

I turned down an MBE – I don't want an honour glorifying the British empire

I was offered an MBE for 'services to literature', but I can't think of anything I want less, writes author Nikesh Shukla



A girl in Amritsar, India looks at a painting of the 379 unarmed men, women and children killed by British forces in the Amritsar massacre.

Nikesh Shukla

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Last month, I turned down an MBE for services to literature as part of the Queen's birthday honours list. My reaction, on receiving the email, was very quick: no thank you.

Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire? Is this the title I'm asked to carry? I cannot think of anything I want less than to be a member of that empire. There are renewed calls to look at the titles of these honours, and change the E from Empire to Excellence, which would be a good step in the right direction. But before making such a move, we must reckon with the legacy of the British empire.

I sit 20 minutes' walk away from the empty plinth in the centre of Bristol where a statue of the slave owner Edward Colston used to stand. I didn't see the statue come down, but, like everyone else in this city, I felt its impact. The conversation about Colston's legacy and how his name pervades the city has been going on for a long time, and something was finally done. I stand in solidarity with the Colston Four, about to stand trial for freeing the city from his gaze.

I think a lot about Operation Legacy, a Foreign Office programme to destroy files that might throw a light on the horrors of the empire. If Britain's colonial history was something to be proud of, as 44% of people in a YouGov poll said in 2016, then why did special branch officers feel the need to rid the world of documents that might give an insight into how racist the British empire was, how brutal? Were these people proud of the Bengal famine, the Amritsar massacre, partition, slavery, the forced castration of Mau Mau rebels? Or did they just like that Britain gave its colonies railways?

An hour before the email came in, I was messaged by a teacher praising a book I had written for teenagers. They told me how this book had connected with a young boy who had been excluded from school. He had never read a book before but my story resonated with him, and the teacher passed on a message from him. This email reminded me why I was doing what I was doing and for whom. I felt like I was doing good. For him. Not for the British empire.

The thing is, anything I've done for literature, I've never been alone. Any work I've done to make the industry more inclusive has been in collaboration with many others, in conversation with many others. I set up the Jhalak prize with Sunny Singh and Media Diversified, I set up the Good Literary Agency with Julia Kingsford. I have worked with so many different people, adding to the amazing work already being done. And the books themselves, where would they be without my agents, my editors, publicists, readers, librarians, booksellers?

To accept an award that individualises me for the work that so many others have been involved in felt wrong.

So I declined my MBE, and I reread a cycle of poems by Inua Ellams, from his collection *The Actual*, called *Fuck / Empire*. The final lines were suddenly so clear to me:

“He waited for the wise ones / at the old clearing / who whispered about empires / as dusk took the sky / that such is their destiny / to crumble and fall / and even their powerful enemies / time would consume them all.”

Time will eventually consume those people who are proud of Britain's bloody, brutal colonial history. I am happy to watch them crumble and fall.