

#WHAT WOMEN DON'T WANT?

Being Irrelevant, Lost And Unfound

Mira, Ma and Ashu are a close-knit family, having fun together. But beneath their apparent proximity and fun lurks another story



Abha Sharma

In India today there are more divorces than ever but when it happens the consequences are not the same for men and women. While divorce means a loss of space and identity to a woman, uncoupled man, however, continue to occupy the same space in society. Even women who choose to stay single face similar challenges as society quietly alienates them.

Three women novelists explored such aspects of modern life, relationships and contemporary womanhood at the session "What Women Don't Want" at the Jaipur Literature Festival on Saturday.

In a fully packed session, that included an impressive presence of men in the audience, Shunali Khular Shroff, Bhavika Govil and Amrita Mahale engaged in an energetic conversation with Pouleni Chatterjee, executive editor at Harper Collins India.

Talking about her incisive new novel *The Wrong Way Home*, Shunali said it was about a deeply flawed woman's spectacular journey. Her protagonist forty-year-old Nayantara grapples with divorce, ambition, and the seductive illusions of success in a society obsessed with reinvention.

"It is not so much about divorce, but the fact that once divorced, she loses a place in the world. Nayantara has to navigate in a society which she discovers is meant for couples. She has no identity and her pride is hurt and to prove her identity to her own mother and her ex-husband, who has married an influential half her age, that she works hard to establish herself by setting up a PR agency."

She tends to reconstitute an aging film star terrified of irrelevance, a politician in urgent need of image rescue and a socialite trying to reinvent herself. While doing their image makeover, she continues to grapple with her own inner conflict as to what really matters in a world obsessed with appearances. *The Wrong Way Home* gives voice to Nayantara's desperation post divorce and her restlessness to prove she is still relevant, she added.

There are women who are transitioning to a new life after divorce or choosing to stay single, they are often left out at family or social gatherings. Society very quietly excludes them.

"Women don't want extra scrutiny of their body nor do they want inappropriate pass by a known or unknown person. They don't want an address like Aunty is used pejoratively. Women also face the burden of staying young. Just take this burden away, give us dignity," said the panellists.

What women don't want also leads them to actually know what they want. And fiction can be the most appropriate medium to convey women's unheard voices.

In the remote Mahamaya



A Man With An Active Mind

• Asif Ullah Khan

met the British writer Hanif Kureishi quite by chance on the way to the Jaipur Literature Festival entrance at Diggi Palace. I recognised him immediately and stopped him for a photograph, then struck up a brief conversation.

When I asked him when he was speaking, he told me he was appearing in a session with V. S. Naipaul. I reacted instinctively and unguardedly, muttering, "That fossil," with some disdain-reflecting my own discomfort with Naipaul's later political positions in India and his perceived proximity to Hindu-nationalist narratives in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition. Hanif said nothing.

"It is a novel about how women disappear from both the world and within the world," she said.

Bhavika Govil shared about the quiet disquiet of domestic life, where a mother and her children negotiate love, absence, and the weight of unspoken expectations in her novel *Hot Water*.

She said the story is about three members Mira, Ma and Ashu who are a close-knit family, having fun together. But beneath their apparent proximity and fun lurks another story that of a family in hot water. All three have their own secrets and all of them confront questions that have no clear answers.

Bhavika had tried to portray the life that is both heartening and heart breaking. Her novel tries to trace the ways in which love, family members feel for each other, can both make and wreck them.

The three women novelists, who have depicted their women protagonists struggling to prove their relevance and different facets of contradictory feelings of love and ambition, right and wrong in their novels, emphatically talked about the key theme-What Women actually don't want?

"A woman in our country is given a script right from her childhood and she grows up happily embracing the label of goodness or expectations, said Shunali. It is not through choices. Emotional tolerance and subconscious beliefs are reinforced in big ways. Women are expected to conform to certain ways, she added.

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Praise and abuse arrived in the same sentence, inseparable.

Writing, especially the kind Hanif pursued, seemed neither safe nor respectable. That tension-between parental expectation and individual desire-would become one of the defining currents of his work.

What made me follow Hanif closely, however, was *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the first film he wrote, set against the backdrop of Thatcher-era Britain. The film was groundbreaking in its portrayal of British Pakistani families navigating racism, ambition, and money in 1980s London. It refused easy moral positions, showing immigrants not as passive victims but as complex, sometimes compromised actors within a brutal economic system.

What truly shocked audiences and, particularly, the British Pakistani community, was the film's central gay relationship between a British Pakistani boy and a white former skinhead. At a time when homosexuality itself was still taboo in many communities, the idea of an interracial gay romance involving a Pakistani protagonist was explosive. For many within the community, the film was seen not as representation but as betrayal.

Hanif did not retreat. He never has. That refusal to flatter any audience-white, brown, liberal, or conservative-has been the most consistent feature of his career. He wrote from the fault lines, not the comfort zones.

The backlash was not confined to public debate. It entered Hanif's own family with remarkable ferocity. One aunt was so furious at *My Beautiful Laundrette* that she wrote to his father, accusing him of having raised a son who had brought shame upon the family name. Hanif, relish-

ing the outrage and already fashioning himself as a literary bad boy, responded with characteristic provocation. In his second film, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, he named a lesbian character after that very aunt-a gesture that was less representation but as reversal.

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#HANIF KUREISHI



can't walk up the front path of my house, open the door, and step back into my old life - lie down on my sofa, with a glass of wine and the Premier League. It seems unbelievably cruel that I cannot do such a simple thing."

And yet, unlike the fictional Harrison of *Suburbia*, Hanif has not relinquished his will to live. Doctors have told him that recovery is possible, but it will be long, slow, and uncertain. Progress is incremental and fragile. Days are now structured around physiotherapy and medical procedures. Privacy has disappeared. Dependency is total.

This more than year-long struggle is documented in *Shattered*. The book offers a redemptive arc and no sentimental uplift. Its title is precise. What Hanif records is the fragility of the body in times of certainty. Days blur into routines; nights stretch interminably. Improvement, when it comes, is minimal and reversible. *Shattered* is not a narrative of recovery but an anatomy of endurance.

One of the book's most striking themes is the disconnect between mind and body. His limbs refuse to respond, but his brain remains acutely alive. Thought continues relentlessly, producing memories, irritations, desires, and anxieties that have nowhere to go. The mouth still works. Language survives spoken, dictated, passed through others' hands into text.

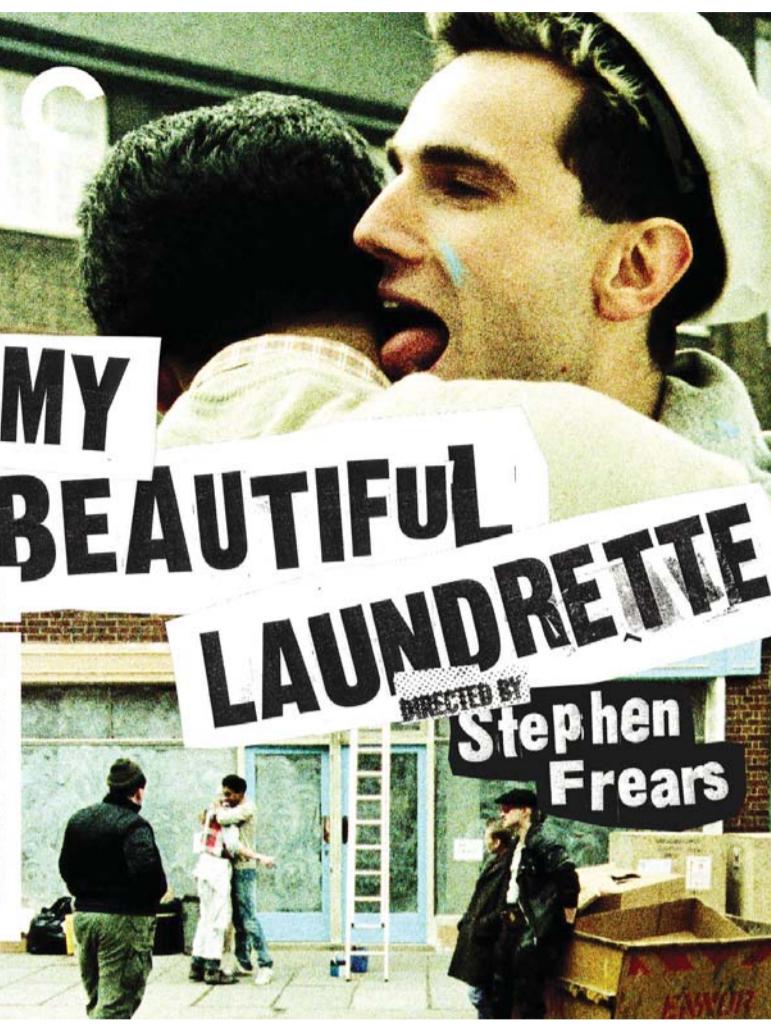
Today Hanif finds himself in the condition of sculptor Ken Harrison (played by Richard Dreyfuss) in *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, as he can no longer hold the pen in his fingers, walk or feed himself. He says he was struggling to come to terms with the fact "I

was born blind."

Writing, in this context, becomes more than expression. It becomes survival. Hanif has been frank about the financial reality of long-term illness and care. The costs are immense, and there is little institutional protection for writers. His *Substack* essays-dictated sen-

National Winnie the Pooh Day

ational Winnie the Pooh Day, celebrated on January 18, honours the beloved fictional bear created by A.A. Milne. This day marks both the birthday of Milne and his charming creation, bringing joy to fans of all ages. Winnie the Pooh, with his love for honey and gentle wisdom, has become a timeless symbol of friendship, kindness, and simple pleasures. On this day, fans celebrate by reading stories, watching adaptations, or sharing Pooh-themed activities with children. It's a reminder to cherish imagination, laughter, and the heartwarming lessons that this iconic bear continues to inspire across generations.



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disabled body. This latest chapter does not feel like a rupture so much as a continuation. Once again, Hanif is examining powerlessness, dependency, and identity-not as abstract themes, but as lived reality. The accident has taken much. What it has not taken is his voice.

In February 2012, Hanif had written an essay 'The Art of Distraction' in *The New York Times*. Today, Hanif finds himself in a position where the 'art of distraction' he once championed has become a vital tool for his very survival.

When Hanif wrote about the futility of consciousness in 2012, he argued that the mind needed to wander to as it unexpected connections. Now, as he lies in a hospital bed or a specialized chair, that wandering mind is not the only way to escape the physical prison of his body.

He has described how his mind "travels" while his body remains still. By engaging in the "art of distraction"-listening to music, dictating his thoughts, and refusing to sanitize suffering offers comfort. "I am grateful for the encouragement," he admits. "I need the appreciation, and it certainly remains unclear."

These reflections echo longstanding themes in Hanif's work: fathers and sons, inheritance and rebellion, expectation and refusal. He has often described growing up in a world that was almost Dickensian, emotional climate, where children were rarely praised and affection was withheld.

Now, in an unexpected reversal, encouragement arrives daily. Readers write to tell him how much his writing means to them and how his refusal to sanitize suffering offers comfort. "I am grateful for the encouragement," he admits. "I need the appreciation, and it certainly remains unclear."

When I think back to that

encounter at the Jaipur Literature Festival, what remains is the sense of a mind always in motion. That vitality has not disappeared. It has been compressed, redirected, sharpened by necessity.

There is something quietly devasting in that admission. The writer who once dissected masculinity, power, and success with ruthless clarity now openly acknowledges his need for affirmation.

Across decades-through 'My Beautiful Laundrette', the 'Buddha of Suburbia', his essays, novels, and screenplays-Hanif has written from the margins, interrogating who belongs, who speaks, and who is allowed comfort. Today, he inhabits a new margin: that of the

disabled body.

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This incident was

by Oscar Guardiola-Rivera,

author of the critically

acclaimed, 'What if Latin

America Ruled the World,' and

of International Law and

International Affairs at

Birkbeck College, University of

London. He is a contributor

with *Faa Dabholwala*, author

of 'What is Free Speech?

The History of a Dangerous Idea'

and a historian at Princeton

at an engaging session on the

third day of the Jaipur

Literature Festival.

He emphasised that

politicians in the Opposition

are always standing for the

liberty of the press.

He also emphasised that

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