he is automatically assimilated with the West. While Kureishi himself still seems to identify better with the Western culture: "...Kureishi has largely accepted its [Western] tradition", and has even incorporated certain "classically Western theories as narratives that have informed his own life" (Buchanan p.13), Hitchcock notes that there is still an "apparent rootlessness" in Kureishi's life in England that hints at a rejection from the West as well.

As an individual, then, Kureishi exists in a limbo state of identity. Nevertheless he does not seem to have a problem negotiating his (rejected) hybrid-child status, changing and exchanging one for the other to suit his needs. For instance, Kureishi is unabashed about (re)assuming his Eastern identity whenever it benefits him, such as when he acted as a commentator on the phenomenon of immigrants: "...[he] readily admits that his initial willingness to play this role meant that he profited from being a member of a visible minority in Britain", adding, in an interview with Colin MacCabe, that, "[T]hey were liberal. And they needed an Asian, and I was the Asian" (Buchanan p.13).

It is natural then, that as an author, Kureishi would incorporate this part of his personal history into his works as well. Noted for his penchant to place his protagonists against various forms of dichotomies as well as maintaining an inconsistent stance with regards to the treatment of the very dichotomies he introduced, Ramin Djahazi observes that more often than not, "Kureishi's novels highlight the heterogeneity of the society in which the individual lives through the reduction of this multiplicity to two contrasting patterns: Society is thus always conceived of as a scenario of conflict, contrasting desirable and deplorable interpretations of society" (p.5). Buchanan contributes further by stating that:

"...the central features of Kureishi's depiction of English life are arguably not based on stable racial or ethnic identities but instead on the blurring of class boundaries...as well as an increased postmodern awareness of the arbitrariness and contingency of identity (be it racial, religious, or cultural)...his work chronicles not a straightforward clash of fixed identities but a complex interplay of many cultural movements." (p.14)

It is precisely these 'contrasting patterns' that this paper intends to investigate in *Goodbye, Mother*; a story of a jaded, middle-aged man forced to reflect on his life and marriage as he drives his mother to a cemetery. More specifically, it aims to analyze a few types of dichotomies that can be traced in the story and its setting, as well as the movement of the protagonist as he navigates his way from one half of the dichotomies to the other half. Ultimately, this essay questions whether his movements through the two halves of the dichotomies assist him to procure his personal freedom, the form(s) of the freedom that he gains (or does not gain), and the cost of that freedom.

FRAMEWORKS AND THEORIES

One of the more obvious schemes of concept that will be relevant to this discussion is the aforementioned notion of dichotomy. Dichotomies, also known as binary oppositions, are basically two contrasting ideas that are pitted against one another in opposition so as to assist in the understanding of the two involved ideas. First introduced by Jacques Derrida to help facilitate understanding in the field of Western metaphysics, binary oppositions function essentially on the premise of deconstruction and the idea of decentering a certain

element to bring give importance to another. Derrida explains that for each of one idea, i.e. centre, there must exist also an “opposing centre” (Bressler, 2007), and this ‘opposing centre’ is usually an inferior one. The sole purpose of this ‘opposing centre’ is to provide a comparison to the ‘superior centre’ so that it may define itself by contrasting itself to the ‘opposing centre’. Bressler clarifies further with an example: “We know *truth*, for instance, because we know *deception*; we know *good* because we know *bad*” (p.121).

Lois Tyson, in contrast, explains this concept simply as a method to view “the world in terms of polar opposites, one of which is considered superior to the other” (p.100), indicating that it is affected by people’s need to classify everything according to hierarchy. Hierarchical binary oppositions are often arranged in such a way that the more superior, positive idea will come before the inferior, negative one. As such, a binary opposition between light and dark will always be written as such: light/dark.

Following the introduction of the binary opposition concept by Derrida, many researchers have come to adopt the idea for their discussion and foundational framework. Some of the more prominent ideas that incorporated the concept of dichotomy/binary oppositions include the subject of post colonialism and feminist studies. In the studies of post colonialism, for instance, Edward Said used binary oppositions to explain the notion of orientalism, a type of othering that details how the West justified its colonization of the East (Tyson, 2006) through the framing of the former with superior qualities and the latter with inferior ones. In a similar line of reasoning, feminist studies have also utilized the same concept to explain the subjugation of women by men.

In lieu of that, however, Bressler is insisted that these dichotomies are merely societal constructs that are subjected to changes when necessary. They are neither stable nor set in stone, and are only reflections of the ideologies that are supported and propagated by the institutions in power rather than absolute truths.

Following that, a second principal concept that will also be utilized in this paper is the motif of leaving. As mentioned in the introduction, a central part of the discussion will revolve around the protagonist’s movement away from half of the dichotomies in the novel to the other. As such, it is vital to understand the premise that underlies the concept of this motif.

To begin with, a motif is simply a pattern (Guerin et al., 2005). It is an idea that recurs often enough in a piece of text or literature that it is possible to attach a literary meaning to it, i.e. to turn it into a symbol or theme of sorts. The motif of leaving, then, is, in simple terms, understood as a pattern of departure that has occurred frequently enough for it to become a theme. It is a form of movement that brings one from one location to another. Djahazi defines this form of movement both positively and negatively. Positively, he describes it as “a trope for the human capacity to find happiness and a meaning in life” (p.6). Negatively, however, he labels it as a form of escapism – a kind of disassociation and transition from an abhorred socio-cultural circumstance to a preferred one. Djahazi neglected, however, to mention that the motif of leaving is not confined merely to the physical form of leaving. It is a process that can also happen mentally, as it is when individuals escape from their mind.

Accordingly, it is in the interest of this paper to find out if the motif of leaving found in *Goodbye, Mother* is an effort to find happiness or a kind of escapism, and whether the protagonist has escaped physically or mentally.

Aside from the above two concepts, one of the other most important assumptions employed throughout the analysis of the text is Raymond Williams’ theory of social formula. Rather than calling it a theory, the term ‘social formula’ is actually a type of novel classification provided by Williams in an effort to understand the society. According to

Williams, novels that are classified as this type of text are usually based on an interpretation of the real society and settings. William places much emphasis on the term 'interpretation'; to him, a novel is never a reflection of the real society and settings, but is, instead, a version of an interpretation of it. In Williams' own words, then, a social formula novel is created from the condition that "[a] particular pattern is abstracted, from the sum of social experience, and a society [within a novel] is created from this pattern" (p.307).

It is fundamental for this paper to first clarify and categories the target text, i.e. *Goodbye, Mother*, prior to the textual analysis because it will help to pinpoint the type(s) of society and setting that are involved in the story. The identification of the types of society and setting in the text is important because society and setting play a major part in influencing the characters of a story. Kureishi, as an author, believes that the proper fleshing out of genuine human characters is only possible through the incorporation of the characters in society, i.e. interaction between the subject and the social context (Kureishi, *Something Given*p.8). Regardless of whether in a positive or a negative way, an authentic subject or character is always reacting to a certain aspect of the surrounding. This means that by understanding the social context, we can also recognize the motivations that drive a character to take a certain action.

With the society and setting of the story being the key structure/site of conflict and the prime interest of this paper, it is, therefore, crucial to first understand its nature. In this case, by determining that it is a 'social formula' novel, we can assume that the society and the setting found in *Goodbye, Mother* are rooted in our reality. Thus, by analyzing the dichotomies found in *Goodbye, Mother* (which is representative of aspects of the social context and setting), we are hoping to discover the reasons as to why the protagonist chose either to move or not to move from one half of the dichotomy to the other. Also, knowing that the social context of *Goodbye, Mother* is an interpretation of the English society allows us to make certain social and cultural assumptions that will help facilitate the discussion.

A fourth and final construct relevant to the discussion is Sir Isaiah Berlin's theory of negative/positive freedom, a politically-inclined theoretical construct. In essence, Berlin's theory of negative/positive freedom challenges the common-held idea of freedom. Common-held understanding of the notion of freedom is expressed most accurately in dictionary definitions. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, for example, lists four basic entries for the word 'freedom'. In its first entry, freedom is described as "the right to do or say what you want without anyone stopping you", whereas the second says "the state of being able to do what you want, without anything stopping you". The third and fourth describe "the state of not being a prisoner or slave" and "the state of not being affected by the thing mentioned", respectively (p.697). In this case, it is possible to conclude that to the general public, freedom is a single-dimension concept that concerns only the external permission to perform something as one likes (but within limits).

Berlin's theory of negative/positive freedom, in contrast, argues that there are two sides to the notion of freedom – two contrasting ways of understanding freedom which he calls positive and negative freedom. In an effort to define the two 'types' of freedom, Berlin had forwarded numerous distinctions to help assist in a better understanding of his proposed theory. However, for the purpose of this paper, it is only necessary to look at the *most basic* form of definition given by Berlin.

Berlin's explanation begins with him defining of negative freedom as a concept that "is involved in the answer to the question 'What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?'" (qtd. in Warburtonp.155). Following that, he contrasts it with an explication of positive freedom by describing it as the type of freedom that "answer[s] to the

question 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?' (qtd. in Warburtonp.155). In other words, the basic difference that distinguishes Berlin's negative and positive freedom lies in the fact that negative freedom is centred upon the *areas* or *things* that one is free to do or be, whereas positive freedom concentrates on the issue of the *person* who determines one's freedom.

Ian Carter offers another way of comprehension by explaining it in terms of the factors that influence the agent. Carter proposes that negative freedom is the type of freedom that is often associated with *external* factors, such as *external* influences and interference that affects a person. Positive freedom, on the other hand, concerns itself with the *internal* factors that affect the agent's actions and ability to conduct himself or herself.

This concept of negative/positive freedom will feature in helping this paper to decide the type of freedom that is achieved by the protagonist in *Goodbye, Mother* (if he achieves it) by moving through the dichotomies (if he manages to successfully navigate his way through the process of achieving freedom). The following section, i.e. the textual analysis, will be informed by a combination of the four constructs and assumptions described in this segment of the essay.

TEXT ANALYSIS

In brief, *Goodbye, Mother* is a short story about a middle-aged man who accompanies his mother on a trip to a cemetery to pay their respect to the late her husband/his father. During the trip, the protagonist, Harry, finds himself inexplicably contemplating aspects of his life and marriage through a series of flashbacks and snatches of scenes of his present life. This interwoven scene from the past and present allows readers to gain an impression of the life transitions that Harry has endured, as well as those that he still has to go through if he wishes to regain freedom in his life.

The textual analysis begins with a determination of the types of dichotomies that exists in the text and those that need to be examined. Throughout Harry's narrative of his past experiences and his present life, it would appear that he has divided his life into a dichotomous set in five types of binary oppositions:

1. Physical setting: Suburban area/Urban area
2. Spatial setting: Past time/Present time
3. Class difference: Low- or middle-class/High-class
4. Female figures: Mother/Wife
5. Generational gap: Previous generation/Current generation

As listed, each of the five dichotomies is made up of two contrasting aspects of the social context and setting in the story; and these are, in summary, the areas (i.e. physical setting, spatial setting, etc.) where Harry has or must make the aforementioned transitions in his life if he is to gain any measure of freedom, in whatever form it is.

Each area of the dichotomies above is related to one another in that every pair of the dichotomies can be split and arranged into two distinctive sets; each set representing a specified idea to Harry. Ultimately, the two derived sets are as listed below:

- Suburban area – Past time – Low-class/Middle-class (Poor) – Mother – Previous generation
- Urban area – Present time – High-class (Rich) – Wife – Current generation

As can be seen, the first set takes all the first components of the dichotomies of each area, whereas the second assumes the second components. What this means to say, specifically, is that Harry appears to have come to associate the suburban area, i.e. the first component

of the physical setting dichotomy, with his past, a low- or middle-class life, his mother as the main female figure in his life, as well as the previous generation. Along the same vein, then, urban area, to Harry, has come to be associated with the present time, a high-class life, his wife, and the current generation.

As a child, Harry and his family had belonged to the lower middle class (p.189), living in a suburban area, within a “the only house in the street which hadn’t been torn through or extended” that consisted of small areas: “a small house” (p.162), “small bedrooms” and “the kitchen was tiny” (Kureishi p.164). Harry openly despises the suburban and is vocal about his gratitude for being able to leave the area: “It was easy to be snobbish and uncharitable about the suburbs, and what he saw around him was ugly, dull and depressing. He had at least got away” (p.175).

These two physical spaces, particularly the house, dominated Harry’s life particularly through his mother’s larger-than-life presence, a figure that he seems to share a love-hate relationship with. On one hand, his mother is family, but on the other hand, he has been terrorized by her presence for as long as he remembered. He does not speak fondly of her, describing her as having a “musty, slightly foul, bitter smell” (p.162) and “mad, or disturbed” (p.166). However, her influence on him is undeniable; he is often affected by her actions and finds himself frequently reminding himself that she is not the centre of his life, and that he must be careful not to turn into her: “If she was ‘ill’, it wasn’t his fault. He didn’t have to fit around her, or try to make sense of what she did” (p.166); “If he didn’t keep himself together, he would turn into her” (p.172). Apart from his mother, the house (and by extension, the suburban area) is also a reminder to Harry of the previous generation, i.e. his father and his grave. From all these, then, we can easily deduce that to Harry, the suburban area is not merely a place on earth; rather, it has become a secluded space that he has warded off to stand for the past – a part of his life that he avoids returning to unless necessary.

The urban area, in contrast, represents the ‘new’ and ‘present-time’ Harry. This version of Harry lives a successful, more than comfortable life. Married to Alexandra, and gifted with two children, “a boy and a girl” (p.161) who usually spend their time at a boarding school, he was successful in his career as a media person: “Sometimes he was proud of his success. He had earned the things that other people wanted. He worked in television news” (p.173). His marriage, however, had deteriorated in spite of the financial ease; “He had wanted a woman to be devoted to him, and, when, for years, she had been, he had refused to notice. Now, she wasn’t; things had got more lively...” (p.184). It becomes immediately apparent that both Harry and his wife do not share much in common, particularly in terms of their outlook on the world (p.176). In contrast to Harry’s more defensive personality, Alexandra is very often open with her emotions and thoughts, as is shown through her trip to Thailand, a trip for “dream, healing, and ‘imaging’ workshops” (p.177). Even when they do agree on something, it is often “a reasonable though stifling one” (p.179). Also, just like how the suburban area is associated with the previous generation, the urban area seems to be related to the present generation, i.e. Harry’s family, particularly the children.

What needs to be addressed, then, is Harry’s success in transitioning from one half of the dichotomy to the other half in order to attain some freedom for himself. Of the five areas of dichotomies identified and elaborated above, it is evident that Harry has made a successful transition in two areas: the physical setting and class difference. Both of these areas are the more corporeal, materialistic aspects of a social context as compared to the others, changeable through an increase in one’s finance and income. Harry has managed to escape the suburban, small house of his childhood to acquire “a large house in the country, even though it was quite far from London” (p.164) through the betterment of his

education and hard work in university (p.173) and his job. In spite of the material advancement in his life, it soon becomes obvious that Harry has not managed to do the same with the more affective dichotomies, i.e. the dichotomies of spatial setting, female figures in his life, and generational gap.

Despite being in the present time, he is still mentally entrenched in the past, a time frame which is closely related to the ghosts of the previous generation, particularly his mother. Harry is distinctly aware of this; he knows that “she haunted him in two ways: from the past, and in the present. He talked to her several times a day, in his mind” (p.161). It is due to this entrapment in the past that his present, and by extension, his relationship with his wife, is threatened.

Harry’s mother, by Harry’s own admission, is nonchalant – almost negligent – of the care of her family. She “hadn’t bathed them [Harry and his siblings] often” to the point where they “had thought it normal to feel soiled” (p.162), is always seeking for escapism through the television (p.162, p.169): “Television was her drug and anaesthetic, her sex her conversation her friends her family her heaven her...” (p.181), and seems to be paranoid on many levels, particularly in regards to moving vehicles (p.166, p.168). She paid little attention to her children, often “disappearing into herself, neither speaking nor asking questions...He doubted that she even knew what courses he was taking, whether he had graduated or not, or even what ‘graduation’ was” (p.181). One would have assumed that with such disregard from one’s own parent, Harry would have just moved on and forget all about it.

Ironically, however, it is this neglect shown by his mother that has tied him to her. Harry’s abandonment by his mother has made him desire absolute attention from the women in his life: “He doesn’t like Alexandra going away because he knew he didn’t exist in the mind of a woman as a permanent object. The moment he left the room they forgot him” (p.183). This act of ‘neglect’ causes havoc in his relationship with Alexandra when he projects his Oedipus complex on her. Harry seeks for a mother’s love in his wife, which she repels by constantly reminding him that wives are “closer to the heart of things – to children, to themselves, to their husbands and to the way the world really works” (p.183). Alexandra seems to make subtle attempts to help her husband by introducing various self-help activities such as hypnosis, hoping to help him get through “...[t]hat pain...it’s your pain. It’s you – your unfolding life” (p.182), as well as to “...[t]o know myself” (p.169), often masking them as activities that she likes to do or is interested in.

In her own way, then, Alexandra tried to help her husband to live in the present and salvage their marriage by drawing as clear a distinction as she could between herself and Harry’s mother. Where Harry’s mother is cold and uncaring, Alexandra is open and intimate. Harry’s mother finds solace in hiding within the imaginations screened by the television; Alexandra finds joy in writing in journals and baring herself open. Even Harry acknowledges that “Alexandra had the attributes that Mother never had,” (p.196). Alexandra’s intention is clear when she said: “Remember this. Other people aren’t your mother. You don’t have to yell at them to ensure they’re paying attention. They’re not half-dead and they’re not deaf. You’re wearing yourself out, Harry, trying to get us to do things we’re doing already” (pp.195-6). Ultimately, Harry’s reluctance to leave his past and the shadow of his mother is interfering with his self-identity in the present time. He is spending more time being his mother’s son than being a husband to Alexandra and father to his children. Till the end of the story, however, Harry somewhat able to successfully transcend the dichotomy, leaving the first half of it to enter the second half, i.e. moving away from past to present, from his mother to his wife, and from the previous generation of his parents to the present generation of his own family.

The transition comes with the epiphany that his life is not static and is always in need of adaptation. Harry realizes that he had been stuck in the past for far too long, transferring all its baggage with him to the present time and tainting his existing relationships and self-identity. He understands, at last, the olive branch that his wife has been extending to him when he says that “Alexandra was educating him: a pedagogy of adjustment and strength. These were the challenges of a man’s life...if he and Alexandra stayed together, he would have to change. If he couldn’t follow her, he would have to change more. A better life was only possible if he forsook familiar experiences for seduction by the unfamiliar. Certainty would be a catastrophe” (p.197).

Along with this dawning knowledge, then, Harry can free himself of self-doubt, thus allowing him to obtain a more stable self-identity and a certain measure of domestic bliss. He recognizes that his chief role in the present life now is to be Alexandra’s husband and his children’s father, and he reprises it with little reluctance: “While Heather was at home, Alexandra rang, but Harry didn’t say she was there. It was part of what a man sometimes did, he thought, to be a buffer between the children and their mother...He could hear the love in it. Heather had come to cheer him up, to make him feel that his love worked, that it could make her feel better” (p.204). He also tries to make himself a part of Alexandra’s life, doing what his wife encourages him to: “He wanted to buy a notebook and return to write down the thoughts his memories inspired” (p.205). Ultimately, he realizes that “[t]he gist of it was: happiness is wanting one thing. That thing was love, if that was not too pallid a word. Passion, or wanting someone, might be better. In the end, all that would remain of one’s years would be the quality of one’s link with others, of how far one has gone with them” (p.205). This is precisely in contrast to his mother’s upbringing of him, characterized by the termination of that ‘link’ and never having gone far, but Harry had been able to transcend his mother and reached out to his wife and children instead. In fact, this re-discovery of Harry’s self has given him so much stability that he is even capable of looking past his mother’s previous treatment of him and mending their bridges (pp.203-4). Harry’s ultimate peace is achieved when “[h]e thought of Father under the earth, and of Mother watching television; he thought of Alexandra and his children. He was happy” (p.205).

Finally, it is necessary to note that the ‘type’ of freedom discussed in Harry’s case is positive freedom and not negative freedom. As both Berlin and Carter have noted, positive freedom is concerned with the *person* who determines one’s freedom and the *internal* factors that affect the agent’s actions and ability to conduct himself or herself. That said, we can draw a parallel between Harry’s situations with the requisite of positive freedom. Harry’s initial circumstance of restricted freedom is concerned with the *person* who determines his freedom (his mother or him?), and it is caused by *internal* factors as opposed to external ones (Harry was held back by his own self-doubt and reluctance to leave his past, not because someone or something else was forcing him to do it).

This observation is important to reiterate the fact that the worst obstacle to achieving one’s own freedom is not any external factors, but rather one’s self. As is shown and proven in Harry’s case, one’s worst oppressor is one’s self; little can be done to free a person caught in one’s own past unless he or she is willing to fight. Freedom, after all, comes in many forms, and escaping from one’s own ghosts is, perhaps, the greatest liberty in life that one can get.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is safe to conclude that *Goodbye, Mother* as a text of dichotomy, as well as a text that promotes self-freedom. Harry is forced to go on an archetypal type of journey, ‘leaving’

one set of dichotomies for the opposing set in order to regain his freedom; and the journey had been difficult, but he is successful in achieving his goal, thus managing to regain his self-identity and family. This paper has also shown that settings and social contexts, when properly dissected, can be the indicators to the thoughts and actions of the characters of a story. In light of that, then, perhaps it is necessary for us to take the examination of settings in a text more seriously; it is, after all, not inferior to character studies and literary theories.

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