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Speaking for Others in Hanif Kureishi's Early Work

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Representation is an important instrument both of domination and of resistance. Part of the oppression of marginalised groups consists in their lack of power over their own representation. They experience being silenced and being represented – often negatively – by other, more powerful groups. Metaphorically speaking, they have no voice of their own. Finding a voice, i.e. finding a way to express oneself and to make oneself heard, and then using that voice for contesting dominant representations, is therefore an important political strategy of social activism that aims at empowering such groups.

In 1980's Great Britain, traditional mono-cultural conceptions of British society were being challenged in this manner. An important figure in this process was playwright, screenwriter, novelist and essayist Hanif Kureishi. He has often been credited with making visible the lives and experiences of Asians in Britain, which had been largely absent from mainstream popular culture before.

The purpose of this dissertation is an in-depth analysis of Kureishi's early works that investigates whether and in what ways they articulate two specific theoretical issues relating to the concept of representation that became evident in this context: the "burden of representation" (Kobena Mercer), which describes the fact that artists who are members of a marginalised group are often expected to act as representatives of that group, and the "problem of speaking for others" (Linda Alcoff), which is concerned with the questions whether it is epistemologically possible and/or ethically legitimate to speak for a social group.

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