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Interview

# Hanif Kureishi: 'I'd like to see a British Muslim Sopranos'

Arifa Akbar



▲ 'Why is it we are so good at protests but we can't organise a substantial leftwing political party? ... the writer at his home. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

**As his new play *The Spank* opens in Italy, the writer talks about the power of ludicrous ideas, the crisis facing the middle class - and why he can't get white liberals off his phone**



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**H**anif Kureishi has been reflecting on toxic masculinity. He has heard a lot about it in the past year and it has entered the fiction he has been writing over lockdown - at quite a rate by the sound of it - and sparked stories about predation, sexual misdemeanour and “what’s going on between men and women”.

But he is just as interested in the benign, everyday dynamic between male friends. Most of the men he knows are good people, he says, who get together to talk about music and books, tease each other and chew the cud about life. He misses them now, locked away in his study in west London, although he has grownup sons up the road for company (they live with their mother). There’s the dog, too, which they take to the park together most days.

There is a natural drama in the way friends report their lives to each other over a pint or a coffee, he says, and he has written a play structured around just that: two men sitting down to talk over a drink. It looks at how well they get on and how catastrophically they fall out. It was written before the pandemic and scheduled to run at the Coronet in London before everything closed last year. Now it has opened at Teatro Stabile di Torino, one of Italy’s seven national theatres, after Kureishi’s Italian girlfriend showed it to the play’s translator, Monica Capuani. It stars Filippo Dini (also the director) and Valerio Binasco.

Its two characters are, like Kureishi’s friends, good men: a picture of middle-class, middle-aged masculinity, even when one of them strays in his marriage and the other tells on him. That decision has a devastating effect on friendship and family life, although the play is sprinkled with its own bathetic comedy. It is called *The Spank*, for starters, which sounds more like a French farce than a serious drama. And there is a plotline of an ineptly taken “dick pic” that ends up being sent to a teenage daughter instead of a lover.



▲ Middle-class masculinity and a ‘dick pic’ ... *The Spank*. Photograph: Luigi De Palma

“It’s a comedy in the Chekhovian sense,” he says, “with a lot of ridiculousness, but I hope it’s also quite moving. *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a comedy about a gay Pakistani and a gay skinhead who fall in love and run a launderette together. That’s a pretty funny idea too. I like ludicrous ideas but I also like them to be serious.”

At 67, Kureishi is avuncular and warm on Zoom, even if he delivers his dry humour deadpan. He made his name as a screenwriter and novelist with a punkish sensibility in the 1980s, with edgy ideas about sexuality, race and class. But theatre is where he began, at the age of 18, when his father came across a letter he had composed to the Royal Court in London in his bedroom. “He read it and forced me to ring up the Royal Court. When I went there, they gave me a job. I read scripts, worked backstage, at the box office and later I became writer.”

His play *Borderline*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, was staged in 1981, and he reckons it was the first drama at the Royal Court about “so-called Asian people”, focusing, as it did, on immigrants living near Heathrow airport. “It was a big break for me. It was one of the few theatres that gave chances to people of colour then. It was a great apprenticeship. I learned a lot from directors. You learn a lot from actors too. You see an actor who can’t say a line and you think, ‘Is it the actor or is there something funny about the line?’”

Now, after decades away from the stage he has returned, although *The Spank* was written partly out of frustration. He had written a BBC TV drama with his son, Sachin Kureishi, which was greenlit and then not made. He turned to the idea of two men talking on stage because the format was simple. He liked the thought of it coming to life without all the fuss of TV.



▲ 'A pretty funny idea' ...  
My Beautiful Laundrette.  
Photograph: Alamy

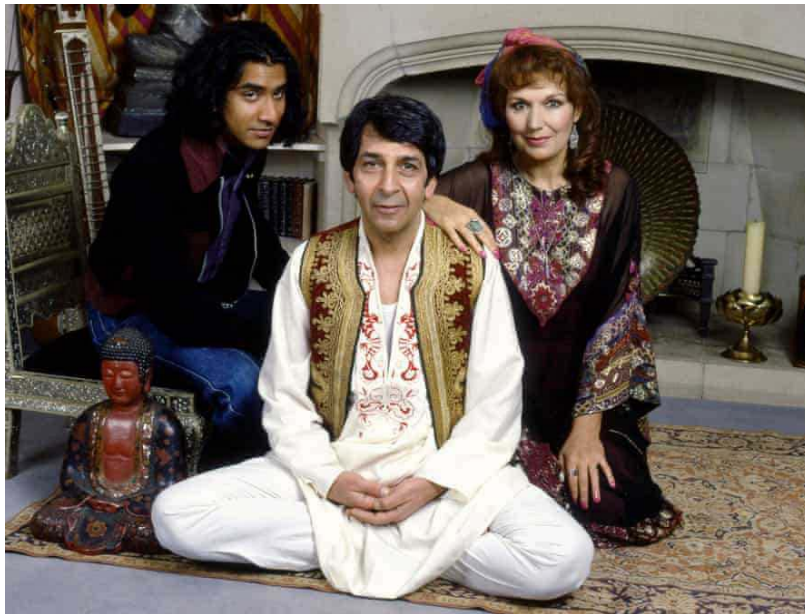
Although it was written before the pandemic, *The Spank*'s minimalism seems perfect for our socially distant times. It also resonates with contemporary anxieties about class. “As we’ve seen in this pandemic,” says Kureishi, “the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and the middle classes are going down. I’m saying that the middle classes aren’t immune from the catastrophes of the world. My children’s lives could easily be far worse than my life, for instance.”

Kureishi has three sons - twins Sachin and Carlo, 26, with his former wife Tracey Scoffield, a film producer, and Kier, 22, with Monique Proudlove, a charity worker. Kureishi’s conversation often returns to them: how they keep him interested in the world, how he is worried for their future, how two (Sachin and Carlo) are also writers. It is clear he is an incredibly proud father. If *The Spank* is about the romance of friendship, Kureishi also rates fatherly friendship highly, especially now they are grown. “This is the best bit because I don’t have to tell them to do their homework or clip them round the ear. I can enjoy their company and enjoy listening to them.”

In his 2004 memoir, *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father*, he wrote of his sons’ relationship to their mixed heritage. Kureishi himself is mixed race, with a white British mother and a British Pakistani father. They were children then, gleefully comparing their skin tones. What is their experience of being mixed-race *men*? “They’re very proud,” he says. “They also live in a much freer time than I ever did and they don’t suffer discrimination.”

Last June, [Kureishi wrote with hope](#) about racial equality in the aftermath of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests. Since then, we’ve had [Derek Chauvin’s conviction](#) for Floyd’s murder in America but also the much-criticised [Sewell report into race in the UK](#). Is he still as optimistic? “There’s a very odd thing going on in the world. We have had the Black Lives Matter protests, we have heard women complaining about abusive

behaviour, we've had protests against the [Super League](#) and the invasion of the pitch at Old Trafford. So there are uprisings and protests - but at the same time, we have a rightwing government. Why is it that we are so good at uprisings and protests but we can't organise a substantial leftwing political party? I've been on demonstrations with my kids but how do we transform that activism into political and social change? I'm puzzled by this."



▲ British Asian stories ... the TV version of *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Photograph: Alamy

As for diversity in film and theatre, Kureishi feels we are in a much better place, although he has seen the patronising effects of "white guilt" in recent times: "You see far more black actors now and obviously I'm not against that. What I don't like is when white people get really guilty and start being nice to you. Black people are winning all the prizes and it's rather wretched to see. I said to one of my kids the other day, 'Since George Floyd [was murdered] the phone hasn't stopped ringing.' Black people are being patronised by white liberals. That's not what we need. What we want is real, substantial equality and real substantial change."

Does he think there are interesting enough stories being told about British Asian lives? "I don't know how many really good British Asian writers have emerged in the last few years," he says, but what he would be interested to see is a British Muslim family drama with all the complexities of that contemporary identity. "There's never been a proper Muslim drama on British television like, say, *The Sopranos*, with a really in-depth look at business and culture and relationships and marriage. I'd really like to see that. I'm too old to write it, but somebody should."

▲ **Black people are being patronised by white liberals. Since George Floyd's murder, the phone hasn't stopped ringing**

In the 1980s, Kureishi wrote with deftness about racial and sexual identities, portraying their multiplicity in such works as *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Where does he stand on sex and gender today? "We see biology viewed through the lens of culture and this was always the case. Freud was talking about how gender was a construct, that it was a spectrum and so on, at the turn of the 20th century. It's really interesting to see how in some countries they are worried about the notion of gender superseding biology. You think, 'Why are you worrying about this and not whether the trains are running on time?' It's very odd."

He thinks the battles around gender are ultimately born out of a "terror" of change: "If we divorce the idea of what a man is and what a woman is from biology then we can reconstruct ourselves in ways that we like. To those who are creative, that's a wonderful idea because we can remake ourselves. That's why we were so impressed by David Bowie in the 1970s and the idea that you

could wear a dress and be a heterosexual man. It's liberating because you can have new kinds of relationships, friendships and conversations. That's terrifying for some people and liberating for others."

He is fired up enough about the subject to have written stories about gender during the pandemic. He is also writing another play, with Carlo, about a father-son relationship set in lockdown, in which simmering family tensions explode during a game of chess. He says he feels honoured to have *The Spank* staged in Italy but deeply regrets not being there. On the day of its premiere, he sends me a video of the clamorous applause as the actors take their bows, with the accompanying words: "Awful not to be there." He adds: "I'd like to have had lunch with the actors. I'd like to have been in the building. I'd like to have seen the lights go down and the actors walk on stage."

- This article was amended on 20 May 2021. The mother of Kureishi's son Kier is Monique Proudlove, not Tracey Scoffield as stated in an earlier version.

- [The Spank is playing at Teatro Stabile di Torino, Italy, until 30 May.](#)

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