



Hanif Kureishi: portraying black people humanly.

## Disposing Of The Raj

Hanif Kureishi is a playwright and writer of the award-winning film *My Beautiful Launderette*. He is writer in residence at the Royal Court theatre in London. He discussed his writing and politics with Janie Glen at *Marxism Today's* Left Unlimited in November.

**I'd like to start by looking at *My Beautiful Launderette* since that is what you are best known for. It's a very unusual film. How did it come to be made?**  
The film was commissioned by Channel 4. It could not have been commissioned by the BBC, certainly not now. I think we'll look back on the start of Channel 4 as a kind of golden period for films. People tell me that today the government is starting to exert pressure on the IBA to look at some of the things the channel is doing. They may be getting a letter any day

from Norman Tebbit.

Channel 4 wanted to commission a film from the Asian community and, as I was the only writer they knew from the Asian community, I was asked to do it. The range of films that Channel 4 have now commissioned is really very broad: films that would not have been made on the open market. To some extent, then, I think the British film industry today is Channel 4 now. *Letter To Brezhnev*, *Mona Lisa* and *My Beautiful Launderette* were all more successful internationally than Goldcrest's *Revolution*. But who would ever have thought that a film about a gay Pakistani who runs a launderette would go down well in America?

**How did the film come to get cinema distribution?**

It was first shown in Edinburgh and then it was tried out in a London independent

cinema. It took off and is still running in America and Europe.

**How did Americans respond to the film?**

When you ask Americans about British films and British life, they think it's like *Chariots Of Fire*. Everything moves very slowly. But their view of England also comes from what I call the Raj films, films about the old empire. Consequently, they have an image of the country that is totally out of date. When they see films like *Letter To Brezhnev*, *Mona Lisa* and *My Beautiful Launderette* they are shocked because England looks like a Third World country.

Many of the English people out there seemed rather embarrassed by the film because it didn't weigh up with the high status they have in the States. When we are seen to live in a doss-house I suppose it's rather disillusioning for them.

**What about the racism in the film. Did that shock the Americans?**

They laughed. They realised that England was going through something that America had tried to come to terms with 30 or 40 years ago. They couldn't believe that English people were so backward and racist. It was very shocking for them.

**Did you get a reaction from the Asian community to the film?**

When I was in New York I went to see the film. There was a huge queue outside - well I thought at first it was a queue to see the film - but I soon discovered that it was a demonstration of Pakistanis protesting that the film should be banned. They thought the film misrepresented Pakistanis as homosexuals. They were insulted.

Having been fondled several times all around the Third World, I knew there were gay people in India and Pakistan. There the film is only available in its bootleg variety. *Launderette* could never have been made in a society like India or Pakistan.

It's amazing how shocked people are by homosexuality. If you show the film outside London, or in America, you

realise this. In one sense, therefore, it's a breakthrough to have got the film distributed in the first place and it seems to have helped produce a range of gay films like *Desert Hearts*.

On a different note, I had hoped there would be a similar breakthrough in black writing as there has been in the States but that doesn't seem to have happened. There is a sizeable audience for it and a whole range of stories to be told. That's why I get so depressed when someone like Kingsley Amis wins the Booker Prize.

**Did you start off by writing about the plight of black people or a more personal story?**

In the end I wanted to do a film about my family, about people I know that I like, about launderettes and business. It's particularly exciting because you realise how new the stories are. That's the point I'm making about black writing - that potentially it's such a rich source of knowledge. I also wanted to do a film that portrayed black people humanly. We're invisible in the media here and that's something I wanted to address. All of those things motivated me. Maybe that's why Channel 4 liked the film so much because they got a film about gay people *and* about black people. So it solved all their problems at once.

**Wasn't it also a film about violence?**

Yes. As far as black people are concerned, Britain is a very violent society. George Orwell's notion of England as a civilised place and of English people as quiet, tolerant and easy-going just doesn't ring true if you are a black person in Britain or if you've lived in India or Pakistan. Violence is evident all the time to black people and I wanted to write about violence in that way. When my father was walking around South London we'd always be frightened that someone would duff him up. He was always conscious of violence.

When I was at school my friends joined right-wing organisations and they would invite me to go with them on

National Front marches ... that kind of violence is an important part of black people's lives in this country.

**But black people's lives are also about love and sex.**

I wanted to make an erotic film, not a dirty film. To me there's a very big difference between pornography and eroticism. Pornography is about the objectification of bodies, of sex. So I wanted to do a film about sexual relationships, but in a mild and



**Magic moment or gay shocker?**

gentle way. I also wanted to do a film about gay people that didn't end with one or other of the gay couple committing suicide... And a gay film that didn't have Dirk Bogarde in it, which is an achievement. So I wanted it to be romantic - a bit like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* with kissing - a film about men together, about men who were in love with each other physically.

I'm very interested in the representation of sex in the cinema. Someone like Mary Whitehouse talks about sex and violence in the same breath as if she doesn't understand that sex is something that many people enjoy and violence isn't.

Many people don't see violence in their everyday lives whereas sex is something that many of us think about every day. Well, I certainly do. Sexual relationships are so important to our lives that it's crucial that TV and the cinema know how to treat them. Channel 4 have started putting ridiculous pink triangles on the screen as a form of censorship. It's like putting a fig leaf on a Michelangelo sculpture. Everyone should complain at such a stupid and crude reaction.

**Do you see the cinema and film**

**as an influential and powerful medium?**

I find film a much more naturalistic medium for discussing questions of race, class and gender. If you can break through to a larger audience film can be very influential. We showed *My Beautiful Launderette* in Milton Keynes and there were a bunch of white working class kids who looked pretty violent in the audience. They were shouting for Johnny and whenever racist remarks were made they cheered him on. They liked the violence against the Pakistanis in the film. But when it got to the scene where Johnny and Omar kissed it completely blew their minds. Things like that can have an effect, a good effect. You can't control an audience but you should poke it up the nose as much as you can.

**How do you see your audience? Are you conscious of wanting a mass audience?**

In the late 60s and 70s people like David Edgar were trying to break away from the small confined audiences of the RSC or the Royal Court theatre. You took your plays on the road to reach out - 7:84 would go around the country performing - as if the working class hadn't suffered enough already! The only way to break through all this was to do your stuff on TV which was what Trevor Griffiths argued for: he thought that by concentrating on TV and cinema you automatically reach a wider audience. That is borne out by our experience of showing *Launderette* in Milton Keynes. It seems to me that the energy has moved away from the theatre to TV and the cinema, which probably isn't a bad thing.

**What are you doing at the moment?**

The success of *Launderette* enabled us to get enough money to do another film. It's about another minority group that are very rarely under-represented in the cinema - heterosexuals. It centres around three couples, one sexual act and the reverberations of this act on all the individuals. •



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