

# Hanif Kureishi: Pakistani-British identities

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Dr Robert Craig  
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# ‘Orientalism’ (Edward Said)

- Said (1935-2003) was a Palestinian-American Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University and a founding figure of the academic field of **postcolonial studies**, a term which was first used in 1990 to signify the political, linguistic and cultural experience of former European colonies; but it has since come to refer also to their cultural impact on European societies, e.g. through immigration.
- His groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978) was based principally on nineteenth-century representations of North Africa and the Middle East from English and French sources. He aimed to show that these representations/portrayals, strongly shaped by Imperialism, divided the world up into ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’.
- A so-called ‘geographical essentialism’ had produced ‘the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically “different” inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture or racial essence proper to that geographical space’ (Said, 1978: 322). **The West (primarily the Imperial European powers)** stands for (signifies) rationality, reasonableness, progress, science, democracy, masculinity; by contrast, **the East – the Orient, be it the Arab world, India or China** – stands (positively) for exoticism, romance, and a lost spirituality; but also (negatively) for cruelty; barbarity; despotism and irrationality; **and in a complex relation to these attributes**, it signifies cultural decadence, decline, and ‘the feminine’.

# The Indian Subcontinent

- The **East India Company** – an English, later British, joint-stock company founded in 1600 – ruled India from 1757-1858. It gradually gained increasing power over ever more extensive Indian territories, sharing sovereignty with the Crown.
- The **Indian Rebellion of 1857-58** – fuelled by deep Indian resentment at socially and fiscally invasive British rule, as well as frustration at the lack of benefits it brought – was characterized by extreme violence on both sides (although only around **6,000** of the British died, compared to over **800,000** Indians – both during the rebellion and afterwards in the famines & epidemics that followed). Through the **Government of India Act of 1958**, India was ruled directly by the British Government in the form of the **British Raj**, with rights similar to those enjoyed by colonial subjects being promised to pacify the rebels.
- The institutional & cultural impact of the Raj on India (e.g., the administrative use of English post-Independence, educational institutions, and parliamentary government) was significant. **However**, extractive & exploitative British economic policies greatly exacerbated the impacts of some of the worst famines in history, such as the Indian famine of **1899-90**, in which some **4.5 million** died, and the Bengal famine in **1943-44**, which claimed an estimated **3 million** lives.

# Partition of India (August 1947)



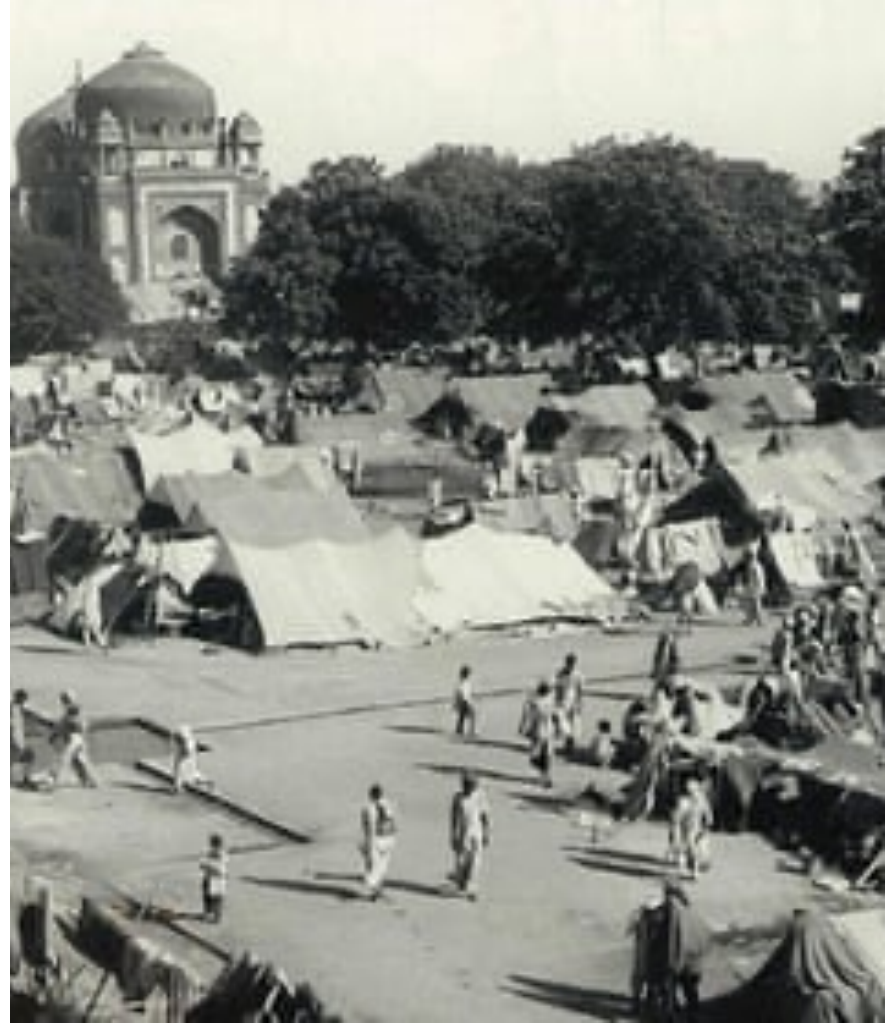
Muslim refugees crowd onto a train bound for Pakistan as it leaves the New Delhi area in India on Sept, 27, 1947.  
Source: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/08/12/commentary/unfinished-business-indian-partition/>

# Partition of India (August 1947)

- Following the new Labour Government's decision to decolonize in 1945, this saw the division of British India – the two provinces of Bengal and Punjab – into (**what are now**) the Republic of India, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of Bangladesh (in 1947, East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan, which became the independent state of Bangladesh in 1972). India and Pakistan came into existence as self-governing states at midnight on **14-15 August 1947**.
- The divisions took place along religious lines (predominantly between Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs), and they resulted in the largest mass migration and one of the severest refugee crises in human history. It **Between 10 and 12 million people were displaced**.
- Between 200,000 and 1 million people died during the forced migration; estimates of loss of life through extreme sectarian violence vary from c. 300,000 to 2 million: **Hindu-Muslim violence was often intended to stamp out respective communities' abilities to reproduce, and had been stoked & exacerbated in the previous decades by high-handed British imperial policies.**

# Partition of India (August 1947)

- The identity politics nurtured by the British over the previous decades – in a ‘divide and rule’ strategy – set the stage for massive inter-religious violence: violence that flared up as the last Viceroy of India, Lord Louis Mountbatten, advanced the planned British withdrawal **from June 1948 to 14 August 1947** (due to the lack of available British resources to maintain order, and the desire to avoid any suggestion of British responsibility).
- The long-term political legacies included entrenched (and continuing) hostility between Pakistan and India, and between Muslim and Hindu communities from both countries. Partition also engendered (largely unspoken) trauma in the 10s-100s of thousands of Indians and Pakistanis who migrated to the UK.



# Hall and Kureishi on multiculturalism

‘Since cultural diversity is, increasingly, the fate of the modern world, and ethnic absolutism a regressive feature of late-modernity, the greatest danger now arises from forms of national and cultural identity - new or old - which attempt to secure their identity by adopting closed versions of culture or community and by the refusal to engage - in the name of an “oppressed white minority” (sic) - with the difficult problems that arise from trying to live with difference. **The capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century.**’

– Stuart Hall, ‘Culture, Community, Nation’ (1992), p. 361.

- Hall heavily criticizes **hegemonic** attempts to make **civic** rights and entitlements as British citizens dependent upon a **cultural** adherence to a particular idea of ‘Britishness’.

‘Religions may be illusions, but these are important and profound illusions. And they will modify as they come into contact with other ideas. **This is what an effective multiculturalism is: not a superficial exchange of festivals and food, but a robust and committed exchange of ideas** - a conflict that is worth enduring, rather than a war.’

– Hanif Kureishi, ‘The Carnival of Culture’, *The Guardian*, 2005.

# Discussion questions

1. How would you characterize Kureishi's narrative style and technique in 'My Son the Fanatic'? How do they shape your sympathies for each of the characters and our sense of their interactions with one another?
2. "Parvez had been telling Bettina that he thought people in the West sometimes felt inwardly empty and that people needed a philosophy to live by" (p. 106). Is this true, and is it perhaps one factor behind the radicalization observable within certain ethnic minority (sub-)cultures in recent decades? Can this story be said to have a 'moral'. And if so, then what is it?
3. In his 1986 essay, 'The Rainbow Sign', what difficulties does Kureishi identify in the ability of a 'second-generation' Pakistani Briton to negotiate an identity between British and Pakistani cultures? Try to find 3-4 specific examples from the essay.
4. In what ways can both the **story** and the **essay** be read either as *reflections* of transculturality – or as arguments *for* it?



# References

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