**Summary (Credits: Wikipedia)**

***My Beautiful Laundrette*** is a 1985 British [comedy-drama](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy-drama) film directed by [Stephen Frears](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Frears) from a screenplay by [Hanif Kureishi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanif_Kureishi%22%20%5Co%20%22Hanif%20Kureishi). The film was also one of the first films released by [Working Title Films](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_Title_Films).

The story is set in [London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London) during the [Thatcher years](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thatcher_years), as reflected in the complex, and often comical, relationships between members of the Pakistani and English communities. The story focuses on Omar, played by [Gordon Warnecke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordon_Warnecke), a young Pakistani man living in London, and his reunion and eventual romance with his old friend, a [street punk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punk_subculture) named Johnny, played by [Daniel Day-Lewis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Day-Lewis). The two become the caretakers and business managers of a [launderette](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Launderette) originally owned by Omar's uncle Nasser.

The [British Film Institute](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Film_Institute) ranked *My Beautiful Laundrette* the [50th greatest British film of the 20th century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BFI_Top_100_British_films).

Omar Ali is a young man living in [South London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_London) during the mid-1980s. His father, Hussein, once a famous left-wing journalist in [Pakistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan), lives in London but dislikes Britain's society and its international politics. His dissatisfaction with the world and a family tragedy have led him to sink into alcoholism, so that Omar has to be his [caregiver](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caregiver). By contrast, Omar's paternal uncle Nasser is a successful entrepreneur and an active member of the [Pakistani community](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistani_community_of_London). Hussein asks Nasser to give Omar a job and, after working for a brief time as a car washer in one of his uncle's garages, he is assigned the task of managing a run-down laundrette.

At Nasser's, Omar meets a few other community members: Tania, Nasser's daughter and possibly a future bride; and Salim, who trafficks drugs and hires him to deliver them from the airport. While driving Salim and his wife home that night, the three of them get attacked by a group of right-wing extremist street punks. Their apparent leader turns out to be Johnny, Omar's childhood friend. Omar tries to reestablish their past friendship, offering Johnny a job and the opportunity to adopt a better life by working to fix up the laundrette with him. Johnny decides to accept and they resume a romantic relationship that (it is implied) had been interrupted after school. Running out of money, Omar and Johnny sell one of Salim's drug deliveries to make cash for the laundrette's substantial renovation.

On the laundrette's opening day, Omar confronts Johnny on his fascist past. Johnny, feeling guilty, tells him that though he cannot make it up to him, he is with him now. Nasser visits the laundrette with his mistress, Rachel. As they dance together in the laundrette, Omar and Johnny make love in the back room, narrowly escaping discovery. At the inauguration, Tania confronts Rachel about having an affair with her father. Rachel accuses Nasser of having invited Tania on purpose to have her insulted, and storms off despite his protests. Later that night, a drunk Omar proposes to Tania, who accepts on the condition that he raise money to get away. Soon after, Salim reveals to Omar that he is on to them, and demands his money back. Omar's father stops by late in the night and appeals to Johnny to persuade Omar to go to college because he is unhappy with his son's role.

Offering Salim a chance to invest in his businesses as a much needed 'clean outlet' for his money, Omar decides to take over two laundrettes owned by a friend of Nasser. Salim drives Johnny and Omar to view one of the properties, and he expresses his dislike of the British non-working punks in Johnny's gang. He attempts to run them over and injures one of them. Tania drops by the laundrette and tells Johnny she is leaving, asking him to come along. He refuses, implicitly revealing the truth about himself and Omar and she departs wordlessly. Rachel falls ill with a skin rash apparently caused by a ritual curse from Nasser's wife, and decides it is best for all that she and Nasser part ways. After Salim arrives and enters the laundrette, the punks, who had been lying in wait, trash his car. When he runs out, he is ambushed and viciously attacked. Johnny decides to interrupt and defend him, despite their mutual dislike, and the punks turn their attention to him instead. As he refuses to fight back, they beat him savagely until Omar returns and intervenes, protecting Johnny as the punks smash the window of the laundrette and flee the scene.

Nasser visits Hussein, and the two discuss their respective failures, agreeing between them that only Omar's future matters now. Nasser sees Tania at the train platform while she is running away, and he shouts to her but she disappears. Meanwhile, at the laundrette, Omar nurses Johnny, and the two bond. The film ends with a scene of them shirtless and playfully splashing each other with water from a sink.

**Critical analysis:**

Hanif Kureishi's 1985 film *My Beautiful Laundrette* portrays a young British South Asian man who runs a laundrette with his white schoolfriend, and the romantic relationship between the two. Sukhdev Sandhu explains how the film marked a radical departure from previous representations of British South Asians in mainstream culture.

Back in the early 1970s and early 1980s, when [Hanif Kureishi](https://www.bl.uk/people/hanif-kureishi) was starting out as a playwright, British Asians were rarely spotted on the stage, screen or in the pages of literary fiction. They were culturally invisible and widely regarded as a ‘model minority’ whose passivity and meekness contrasted favourably with the feistiness of second-generation Caribbean youths. They had no presence in the pop charts, no fashion styles that were aped by white Britons, no dashing wingers or centre-forwards whose footballing prowess might make them poster or sticker-book heroes.

Ever so infrequently, British Asians were represented in current-affairs coverage of industrial disputes, shocked reports about the cruelty of arranged marriages, and occasional dispatches about how, on the streets of Whitechapel and Southall, they were beginning to fight back against xenophobic bootboys. Elsewhere, in sitcoms such as *It Ain’t Half Hot Mum*(1974–81) and *Mind Your Language* (1977–79), or in the routines of portly end-of the-pier comedians, they were language-mangling, curry-gobbling misers. In short, they were the butts of jokes rather than the tellers of them.

For writers such as Salman Rushdie, in his essay ‘Outside The Whale’ (1984), this sorry state of affairs was compounded by what he regarded as the televisual Raj Revival of the early 1980s. He argued that expensive, gorgeously shot, multi-episode costume dramas such as *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984) and *The Far Pavilions*(1984), as well as films such as *Gandhi*(1982), propagated conservative, reactionary politics all too similar to those being espoused by the then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In towns and cities across the United Kingdom, many immigrants and their children were being treated as second-class citizens, perpetrators of economic crises of which they were actually the victims, and yet, according to Rushdie, here were splashy film works that seemed to portray ‘easy escapes from history, from hullabaloo, from terrible, unquiet fuss’.[[1]](https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-my-beautiful-laundrette#footnote1)

The clamour and criticality for which Rushdie hungered was to be found in Hanif Kureishi’s debut film [*My Beautiful Laundrette*](https://www.bl.uk/works/my-beautiful-laundrette)(1985). It was originally conceived as a television series, one whose drama was contextualised by explicit and sweeping references to post-*Windrush* immigration to the United Kingdom. The final version, directed by Stephen Frears, focused on the present day. It portrayed, almost *Bildungsroman*style, a young Anglo-Pakistani called Omar (played by Gordon Warnecke) who opens up a launderette in south London that he runs with Johnny (Daniel Day Lewis), a schoolfriend who some years before, to their mutual regret, had chosen the company of racist skinheads over his. A romance forms between them and makes them both pariahs to their respective communities.

It was also eye-opening in its focus on sex. British Asians were popularly regarded as dowdy, puritanical and family-focussed rather than hedonistic. Yet here, Omar has a relationship with someone who’s not his fiancée, with a man rather than a woman, and with a poorly educated skinhead of the kind many immigrants would have feared and despised in equal measure. This same-sex relationship is depicted explicitly – at a time when much of the conservative establishment decried homosexuality in the name of Victorian values, and when the popular press used the AIDS epidemic as an excuse to castigate gay people. Though occasionally fraught, the leads' romance is mostly fun, certainly not tragic.

**Identity, Alienation, and Sexuality in Hanif Kureishi’s ‘My Beautiful Laundrette’**

**(Credits: Café Dissensus blog).**

In his screenplay, My Beautiful Laundrette (1985), the British Pakistani author, Hanif Kureishi chronicles the life of Pakistani immigrant, Omar Ali, in South London inner-city of Battersea. It depicts the reality of the place through the squalid imageries of crime, sex, and drugs, laced with the complexities of postcolonial racial identity that travels through the borders. The narrative of the screenplay is set against the backdrop of twentieth century’s post-war colonial immigration to Britain. Ali is the protagonist in this screenplay. And it is through Ali and his extended family in London that Kureishi creates a complex gallery of Pakistani immigrant life that in the first instance defies stereotyping. The narrative, in Leonard Quart’s words, “never indulges in the kind of patronizing sentimentality that turns the Pakistanis into either social problems or mere victims of English racism.”

The themes running throughout the text of the screenplay revolve around multicultural identities that include alienation, exclusion, conflict, sense of belonging, and also the complexity of sexuality.  Torn between the two extremes of tradition and modernity, each of these elements is represented by two characters of Omar’s family in the screenplay. While Omar’s father longs to go back to their home in Pakistan, Nasser, his brother, finds the country “sodomised by religion.” In the climactic conversation between the two brothers, Nasser tells him, “compared with everywhere, it [is] a little heaven here [London].”  This is a powerful climax, which successfully attempts to bring to the fore the complexities of an immigrant life, the struggle to survive, and conflicts with the self. Kureishi brilliantly sums up the theme of his screenplay in the last five pages, leaving the reader to ponder over the profound questions of an immigrant identity – race, belonging, and sexuality.

 In Kureishi’s work, we see that the burden of immigration falls on British multiculturalism, that is, any policy paralysis at the level of the Government is quickly blamed on the immigrants, who find space in a culturally diverse society. As Whiteman argues, “…the resentful, marginalized and disillusioned working class [fails] to control and integrate post-war immigrants into Britain. This political sacrifice blamed multiculturalism for white working class socioeconomic disparities, when, in reality, they were marginalized through ineffective housing and employment policies.” He depicts a time when “inequality became almost exclusively understood through the prism of race and ethnic identity.” In My Beautiful Laundrette, one observes that the link between race, inequality, and the rise of multiculturalism has led the white working class to think of themselves as a new ethnic minority with their own distinctive culture. The tension between immigrant and indigenous groups within Britain is realistically represented in the screenplay, as is evident in the declaration of Johnny’s disgruntled friend and National Front member:

I don’t like to see one of our blokes [Johnny] groveling to Pakis. Look they came over here to work for us. That’s why we brought them over, okay?

This colonialist mentality illustrates the resentment against mass post-war immigration, which many white working class people feel has resulted in their economic and social downturn. This story – a richly textured and most original account of a Pakistani immigrant life in London – is of particular interest because of Kureishi’s experiential epistemology. It recounts the author’s first trip to Pakistan, where he found a combination of servility towards Western culture and troglodytic calls for a return to Islamic purity. It is in Pakistan that Kureishi becomes aware of his British identity, but he returns to Britain only to see once again how he is still perceived by the English as the “other” – a “Paki.”

Alexander Whiteman writes that the text also “portrays the multifaceted relationship of two homosexual men, one of middle class, British-Pakistani ethnicity and the other of a white British working class background, struggling to live in multiracial London.” Here, Omar represents the British-Pakistani ethnicity and Johnny, his school friend, the indigenous white working class.

In My Beautiful Laundrette, one notices a negotiation of sexuality. The two men rekindle their teenage relationship when they are alone together in the laundrette. It is illustrative of how they escaped the ethical and moral boundaries that both society and Omar’s family had imposed on them. When they are left alone in the laundrette, they are able to surpass Omar’s family’s cultural expectation of a heterosexual arranged marriage between Omar and Tania. Similarly, Johnny is able to detach himself from his racist group of resentful white working class peers and form a relationship with the supposed “other” – the son of a Pakistani immigrant. In this sense, the laundrette further serves as an analogy for the individual fulfillment the two men feel, regenerating it from an abandoned, misused business to a successful one. Their relationship, like the laundrette, demands hard work and commitment through adversity, symbolised by their secretive relationship, which only allows them to show affection for each other in darkness, outside of the “real world”. The dominant discourse on ‘correct’ model of sexuality foregrounds the importance of spatiality in the screenplay.  It is in these spaces, which are hidden and dark, that the less dominant form of sexuality finds form and expression.

My Beautiful Laundrette further illustrates the general ignorance attached to homosexuality – that is, it can be a conscious decision rather than always being a natural occurrence in human nature. This is evident when Omar’s uncle, Salim, questions whether his nephew’s penis is in working order, when he shies away from the idea of marriage with Tania. It did not occur to Salim that possibly his nephew chose to be a homosexual. However, some scholars have argued that there is very little scientific evidence that sexuality is a state we are born into. This means that homosexuality is still a choice. The film seems to critique this when Omar drunkenly proposes to Tania in an effort to both please his family’s expectations of heteronormativity and to deny his homosexual feelings. Both Omar and Johnny, however, are seen to struggle with their feelings of homosexuality after hearing the news of Omar’s engagement. In an attempt to bury his feelings for Omar, Johnny leaves the laundrette and decides to drink all by himself. The engagement unsurprisingly falls through, and Johnny, after failing to abide by expectations of heteronormativity, confesses his secret relationship to Tania. This illustrates how Omar and Johnny could not successfully deny their genuine sexuality. The case for innate sexuality is, thus, still unclear, both academically and scientifically. This means that any such investigation into the issue is limited.

In this ironic, intelligently structured screenplay, Kureishi succeeds in dealing with issues that still hold relevance in twenty first century. My Beautiful Laundrette provides a satirical, comic portrait of upper middle class Pakistanis in twentieth century England, where young, native Cockneys have only the dole and street violence to console them. The Pakistanis are ambivalent about Thatcher’s England, but are not put off by its racism, knowing that “there is money in the muck.” They feel contempt for the English, who lack the energy and drive to “squeeze the tits of the system.” Still, they become nostalgic about their past privileged life in Karachi. Nasser continues to run his home in the traditional way, with an illiterate wife and daughters clipping his toe nails, while he holds court like an eighteenth century Raja in an undivided India.

In the screenplay, the immigrant and indigenous idiosyncratic lives vividly reflect the social realities of the time – ambiguous and dark.