

[Work in Progress]

The Pressure of Assimilation and *East Is East*

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In this paper, I argue that Ayub Khan-Din's *East Is East* is a play that criticizes the pressure of assimilation and Thatcherism in Post-war Britain. In 1996, *East Is East* was first performed at the Birmingham Repertory Studio Theatre and gained popularity. It was later performed in New York. The playwright Ayub Khan-Din was born in Salford as the youngest of ten children. His father is from Pakistan, and his mother is from the U.K. This play also depicts a Pakistani father, a mother from the U.K., and their seven children. The seven children were born in the U.K. and speak English. However, their father George forces his children to behave according to Pakistani and Islamic customs. He believes that his family cannot be seen as British people but as immigrants in the U.K.

Differences in recognition between the first- and second-generation immigrants cause conflict. The Khan family's father, George, was born and raised in Pakistan, so he has a Pakistani identity. He moved to England in 1930, and he married an Irish woman, Ella. Their children were born and raised in the U.K. All of them speak English. The gap between the first-generation immigrants and the second-generation immigrants is a theme of this play.

Between the 1970s, when the play is set, and 1996, when the play was first performed, several policies regarding immigration were enacted. In 1971, the Immigration Act 1971 was established, and in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher was elected as the prime minister, and her "swamped" speech strengthened prejudice against immigrants. Although some policies to acknowledge diversity have been introduced, there has always been a harsh view of immigrants.

In Section 1, I will categorize the seven children's identities into three types: a British

identity, a Pakistani identity, and an identity that does not belong to either. I will do this by examining the children's attitudes toward various objects. In Section 2, I will describe the British policies that affected immigrants from 1945 to the 1990s, mainly from the 1970s to the 1990s. In section 3, I will investigate how the influences of those policies are reflected in *East Is East*.

1. Three Types of Identities among the Children

In the Khan family, we can see three types of identities. The first group consists of children who think of themselves as British; the second group consists of children who think of themselves as Pakistani; and the third group consists of children who have not yet established their identities. Nazir, Saleem, Tariq, and Meenah can be classified in the first group, while Abdul and Maneer belong to the second group. The youngest child in the Khan family, Sajid, can be seen as belonging to the third group. Since Nazir is no longer in the Khan family and there is little information about him, the analysis will focus on the remaining six children. In *East Is East*, Sajid mimics his siblings and uses discriminatory words toward Pakistanis. However, he also shows an attitude that suggests he is trying to understand Islamic culture. From these expressions, we can see that Sajid is in the process of constructing his identity through his environment. This play also shows how people form their identities during childhood. At the beginning, the children's identities can be divided as above, but we can assume that their identities may change over time.

At the beginning of the play, we can see the contrast between cultures through objects, for example, Islamic prayer stickers and a picture of the Taj Mahal (3). Additionally, this family lives in Salford, which is not a Pakistani town. These environments make the children's identities more complex. The children's father, George Khan, wants to move to a Pakistani town, but his wife, Ella Khan, is against his opinion. She is one of the reasons why the family is still living in a non-Pakistani town. Also, Ella is Irish, which could be another reason why this family remains in a non-Pakistani town.

The first group, the children who have a British identity, show an attitude of often despising Pakistani and Islamic customs. Even though they say they are not Pakistani,

they know that they will never be treated as British in the U.K. This gives them doubts about their identities. In Act One, Scene Two, Meenah and the boys throw Maneer's skull cap and run into the chip shop that their parents operate (9). This skull cap is a religious symbol, but they treat it disrespectfully. This shows that some of the children have little faith in Islam. In the chip shop, Islamic music is playing. Maneer and Meenah are listening to it and dancing, but Tariq stops the music and says, "I hate Paki music" (23). Although he eats curry and chapatis, he does not accept Pakistani things. There is no reference to whether Maneer eats pork or not, but Meenah, Tariq, and Saleem eat a plate of bacon and sausages in Act Two, Scene One (38). They hide the pork from their father before he comes home.

Abdul and Maneer are classified as Group Two, who have Pakistani identities. It is impossible to say that they have Pakistani identities 100 percent, but they try to follow what their father tells them to do. Unlike Tariq, they do not use the discriminatory word "Paki" when they talk to others, and they have the will to obey Islamic customs. Abdul knows how to tell the time and read Arabic. He strengthens his Pakistani identity after he goes to a club and is discriminated against by white British people. It is not clear whether Maneer can read Arabic, but the cap that Meenah was throwing belongs to Maneer; unlike the others, Maneer always wears religious items.

Lastly, I am going to examine what Sajid says and does in the play and investigate what his identity is like. In Act One, Scene One, Sajid is forced to be circumcised because of Muslim customs. His brothers were also circumcised when they were born. This family basically lives according to Muslim customs and under their father George's authority. Sajid wears a coat that his mother bought for him in England, and he keeps wearing it no matter what he is doing and at all times. He even wears the coat when he undergoes circumcision surgery. Meanwhile, he does not pay attention to the watch that his father buys for him as a reward for the surgery. This watch with numbers written in Arabic script is a religious item that represents Muslim culture in the play. At first, he has no interest in the watch and simply holds on to his coat. However, he later becomes interested in the Arabic watch. At the end of the play, he throws his coat into the garbage can and comes out of his own world. Sajid says he does not have to listen to other people arguing if he wears his coat, but it can also be said that he holds on to his British identity

when he wears the coat, which was bought in the U.K. Although he makes discriminatory remarks about Pakistan, he is also seen trying to understand its culture, so he can be described as neutral.

The gap in identity recognition between the first-generation immigrants and second-generation immigrants can be seen in families with foreign roots. However, it cannot be defined in such a broad category. In *East Is East*, we can observe the differences among the second-generation children through their behavior and attitudes toward various things. Six of the seven children in the Khan family have almost established their identities, which are still changing, while the youngest child, Sajid, is forming his identity through his environment.

In addition, George's behavior is based on Islamic and Pakistani customs. While he is trying to force his children to become Pakistani and Muslim, British policies have also tried to assimilate immigrants.

2. Immigration Policies in the U.K., 1945-1990s

I used the word "assimilate" in the first section, and I would like to define this word before beginning this section. The OED defines "assimilation" as "The action of making or becoming like; the state of being like; similarity, resemblance, likeness." "Assimilation" is also defined as "To make like to, cause to resemble." The terms "assimilation" and "assimilate" are not always used as derogatory terms. In this section, I will use these words only in a derogatory sense.

East Is East criticizes assimilation policies in the U.K. through the Khan family. In *East Is East*, one of the main issues is the father George's attitude toward his children. As a Pakistani immigrant and a Muslim, George is in a weaker position in British society. He has experienced discrimination and believes he cannot live in the same way as white British people. He tells his children, "You no English, English people no accepting you. In Islam, everyone equal see, no black man, or white man. Only Muslim, it special community" (55), and forces them to follow Pakistani and Islamic traditions. *East Is East* was produced in the 1990s but is set in the 1970s. Therefore, I will discuss some policies that influenced immigrants from the end of the Second World War in 1945 to the 1990s.

From 1945 to the 1960s, Britain can be seen as adopting assimilation policies. School education was designed mainly for white British children, and the cultural or religious backgrounds of immigrant children were often ignored. In the late 1960s, ideas of diversity began to appear, but British society was still not ready to accept cultural differences. In the 1970s, Pakistani migration peaked, rising to an average of close to 10,000 a year (Travers 14). The play is set in 1970, when racial problems and cultural conflicts were becoming serious social issues. After that, the oil crisis and the decline of manufacturing industries caused higher unemployment, and immigrants were often blamed. The Immigration Act of 1971 made immigration control stricter.

The Conservatives introduced the 1971 Immigration Act, a main component of which was the concept of patril and non-patril, the former having close ancestral relationship with Britain, the latter, less so. Effectively, this act took British citizenship away from hundreds of thousands of persons living in the Commonwealth. (Small and Solomos 244)

The Race Relations Act of 1976 tried to provide legal protection against racial discrimination. Although this law aimed at equality, the gap between white British people and immigrants remained large. In the 1980s, during Margaret Thatcher's government, the situation became more severe. Thatcher blamed immigrants for rising unemployment and said that "Britain was being 'swamped' by people from 'alien cultures' (Travers 158)". She used anti-immigrant feelings for political advantage. Even though the idea of diversity existed, the pressure for assimilation grew stronger during this period.

In the 1990s, British society became more complex as the number of immigrants from other regions increased.

Significant discussions and many policy initiatives continued in the 1990s, as the populations from the Commonwealth became more and more indigenous. With the break up of the Soviet Union, and with problems of poverty and political terror in many nations, Britain saw its immigrant population became more and more white and European, and more likely to arrive in the form of

asylum seekers. (Small and Solomos 244)

3. The Influence of Immigration Policies on the Khan Family

This section examines how immigration policies in Britain affected the Khan family in *East Is East*, focusing on specific scenes and lines spoken by the characters. So far, I have categorized the identities of the Khan children into three types and analyzed Britain's immigration policies, mainly from the 1970s—the period depicted in the play—to the 1990s, when it was written. I will highlight some scenes from *East Is East*.

In the early 1960s, British society emphasized assimilation, expecting immigrants to adopt British customs and values. However, from the late 1960s onward, there was a gradual shift toward recognizing cultural diversity and reducing discrimination against immigrants. The situation of the Khan family reflects the struggles of many immigrant families living in Britain at that time. The play includes several depictions of discrimination against Pakistani immigrants, showing that the Khan family's experiences were not unique but part of a broader social pattern.

In Act One, Scene Five, Ella, the mother of the family, talks to the doctor who is performing Sajid's circumcision. She explains that she disciplines her children strictly because she fears prejudice against them and does not want anyone to say her kids are badly behaved: "I'm not having my kids being accused of bad manners. People are a lot quicker to point the finger if they see they're a bit foreign. Well, not with mine" (36). Her comment reveals the pressure felt by immigrant families to appear "respectable" in the eyes of white British society.

George, the father, also speaks about the discrimination he has experienced as a Pakistani immigrant.

You see puther, this country not like our peoples, I been here since 1930, I try to make good life for my family. Your mother is good woman, but she not understand, son. I love my family, but all time I have trouble with people, they not like I marry you mother. Always calling you mother bad name. (42)

His line indicates that prejudice extended not only toward immigrants themselves but also toward those who married them.

While the play touches on immigration policy and racism, it also explores the experience of mixed-race identity. In Act Two, Scene Two, the Khan children discuss how they should define themselves—Eurasian, Anglo-Indian, British, or Pakistani. In other words, they define themselves in terms of race, culture, and nationality. However, they still cannot say for certain who they are. Their conversation reveals confusion and disagreement about their identities. Being of mixed heritage makes them question where they belong. Moreover, criticism of mixed-race families comes not only from white British people but also from within the Pakistani community.

When a dispute breaks out over the sons' arranged marriages, one Pakistani character insults the Khans as “a jungle family of half-breeds” (71). From this line, we can see that mixed-race children are looked down upon not only by the British but also by Pakistanis. If British people and immigrants had favorable attitudes toward each other, discriminatory words like “a jungle family of half-breeds” would not occur. One of the reasons for the conflicts between the U.K. and immigrants comes from policies that were implemented with the aim of assimilation. This illustrates how policy and social pressure for assimilation created divisions not only between immigrants and the British majority but also within immigrant communities themselves. In a society that demanded conformity rather than acceptance, both groups grew more distant and hostile toward each other.

In Act Two, Scene Two, Maneer criticizes Tariq, who called their father “Paki.” Maneer says:

I've seen you with your friends taking the piss out of him on the road behind his back and it's not right, and it's not fair, (*He starts to get a bit upset.*)' cause it's me dad you bastard! They're not your friends, they're just laughing at his own dad. (44)

In Act Two, Scene Four, Abdul is talking with Tariq about his experience in a pub. Abdul shows his despair when he tries to drink in a pub where various people gather and says:

I was pathetic, tonight in the pub with the lads. We were sat drinking, telling jokes, playing music, telling more jokes. Jokes about sex, thick Irish men, wog jokes, chick jokes, Paki jokes...

And the biggest joke was me, cause I was laughing the hardest. And they laughed at me because I was laughing.

I know me dad'll always be a problem, but I can handle that now, perhaps I might make him change; but I don't want that out there, it's not who I am, It's as alien to me dad's world is to you. (57)

Abdul is the butt of jokes and can only laugh them off. However, he is hurt by his situation and is reminded of his position as a mixed-race immigrant who is looked down upon.

From Ella's line, we can see how people who married immigrants were perceived; from George's experience, we can see how first-generation immigrants were treated in the U.K.; and from Abdul and Maneer's statements, we can understand how second-generation immigrants were evaluated by people in the U.K. In a dispute that breaks out over the sons' arranged marriages, we can see how Pakistanis view mixed-race children.

4. Conclusion

In Section 1, I classified the seven children's identities into three types. The first group has a British identity, the second group has a Pakistani identity, and the last group has an identity that does not belong to either. The first group's members are Nazir, Meenah, Tariq, and Saleem. They do not want to be treated as Pakistani or as immigrants. In particular, Tariq has a hatred for Pakistan and his father. Even though they consider themselves British, they know that they will not be treated as British people. Abdul and Maneer are classified in the second group. They follow their father's guidance and try to understand Islamic customs. Unlike Tariq, they want to be good children in their father's eyes. Sajid belongs to the third group. He sometimes uses discriminatory words toward Pakistanis; however, he also tries to understand Arabic letters. He occupies a neutral position.

In Section 2, I have written about immigration policies from the 1970s to the 1990s. The author, Ayub Khan-Din, wrote *East Is East* after events that strengthened prejudice against immigrants, such as Thatcher's "swamped" speech. In the 1960s, Britain was beginning to embrace the diversity of immigrants, but at the same time, policies were being developed to limit the number of immigrants. These policies exerted pressure for assimilation on immigrants, and George in *East Is East* also exerted pressure for assimilation on his children.

In Section 3, I investigated how the influences of immigration policies are reflected in *East Is East*. All members of the Khan family have been wronged, and not only the first- and second-generation immigrants, but also Ella, who married an immigrant, was treated unfairly.

East Is East can be considered a criticism of British policies that forced assimilation, particularly Thatcher's attitude. Through the Khan family's experiences, *East Is East* reveals how British immigration policy and the pressure to assimilate affected immigrant families, leading to identity conflicts and cultural tension. The children's confusion about their identities is not only due to the gap between first- and second-generation immigrants but also to policies that triggered anti-immigrant sentiment. George's attitude toward his children can be seen as a reaction to his concern that they would be treated as immigrants in British society, but his insistence on assimilation can also be interpreted as a reflection of Thatcher's influence.

Works Cited

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