

OVERTURNING IMPERIAL VIEWS A TALK WITH HANIF KUREISHI

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Hanif Kureishi, author of the screenplay of *My Beautiful Launderette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* as well as numerous stage plays, was in Barcelona in June 1991 to promote his first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

F.H. What medium do you feel most comfortable in, prose or drama?

H.K. Well, I've just written a film called *London Kills Me*, which I directed myself, so that was another new direction and I've written for the theatre and done many things but I get bored doing just one. I like to do many things and I feel comfortable doing many rather than doing just one and if I just wanted to write novels or write films then I would do that but I like to work in a number of different forms. It's always given me more pleasure than devoting myself to one activity because one of the beauties of writing that is very difficult and very essential is having a talent for isolation and having a talent for being on your own and of course I enjoy that, but at the same time I enjoy the process of collaboration, of working with other people, working with actors especially, as I have done with actors in the theatre and in films. This is a long way round of saying that I enjoy doing everything that I do, otherwise I wouldn't do it.

F.H. The fact that you do not stick to one particular genre but instead use a multiplicity of media seems to suggest the multiplicity of cultures that make up post-war Britain. Would you agree with this?

H.K. I don't know if there's any direct congruence between those things, but one of the interesting occurrences in England today is the number of writers, film directors and actors and so on, who are emerging from different colonial backgrounds in a number of different forms and of course these writers and artists are very interesting because the stories they've told, the stories they're telling, are not stories that have been told before, so I'm looking forward to a whole range of films and stories from the new Britain, which is a mixed Britain, which is, as you say, a multicultural Britain, representing whole areas of our society that haven't been represented before. One of the things that excited me when I was writing *My Beautiful Launderette* was that I was very aware when I was doing this film that these stories really hadn't been told before and in ten years' time, this will only seem, I hope, like the beginning of a flowering of multiculturalism in British culture.

F.H. Would you accept that you have certain similarities in style with Salman Rushdie? Is this because you are both trying to reveal the injustices and prejudices that exist in what people believe to be a tolerant country?

H.K. I feel that we're quite different writers. I mean, he's an Indian writer really and I'm a British writer. He's a man who was brought up in India and I'm a man who was brought up in the South London suburbs and I think our view of life and our methods of work are quite different. I would be deeply flattered to be compared to a man I admire as much as I do him. But I wouldn't say there was anything similar between us. The only similarity between Timothy Mo, Ishiguro, Salman and myself and the others that are emerging, is that we have some sort of perhaps colonial or other or foreign background but of course this kind of thing has been happening in the United States for many years too, it is only that it is the first time in Britain that English literature or English film making is now full of people with foreign names. I'm not conscious of imitating his style at all. I don't think we have similar concerns. Fortunately for him he has a whole Indian aspect to his life which gives his work a depth and resonance from another place which my work lacks.

F.H. Do think that the average white Briton is aware of the cultural conflict young Asians in the UK must face?

H.K. I don't know how much anybody in Britain knows about the inside of Asian families really at all. I know there's a new soap opera coming out soon in Britain about Asian families¹ but I think until now Asian life has been a complete mystery to English white people. I think when the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* happened and the book burnings and the attacks on Salman... but I think people were deeply shocked by this and also had no understanding of how important Islam was in people's lives and what it meant to them and how important it was for them to cling to that in a country they saw themselves as being alien in, in a society they saw as being in many ways hostile to them, and I think that, I hope, that the whole incident, tragic, cruel and vicious though it was, perhaps in some ways will help to educate people about Islam and what it means and I think what a danger it may be within secular democratic societies in the West in the next ten years.

F.H. Karim, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, doesn't seem to be at all proud of his Indian origins. Does he represent this cultural conflict in second or third generation migrants?

H.K. I think it's more to do with the way my generation felt. When I meet 18 year-old Indians and Pakistanis now I feel they have a much better understanding of their history, their religion and their place in British society than I ever did because my father wanted my sister and I to be brought up almost entirely English and he felt this would help us to fit in, so we didn't have any strong sense of our cultural background from that side

¹ *Family Pride* produced by Zia Mohyeddin, first shown on Channel 4 on 30 June 1991.

of us. He thought we should be absorbed and be as English as the English and this would help us get on. I don't think he realised how much we would regret and feel the loss of that side of ourselves later on. People are more aware of it now especially in schools where the emphasis on multicultural, multiracial education is much greater than when I was young, when there was no such thing. Where the racism in the school was something that was entirely unchecked and especially from the teachers as well. They had no interest in any religion but their own. I like to think and hope that things have changed, especially in education.

F.H. Karim is bisexual but his male lovers are always white. Does this suggest that he feels the need to subjugate the white man in the same way that the European or American colonisers 'used' black women merely for their pleasure?

H.K. Well, he only has one lover in the book anyway, Charlie, but the thing about growing up in South London at the time was that you didn't really meet any Asian people, you didn't really meet any black people because that part of London wasn't like that. Obviously, there were friends of my father's and my family's that I knew round and about a bit, but there were very few. I had a couple of Asian friends but mostly at that time in that part of England there were hardly any black or Asian people, which is perhaps why I felt alone and isolated.

F.H. Actually I was including Terry among Karim's lovers as, although the relationship is not consummated, there is no lack of trying on his part. There's no idea of revenge, then, of Karim's 'getting his own back' by using white men?

H.K. I think there's more of that in *My Beautiful Launderette* than in *The Buddha of Suburbia* but there might be an element of that in that book as well. *My Beautiful Launderette* is much more concerned with reinstating certain power, getting power over those who had power over you in the past and I think that the character of Omar is very much concerned with reestablishing his own power over the white character, Johnny, and that struggle between them is much more nakedly a power issue than the issues in *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

F.H. In *My Beautiful Launderette* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* the question of arranged marriages arises. Tania leaves home but Jamila gives in and marries the husband chosen for her by her father. How do young Asian girls brought up in the UK nowadays react to arranged marriages? Do they accept that their parents have the right to interfere with their lives? In other words, to what extent do they identify with their traditions and the concept of loyalty to the family?

H.K. To be honest, it's not something I know very much about. One of the things that's happened to me as I've grown older is that I really feel I've lost touch with Asian life in Britain. I suppose because when I was growing up, the only contact I had with all that was through my family, my father, my uncles, my cousins, and so on, but as I've grown older, I've moved away from that and mostly all the Asians and black people I know are

rather like me, people who work in the media. They're film directors, and writers, and actors and so on. So one of the tragedies in a way of becoming a writer, or a successful writer, is you lose touch with the things that got you there in the first place and I think it's happened to me in a way so it would be very foolish of me to pronounce on the lives of young Asian women in Bradford, or Southall, Leicester or wherever, when in fact I have no contact with these people at all.

F.H. As the subject came up in two of your works I was under the impression that you felt quite strongly about it.

H.K. It was something that happened to two young women I knew when I was a kid, when I was a teenager, and I wasn't even thinking of getting married at the time and I remember that they were and one of the women I knew, one of the girls I knew, was being hauled into an arranged marriage and her father had gone on a hunger strike and that's where I got the idea for *The Buddha of Suburbia*. It was something that seemed very shocking to me at that time because the amount of oppression that was involved in it, the amount of power that was being put on her, seemed to me to be quite frightening and the life she was being forced into, seemed to be not what someone of her age should be going into.

F.H. Does Jamila give in out of loyalty to her family and to Asian traditions?

H.K. [laughing] No, I think she does it out of perversity, doesn't she?! And also she does it because that's how the plot has to work. I don't think she feels particularly loyal to her tradition. After all, tradition is something you make as well as you inherit. If there are traditions in Britain, certain ideas, of Land of Hope and Glory, imperialism and so on, there's also another tradition in Britain of dissent, of radicalism, of socialism and argument, debate and so on. The notion of tradition is a very spurious one which is often used like religion to oppress people, so I don't think she'd be very into that.

F.H. In *Birds of Passage*, Asif, the lodger, eventually takes over the house including its inhabitants. Are you suggesting a kind of reversal of affairs as regards the British Raj? That is, the masters in India have now become the slaves in Britain? A similar idea is expressed in *My Beautiful Launderette* in the sense that Johnny, much to his mates' horror, is actually working for a 'Paki'.

H.K. Yes, well, that idea in *Birds of Passage* was one I later did develop in *My Beautiful Launderette*. I suppose it's because the view most people had of Asian people was of them being these poor, poverty-stricken, broken-down victims and of course, there's a lot of truth in that view but in my own family, the Asian, the Pakistani Briton that I knew was nothing to do with that. They owned businesses, they were intellectuals, teachers and writers and it seemed daft for me to write about Asians who were broken-down victims from Bangladesh crawling around the East End, when in fact the people I knew were running launderettes. These ironies of course interested me very much but at the same time it seemed to me as true a picture as the other. As a writer you write about what

interests you and I liked the irony of overturning the imperial views especially at a time when in Britain there were so many films like *A Room With A View*, *A Passage to India*, *The Far Pavilions* and *The Raj Quartet*, which all showed Britain in a certain sort of glory, a certain sort of domination, sort of perfection of a past, all those teacup films, which seemed to me to be rather loathsome. What interested me more was what was actually happening in Britain at the time. It seemed to me much, much richer.

F.H. Asif actually despises poor Pakistani immigrants instead of feeling some kind of solidarity with them. As Salim says in *My Beautiful Launderette*, 'we're nothing in England without money'. Do you agree that racism is basically a consequence of economic reasons?

H.K. Well, I suppose that one of the things that happens is that people think of Indian people or Pakistani people or Bangladeshi people somehow as being all the same. It would be as if they'd met a roadsweeper and Prince Philip and thought that just because they were English, they would have something in common. They wouldn't understand the divisions in these communities were also based on class, on religion, on economic status as in any other society. What I wanted to show was that there's prejudice, there's discrimination, violence against minority groups in Asian societies as well, quite clearly, but the real divisions, the most powerful divisions, the ultimate divisions, are economic. They prevent people getting power. You can't control the law, you can't control the judiciary, business, education and so on unless you have power and that's where racism always seemed to me to be at its most cruel because it prevented you from making anything of your life and controlling your own destiny and that of your own people. Therefore, of course the economic argument in the end is the most powerful one against racism because it prevents anyone living their life to the full in the society as it is. There are forms of racism which are just based on hatred of a particular race, a particular colour, a particular culture and these are obviously noxious, unpleasant but there's another form of racism which involves putting down a whole race economically, which is an even worse phenomenon.

Barcelona, 11th June 1991