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• HANIF KUREISHI'S

The Buddha of Suburbia

A READER'S GUIDE

NAHEM YOUSAF

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Contents

1.
The Novelist 7
 2.
The Novel 27
 3.
The Novel's Reception 58
 4.
The Television Adaptation 66
 5.
Further Reading and Discussion Questions 79
- Notes 89

The Novelist

The protagonist of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim Amir, describes himself as a "funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories" (3) and it is this historicized tension between the history of the colonizer and the colonized that characterizes Hanif Kureishi the author. Born in 1954 to an English mother and an Asian father, Kureishi's creative output investigates and explores what it means to hold a position in society, indeed, a position within identity that is predicated on plurality rather than singularity. In his essay "The Rainbow Sign" he describes the relationship and its significance in succinct terms:

The two countries, Britain and Pakistan, have been part of each other for years, usually to the advantage of Britain. They cannot now be wrenched apart, even if that were desirable. Their futures will be intermixed. What that intermix means, its moral quality, whether it is violently resisted by ignorant whites and characterized by inequality and injustice, or understood, accepted and humanized, is for all of us to decide.

Kureishi has said on many occasions that he wanted to be a writer and was sufficiently disciplined as a school child to write novels and

short stories in his evenings at home. But his early efforts, like those of his father, were destined to remain unpublished. In fact it wasn't until he was a student at a university in London that he found some publishing success writing for pornographic magazines under such pseudonyms like Antonia French and Karim, the latter the name he goes on to choose for the protagonist of his first novel. His breakthrough came in 1980 when his plays were accepted: two for the stage, *The King and Me* and *The Mother Country*, and *You Can't Go Home* for BBC radio. He continued to write for the stage, winning the George Devine award in 1981 and becoming the Royal Court's Writer-in-Residence in the same year. In the following year his play, *Borderline*, was a winner in Thames Television's Bursary scheme and he adapted Kafka's *The Trial* for BBC radio. However, widespread success didn't come until 1985 when Kureishi scripted *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the screenplay for which he was nominated for an Academy Award. His next film, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, received a lukewarm reception from critics and viewing audiences alike. However, it was money earned from this film that allowed him the security to take a two-year break in which he could concentrate on writing what would become *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The idea for the novel had been around since 1987 when Kureishi published a version of the first chapter as a short story in *Harper's* magazine. This is unsurprising since Kureishi, as he says below, often writes and rewrites stories and returns to characters until he is satisfied that he has exhausted what he wants to say about them and their contexts.

AN INTERVIEW WITH HANIF KUREISHI

Your interests are eclectic: you have cited African American and Russian novelists, short story writers like Maupassant, and your

*contemporaries, like Rushdie. How do you find your own voice as a writer?*¹

I do think I have my own voice but I can only tell you that I am naturally influenced by everything I hear and read. I guess you might say that is the postmodern condition. There is inevitably such a range of influences and associations, as there is in Salman Rushdie's work too, for example.

Is it true that Rushdie encouraged you into writing novels?

He did in that he knew the screenplays but felt that the novel was the thing to work on in a sustained way and he told me I should get writing one! I was a bit stung to begin with but I remember it fondly. I was always just about to start on a novel and then I did, *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Could you cast your mind back to the publication of Buddha. Were you surprised by its overwhelming success? And how do you feel about its endurance as a classic of contemporary fiction?

I am pleased it has held up. I wanted to write a book that people would want to read ten years later. But I am also pleased that works like *Buddha* and *My Beautiful Laundrette* helped to open the publishers' doors for other writers because you forget that when I started writing people asked "Why are you writing about Asians? Who is interested in minorities?" You can't believe it now but when *My Beautiful Laundrette* came out it proved it was possible to make a film about Asian people that other people wanted to see: people went to see it and it was popular and made money. It is hard to get into that position in the first place. I remember applying for a bursary and being told, "You are going to be in a writers' ghetto if you write about Asian people. Don't do that." It was really insulting and offensive. So it is important to me, and I think to others who get through to publishers now. A novel like Zadie Smith's *White*

Teeth can be a huge hit now whereas we used to be described as "Commonwealth Literature." To be located in that way is a form of ghettoisation.

You have managed to deconstruct that ghettoisation in innovative ways. For example, Jay, the protagonist of Intimacy, doesn't wear his ethnicity on his sleeve so I think the reader is quite surprised to discover some way in to the book that he is of mixed heritage.

You expect to recognise ethnicity but no-one says that a white character is white. It can unsettle the reader.

*There used to be the expectation that black and Asian writers would write about racism and victim status, what writer Barbara Burford called "a little black pain undressed."*²

There are always expectations. Asian people aren't "Asian" for me any more than white people are "white" for white people. They are just people. I was writing about my father not "an Asian man." You couldn't get too caught up in issues of representation and continue to write.

But the burden of representation did fall on you. There were those who expected you to smash stereotypes and create only positive representations.

Yes, I was in New York when *My Beautiful Laundrette* came out and people demonstrated, marching up and down outside the cinema, shouting that the film was a slur and that there were no gay Asians. But you can understand where they were coming from since there had been virtually no representation of Asians in the media. The answer is more diverse representation which the film helped to establish, I hope. In the end, you can't write to anybody else's ideas. If other people think Asians should be represented in a certain way, then they can write their own stories.

You have also been a target for those who argue you create stereotypes of fundamentalist Muslims in My Son The Fanatic. How would you answer their charges? Do you feel the need to?

Well, there are as many kinds of Muslim as there are Christians, obviously. I just write about the small corner of the world that interests me. I never claim to create a full picture. I just do what I do. The self censorship goes on all the time, to do with issues of style, taste, judgement, character. But I would never try to imagine what the world might want or not want. To try to fit in with it would prevent you from writing anything. For example, does the world want a film about a gay Nazi running a launderette? The work creates the market rather than the other way around, as with, for example, postcolonial writing where the works create the interest and the label comes later. When you imagine a mixed-race Asian living in the South London suburbs, you can't ask if anyone wants to read about him because no one has previously written about him, so you can't know.

Your humour is earthy, salty, farcical at times. Can you say something about humour, in Buddha especially?

I guess you develop your humour from your family, out of the sense of humour your parents have. But I also grew up on British sitcoms. When you're sitting at home in Bromley you tend to mostly watch *Dad's Army* and *On the Buses* and *Please, Sir!* and all that stuff. That was the humour of my time. In Bromley you didn't go and watch films directed by Godard, you watched *On the Buses!* My humour is very British in that sense. Any writer's humour comes from the sort of person you are—just as your whole style, the language you use, the characters you create—comes from your own character and how you see the world. The humour in my work has certainly changed over the years. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a comic novel in a way that *Intimacy* quite clearly is not. Humour

depends on your mood, on what the subject is, and on what you're thinking about at the time. I think the humour in *Buddha* comes from the point of view of a young man. When you're a kid adults are hilarious, your teachers all seem to have one leg and one eye and they're just funny. And you sort of deconstruct the world as a kid: you deconstruct the power and authority of the world by mocking it. People's parents are very funny to their kids. My children just look at me and they laugh. They think that the things I do are hilarious and I don't realise that I'm doing anything that might be conceived as funny. You can see the same things happening through the generations: you are just as idiotic to them as your parents were to you and so on. When you become the teacher yourself—when you become middle-aged and have only got one eye and one leg yourself—it is not so funny and the world becomes more complicated and more painful.

Memory and history seem to play an important role for you.

I think the history you remember is first and foremost your parents' lives: my father's life in India, my mother's during the Second World War. They were two quite different people coming together after the War in a bombed out London, then having my sister and I and worrying about how we would fit in. Then there was the racism of the 1960s and Enoch Powell. Where your own life and that of your family intersects with general history is significant in terms of personal, psychological and social history. I would say my father was the key influence.

In Intimacy you write: "The dream or nightmare of the happy family haunts us all. It is one of the few utopian ideas we have these days." Are you writing in part against the fetishisation of the nuclear family?

I was thinking the other day about the idea of the family that we grew up with in the 1950s and 1960s. The idea of the family that my generation had inherited was really breaking up by the 1980s when people like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan began to proselytize it. I remember being very puzzled by why Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in particular went on and on about the family. The whole idea of family in that period was clearly breaking down and that is partly chronicled in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and later more seriously and in other ways in the other books. It was probably a fantasy in the first place. The whole idea rested on the woman being at home and the man going out to work while the kids were at school. There are very few people who live in that precise way in nuclear families.

In the early work there are alternative "families"—communes like Jamila's house in Buddha, Danny/Victoria's trailer site in Sammy and Rosie and the posse in London Kills Me. Do you see the nuclear family mediating into other forms—strangers or social outcasts coming together? Are you testing the boundaries of the "family"?

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and being involved on the Left, and with hippies, I was very aware that my mates were thinking about new ways of living, particularly in that period after university and before usually you have kids yourself. I knew a lot of people living in housing associations, other people in communes and others involved in all kinds of other sexual relationships, for instance, particularly the Gay Movement in the 1970s. I was very interested and involved in thinking about whether there were other ways in which to live without living in the traditional nuclear family. But I think people are still hypnotized by that idea. I don't think it's much of a reality and it's a dangerous idea in lots of ways because it makes

people feel like failures. That is how "family" has often been used, particularly by Margaret Thatcher: to make people in single families think that they were not as good as those in traditional families. I was extremely interested in the ways that the family was used politically in the 1980s.

One cultural critic has argued that if we could stop the fetishizing of the family unit, homesick fathers might have a better hearing.³ It seems to me that the non-custodial parent, still almost always the father, is a figure you have begun to rescue from obscurity in your recent work.

I think that before feminism it was a bad deal: men got the work and the women got the kids and there wasn't much sharing either way. So, the women missed out on the work and the men missed out on the kids. In a way under Thatcherism a lot of that changed, partly because of mass unemployment because men were at home and women did other kinds of work to make do. Inadvertently, people were able to experiment with different modes of living. I guess I'm interested in men because I'm a bloke myself but also because I was very interested in the revolutions of my time: for gays, women, blacks and Asians—with people becoming aware of their positions. And white blokes got rather left out of that. But of course when everybody else's position changed so the white bloke's position changed as well. So I try to write from his point of view as well.

So, is a feature of your writing agenda a study of masculinity in crisis? I'm thinking of Stephen in Sleep With Me and Roger in "Umbrellas," for example.

I think as a writer you look for the moment of crisis because it is so dramatic. When you think about how you're going to construct a text, you think of the moment when something is breaking down and you'll go in at that point. Say, in the film *My Son the Fanatic*

where the main character is a taxi-driver: you look for the moment when his life is falling apart because for a writer that is dramatic. You look for the moment when he has to make lots of difficult decisions about who he wants to be. It's partly to do with craft, about where you start a story and about what you look for and where the story begins: where do you start? Where do you go in? It is about looking for the moment when somebody's life is falling apart and they have to think about who they are, what they believe and who they want to be and what sort of relationships they have. You can enter a marriage that is in crisis and think what do these people really want. Who do they want to be now? As a writer I try to go in at that point of crisis and then I can go back or forward and see what's happening.

Are specific objects sometimes a symbolic or metaphorical focus (Clint's search for shoes in London Kills Me, the umbrella, "The Penis," the turd in "Tale of the Turd") Are they an imaginative and associative starting point?

It's not something that I'm particularly aware of. . . . Maupassant is a writer I've always really loved. I've never really thought about things or objects quite in that way. I love absurdity and in *The Black Album* there's the aubergine so there are symbols or objects in my work. But, to be honest, I've not really thought of it in that way.

How do you feel about critical labels being attached to you, then? I'm thinking specifically of your work being labelled "postcolonial." Is it a term you can embrace?

It's something you have to live with. It is going to happen. You write stuff and send it out and people are going to do things with it. That's fine and up to them but if you try to engage with them then that's when it gets difficult. For example, I can't think about myself as a postcolonial writer. When I go upstairs to my study, I think "what

do I want to write about today?" I can't think about myself or my work theoretically. I have to go to a concrete object: two people fighting over an umbrella, as you say. Then the writing comes alive. There are two aspects to writing: one is the creative aspect and the other is that it is a business in the sense that I have to support my family and that's the side of it where I send stuff out into the world and people make of it what they will. I think the postcolonial label has always bothered me slightly because, to me, it is a narrow term. And so much of my work is not about that and so you feel that you're being squashed into a category that you don't quite fit and you fear that there are lots of other aspects of your work which people might then be ignoring. But I'm not going to get hung up about that or bother about it too much. Perhaps people will get bored with postcolonialism and carry on reading my stuff. I don't think of V. S. Naipaul as a colonial or postcolonial writer, I think of him in the same way as I think of Graham Greene. They're both great writers.

Are there descriptors that you feel more closely define you as a writer? Would you be happier being described as a chronicler of London?

I like London and I like what goes on here. I'm interested in the idea of opening the door and not knowing whom you are going to meet or what's going to happen. Also, being a suburban boy, I've never lost the romance of London: the idea of coming to London and it always being exciting and it always being dull in the suburbs which to me as a teenager it was. Writers have to be interested in the inside of people—their minds—and in the outside—the world—and the conjunction of those two things. The city has always turned me on. There's always something else I want to describe. For example, writing about the 1980s, the film world, Soho, the advertising business that I haven't written about yet. I think what is great

about the novel is that you can go anywhere with it and do anything. It seems to me to be a wonderful form, almost better than any other form for conveying human experience. You can go into people's minds, the intricacies of their minds, describe shops, streets, anything. If I read a book about Paris in the nineteenth century I like those bits, the descriptive sections. The novel is the most capacious, the most sensual form.

So how do you feel when a novel is transferred to the screen? In the adaptation of Buddha, the first person narration is lost. Do other aspects concern you?

The language is lost and for writers it's the most important thing. All writers go to a lot of trouble to put their words in a certain order and to catch the right words where possible, and of course, you lose that. But you gain lots of other things too. You get to see actors' faces, you get to see good acting, good directing, when you see the text as a movie. I've always worked in film so it's not as if I feel that film is necessarily a degradation of the work. I thought Roger Michell did a really good job with the TV version of *Buddha* and it worked very well. Now when I think of *Buddha*, I see the actors and the text is mediated through them. The actors have become superimposed on the text.

You have compiled an ensemble, a cast of characters, and had some important collaborative relationships too, haven't you?

I have been lucky to work with some tip-top people in the theatre and in film: Howard Davis, Max Stafford-Clarke, Stephen Frears, Patrice Chereau, Udayan Prasad. You have to rework, compromise, change when working with directors and I need the argument and the criticism to test my work. I enjoy good and important fights over material and I've enjoyed working with a set of actors who are associated with my work, like Roshan Seth, Naveen Andrews, Rita

Wolf, Meera Syal, Steve Mackintosh. I've got a new film coming up called *The Mother* that Steve Macintosh might be in. It's a dull life being a writer so working in film and the theatre with actors is cheering and inspiring.

You have also compiled a cast of characters who reappear?

In *Gabriel's Gift* especially. I think you become really fond of them, you get to like them. They're all parts of your own self in some way but you also wonder how they develop and age. I guess what I'm interested in is time and how people change over time. I'd like to know what Karim is doing now or what Charlie Hero is really like now. It is inspiring for me to imagine what might have happened to them so I write about a character I created years ago. I like the fact that the audience is interested too so you have a relationship with those readers who recognise what you are doing. I usually write a group of pieces around a subject, like *The Black Album* and "My Son the Fanatic" which go together. There's a short story, "Night Light" that goes with "Sleep With Me" and *Intimacy*, then there's *Buddha* and *My Beautiful Laundrette*. I tend to write around the same subject for a bit until I feel that I've said what I want to say. You circle around, rather like a painter who might do a sketch, a sculpture and a painting of the same subject, a face or a body, and experiment with the subject for a while before moving on to something else.

You have also said that you measured out your life in pop music and that consequently music forms part of your cultural vocabulary. Can you say more about this?

I did at the beginning. I don't think I do so much now. It was so liberating for us at that time. Music was linked to so many other things, not just fashion but politics—in Eastern Europe and in the United States—the straight world, the weird world. It meant so

much. Then, when I was writing *The Black Album*, I was listening to a lot of Prince and Madonna. It was a time in the 1980s when ambiguous sexuality was moving into the mainstream and subcultures were becoming mainstream. It was very odd how the Thatcherite-Reaganite energy was absorbing the weirdo stuff, turning people on to it but at the same time rendering it innocuous. Music can take you anywhere. I had been interested in The Beatles but I hadn't heard Little Richard. So then I listened to him and to John Lee Hooker, and to other black music of the 1950s. You begin with one thing and take up others. You might say that all culture works by appropriation. There's me, an Asian kid sitting in Bromley in my bedroom listening to The Rolling Stones who appropriated black music and at the same time I am reading James Baldwin. I'm in a sense reappropriating it when it comes to figure in *Buddha*, having been influenced by all this other stuff as well. Clearly, you have to say there are all kinds of distinctions to be made about appropriation.

There are certain signature scenes, moments or phrases that occur across stories too. Is this conscious?

Some of it is unconscious and some of it is deliberate. I think the stuff in *Intimacy* and "Sleep with Me" is deliberate. I was playing with ideas. You have to write them out, release them.

Thinking about Intimacy, we wondered whether it is really more about desire than intimacy? In "Blue, Blue Pictures of You" you actually have a character who considers writing "a book of desire."

It is about the *dream* of intimacy rather like we were talking about the dream of the family—or a fantasy of a certain kind of family. It is the idea or ideal that you might have that haunts you that you pursue but never quite catch up with. So, therefore, the story is about failed intimacy or the desire for intimacy. It is certainly about

desire but what it is a desire for I'm not entirely sure: certainly for recognition rather than union, being recognised, being seen, being understood. The film is an adult film. I always thought it should have a 35 certificate! It is quite a dark film, not a film for eighteen-year-olds eating popcorn. Films at the moment seem to be so formulaic. When you see a film like this, it feels dark, strange, and very unusual.

Interviewed in the Guardian, Alexander Linklater the partner of Kerry Fox the actress in Intimacy, described the film as an example of "sublime ugliness." What would you say to that?

I have just written an essay about the film, "The Two Of Us." It is really about Patrice Chereau and I was thinking about people like Bacon and Freud, about flesh—real flesh as opposed to advertising flesh—the idealisation and use of sex in the media that seems to be corrupt, as opposed to what bodies and sexuality are really like in real people which I try to write about more seriously. This film is more like that—more like a Lucien Freud painting and that's the ugliness. There are real human bodies and real people, real struggles over desire that you don't usually see in the cinema. It is a composite of "Night Light," "Strangers When We Meet" and *Love in a Blue Time*. I told Chereau to take what he wanted from the works and then we sat around and worked out a story. I did the story in that sense.

Desire has been seen as the location of resistance to convention through transgressive sexualities and relationships, drug-fuelled passion, pornography. Is that how you conceive of desire—or is it simply a utopian project?

I think that all western literature is probably about desire so it is a broad subject in that sense. *Anna Karenina* is all about desire and so is *Madame Bovary*. It is question of people wanting things very

badly which often comes down to people wanting other people very badly. The literature then being an exploration of the way that your desire for other people is always constrained by the society, in that you are not allowed to desire certain people, certain things.

You could say that Anna Karenina and Tess of the D'Urbervilles are constrained by romance plots, though, while you are not limited in that precise way.

That's an interesting thing to say. The form of the novel has changed and I'm also working across a number of genres. What is common is the idea that desire is transgressive, as you say: *Madame Bovary* does not love her husband but she does love people who are not her husband. In *My Son The Fanatic* the main character is no longer in love with his wife but he loves a prostitute which is transgressive in itself. But what should we make of it? It becomes not only an emotional, sexual problem but a social problem too and that is when a novelist gets interested and worried and starts to think about how desire works in society, not only in the minds and bodies of the people involved. That's a question that we are all interested in: what do we do with desire? What shapes does it follow and how does it run? How transgressive does it have to be to continue to be exciting? For Freud all desire is transgressive and incestuous.

In your early work desire is set against impending social crisis as in Sammy and Rosie and My Beautiful Laundrette. But with the later work there is a stronger emphasis on the interior worlds of the characters, isn't there?

I suppose different kinds of desire are transgressive and dangerous in different ways. Let's say being gay in London today is not like being gay in Afghanistan so it depends where you locate the characters. During the 1980s, Thatcher, it seemed to a lot of us, was trying to introduce, in shorthand, "old-fashioned morals."

Therefore, transgressive desire seemed very important to write about then. So you combine two gay blokes running a launderette, which is the entrepreneurship she wanted, and you make it transgressive. The social stuff *has* fallen away to a certain extent. Also my work has got pared down. I think that often does happen to artists: you become very interested in economy, doing things as economically as you can, and the wrong word, or too many words, offends you. I think you look for new styles. I am much more interested in a piece of writing that is broken up, fragmented, unfinished. Sometimes I look at my notes and think why would I even bother to organise these notes into a fluid page. I like the spaces between the notes. I leave three spaces between this chunk of prose and the next. I like it looking like that on the page. You show it to people and they tell you that you can't publish it as it is not "written" yet. But it is the fact that it is *not* written that interests me. Then, to follow through, you may be moving away from the public. I guess my writing has always been quite conventional. I start at the beginning and move all the way through—just like the novels I read as I grew up—or the way I thought they worked. But now I am much more interested in the experimental, not for its own sake but because I like the look of the words on the page in that way—the gaps, the unfinished bits. The writing is like some of the later work of Miles Davis: it sounds cacophonous to other people. It may sound like banging on pots but it is interesting to Davis. It is quite difficult, particularly when you are an established writer, to decide how far you can go in terms of your relationship with the audience. I liked *Intimacy* being a rough book in that sense; the cruelty, the fragmentation, the lack of smoothing out or over. People have said the book is so cruel and horrible, the people in it are so nasty and I say "well, that's what it's like." I wanted the book to be an experience. If I wrote a book now about a relationship that split up ten years ago, it would probably be overworked and too thought-out. I wanted to capture the rough-

ness. The style you use has to reflect what is going on in the mind at the time of writing.

You have begun to exploit new technology as with your website.

I guess so. Websites are good for certain things. You can publish stories and bits and pieces on them. Websites are great in that you can write something and bang it up straightaway but people don't really know it is there unless you go to a lot of trouble to advertise. Books are still best. But you get a lag with books. I've got two books that my publisher hasn't yet got around to publishing that will turn up after a while. You have to plan an advertising campaign and go to bookshops. "Goodbye Mother," a story that was published in *Granta*, is now on my site. But I don't think I would put a novel on there.

Would you mind talking about unpublished work?

I have completed a novel called *The Body* and I would like to write another book about race, starting from the 1970s and coming up to the present day. I thought it might be a saga but my books are getting shorter and more condensed. My work, as I say, is becoming really concentrated and I don't write the bits I don't choose to. How much should you explain? Will the audience move through the ideas with you? These kinds of questions don't go away as you continue into your writing career.

Do you feel you are picking up new readers with short stories?

Maybe. It is hard for me to get a sense of the readership. Sometimes I will go to a reading but I don't get much idea of the specific audience. Reviews don't tell you much about your readership either. It is not like sitting in a cinema where you can see and feel people responding to the film you have made. But, I did a reading in Leeds recently and there were a few men who were talking about being

separated from their wives and children and of the relationships they try—and sometimes fail—to build with them both. It did give me a sense that people might look for that stuff in my work.

At one juncture in the screenplay for Sammy and Rosie Get Laid you say that you are "no good at plots, at working out precisely what the story is." How significant is plot in your writing?

I am interested in movement and change, in development in¹ a person or character. Plot is a much more mechanical unfolding according to some preconceived plan which I can never quite do. I'm writing and then I think, wouldn't it be great if so-and-so happened now and I go off in another direction, often this seems disjointed or weird. With *Sammy and Rosie* the film moves all over the place and I rather like that. In a sense there are two sides to me: wanting the work to be crafted and liking to do weird things in the work. In *Gabriel's Gift* a painting comes to life and Gabriel speaks with his dead brother, for example. Really in that novel the weird aspects have to do with somebody going mad because their parents have split up and Gabriel wants to be an artist but is unable to move outside of his own head. Later in the book, Gabriel stops feeling crazy because he begins to relate to other people and to the world outside. It is important to be part of wider relations. It is rather like being a writer: if you sit up in your office imagining for long enough, your relationship with the rest of the world could become tenuous. So you keep sane by having relationships.

So Gabriel is rescued by the relationship he has with his father which socialises him?

Yes, and he is rescued by his general ability to make friends with other people. I think the writing always has to exist in relationship

to others or it becomes obsessive, circular. It is not just self-expression. Literary form is important too as recognised by others.

You conceived of Gabriel's Gift as a children's book, didn't you?

Yes, in that David Bowie wanted a book that he could then illustrate, but as I was writing it became more of an adult book. I have written one children's story, "Ladybirds For Tea." I think when you have children, you want to write for them and it wouldn't occur to you otherwise.

Do you feel Gabriel's Gift re-established you after the controversy of Intimacy?

Intimacy really bothers people where *Gabriel's Gift* does not. I think some reviewers were caught up in the furore around *Intimacy* and so haven't yet looked fairly and squarely at the book. Nor have they yet taken into consideration the fact that I was aware I was playing a literary game. I consciously wrote *Intimacy* in the form of a confession and was also aware that it might be read as "Hanif Kureishi telling the truth about a relationship break-up." That too is a literary construct: it is artificial. All of one's work is autobiographical to the extent that it reflects one's interests. But the book hasn't yet been read as a move in a literary game which is quite disappointing. It operates as a construct—written in the first person, constructed as a confession—and this is the basis on which it should begin to be evaluated. I wanted a book people could play with in that way. It is a text, not me. I am not the text.

Does the cult of celebrity annoy you then? If you weren't famous, critics wouldn't have read the novel as autobiography and you do have that ironic scene in the story "That Was Then" when Natasha challenges Nick for using her life in his book.

I suppose it works both ways. Being a celebrity allows you to write books that people will read, which is what we all want. But, on the other hand, it devalues what you do, as all celebrity does. It makes it one-dimensional.

The last section of Gabriel's Gift is a kind of coda—a happy ending. In reclaiming what is comfortable at the heart of many families, it is perhaps the happiest ending you have written, isn't it?

There aren't any happy endings in life but there are happy moments. Other pieces are cheerful too, like "Four Blue Chairs." What you want as a writer is to write in different tones for your own pleasure. It isn't as if any one thing you write is your final testament. *Intimacy* isn't how I am feeling today, or even how I felt the day after it was finished. It isn't my last word on marriage, relationships, children. You write in light and dark.

The Novel

The *Buddha of Suburbia* tells politically-nuanced and hugely comical stories about contemporary Britain. Published in 1990, it was a novel ahead of its time. Its British protagonist of biracial heritage only found a category to tick on the national census form in 2001, and the appellation "mixed race" still conveys little of the complex history of ethnic encounters in the UK with which Kureishi engages. Hanif Kureishi's first novel uncovers many of the ironies that underlie our recognition of Britain as a multicultural society and of Britons as racially diverse and culturally heterogeneous citizens. Kureishi sets his novel in London where around 300 different languages are currently spoken. In 2001, the (then) British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook declared chicken tikka masala a "true British national dish" in an effort to promote Britain's cultural harmony in the year in which the British National Party secured their best ever result in a General Election.[†] Multicultural Britain remains at the forefront of public and media attention into the new millennium, and this novel set in the 1970s touches on many issues that remain as controversial as they are comic. It provides food for cultural and political thought all at the same time.