

### 3. Postcolonial Poetic Discourses in Zaffar Kunial's "The Word", "Empty Words", "Us" and "W\*nd"<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

Zaffar Kunial's poetic style evokes the genius of Shakespeare, marking him as a significant voice in postcolonial literature. His poetry exemplifies themes of Otherness, in-betweenness, and hybridity through linguistic ambiguities and structural nuances that emerged after colonialism. Kunial explores these ambiguities to articulate fundamental aspects of a homogenous identity. The most meaningful signs for his identification appear in the lines of "The Word", "Empty words", "Us" and "W\*nd." Through these works, Kunial interrogates postcolonial experiences reshaped by cultural and linguistic integration. He gains a critical acclaim for his portrayal of multilingual influence on English speech, especially for the colonists who cannot leave former cultural inheritance. Kunial's poems tell the stories of individuals who have left their homeland, adapted to new customs and rituals, and navigated the complexities of speaking a foreign language while preserving their indigenous self. Rather than challenging or reforming existing narratives, his work reflects the emergence of new, hybrid communities in postcolonial society. Kunial's verse explores both the external and internal processes that shape postcolonial social structures. Hence, it is crucial to understand the multilingual and multicultural developments in British literature through this innovative poetic style. This study will evaluate the evolution of postcolonial literature through an analysis of Zaffar Kunial's most impactful poems.

**Keywords:** ZaffarKunial, Postcolonial poetry, "Empty Words," "Us," "W\*nd"

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## Zaffar Kunial'ın "Kelime", "Boř Kelimeler", "Biz" ve "Rüzgâr" Őiirlerinde postkolonyal Őiirsel sylemleri<sup>3</sup>

### z

Zaffar Kunial'ın Őiirsel tarzı, Shakespeare dehasını anımsatmaktadır. Őiiri, smrge sonrası edebiyatın iyi bir temsilcisidir. Smrgecilik sonrası dilbilimde szck daęarcıęı ve yapısal belirsizlikler aracılıęıyla tekilięi, arada kalmıřlıęı, melezlięi yansıtır. Kunial, homojen kimlięin temel izlenimlerini tanımlamak iin bu belirsizlikleri arařtırır. Kimlięinin imgeleri "Kelime", "Boř Kelimeler", "Biz" ve "Rüzgâr" dizelerinde ortaya çıkar. Kunial'ın Őiirleri, anavatanlarını terk eden, yeni gelenek ve ritellere uyum saęlayan ve kendi benliklerini korurken yabancı bir dil konuřmanın karmařıklıklarıyla bař eden bireylerin hikayelerini anlatmaktadır. Mevcut anlatılara meydan okumak veya onları yeniden Őekillendirmek yerine, alıřmaları smrge sonrası toplumda yeni, melez toplulukların ortaya ıkıřını yansıtır. Kunial'ın Őiirleri, smrge sonrası toplumsal yapıları Őekillendiren hem dıřsal hem de isel sreleri arařtırır. Dolayısıyla, bu yeniliki Őiirsel slup aracılıęıyla İngiliz edebiyatındaki ok dilli ve ok kltrl geliřmeleri anlamak ok nemlidir. Bu alıřma, Zaffar Kunial'ın en etkili Őiirlerini analiz ederek smrge sonrası edebiyatın evrimini inceleyecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** ZaffarKunial, Postkolonyal Őiir, "Boř kelimeler," "Biz," "Rzgar".

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## Introduction

Zaffar Kunial contributes to poetry with his concise poems which are based on Otherness, disorientation and linguistic complexity. His poems reflect a rich heritage, offering readers a profound sense of delight, which stems from the legacy of his parents. Kunial's father is from Kashmir as his mother is from England. Although he was born in British territory, he was raised in accordance with the customs of both cultures (Kunial, 2018). His mixed-race identity is palpable throughout his poetry, where he skilfully employs wordplay to express this dual cultural background. He reflects this binary cultural background with wordplays. Words are used in various forms between the lines. In fact, his wordplays are reverberation of complexity for second-language learners. He indicates how togetherness occur in the post-colonial era.

As a British poet, Zaffar Kunial has reached a wide audience, particularly with his poem "Hill Speak," (2014) which was recognized as the third-best poem in the National Poetry Competition (Kunial, 2018). He was described as "an acknowledged star of the Faber New Poets scheme" (Kunial, 2018). Zaffar Kunial's poetry collections, *Us* (2018) and *England's Green* (2022), have received significant attention and acclaim, reflecting their popularity among readers and critics (Kunial, 2018). This acclaim provides him to unearth postcolonialism and enliven postcolonial soul in literary works. The postcolonial soul is definitely associated with cultural, linguistic, and ideological remnants of the colonial era. Indeed, it is a legacy of precolonial traditions, colonial culture and anticolonial resistance.

Postcolonial theory is an outcome of complex conditions on colonial territories. This theory is shaped with "insights gained from an array of recent historical, sociological, psychological, and political meditations of subaltern cultures and societies" (Booker, 1996, p. 153). Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha have significantly contributed to the development of diverse methodologies within postcolonial literature. Fanon explored the dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, while Said's work focused on the concept of "Orientalism." Bhabha, on the other hand, advocates for the idea of "hybridity," emphasizing the complex interactions between cultures.

Zaffar Kunial profoundly embodies the concepts of postcolonial literature in his work. His poems serve as a ballad for the postcolonial era, giving voice to a new generation of hybrid identities. Kunial's poetry goes beyond mere theory; it examines the "afterwards" of cultural integration, exploring the hybrid selves of contemporary individuals and their vestigial traditions (Kunial, 2018). Kunial is as if their speaker because he is one of them. Most of his poems are inspired by his parents. Thanks to this biographical effect, his tone in his poems is always sincere and realistic.

In this study, postcolonial theory will be explored through the concepts of significant theorists, providing a framework for analyzing Kunial's poems. The analysis will be structured in three parts: the first will highlight the biographical elements woven into his lines. The second part will investigate themes of Otherness and Orientalism as they manifest in Kunial's work. Finally, the third part will evaluate the concepts of hybridity and unhomeliness in his poetry.

## Roots on track: Biographical features in his poetry

Kunial never disguises his thoughts while releasing his poems. Instead, he formalizes his stanzas on the real life experiences or as a poet he fictionalizes his real view of life. This can seem awkward. However, essentially, he makes his poem readers trust him. Therefore, the reader can read his works by heart. This

has a result of an ideological purpose. His biographical information attracts the reader and approaches them to his view of life; it is also accomplished without prejudice because the poet utters what he urges to acclaim. He expresses his truths through the voice of the speaker in his poems, articulating his feelings and thoughts that are deeply rooted in his unique life story.

In several of his poems, Kunial introduces his mother and father as characters, with the speaker enthusiastically embodying the role of a son. Given that the poet is male, it's natural to consider the speaker's gender and age. In "The Word", the poet writes "It's my dad, standing in the door frame/not entering-but pausing to shape advice/"Whatever is matter/*must enjoy the life.*" (Kunial, 2018, p. 4). The father serves as an important figure of authority, standing at the threshold without crossing it, which can symbolize a border—perhaps representing the distance between father and son or the intersection of two nationalities. This line is perhaps between the son and the father or a border between two nationalities. "Empty Words" opens with "The year Dad was born/ a long trail," and it continues with "At home in Grasmere-thin mountain paths have me back, a boy in Kashmir" (Kunial, 2018, p. 19). In these lines, the speaker talks about a boy, most probably, his father. As it is understood, Grasmere is the boy's hometown. This indicates Kunial's inclination towards biographical elements, with 'Grasmere' serving as a poignant detail connected to his father's past. Not only the speaker's but also the poet's father is from Kashmir which is near Pakistan. In the following lines, the speaker reveals this connection in the lines, "Dad's twin / kids in Pakistan" (Kunial, 2018, p. 19), indicating that his father has children from a previous marriage who live in Pakistan. An intriguing detail emerges in the opening lines of "Empty Words," which echo his father's insights: "Meaning 'homeland'—mulk / (in Kashmir)—exactly how / my son demands milk" (Kunial, 2018, p. 42). The word '*Mulk*' expresses how his homeland is uttered in Kashmir and it is a word that his son uses while demanding milk. Although the words 'milk' and 'mulk' sound similar, they have entirely different meanings, highlighting his father's bilingual confusion. From another perspective, this confusion prompts readers to question the concept of 'homeland. Is it the land where his father originates or the land where his son is nurtured? As his son, he complains about his position. In "The Word", it is written "I couldn't tell you now what possessed me/to shut summer out and stay in my room" (Kunial, 2018. p. 4). The speaker expresses dissatisfaction with being in the room, feeling trapped despite the shining sun outside. In the following lines, he defines that his father is "standing in the door frame not entering" (Kunial, 2018, p. 4). Until this part, the speaker implicitly demeans what is 'room', 'the door frame' and 'the sun'. 'Room' describes his nativity. Therefore, 'room' represents what he means with "That I'm native here./ In a halfway house" (Kunial, 2018, p. 4). From these lines, it is clear to apprehend the son is born in the land which is not that of his father. His father acts as a barrier, preventing him from stepping into the light of 'the sun.' Both the words 'the sun' and 'summer' represent the bright future he envisions for himself in his homeland. In fact, the son imprisons himself in his room where he feels as a native, yet he is unable to transcend the influence of his non-native father. As his father stands at the door, the son cannot fully embrace his identity as a native-born boy. Ultimately, these lines in "The Word" present important biographical information about Zaffar Kunial. "In a halfway house" signifies Kunial's identity which can be explained as 'half-English and half-Kashmiri'.

### Identity estrangement: Otherness

Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, describes the colonial world as divided, rigid, and oppressive, imprisoning the native within boundaries. He writes, "A world divided into compartments, a motionless, Manichean world...The native is a being hemmed in; apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments" (Fanon, 1965, p. 27). Fanon emphasizes how colonialism enforces strict

divisions, physically and psychologically limiting the native's existence and maintaining the colonizer's dominance. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, examines the ideological division between the West and the East. He asserts that colonialism imposes not only a physical separation but also a profound ideological distinction. It is rooted in commercial, military, ideological, and cultural interests, which create divergences in national identity. The most excessive division emerges between the West and the East. Due to western colonial attempts, the West is characterized as the winner while the East is seen as the loser. Said argues that the Occident is viewed as superior to the Orient (Said, 1977, p. 20), and this hegemonic dominance leads to the East being perceived as "the West's inferior 'Other'" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 34). Otherness results from a colonial identity that creates clear, unequal distinctions between the colonizer and the colonized, often positioning the latter as marginalized and subordinate.

This division, as Fanon and Said both highlight, gives rise to a complex sense of identity for the colonized. In the realm of postcolonial literature, poetic discourse plays a crucial role in exploring and challenging this colonial identity and the notion of Otherness. As Patke (2006) notes, "poetry seeks to mitigate the negative effects of alienation, isolation, and dispersal through the literal and symbolic activities of translation" (p. 24). Poets like Zaffar Kunial engage with the complexities of identity, particularly through the interplay of English and their native languages. Zaffar Kunial captures 'other self' in his poetic discourse, crafting English poems infused with the remnants of his Kashmiri identity. In "The W\*nd," he has written "W,w,w.../Between the wires/weather from elsewhere/becomes ours" (Kunial, 2018, p. 16). 'Weather' belongs to another territory but becomes their weather. The phrase "Between the wires" suggests that they are not in their homeland but rather in a foreign place. The 'wires' evoke the borders familiar to refugees and immigrants. Furthermore, the lines "All swirling directions a word could go / But not homeward. / West, west" indicate that his mother tongue is not readily accepted, compelling him to rely on the Western language (Kunial, 2018, p. 17). In these lines, their mother tongue is otherized, as the words can be pronounced in various accents but not in their hometown's dialect. The poem "Us" conveys a sense of unity, yet the speaker grapples with uncertainty about its feasibility: "When it comes to us, colour me unsure." This hesitation is evident as he expresses his longing with the lines, "I'd love to think I could stretch to it—us— / but the waves therein are too wide for words" (Kunial, 2018, p. 50). 'The waves' symbolize significant obstacles that are difficult to articulate. In the subsequent line, "I hope you get, here, where I'm coming from," the speaker confronts the potential loss of his identity. In the coming line, "I hope you get, here, where I'm coming from," he challenges to lose all properties of his identity. In other words, he does not embrace being 'other'. In the lines, "us equally meant me," "I, being one, am *Liverpool* no less," he wishes to protect his self-assessment (Kunial, 2018, p. 50). It is clear that the speaker believes that achieving 'us' could bridge the divide between Western and Eastern peoples. Unfortunately, it is too hard to reach such a goal. This ideological view is against an individualist approach. 'Me' is to be collapsed to let 'us' be born.

### **A Halfway House: Hybridity and Unhomeliness**

Bhabha defines *unhomeliness* as "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9). This condition arises from an exploration of identity situated at the intersection of multiple cultural influences. He describes this state as a blend of "extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9). It signifies a new beginning through cultural discoveries, but tensions may arise between old and new cultural patterns. The concept of 'home' is metaphorically explored in Zaffar Kunial's poetry, which primarily focuses on the meaning of 'home' within the context of unhomeliness. In "The Word," Kunial defines home as "halfway house" (Kunial, 2018, p. 4). In the "W\*nd," the speaker feels as if he belongs to nowhere, which is clear in the following lines: "But no

shore/was ever a harbour/for me. Never home/entirely" (Kunial, 2018. p. 16). Kunial emphasizes that 'home' encompasses not only a physical nation but also the notion of nationality. However, culture is one of the significant characteristics of being wholly a nation and having a national identity. Considering Kunial's viewpoint, admittedly, 'belong to nowhere,' pinpoints ghostlike identification without cultural integrity. More explicitly, the speaker struggles to uphold his cultural values due to insufficient interaction with his community and territory. This causes a quest for a new identity, which is blended with the past and present.

Ambivalence can arise in determining one's true home, as it is deeply tied to personal notions of belonging. Homi Bhabha argues that language and culture do not evolve solely in accordance with past heritage. This stems from "the instability of the colonizer–colonized dichotomy" (King, 1999, p. 207). The tension between the colonizer and the colonized generates new resolutions for cultural development. The colonized cannot exist solely through ancestral ties, yet they also struggle to fully integrate into the Western cultural landscape. This in-betweenness results in ambivalence. Salman Rushdie illustrates in-betweenness, stating, "I am that comma—or at least I live in the comma... I feel like a comma" (Reder, 2000, p. 163). He perceives himself as caught between East and West, a sentiment reflected in the title of his short story collection, *East, West* (Ayyıldız, 2020, p. 3). In such a dilemma, meaning and reference become fluid, turning cultural identity into an ambivalent process. Bhabha captures this complexity, explaining that cultural knowledge is often presented as an integrated and expanding code. He challenges the notion of culture as a "homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37).

Kunial further explores cultural ambivalence as a result of dual perception. In *Empty Words*, the speaker highlights the contrast between Eastern and Western writing traditions. His father writes from right to left, while his mother writes from left to right: "Letters, West to East / Mum's hand would write; Dad's script goes / east to west" (Kunial, 2018, p. 42). This divergence extends beyond script to cognitive frameworks. Raised in a Western cultural environment, the mother processes matters through her inherited norms, while the father approaches life through an Eastern perspective. Their differing approaches reflect the complexities of their distinct cultural inheritances.

Old English 'Deor'  
 An exile's lament, the past's  
 dark, half-opened door.  
 Where migrating geese  
 Pause to sleep—somewhere, halfway  
 Is this pillow's crease (Kunial, 2018, pp. 19-20)

The rejection of a fixed, homogeneous identity can ultimately lead to hybridity, as individuals navigate the tension between multiple cultural influences. When diverse communities neglect and even reject other cultural values, hybrid cultural heritage cannot be achieved. Alfred Lopez interprets hybridity as a "condition of consciousness" (Lopez, 2001, p. 27). In this context, both the colonizer and the colonized embrace their own cultural identities while simultaneously recognizing each other's without hierarchical dominance. This mutual recognition can result in a nuanced understanding of hybrid identity. As Homi Bhabha delineates, hybridity exists in a space of "neither one nor other" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 128). Kunial explores this notion of hybridity and desire for unity in his poem "Us," where the speaker expresses a longing for togetherness while acknowledging the distance that complicates it:

I'd love to think I could stretch to it-us-  
 but the waves therein are too wide for words.  
 I hope you get, here, where I'm coming from  
 I hope you're with me on this-between love

and loss-where I'd give myself away, stranded  
 as if the universe is a matter of one stress.  
 Us. I hope, from here on, I can say it

and though far-fetched, it won't be too wrong. (Kunial, 2018, p. 50).

The speaker hopes not to be seen as inferior, so that his/her ethnic identity can be embraced. With "the waves therein are too wide", it is emphasized that there are disparities between communities. Despite these disparities, there remains a hope for unity and the possibility of becoming 'us.' Although the speaker's confusion lingers throughout the poem, they ultimately remark, "it won't be too wrong." In this line, 'it' indicates *us* which is expected to be 'right' because it is not thoroughly tried yet. Kunial concludes his poem "The Word" with the lines "half right, half / wrong" (Kunial, 2018, p. 4). Both poems highlight the concept of 'half,' signifying an incomplete identity rather than a totality. In "The Word," the speaker expresses frustration over a grammatical error in their father's speech, as the father states, "Whatever is matter/ must *enjoy the life*" (lines 6-7). The speaker is not pleased with 'the,' because he recognizes that his father makes a mistake in that sentence. He empathizes with his father, who is a second language user. The speaker reflects on this duality, explaining that he can exist "In two minds" (Kunial, 2018, p. 4). Actually, this is an enunciation of his double consciousness. He is between his identity and that of his father's. In "Empty Words", their dissimilarity is further emphasized in the lines, "The son filled *The Globe*./The dad seamed a second skin" (Kunial, 2018, p. 20). The son sees himself as a representative of a universal world, while his father is rooted in an 'other' world, likely tied to his ethnic community. The son expresses his discontent with meaninglessness in the line, "Yes I know. Empty," (line 31). However, he ends the poem with a sense of hope: "But there's just something between / the p and the t" (lines 32-33). He defends that he is different from his father and not a pure carrier of his ancestor's heritage. Therefore, he identifies as hybrid, that is, neither one nor none.

## Conclusion

Zaffar Kunial intends to explain social consciousness as a means through which cultural, historical, and linguistic heritage is sustained across diverse territories. His perspective reflects the mingling of minds in contemporary communities shaped by the legacy of colonialism. This period affects both the colonizer and the colonized, as each must navigate the revolutionary effects on their lifestyles and ideological viewpoints. In this postcolonial age, hegemony is reevaluated, as every community that engages with the colonial past seeks to protect its own legacy, which is intricately connected to loyalty to its ancestors. However, mingling with other communities carries significant risks. Domination emerges as a key issue; the dominant community often seeks to impose its privileges on the subordinate group, a natural outcome of the assimilative process. Yet, new philosophical approaches illuminate these complex interactions. Eastern thinkers critically interrogate the concept of the Orient and the notion of 'the other.' Additionally, hybridity is introduced and rigorously debated, raising essential questions about identity and cultural exchange.

Postcolonial theory explores concepts that illuminate cultural, social, and linguistic developments within communities. Edward Said argues that Eastern peoples are "otherized" in *Orientalism*, noting that there are hard-and-fast distinctions between "East" and "West" (Said, 1977, p. 37). These disparities arise primarily from negligence. Said contends that Western culture is often regarded as superior to Eastern culture. He states, "A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery" (Said, 1977, p. 35). Consequently, the beauty of Eastern culture remains underappreciated and constrained by Western dominance in cultural integration, leading Eastern peoples to inhabit otherized identities. Homi Bhabha extends this discussion to the concept of hybridization. He argues that Otherness can challenge colonial dominance and authority; however, he asserts that hybridity is hindered by denial. Bhabha writes, "The disavowal of the Other always exacerbates the edge of identification" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 62). Thus, he supports the idea of hybridity within communities, provided that denial is acknowledged. As Young briefly concludes, "The hybridity of colonial discourse...reverses the structures of domination in the colonial situation" (Young, 1995, p. 21). This suggests that the binary opposition of racial and cultural groups can diminish, allowing for a more unified identity.

Zaffar Kunial's poetry reflects the essence of "us" in a postcolonial era characterized by cultural, linguistic, and social changes. His biographical background adds significant depth to his work, imbuing his lines with a strong sense of authenticity. Kunial skilfully plays with letters and words to explore the complexities of a homogeneous identity. In poems like "The Word," "Empty Words," and "W\*ind," he seeks to define his identity as a representative of both past and future generations. "Us" offers a pathway to identification, yet it is fraught with ambiguities.

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