

And is so I sending home photos of myself
 Among de pigeons and de snow
 And is so I warding off de cold
 And is so, little by little
 20 I begin to change my calypso ways
 Never visiting nobody
 Before giving them clear warning
 And waiting me turn in queue° *in line*
 Now, after all this time
 25 I get accustom to de English life
 But I still miss back-home side
 To tell you de truth
 I don't know really where I belaang

 Yes, divided to de ocean
 30 Divided to de bone

Wherever I hang me knickers—that's my home.

1989

HANIF KUREISHI

In his essay "The Rainbow Sign" (excerpted below), Hanif Kureishi (b. 1954; see the headnote to him and his story "My Son the Fanatic," later in this volume) recalls the difficulties of coming of age in a country that hadn't yet come to grips with black and Asian immigrants from its former colonies. As a boy, he was made to feel ashamed of his Pakistani background and wanted to identify with Englishness. At the same time, he witnessed the racial exclusions and violence against Pakistani and other recent immigrants in the name of Englishness. Though horrified by neo-Nazi attitudes, the young Kureishi also felt uncomfortable with separatist and fundamentalist attitudes on the part of those who demonized whites and non-Muslims. He began to explore ways of belonging that confound simplistic conceptions of race, identity, and nationhood.

["You Will Always Be a Paki"]

One: England

I was born in London of an English mother and Pakistani father. My father, who lives in London, came to England from Bombay in 1947 to be educated by the old colonial power. He married here and never went back to India. The rest of his large family, his brothers, their wives, his sisters, moved from Bombay to Karachi, in Pakistan, after partition.¹

1. Division of the South Asian subcontinent into the nations of India and Pakistan (and later, Bangladesh) in 1947, after independence from British colonial rule.

Frequently during my childhood, I met my Pakistani uncles when they came to London on business. They were important, confident people who took me to hotels, restaurants and test matches,² often in taxis. But I had no idea of what the subcontinent was like or how my numerous uncles, aunts and cousins lived there. When I was nine or ten a teacher purposefully placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts in front of me and said to the class: 'Hanif comes from India.' I wondered: did my uncles ride on camels? Surely not in their suits? Did my cousins, so like me in other ways, squat down in the sand like little Mowgli,³ half-naked and eating with their fingers?

In the mid-1960s, Pakistanis were a risible subject in England, derided on television and exploited by politicians. They had the worst jobs, they were uncomfortable in England, some of them had difficulties with the language. They were despised and out of place.

From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else. I read with understanding a story in a newspaper about a black boy who, when he noticed that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water.

At school, one teacher always spoke to me in a 'Peter Sellers' Indian accent.⁴ Another refused to call me by my name, calling me Pakistani Pete instead. So I refused to call the teacher by *his* name and used his nickname instead. This led to trouble; arguments, detentions, escapes from school over hedges and, eventually, suspension. This played into my hands; this couldn't have been better.

With a friend I roamed the streets and fields all day; I sat beside streams; I stole yellow lurex trousers⁵ from a shop and smuggled them out of the house under my school trousers; I hid in woods reading hard books; and I saw the film *Zulu*⁶ several times.

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And then, in the evening, B.B.⁷ took me to meet with the other lads. We climbed the park railings and strolled across to the football pitch, by the goalposts. This is where the lads congregated to hunt down Pakistanis and beat them. Most of them I was at school with. The others I'd grown up with. I knew their parents. They knew my father.

I withdrew, from the park, from the lads, to a safer place, within myself. I moved into what I call my 'temporary' period. I was only waiting now to get away, to leave the London suburbs, to make another kind of life, somewhere else, with better people.

In this isolation, in my bedroom where I listened to the Pink Floyd, the Beatles and the John Peel show,⁸ I started to write down the speeches of politicians, the words which helped create the neo-Nazi attitudes I saw around me. This I called 'keeping the accounts'.

2. Important cricket matches.

3. The child reared by wolves in the stories in *The Jungle Book* (1894) by the English novelist Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936).

4. English comic actor (1925–1980), who played Indian characters in the films *The Millionairess* (1960) and *The Party* (1968).

5. Pants made from fabric with metallic threads.

6. Film (1964) depicting a battle in 1879

between the British Army and the Zulu tribe in South Africa.

7. A friend.

8. Show on Radio 1, the British Broadcasting Corporation's pop music station, which popularized the countercultural music of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Peel (1939–2004) was a disc jockey on the station from 1967 until 2004.

In 1965, Enoch Powell⁹ said: 'We should not lose sight of the desirability of achieving a steady flow of voluntary repatriation for the elements which are proving unsuccessful or unassimilable.'

In 1967, Duncan Sandys¹ said: 'The breeding of millions of half-caste children would merely produce a generation of misfits and create national tensions.'

I wasn't a misfit; I could join the elements of myself together. It was the others, they wanted misfits; they wanted you to embody within yourself their ambivalence.

Also in 1967, Enoch Powell—who once said he would love to have been Viceroy of India—quoted a constituent of his as saying that because of the Pakistanis 'this country will not be worth living in for our children'.

And Powell said, more famously: 'As I look ahead I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, "I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood".'²

As Powell's speeches appeared in the papers, graffiti in support of him appeared in the London streets. Racists gained confidence. People insulted me in the street. Someone in a café refused to eat at the same table with me. The parents of a girl I was in love with told her she'd get a bad reputation by going out with darkies.

Powell allowed himself to become a figurehead for racists. He helped create racism in Britain and was directly responsible not only for the atmosphere of fear and hatred, but through his influence, for individual acts of violence against Pakistanis.

Television comics used Pakistanis as the butt of their humour. Their jokes were highly political: they contributed to a way of seeing the world. The enjoyed reduction of racial hatred to a joke did two things: it expressed a collective view (which was sanctioned by its being on the BBC), and it was a celebration of contempt in millions of living rooms in England. I was afraid to watch TV because of it; it was too embarrassing, too degrading.

Parents of my friends, both lower-middle-class and working-class, often told me they were Powell supporters. Sometimes I heard them talking, heatedly, violently, about race, about 'the Paks'. I was desperately embarrassed and afraid of being identified with these loathed aliens. I found it almost impossible to answer questions about where I came from. The word 'Pakistani' had been made into an insult. It was a word I didn't want used about myself. I couldn't tolerate being myself.

The British complained incessantly that the Pakistanis wouldn't assimilate. This meant they wanted the Pakistanis to be exactly like them. But of course even then they would have rejected them.

The British were doing the assimilating: they assimilated Pakistanis to their world view. They saw them as dirty, ignorant and less than human—worthy of abuse and violence.

At this time I found it difficult to get along with anyone. I was frightened and hostile. I suspected that my white friends were capable of racist insults. And many of them did taunt me, innocently. I reckoned that at least once

9. Anti-immigrant British politician (1912–1998).
1. Conservative British politician (1908–1987) and head of the Commonwealth Relations Office, who opposed immigration from Britain's former colonies.

2. From Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech (1968), warning against unchecked immigration from the Commonwealth and citing the prophecy of war from book 6 of the Roman poet Virgil's *Aeneid* (1st century B.C.E.).

every day since I was five years old I had been racially abused. I became incapable of distinguishing between remarks that were genuinely intended to hurt and those intended as 'humour'.

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I saw racism as unreason and prejudice, ignorance and a failure of sense; it was Fanon's 'incomprehension'.³ That the men I wanted to admire had liberated themselves only to take to unreason, to the abdication of intelligence, was shocking to me. And the separatism, the total loathing of the white man as innately corrupt, the 'All whites are devils' view,⁴ was equally unacceptable. I had to live in England, in the suburbs of London, with whites. My mother was white. I wasn't ready for separate development. I'd had too much of that already.

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I saw the taking up of Islam as an aberration, a desperate fantasy of worldwide black brotherhood; it was a symptom of extreme alienation. It was also an inability to seek a wider political view or cooperation with other oppressed groups—or with the working class as a whole—since alliance with white groups was necessarily out of the question.

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Two: Pakistan

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I was having a little identity crisis. I'd been greeted so warmly in Pakistan, I felt so excited by what I saw, and so at home with all my uncles, I wondered if I were not better off here than there.⁵ And when I said, with a little unnoticed irony, that I was an Englishman, people laughed. They fell about. Why would anyone with a brown face, Muslim name and large well-known family in Pakistan want to lay claim to that cold little decrepit island off Europe where you always had to spell your name? Strangely, anti-British remarks made me feel patriotic, though I only felt patriotic when I was away from England.

But I couldn't allow myself to feel too Pakistani. I didn't want to give in to that falsity, that sentimentality. As someone said to me at a party, provoked by the fact I was wearing jeans: we are Pakistanis, but you, you will always be a Paki—emphasising the slang derogatory name the English used against Pakistanis, and therefore the fact that I couldn't rightfully lay claim to either place.

* * *

1986

3. Cf. "Racism and Culture" (1956), an essay by Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), psychologist and theorist of decolonization. Fanon writes that "the end of race prejudice begins with a sudden incomprehension," a mental shift in which the target of prejudice recognizes that racism is

unreasonable and ineffective and refuses to condone it.

4. Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975), African American leader of the Nation of Islam, condemned whites as "blue-eyed devils."

5. I.e., in Pakistan rather than in England.