

My Beautiful Laundrette: A Short Film Review

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My Beautiful Laundrette can be seen as a critical examination of Thatcherite Britain. Set in South London in the early 1980s, the film depicts a period rich with British history. Written by Hanif Kureishi, the screenplay is heavy with references to not only his own life, but also to life in multiracial Britain in general. It tackles a number of issues, including racism, changes in sexuality and economic hardship, all of which contributed to Britain's nationwide identity crisis at the time.

The main character is a young, British Pakistani man called Omar Ali, who spends his time caring for his father, a journalist-turned-alcoholic, following the suicide of Omar's mother. His father, Hussein, requests Nasser, his younger brother, to give Omar a job, so that he doesn't have to live on unemployment benefit "like everyone else in England." Nasser agrees, and thus begins Omar's excursion into the complicated world of family business.

Omar's ambition and willingness to please quickly get him promoted to manager of his uncle's run-down laundrette. His task is to make it turn a profit, and being so in awe of Nasser and his accomplishments, Omar is eager to prove himself. He enlists the help of his old friend from school, Johnny – a homeless, ex-fascist who now spends his time as part of a gang of street punks.

The film highlights both the differences and similarities between Omar and Johnny as part of the British youth in the 1980s. A major difference lies in the roles that family and community play in their lives. Omar's social circle consists largely of his extended family and the wider Pakistani community in London. Hussein's dependence on Omar for basic things is also significant because it shows how important family loyalty is to Pakistanis. Love between family members is non-negotiable, even though this concept

is foreign to Omar, since he was not brought up in Pakistan. This is emphasized when Nasser declares that he loves Omar like a son, prompting a confused response from Omar – “I don’t understand how you can love me.” This is part of the Pakistani culture that the older generation holds on to, despite the fact that they have abandoned other traditions in order to adapt to living in Britain. On the other hand, Johnny has virtually no contact with his family – “I don’t get on with me mum and dad.” – and is therefore forced to seek the company of his punk friends. It is interesting to note how he is considered to be of a lower social status than Omar and his family, in a period during which widespread racism made people regard immigrants as scum. Johnny's street gang becomes his makeshift family, even though he doesn’t necessarily share the views of his right-wing companions – this is indicated when he refuses to take part in their hooliganism and chooses to be a neutral observer instead.

Johnny’s main struggle is finding a way to move on from a past riddled with fascism and hatred. He feels that by working with Omar, he’ll be able to become a better person by doing something constructive. The audience sees shots of Johnny singing and laughing as he renovates the dingy laundrette, but also sees how shaken and upset he gets when his past is brought up – “I want to forget all of them things.” Johnny works so he can pave the path to a better future for himself.

Omar’s goals are similar in the sense that he wants a brighter future. However, his ambition acts as his driving force, and he is obsessed with the concept of achieving something “big.” Nasser’s influence plays a great part in this, as Omar’s admiration for his success is evident in the film. Nasser is only too happy to encourage Omar to pursue his goals, which is emphasized when he says, “we’ll drink to Thatcher and your beautiful

laundrette.” Not only does this reference the title of the film, but it also underlines the opportunities offered by Thatcherism. When Omar and Johnny finish the renovation of the laundrette, there is a grand opening, complete with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. At this point in the film, the laundrette can be seen as an embodiment of the benefits of Thatcherism.

While the entrepreneurial spirit encouraged by Thatcherism can be beneficial to society in this way, there are also various downsides to committing too fully to this ideology. For example, Salim, a friend and business associate of Nasser’s, represents the corruption that goes alongside the more lenient regulations of Thatcherite Britain. He is actively involved in drug trafficking, and even drags Omar and Johnny into the mix; this is a far cry from the legitimate operation that they want to run. Hussein, on the other hand, symbolizes the failures of Thatcherism. His socialist views clash with Thatcherism at a fundamental level. To Hussein, Thatcherite Britain is a cruel place in which he and his fellow Pakistanis are unwelcome because major issues like racism have not been properly tackled.

Furthermore, Omar’s obsession with success makes him act in a heartless manner at times, and this threatens his relationship with Johnny. It is implied that there is something more than just friendship between the two of them, long before their romantic relationship is revealed. During their first encounter in the film, Omar approaches Johnny with an expression of unbridled joy, which is mirrored in the music playing in the background during the scene. He does not introduce himself – “It’s me.” – and this alludes to the intimacy of their relationship. While Johnny initially responds with pseudo-indifference, as the film progresses, his affection for Omar becomes more evident.

However, despite the more open attitude towards sex in 1980s Britain, homosexual relationships are still frowned upon, with the AIDs crisis brewing feelings of intense homophobia in the minds of the public. Omar and Johnny keep their relationship hidden, but are less secretive about their friendship and their business partnership. In one scene, Johnny is painting the laundrette sign when Omar comes to supervise. He subsequently shoves money into Johnny's front pocket, in broad view of Johnny's punk friends, before pulling him in for a hug. Johnny secretly licks Omar's neck as he hugs him. This scene is noteworthy because the irrationality of the social norms of British society at the time is conveyed to the audience – money, which should be seen as something cold and hard, is exchanged openly, while affection, which is soft and universal, is hidden.

The secretive nature of Omar and Johnny's romantic relationship is contrasted heavily with the heterosexual relationships in the film. Nasser has a British mistress called Rachel; they openly pursue their affair, even though Nasser is married to a Pakistani woman. This highlights the hypocrisy of society – homosexuality is taboo while infidelity is accepted as a norm. This is further emphasized when Tania, Nasser's daughter, confronts Rachel about Nasser spending money on someone who isn't part of her family, rather than being concerned about the fact that her mother is being betrayed – “But I don't like women who live off men. That's a pretty disgusting, parasitical thing, isn't it?”

This is also an illustration of Tania's confused approach to women's empowerment. She dislikes Rachel for leaning on Nasser for financial support, but isn't opposed to the idea when her own well-being comes into question. She is expected to

marry Omar because it is a union supported by both their fathers, but only agrees to do so if Omar can give her money to run away from home – “I want to leave home. I need to break away. You’ll have to help me, financially.”

Omar and Tania’s marriage has been arranged to ensure that they both marry respectable members of the Pakistani community. This is yet another example of a double standard in the community – interracial relationships are so discouraged that they can only exist in a premarital or extramarital environment. Rachel senses this, and ends her affair with Nasser because “it’s not possible to enjoy being hated so much.”

Social customs of this kind contribute to the confusion surrounding the identity of the Pakistanis as part of British society. Nasser is keen to immerse himself fully in British culture because he believes it to be the only way he will be truly successful – “In this damn country, which we love and hate, you can get anything you want. It’s all spread out and available. That’s why I believe in England.” “I’m a professional businessman, not a professional Pakistani. And there is no question of race in the new enterprise culture.” On the other hand, Salim’s wife, Cherry, is unable to understand “how anyone in their right mind could call this silly little island off Europe their home.” Hussein shares this view because of his unfortunate experiences in Britain, and feels that he belongs in Pakistan instead – “This damn country has done us in. That’s why I’m like this. We should be there. Home.”

The National Front marches in Lewisham, and other similar events, have haunted Hussein and have made him look at Britain in a perpetually negative light. Omar and Johnny’s relationship is constantly under pressure because of Johnny’s involvement in the marches years ago. The betrayal felt by Omar, and Johnny’s own guilt, further

accentuate Johnny's struggle to find his own identity. He wants to prove his loyalty to Omar, but does not know how to articulate his emotions – "There ain't nothing I can say to make it up to you. There's only things I can do to say that I am with you." Ironically, his desire to be a better person is the very thing that makes him a target of abuse from his own gang.

On one hand, the punks want to save Johnny. They think that by working for Omar, Johnny is degrading himself – "I don't like to see one of our blokes grovelling to Pakis." – and they do not like the distance that this creates between him and them – "Don't cut yourself off from your own people." However, when Johnny stops them from beating Salim (who aggravated the punks in an earlier scene), his so-called friends turn against him. Johnny is pummelled to a pulp because he refuses to fight back, and the laundrette is wrecked.

While the events depicted in the film had dire consequences in some cases, Omar and Johnny emerge stronger after having learnt from their experiences. The destruction of the laundrette symbolizes the crumbling of the traditional British identity; a difficult transition that is vital in creating a better society. The last scene of the film shows Omar cleaning Johnny's wounds and the two of them splashing each other with water. They are happy, despite the fact that everything they worked for has been destroyed. Their unwavering hope is conveyed to the audience in a powerful way, and it is this hope that is a key component in Britain rising from an era wrought with challenges and discontent.