



BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

My Beautiful Laundrette

+ On-stage interview with writer Hanif Kureishi

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Originally shot for television in six weeks on a low budget, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) was directed by Stephen Frears, from author Hanif Kureishi's first screenplay. Originally shot on 16mm, it was so well received by critics at the Edinburgh Film Festival that it was internationally distributed for cinema on 35mm. Heralded as one of Britain's most commercially and critically successful films of 1986, it earned Kureishi an Oscar nomination for Best Screenplay.

My Beautiful Laundrette was ground-breaking in its bold exploration of issues of sexuality, race, class and generational difference. It also sparked controversy, particularly within the Asian community, which was disgusted by its perceived degrading representation of Pakistanis. At a New York demonstration by the Pakistan Action Committee, banners called the film 'the product of a vile and perverted mind'.

Much of the outrage was targeted at the homosexual affair between Omar and Johnny, which develops from a genuine mutual fondness through the buzz of sexual experimentation, before hinting, at the end, at something deeper. On the way, it survives several obstacles, including Johnny's racist connections and Omar's resentment.

The film highlights a dilemma at the heart of the immigrant experience – the desire to belong to Western society while maintaining a clear sense of Pakistani identity. The two brothers, Nasser and Papa, demonstrate this cultural conflict. An ardent intellectual socialist, Papa belongs to old school Pakistan because, like most first generation immigrants, he believes fervently in education combating racism and is vehemently against the greed and conservative economics of Thatcherism.

Nasser, however, has largely abandoned his immigrant roots, toasting 'Thatcher and your [Omar's] beautiful laundrette'. He has deserted eastern traditions in favour of money, success, and a white mistress. Despite this, Nasser retains many Asian ways: returning to his rancorous wife and attempting to arrange his daughter's marriage.

Kureishi writes characters for what they are rather than what they represent, and while he may dislike his character's actions, it is evident that he is fascinated by their humanity. It is for this reason that we are able to grasp the underlying truths of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, often ambiguous and contradictory, sometimes obscure, but hauntingly resonant, even today.

My Beautiful Laundrette's international success helped establish Channel 4's fledgling feature film production arm, Film on Four, and confirmed a move away from television single drama. The Frears-Kureishi collaboration continued with *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987).

Shalini Chanda, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

A contemporary review

My Beautiful Laundrette is surprising in many respects. Made for TV, for the Film on Four slot, and due to be shown later this year, it was such a success at the Edinburgh Film Festival that it almost immediately found a theatrical distributor. Yet not only is it quintessentially a TV product, even down to built-in natural breaks, but it marks the TV debut of a young Asian, Hanif Kureishi, whose script is largely responsible for the film's success.

Clearly, the subject matter itself is controversial: a love affair between two South London youths, one Asian, the other white with National Front connections, set against the activities of a crooked Asian family business intent on turning Thatcherite enterprise economics to their own advantage. But what is really surprising is the skill with which a number of contradictory themes and ideas have been woven together in a complex tapestry in which race, sex and class are shown to be intimately related, and in conflict.

Omar's down-at-heel socialist father clings to his belief that education will help the working classes, while Omar himself understands that power resides in money rather than knowledge, in being able to employ others and so control their destiny. Johnny has mixed motives in accepting a role as Omar's employee and subordinate – partly out of a desire to expiate his former National Front activities, partly out of love, and partly just in order to work. Johnny and Omar together pit their wits against Nasser and Salim, whose corrupt activities extend to property rackets, pornographic videos, and drug-running. They go along with them to a certain extent, but Johnny holds back when it seems that Omar aspires to become another Salim.

Johnny has a certain moral strength that Omar lacks, and it is the personal relationship between the two young men that determines their actions, rather than any abstract political analysis. But that relationship is never seen to be outside politics and history. Moments of tenderness, warmth and humour are set against those in which power relationships deriving from deep-seated colonialist attitudes are shown to be all-pervasive, shifting attention to the disturbing implications of Omar and Johnny's affair.

This unlikely affair not only provides the focus for the film's ruminations on the state of present-day multi-racial Britain, it also acts as an ironic counterpart to other (heterosexual) relationships – that between Nasser and his mistress Rachel (Shirley Anne Field), for instance, largely sent-up as an old-fashioned romance. But one of the most moving scenes occurs when Rachel, confronted by Nasser's daughter Tania, defends her affair, and her status as a 'kept woman', in terms of her class and age. And Tania herself, outspoken, intelligent, independent, can find no place for herself or her sexuality either within the male-dominated Asian family or outside it, since both Omar and Johnny, her potential allies, owe allegiance primarily to one another (a *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* parody underlines this point nicely). So Tania disappears, as indeed does Rachel, leaving Nasser devastated – on the point of financial and emotional collapse – and Johnny and Omar to comfort one another in the ruins of their dream laundrette, smashed up by the racist white gang. No easy way forward here, only more question marks.

The strength of *My Beautiful Laundrette* is that it asks difficult questions in a provocative and entertaining manner, managing to be critical and sympathetic at the same time. Maybe, in the end, we are asked to sympathise with too many characters at once, so that we are left in a familiar liberal impasse; and perhaps some themes could have been more fully developed to toughen up the film's political message. But there is no doubt on this evidence that Hanif Kureishi is an exciting new voice in British television.

Pam Cook, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1985

MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE

Director: Stephen Frears
Production Companies: Working Title Films, SAF Productions, Channel Four
Producers: Sarah Radclyffe, Tim Bevan
Production Accountant: Bill Craster
Assistant Accountant: Grainne Marmion
Production Manager: Jane Frazer
Location Manager: Rebecca O'Brien
Production Assistant: Sarah O'Brien
Production Runner: Sam Garwood
Unit Runners: Chris Bruce, Charlie McGrigor
NFS Attachments: Jo Brown, Ronald Bailey, Abdul Chowdray, Andree de Silva
1st Assistant Director: Simon Hinkly
2nd Assistant Director: Waldo Roeg
3rd Assistant Director: Gary Davies
Continuity: Penny Eyles
Casting: Debbie McWilliams
Screenplay: Hanif Kureishi
Director of Photography: Oliver Stapleton
Focus Puller: Steve Keith-Roach
Clapper: Fiona Cunningham Reid
Camera Trainee: Anthony James
Camera Grip: Jim Monks
2nd Camera Grip: Jamie Monks
Gaffer: Malcolm Davies
Electricians: Dave McWhinnie, Martin Duncan, Tony Hare
Stills: Mike Laye
Graphics: Julian Rothenstein
Editor: Mick Audsley
1st Assistant Editor: Jason Adams
2nd Assistant Editor: Chris Cook
Designer: Hugo Luczyk Wyhowski
Production Buyer: Jeanne Vertigan
Property Master: Ray Perry Sr
Costume Designer: Lindy Hemming
Wardrobe Mistress: Karen Sharpe
Make-up: Elaine Carew
Hairdresser: Wendy Rawson
Titles: Frameline
Music: Ludus Tonalis
Music Producers: Hans Zimmer, Stanley Myers
Sound Recording: Albert Bailey

Boom Operator: St. Clair Davis
Dubbing Mixer: Peter Maxwell
Dubbing Editor: 'budge' Tremlett
Assistant Dubbing Editor: Matthew Whiteman
Stunt Co-ordinators: Rocky Taylor, Jim Dowdall, Bill Weston, Noshier Powell

Cast

Daniel Day Lewis (*Johnny*)
Richard Graham (*Genghis*)
Winston Graham (*1st Jamaican*)
Dudley Thomas (*2nd Jamaican*)
Derrick Branche (*Salim*)
Garry Cooper (*squatter*)
Gordon Warnecke (*Omar*)
Roshan Seth (*Papa Hussain*)
Saeed Jaffrey (*Nasser*)
Shirley Anne Field (*Rachel*)
Charu Bala Choksi (*Bilquis*)
Souad Faress (*Cherry*)
Rita Wolf (*Tania*)
Persis Maravala (*Nasser's elder daughter*)
Nisha Kapur (*Nasser's younger daughter*)
Neil Cunningham (*Englishman*)
Walter Donohue (*Dick O'Donnell*)
Gurdial Sira (*Zaki*)
Stephen Marcus (*Moose*)
Dawn Archibald (*1st gang member*)
Jonathan Moore (*2nd gang member*)
Gerard Horan (*telephone man*)
Ram John Holder (*poet*)
Bhasker (*Tariq*)
Ayub Khan Din (*student*)
Dulice Liecier (*girl in disco*)
Badi Uzzaman (*dealer*)
Chris Pitt (*1st kid*)
Kerryann White (*2nd kid*)
Colin Campbell (*Madame Butterfly man*)
Sheila Chitnis (*Zaki's wife*)

UK 1985©

97 mins

BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

The Warrior + on-stage career interview with writer-director Asif Kapadia

Sat 19 Jun 20:30

Ahimsa: Gandhi the Power of the Powerless

Sun 20 Jun 15:00

Searching for Happiness...

Tue 22 Jun 20:50

Nazarband Captive

Wed 23 Jun 20:45

A'hr Kayattam

Thu 24 Jun 18:00

The Salt in Our Waters Nonajoler Kabbo

Sun 27 Jun 15:00

LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

UK Competition 1: I Forgot More than You'll Ever Know

Sat 26 Jun 21:00

UK Competition 3: Close Quarters

Fri 26 Jun 21:10

UK Competition 2: The Double Life Of...

Mon 28 Jun 17:45

UK Competition 4: Lessons in Survival

Tue 29 Jun 21:10

UK Competition 5: The Devil's in the Details

Wed 30 Jun 17:50

CHINESE VISUAL FESTIVAL

Opening Night: UK Premiere: Drifting + intro

Thu 15 Jul 17:50

UK Premiere: Love Poem + intro

Sat 17 Jul 12:00

Spring Tide + intro

Sun 18 Jul 15:00

Back to the Wharf + intro

Wed 21 Jul 17:50

Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue + intro

Sat 24 Jul 14:00

Closing Night: UK Premiere: Shadows + intro

Sun 25 Jul 15:10

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