

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.⁴ 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.

In *Karim*, Kureishi creates a seventeen-year-old boy and follows him over four years in the 1970s, during which he falls in and out of love and tries on a host of different identities (from self-imposed to imposed). He witnesses the breakdown of his parents' marriage, the unconventional "marriage" of his friend Jamila, and the transformation of his father into a "Buddha" of the South London suburbs. The latter is not the only transformation that takes place: the love of Karim's young life, Charlie, echoes the mood of the late 1970s when he embarks on a career as a punk in London and New York. Much of the action takes place on the urban fringes of popular culture, and much of the humor rests on the ways in which these lower middle-class boys negotiate new lives outside of the safe suburban setting that is their typically English home. The whole is a rollercoaster of a novel; funny, ironic, and archly knowing.

The Buddha of Suburbia is a lively, busy novel — two novels even, since the two sections "In the Suburbs" and "In the City" are arguably synonymous with a short first novel and its sequel. Its primary settings, the South London suburbs, most specifically Bromley and Central London, give way to New York for a short but significant section. However, in the main, the novel focuses on life in Britain, reworking Disraeli's "two nations" of the Victorian rich and poor as center and margin, metropolitan and suburban.⁵ Kureishi is clearly interested in multiple conceptions of England. The "England" he describes is contradictory and duplicitous at times. One is reminded of a writer he admires, J. B. Priestley, and his famous statement "I had seen a lot of Englands." In his essay "Bradford," Kureishi notes the importance of Bradford-born Priestley's "three Englands": the "traditional" guide book England of cathedrals and countryside, industrial England, and suburban (Americanized) England, and Kureishi adds a fourth, the inner city. Kureishi has stated elsewhere that the inner city represents the evanescent fads and phases of contemporary British life; in contrast

to living quietly with the family in the suburbs, in the inner city London that Kureishi takes as his subject, "People came and went. There was much false intimacy and forced friendship. People didn't take responsibility for each other." Reading *The Buddha of Suburbia*, one is made aware of the dialectical relationship between freedom and commitment, politics and sexuality, but each politicized point is deftly crafted as farce. The idea of Britain Kureishi wills into being lampoons many of the old established tropes of English life and leads the reader to reflect on new ways of seeing a nation they may feel they know well.

BUDDHA: A VERY ENGLISH NOVEL

It is worth noting that when foreign students study in England, institutions and organizers, like the ISA-Butler program, recommend *The Buddha of Suburbia* as a novel they should read to aid orientation, "to get a feel for the country." Kureishi has dryly described his first novel as "Kingsley Amis meets the Velvet Underground." Amis's novel *Lucky Jim* (1953) has as its protagonist "Lucky" Jim Dixon, an enduring figure within the English literary tradition who is a curious admixture of self-centered pretense and a clumsy desire to belong. English fiction is renowned for its unapologetically eccentric ex-centrics, its outsiders as heroes. D. J. Taylor believes characters populating the novels of Martin Amis and James Kelman fulfill that role but finds them lacking in the qualities readers found in Kingsley Amis's Jim. He might be as well to examine Kureishi's protagonist, Karim Amir, for a witty exploration of the complexities of living in Britain in the 1970s.

Kureishi is more of the satirist. On *The Late Show* in 1990, he described himself as "in some ways quite a traditional English comic writer who happens to be dealing with subjects that are

considered by some to be dangerous, like drugs and certain sexual practices." Setting himself up in this way steals a march on those who may unquestioningly assume an English writer will be ethnically undifferentiated as "white." On the novel's publication, his interviewers on television shows like *The Late Show* and *Rear Window* certainly focused on *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s location within a British fictional tradition, with one interviewer referring to Kureishi as "an Asian John Mortimer" after the creator of the popular comic character Rumpole of the Bailey. Novelist Angela Carter asserted "Karim's story will prove to be most English in its heritage, that of the glorious, scabrous, picaresque, savage, sentimental tradition of low comedy that stretches from Chaucer to the dirty postcards on Brighton Pier." Another critic, Alamgir Hashmi, spends most of his article exemplifying Kureishi's indebtedness to an English literary tradition, comparing *Buddha* to works by H. G. Wells and Angus Wilson and various other novels of "social focus eased by a comic outlook."

However, even when located within a comic tradition, Kureishi's work remains controversial, not solely as a result of its sexual content but as a result of its clearly anti-Thatcherite stance. Prior to the publication of this novel, Kureishi's ideological position was made clear in plays and in the films *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. Stephen Frears, whose directing career might be reasonably described as anti-establishment, has described the films he directed in the 1980s, including those with Kureishi, as "films shrieking at Mrs. Thatcher." The right-wing Oxford historian Norman Stone infamously criticized a number of such films for what he called an "overall feeling of disgust and decay," a response to British society that he believed "worthless and insulting." The venomous tirade in which he celebrates "very good films of a traditional kind," like *Passage to India*, *Room With A View*, and *Hope*

and *Glory* and decimates *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie*, falls into a national myth of British life as resolutely traditional and ethnically undifferentiated. Stone's British community romanticizes the history of Empire that denies the hybridity of British identity underpinning the dynamics of the films he attacks. Kureishi, in his response to Stone ("England, bloody England"), points out that E. M. Forster, writer of two of the three novels on which Stone's favorite films are based, was himself a controversial and dissenting individual. Salman Rushdie's comment that the success of "Raj revisionism" is "the artistic counterpart to the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain" helps to clarify Stone's reactionary attack, and to contextualize just why Kureishi's representations of English life may hit a nerve.

Stone is an example of the rear guard action that right-wing apologists mounted in the 1980s to help to preserve a myth of harmonious "Englishness" in the face of that decade's political and social realities. It is difficult to consider *The Buddha of Suburbia*, published at the end of that decade, without also countering Stone's criticisms since Kureishi's work emerges from what Iain Chambers has called "the inventive edges of the consensus, from the previously ignored and suppressed." In Chambers's definition the inventiveness comprises of "a widening democratization" of styles and images reflecting "new possibilities, new perspectives, new projects." Kureishi provides new perspectives on myths of Englishness and nationhood and attendant problems of nationalism. Film critic Sheila Johnson, examining representations of "Britishness" via *Chariots of Fire* and *Ploughman's Lunch* (one would assume that Norman Stone would enjoy the former but revile the latter), identifies the 1980s as "an historical moment when notions of national unity were once again being dusted down and re-mobilised in the interests of political expediency." Most significantly for our context, Johnson

expresses the hope that subsequent cultural productions "will continue to move away from hoary national mythologies and conventional narrative formats."

When Kureishi shifts his attention to fiction with *Buddha*, he undermines the same national myths he satirizes so successfully in his screenplays: those that derive from lower middle-class white social mores and those that derive from the etiquette of immigrant groups. Karim's Auntie Jean and Uncle Ted (Gin and Tonic as Haroon calls them) have prided themselves on their "dos," garden parties where the air is "thick with aftershave and perfume," and while Karim's mother hopes to go unnoticed, his father Haroon "liked to stand out like a juggler at a funeral" (42). When Kureishi distinguishes between social groups he avoids limiting them by assumptions about cultural designation. When Jamila and Changez marry, the dowry he demands reflects the character's own idiosyncracies rather than the ways in which he might represent his ethnic and cultural group: "the ageing boy had demanded a warm winter overcoat from Moss Bros., a colour television and, mysteriously, an edition of the complete works of Conan Doyle." This prompts Haroon to ask "What normal Indian man would want such a thing? The boy must be investigated further—immediately!" (57)

Kureishi edges into satire most effectively when he confronts the sheer banality of quotidian life for most Britons most of the time. Most of those who live in Karim's neighborhood are in bed by 10:30 pm and most kids his age lead what he calls "a steady life in my bedroom with my radio" (94). The predominant emotion is boredom. Charlie Hero finds it easy to accuse Karim of "looking English" when he is at his most awkward and reserved: "So shocked, so self-righteous and moral, so loveless and incapable of dancing. They are narrow, the English. It's a Kingdom of Prejudice over there. Don't be like it!" (254). Even though Charlie is em-

barking on a session of sado-masochistic sex, he still feels able to take the "high ground" by contrasting himself to the rest of "the English."

When Kureishi published *Buddha* he helped to fill what he has called "a hole in the centre of English writing," a gap about the lives and experiences of Black peoples in Britain or, in Kobena Mercer's terms, he performs "the role of making present what had been rendered absent." Kureishi follows Orwell for whom class was the hole waiting to be filled and, like Orwell, he takes stands on certain issues. He has drawn readers' attention on many occasions to his repeated readings of George Orwell's 1944 essay "England Your England." Following Orwell, among others, Kureishi admitted the difficulties of identifying himself with England's colonialist history and myths of nationhood in the early essay "The Rainbow Sign" (1986). It is precisely this sense of dislocation that has led to his becoming consistently tenacious in exploring precisely what it is to be British, and how that complex citizenship might be represented. Kureishi remembers "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." Kureishi and, by extension, Karim, has few problems in identifying with even the most traditional features of British life. One thinks of Karim's disquisition on the joys of drinking tea and cycling (62) and of the things he values about Uncle Ted: "We ate corned-beef sandwiches and drank tea from our thermos flask. He gave me sporting tips and took me to the Catford dog track and Epsom Downs. He talked to me about pigeon racing... fishing and air rifles, aeroplanes, and how to eat winkles" (33). Kureishi remembers his grandfather's influence on his childhood as "pigeon-keeping, greyhound racing, roast beef eating and pianos in pubs." He is quite clear that:

It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time. Much thought, discussion and self-examination must go into seeing the necessity for this, what this "new way of being British" involves and how difficult it might be to attain.

The failure to grasp this opportunity for a revitalized and broader self-definition in the face of a real failure to be human, will be more insularity, schism, bitterness and catastrophe.

Kureishi's statement here could be said to serve as an alternative articulation of what Kobena Mercer believes is the predicament of contemporary black British cultural producers: "If, after many years of struggle, you arrive at the threshold of enunciation and are 'given' the-right-to speak and a limited space in which to tell your story, is it not the case that there will be an overwhelming pressure to try and tell the whole story at once?" Kureishi does not bend to the pressure to tell everything about Britain at once, although like Orwell he seems to exclaim "And the diversity of it, the chaos!" Kureishi confronts the difficulty of being able to convey his fresh way of seeing Britain effectively when as Orwell noted, "In left-wing circles it is always felt that there is something slightly disgraceful in being an Englishman and that it is a duty to snigger at every English institution, from horse-racing to suet puddings." Kureishi has Cherry, a Pakistani woman living in London, snigger that "this silly little island off Europe" could never be home, while in the *Buddha* Changez refers to an "unfriendly cold England" (101). But in *Buddha*, it is the comedy inherent in Karim's position as "an (almost) Englishman" that drives both the plot and much of the political satire. "The Rainbow Sign," where he begins to outline his ideas and beliefs, derives its title from James Baldwin's important essay collection *The Fire Next Time* (1963), "God gave Noah the rainbow

sign/ No more water, the fire next time!" When one reads Kureishi through the African-American writer and activist, it becomes clear that, even at its comic heart, the political thrust of *Buddha* involves a warning that if British society continues to marginalize racism rather than tackle the problem, there will be dire social consequences.

Kureishi, then, perceives his writing as located firmly within a British context where establishing a *conceptually* British identity that incorporates ethnic and cultural differences is an ultimate aim. Roy Jenkins, as Home Secretary in the Labour government, expressed a similar view as long ago as 1966:

I do not think we need in this country a melting pot, which will turn everybody out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone's misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman. . . . I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, coupled with cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.

Kureishi outlines his belief that contemporary British fiction is a space in which such issues may be explored:

If contemporary writing which emerges from oppressed groups ignores the central concerns and major conflicts of the larger society, it will automatically designate itself as minor, as a sub-genre. And it must not allow itself to be rendered invisible and marginalised in this way.

His England is clear-eyed and unpatriotic: even though, and again like Orwell, he allows that suet puddings and red pillar boxes have entered his soul, his context is post imperial and post-industrial, and rarely nostalgic.

LONDON AND SUBURBIA

London almost always figures largely in Kureishi's writing, as he points out in the interview that opens this book. He has said "I'm no Britisher, but a Londoner" on more than one occasion. London is his special subject; the city functioning, on the one hand, as a metonym for a complex and heterogeneous British Isles and, on the other, as a precise location for his characters. Kureishi, like Angela Carter in fiction like *Wise Children* (1992), a novel Salman Rushdie described as "a raspberry blown by South London across the Thames," begins his first novel in the South London suburbs and, again following Carter, Kureishi can be described as a "thumber of noses, a defiler of sacred cows." There is little in Kureishi's London that is calm or time-honored. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* includes a paean to the city in which Sammy's voiceover comments on a collage of bohemian scenes:

On Saturdays we like to walk along the towpath at Hammersmith and kiss and argue.

(Next we see Sammy and Rosie in 'Any Amount of Books'.)

(Voice over) Then we go to the bookshop and buy novels written by women.

(Next, Sammy and Rosie outside the Albert Hall.)

(Voiceover) Or we trot past the Albert Hall and up through Hyde Park. On Saturday nights things really hot up. . . .

We go to an Alternative Cabaret in Earl's Court in the hope of seeing our government abused. . . .

We love our city and we belong to it. Neither of us are English, we're Londoners you see.

Kureishi's London is an eclectic educated mix for accountant Sammy and social worker Rosie. Whereas for Karim the bohemian gives way to a fascination with the seedy:

So this was London at last, and nothing gave me more pleasure than strolling around my new possession all day. London seemed like a house with five thousand rooms, all different; the kick was to work out how they were connected. . . . There were small hotels smelling of spunk and disinfectant, Australian travel agents, all-night shops run by dwarfish Bengalis, leather bars with fat moustached queens exchanging secret signals outside, and roaming strangers with no money and searching eyes. In Kensington nobody looked at you. In Earls Court everybody did, wondering what they could wrench from you. (126-127)

As Kureishi continues to publish, his literary London becomes more expansive. The short story "The Umbrella" is anthologized in a special issue of *Granta* called "London, the Lives of the City" and in the film *Intimacy* the capital feels lonely, even brutal, with quietly desperate characters seeking sexual intimacy amid its bleakness.

In *Sammy and Rosie*, Sammy explains to his father that London is *the* place to live since it is cosmopolitan and cheap. Neither Kureishi nor his characters are rootless cosmopolitans though; they are often Londoners born and bred and, apart from *My Son the Fanatic* set in Bradford and the play *Sleep With Me* located in the Gloucestershire countryside, even Kureishi's "dual-location" writings like "With Your Tongue Down My Throat" are set in Pakistan — and London. Kureishi's London is not the same kind of "city within a city" as Sam Selvon's lonely Trinidadian Londoners inhabit in Bayswater and Brixton, or Timothy Mo's Chinatown in *Sour Sweet* (1982). Rather than an immigrant enclave, Karim's London is more reliant on popular cultural images of the 1960s that persist into the 1970s: music, TV, theater. In *Buddha* the city is overblown and unrestrained, sexy and cheap, grotesque and theatrical, "an inferno of pleasure and madness," as Kureishi recently described London in an interview. For Karim it epitomizes the best of all possible worlds in which to take his faltering but exciting steps from adolescence to adulthood. When one remembers that Angela Carter re-

ferred to Karim as a version of Voltaire's *Candide*, the Panglossian reference to "the best of all possible worlds" takes on a specifically literary resonance. Kureishi seems tagged with such references: one critic even referring to him as a Dickensian "artful dodger."

In many ways the New York where Karim and Charlie spend the last few chapters of the novel is as much a postmodern extension of their popular cultural fantasies as it is a firm geo-cultural location. Much of New York's artistic scene passes in an aimless drunken haze. Charlie's rock persona is "temporary, borrowed" and his music has "lost its drama and attack when transported from England with its unemployment, strikes and class antagonism" (246-7). As soon as he begins living in New York, Charlie acquires a Cockney accent, when Karim's memory of him is as a boy at school who "cried after being mocked for talking so posh." Karim is in no doubt: "Charlie is 'selling Englishness'" (247). Charlie's striking of this pose reflects something of the fluidity and popular cultural currency of working class markers and echoes Johnny in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, whose position within the British community is also unstable and shifting; he moves from marching with the National Front through Lewisham to working for Omar and being one of Nasser's "people." In this way, Kureishi draws in the discourses of nationalism and patriotism and the commodification of "Englishness" with those of race and community, and attempts to deny any reductive reading. New York functions in direct counterpoint to London; metaphorically it reflects the trappings and the snares of fame and success but Karim still prefers his own "bitter, fractured country in turmoil" and the prospects of a part in a TV soap opera intending to tackle contemporary issues (259).

From Iain Chambers' "obscured" metropolis, to John Clement Ball's "semi-detached" metropolis, there are many ways of thinking about literary London. For Orwell, the place to look for "the germs of the future England" was "the arterial roads," in the suburbs or

the "outskirts," the title of a 1981 play by Kureishi. In *The Buddha of Suburbia* Haroon declaims "There are many more things in heaven and earth, than you damn well dream of in Penge" (27). Kureishi is certainly not the first writer to satirize the suburbs: from George and Weedon Grossmith's classic comedy *The Diary of A Nobody* (1892), chronicling the absurd petty life of London clerk Charles Pooter, and H. G. Wells' *The New Machiavelli* (1910), to George Orwell's own *Coming Up For Air* (1939) and John Betjamen's *Slough* which "isn't fit for humans now," English writers have castigated the suburbs. They are a creative source of conflict and comedy, a backdrop where existence is sheltered but bland, a kind of manufactured monotony in which vacuous lives are lived out in what James Kunstler has called "the Geography of Nowhere." It is easy to laugh at the social enclaves where most Britons have grown up and since Kureishi believes that English values are suburban values, he is particularly acerbic about the stifling containment of suburban desires. People in Chislehurst would, Karim is convinced, "exchange their legs" for "velvet curtains, stereos, Martinis, electric lawnmowers, double glazing" (51). He compares his father's idyllic childhood in the exciting city of Bombay with his own dreary suburban sprawl of "gardens, lawns, greenhouses, sheds and curtained windows" (62).

Kureishi poses questions about the ways in which suburban living impacts on his characters. The suburbs are traditionally an "in-between" space—between city and country, and public and private lives—and so they function metaphorically in the novel as the liminal space Karim inhabits as he negotiates his way from adolescence to adulthood, and from margin to center. According to Alison Light, suburbia is typically "Janus-faced," not unlike Karim in his confusion over sexual and racial identity—or Haroon, a lapsed

Muslim commodifying himself for white suburbanites searching for the "inner room" as an Oriental-Hindu "Buddhist" guru. Haroon leaves his wife sitting at home in the suburbs watching television, a model of John Hartley's idea that female suburbanites are constructed through television, while he "buddhas off" beyond Bromley with Eva, whose primary goal is to "scour that suburban stigma" from her skin (134).

Suburbia sits at the nexus of a variety of contemporary forces: consumerism, lower middle-class complacency, political mobilization of voting districts, transport and traffic, and the green belt. It is hugely familiar and enduring and, for today's readers, often nostalgic and hackneyed. One is reminded that the word suburb owes much to expansion of work and leisure in the 1950s and some of Kureishi's descriptions are eerily reminiscent of the era, "scores of front rooms containing familiar strangers and televisions shining like dying lights" (74). Kureishi spends a lot of time delineating the suburbs. Bromley and Beckenham are filled with kids wearing velvet and satin and bright colors, "some were in bedspreads and curtains" (8); Chislehurst is "a lower middle-class equivalent of the theatre" (29) and, therefore, much more contradictory than the ubiquitous stereotypes would seem to allow. Obviously the suburbs have to be sufficiently banal for the protagonist to wish to escape them but some of the most surreal scenes take place in Karim's neighborhood. In suburbia, Karim undertakes an apprenticeship in how to be transgressive and Eva's successful career in interior design is initiated there. As Kureishi wryly states in "Finishing the Job," an essay describing a visit to Bromley ten years after moving out, "Look into the centre of the suburban soul and you see double-glazing. It was DIY they loved in Thatcherland... the concrete display of hard-earned cash." Fewer reviewers than one might expect have spent much time on how this particular item in the title's lexicon feeds the fantasy of self-renewal that underpins this novel. But many

more have engaged with the images of Asians and the controversy that undergirds the representation of this particular group of British citizens.

IMAGES OF THE ASIAN FAMILY IN BRITAIN

In telling stories of individuals, Kureishi acknowledges the multifarious complexity of Asians' experiences in Britain. He strives to open up and to deconstruct popular misconceived images of British Asians. In *The Buddha of Suburbia* Kureishi creates families when this particular image of Asians is the most redolent, and frequently vilified in the popular press. A study published shortly before *Buddha* argues that the umbrella term "the Asian family" performs a "double conjuring trick." Within it "disappear the many types of Asian family structures, specific religions, cultures and migratory patterns, alongside the great variety of family life found here... a caricature is developed in opposition to an account of the British family which posits it as open and non-patriarchal." Sociologists Sallie Westwood and Parminder Bhachu describe this as a "convenient fiction" because it ignores what we have come to understand about the workings of power relations in *all* families. It also elides the fact that Asian families *are* British families and, as they point out, it underestimates the extent to which Asian families are a "major source of strength and resistance against the racism of British society."

The "popular" image of the Asian family involves tropes of the authoritarian patriarch, the unhappy arranged marriage, and the Asian woman as submissive victim of the family itself. These features would seem to characterize the family unit that is Anwar, Princess Jeeta, and Jamila in Kureishi's novel. They do not comprise the focal family but they, and the writer's representation of them,

form the crux of the predicament of responsibility that Kureishi finds himself in vis-a-vis his critics. Kureishi obviously feels that he should engage with such a tenacious stereotype but this facet of *Buddha* is one with which even the most favorable reviewers of the novel have frequently felt uncomfortable—and endeavored to ignore. Neil Berry in the *London Review of Books* writes “in Karim’s uncle Anwar, Jamila is faced with an obdurate Muslim father, bent on lining up an arranged marriage for her,” exhibiting the kind of reviewers’ shorthand that is only possible when the image of that particular confrontation is already clearly inscribed within the minds of the reading public. Berry does not engage with issues of representation though:

All this might well seem to justify claims that Hanif Kureishi trades in facile caricatures of Asians. But his quality as an observer of Asian mores becomes a less obtrusive issue when the narrative shifts from the suburbs to London itself.

Like Angela Carter in the *Guardian* and Hermione Lee in the *Independent*, Berry celebrates the novel’s humorous ebullience. Lee does address the issue of representation, finally deciding, “perhaps Karim/Kureishi’s gift is not for political heartsearching or answerability but for ruthless, farcical improvisation.”

Kureishi presents the Anwar family as a foil for the Amirs and in so doing he also shows that not all families are the same. However, to dismiss the Anwars as nothing more than facile caricatures would be to miss the point. In Jamila and her mother we have two very strong women who are conscious of the roles assigned to them within a traditional working-class family unit, be the family black or white. I would argue that they choose to uphold a patriarchal structure that they know to be crumbling. Furthermore, it would be grossly inaccurate to see Jamila as an uncomplicated victim of her

parents, when she is, in fact, given a great deal of freedom to pursue her own interests, in contrast to the stereotypical image that would have her at the parents’ beck and call, dressed in salwar kameez, head bowed and acquiescent.

Jamila is a politicized character, presented in counterpoint to Karim who admits that: “compared to Jammie I was, as a militant, a real shaker and trembler. If people spat at me I practically thanked them for not making me chew the moss between the paving stones” (63). She stands up for her rights and is prepared to fight her aggressors: “once a greaser rode past us on an old bicycle and said, as if asking the time, ‘Eat shit, Pakis’. Jammie sprinted through the traffic before throwing the bastard off his bike and tugging out some of his hair, like someone weeding an overgrown garden” (53). Jamila’s political views can be located not only within the texts she reads, works by Simone de Beauvoir, Angela Davis, and George Jackson, but also in relation to political organizing against racism in the late 1970s, especially the campaigns launched by Black women’s movements, Asian youth, and community groups. To delimit a reading of *Buddha*’s Asian women characters is to perpetuate and maintain a stereotypical hierarchy that Kureishi goes some way towards demolishing.

Readers may laugh at Kureishi’s portrait of Ted, Jean’s henpecked husband, and find little that is morally or politically awkward in that representation, but when it comes to the gentle mocking of his Asian characters there is sometimes a strong feeling of (misplaced) disquiet. Jamila is astute enough to acknowledge that “families aren’t sacred” (55), but she also concedes that they have ways of asserting control. For example, her father attempts to rule his household with an iron fist, a fist that is directed at Jeeta until his daughter threatens to “cut off his hair with a carving knife” (58). But, with the end of physical violence, comes the birth of non-physical violence and it is this latter form of warfare that Anwar

directs at his wife and daughter to encourage them to bend to his will. In Anwar, Kureishi demonstrates that the "old ways" first generation immigrants are prone to cling to outside their country of birth are outmoded and redundant. Indeed, when seeking the "buddha's" advice on the potential arranged marriage Haroon sagely responds "We old Indians come to like this England less and less and we return to an imagined India" (74); it is this India of the imagination that drives Anwar, in belligerent patriarchy, into commencing his hunger strike. Anwar overlooks his own English "freedom" which includes "the prostitutes who hung around Hyde Park" whom "he loved" (25). Instead, by evoking Islam he represents himself as having a "fixed identity" that originates in his "motherland" and it is this that Kureishi deplores and satirizes.

For the author, one of the fundamental problems in British society is a hankering after a fixed, unbending, originary identity that takes little account of the various ethnic groups and communities that comprise contemporary Britain. In his creative representations Kureishi can be read as refuting any vestigial belief in transcendental racial or cultural categories. As he represents it, this is not the sole purview of whites but also of immigrants, especially those who espouse an uncritical orthodoxy. Karim reminds the reader "Like many Muslim men—beginning with the Prophet Mohammed himself, whose absolute statements, served up piping hot from God, inevitably gave rise to absolutism—Anwar thought he was right about everything. No doubt on any subject ever entered his head" (172). Such fixed views inevitably lead to conflict. Jamila operates strategically, endorsing an open and flexible stance—which, I would argue, leads her into "accepting" her father's choice of husband, Changez, in the knowledge that the marriage will operate on her terms, and be "a rebellion against rebellion, creative novelty itself" (82). In managing her situation in this way, Jamila prevents her father's death and curtails the violence directed at her

mother. After Anwar's aborted hunger strike, Jeeta succeeds in making his life miserable (through food and silence) while, at the same time, taking control of the family business. Bilquis in *My Beautiful Laundrette* "bewitches" Nasser's mistress, while his daughter, Tanya, craves independence on her own terms and leaves the family fold. Amjad and Banoo's daughter, Amina in the play *Borderline*, enjoys a sexual relationship outside of marriage and joins a group of Asian activists against racism; Yasmin, in the same play, leaves the husband her family arranged for her.

Kureishi has always been interested in families and family relationships (as indicated by his comments on this topic in the interview that precedes this chapter). However, his focus is not limited to father-daughter relationships, as the discussion above might seem to suggest. Some of Kureishi's most interesting representations are father-son relationships. From *Borderline* in 1981 to his most recent novel *Gabriel's Gift* (2001), Kureishi has examined the complex ways in which fathers and sons interact. In *Borderline*, Haroon defends his father against charges that he only employs cheap immigrant labor in his restaurant, even though he ultimately escapes him and restaurant work by leaving for university. Gabriel does everything he can to save his father's relationship with his mother. Kureishi shows that children assume as much responsibility for parents as parents do for their offspring: Gabriel admires Rex, but more than that he respects him, even though he is reduced to living in a grubby bed-sit. Indeed, his son helps Rex find work and is ultimately responsible for reconciling his parents. Even Kureishi's most comic work is invested with scenes of respect and admiration across the generations. For example, Omar respects Papa, but aspires to follow Nasser as his role model in *My Beautiful Laundrette*; even though, superficially at least, Sammy doesn't much care for Rafi, he still respects and admires him in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. Even in *My Son the Fanatic* in which most relationships

collapse or are severed, the father preserves his love for his son, despite the son's blinkered disrespect being in stark contrast to the Islamic teachings he claims to have fully embraced. It is only in *London Kills Me* that the father-son relationship is shown to be beyond repair, but this is clearly the result of the father's absence.

In *The Buddha of Suburbia* the central relationship of Haroon and Karim dominates our understanding of the novel. Karim, growing up in Britain, has consistently been positioned as "Other" within his own society but this has not always been the case for first generation immigrants like Haroon. Haroon's generation either attempted to disregard a projected "negative identity" or learned their Otherness in Britain. Kureishi tells the stories of the father and of the son and differentiates between their experiences. Haroon has "lived in the West for most of my life, and I will die here, yet I remain to all intents and purposes an Indian man. I will never be anything but an Indian" (263). Whereas Karim describes himself as "an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care—Englishman I am (though not proud of it)" (3). Kureishi explores the issues inherent in both these descriptions, through an examination of their father-son relationship.

From the outset the reader is aware of the link, or yoke, that binds the two characters. This is established during Haroon's yoga routine when he encourages his son to read from his favorite book, *Yoga for Women*. As Judith Misrahi-Barak explains, the term yoga derives from the Sanskrit root *yuj* which means to link, unite, or "to put under the same yoke." It also connotes: "the union, or even communion, between the different components of the human being—physical, mental and spiritual, and between the individual and the world." This establishing scene serves to unite the two charac-

ters before they embark on their escapade to Eva Kay's house, and functions, at the novel's outset, to designate the nature of their relationship. Their connection is based on the closeness of family rather than, as Kenneth Kaleta attests, "a typical adolescent power struggle" in which Haroon "orders" Karim help him practice his yoga. Each character has his own *particular* motives for attending Eva's soiree, but these motives overlap and intersect: father and son desire mother and son. And they each witness the other's "transgression," Haroon's extra marital lovemaking with Eva and Karim's homosexual masturbation of Charlie, which, in turn, cements their relationship beyond the filial with each sharing and protecting the other's "secret."

Adolescent Karim hopes that he is "going somewhere" and so partially mirrors his father who is going somewhere *else*: leaving his wife and children, his life as an employee in the Civil Service, and finally the suburbs. Concomitantly, Karim is taking leave of his mother and brother, his life as an adolescent, and the suburbs. It is no accident that Haroon tells his son that "we are growing up together" (22). The two utilize different but similar vehicles to escape their previous identities: Haroon becomes the "buddha" of suburbia and Karim takes to the stage as an actor. Haroon jettisons a career spent earning a pittance as a servant to Her Majesty's Government, where he knows that he will not be promoted ("The whites will never promote us. . . . Not an Indian while there is a white man left on the earth") but is expected to play the mimic man, taking orders and serving "his country" (27). However, it would be inaccurate to assume that mimicry cannot also be a form of subtle and potentially subversive power. As Jacques Lacan says:

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage. . . . It

is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.

Throughout the course of his life in England, Haroon succeeds in leading a mottled existence, demonstrating the sublimation of his past, but the “itself that is behind” comes into focus during his “buddha” phase. No longer does he desire to be “less risibly conspicuous”: “He was hissing his s’s and exaggerating his Indian accent. He’d spent years trying to be more of an Englishman . . . and now he was putting it [Indianness] back in spadeloads” (21). Haroon frees himself of the identity that has been imposed upon him by his work and family, specifically Ted and Jean who think that it is “bad enough his being an Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too. They’d called Dad Harry from the first time they’d met him” (33). The concept of mimicry is also applicable to Karim. In playing Kipling’s Mowgli he finds an identity thrust upon him, precisely because Shadwell’s conceptions of identity are predicated on essentialist notions. He asks Karim whether he speaks another language before ordering him to “put on” a false Indian accent along with his yellow scarf while smeared in a “shit-brown cream” (146), informing him that he has been “cast for *authenticity* and not for experience” (147; my italics). The majority of the white characters the reader encounters in this work have preconceived notions of identity, believing that as “foreigners” Haroon and Karim should act and behave in authentic ways. However, both characters turn the tables on those who would see them as “other” by subverting expectations: Haroon through his teaching and wisdom, which is initially seen as a performance (“Your father looks like a magician”, 31), and Karim through, for example, adopting a Cockney accent in the middle of his representation of Mowgli.

Karim follows his father faithfully and learns from him, even

though some of his teaching is rather unconventional. For example: “Dad taught me to flirt with everyone that I met, girls and boys alike, and I came to see charm, rather than courtesy or honesty, or even decency, as the primary social grace. And I even came to like people who were callous or vicious provided they were interesting” (7). Karim is also quick to acknowledge that the father presents his ethnicity as an element the individual may or may not choose to endorse:

I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I’d been colluding with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them. Partly I blamed Dad for this . . . he wasn’t proud of his past, but he wasn’t unproud of it either; it just existed, and there wasn’t any point in fetishizing it, as some liberals and Asians radicals liked to do. So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it. (213)

Karim sees identity as something one invents on the one hand and as something one may choose to inherit on the other. He only “partly” blames his father because he can see that in not pushing an identity on him, he refuses to act like those whites who position him in a particular way. Both characters adopt what Gayatri Spivak has called “strategic essentialism”: performing ethnicity, in order to achieve their own ends without, in this case, causing too much damage to those around them. In the end Haroon and Karim adopt the same credo: “we must find an entirely new way of being alive” (32). This would seem to me to completely counter Kaleta’s assertion that, “Karim is anxious to free himself from his father as part of his process of growing up: The son escapes his father’s domination and asserts his independence.”⁶ Rather, Karim knows his life choices are inextricably bound up with the connection he has with his father.

**LOOSENING THE IDEA OF EMPIRE: THE POLITICS
OF REPRESENTATION**

Hanif Kureishi has referred to writers like himself as cultural translators and to writing about contemporary British communities as involving "the psychological loosening of the idea of Empire." This would immediately appear to locate his work in relation to postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha's discussions of cultural translation as deriving from the hybridity of cultures, and of the process of representation undermining any pretence to "a holistic, organic identity." Kureishi's comment also could be said to align him with Salman Rushdie who in the essay "The New Empire Within Britain" explores dominant images of immigrants and their relation to institutional racism, "in the new Empire, as in the old one, it seems our masters are willing to use the tried and trusted strategies of divide-and-rule." Rushdie has also discussed writers who offer what he calls "stereoscopic vision" rather than "whole sight" in that they succeed in seeing *between* and *across* cultures. Kureishi is a prime example and he adjudges that one's identity has to be "some sort of alliance between the way you see yourself and the way other people in the world see you." Together, they allude to the kind of double consciousness or dual vision that black cultural critics and commentators from W. E. B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon to A. Sivanandan and Henry Louis Gates Jr. have exposed and explored in writing about issues of representation.

It is also possible to locate Kureishi's writing within contemporary debates about identity politics in a "dis-United Kingdom." He has been asked repeatedly to state and explain his position and to quantify it in the light of a changing Britain: "I'm an English writer, a British writer, let's say, with an Indian background. And there's

going to be more and more of that in England." Interestingly, though, despite the (sometimes wary and often weary) self-definition required of him, it is also difficult to pin Kureishi down, to *quantify* his artistic intentions in the light of popular and critical reactions to his work. This is, I would argue, partly the result of what Kobena Mercer has called the structural predicament of the black artist and intellectual and partly due to Kureishi's flirtation with controversy, his willingness to grapple with issues that are at once populist and intellectualized. Todd Pruzan, in his *Washington Post* review of *Gabriel's Gift*, recently observed that "A spoonful of glam rock helps the politics go down" and, as this study of *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows, Kureishi is adept at tempering serious interrogation of Britain's flaws and fallacies with huge portions of satirical comedy, choosing the kinds of literary topics and making the kind of observations in the press that catch public attention.

In *Buddha* Karim has learned from his father that, with the empire exhausted, he should "never let the ex-colonialists see you on your knees" or to fail to make the most of any opportunities he may have (250). One is reminded of U.S. Secretary Dean Acheson's famous statement of 1962 that when Britain lost its Empire, it failed to find a new role. When Ian Jack ponders the subject he observes, "how odd we thought the periphery could shrink, and the centre stay unchanged." It is precisely in the interstices between the center and the periphery, and the past and the present, that Kureishi finds a new perspective that animates Karim's barreling progress through post-imperial Britain.

In Kureishi's writing, the politics of representation is inextricably linked to what is often a precarious membership of a British community, and by extension a multi cultural Europe.⁷ This is not to say that Kureishi seeks to create a group identity that is "Asian" and "British"; rather, he illustrates the diverse forms of membership of

any community. Membership of "the" Asian "community" in contemporary Britain ranges from that *necessary* to African Asian refugees fleeing Amin's Uganda or *encouraged* to leave Kenyatta's Kenya to that *negotiated* by first generation immigrants like Nasser and Hussein in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Haroon in *The Buddha of Suburbia* to that *challenged* by Karim and Jamila in the same novel. Karim and Jamila are young Britons for whom identity politics is relational, an extension of the political and ideological times and tides within British society. They rail against the burgeoning right-wing movements of the late 1970s and Karim can be read against his younger brother Amar, or Allie, who hates "whingeing lefties" and "people who go on all the time about being black" and loves Italian clothes and soap operas (267–8).

An early essay by Paul Gilroy is particularly close in its identification of the intersection between class, race, and cultural identity to the issues that Kureishi explores. In "You can't fool the youths . . ." a contribution to a *Race and Class* special issue on the "riot"-torn Britain of 1981, Gilroy describes an enduring image of working-class Black communities from the 1970s on. In doing so he captures the stereotyping of young people like Karim and Jamila explored (or as some may say re-inscribed) by Kureishi:

the image of the respectable and hard-working first generation of black immigrants locked in struggle with their children, whose "identity crises" and precarious "between two cultures" impel them into deviant behaviour. Rejecting the parental culture whilst reproducing its pathological characteristics, these young people, whether of Asian or Afro-Caribbean origin, are presented as divorced from their parents' concerns. *This powerful stereotype unites self-proclaimed radical and openly racist theories of black life* (my emphasis).

This final sentence encapsulates the dilemma inherent in representing many of the characters in *Buddha* when that representation

can be tipped either way on the scales of political and moral responsibility. Kureishi has, it seems to me, often been judged according to a political agenda of the 1970s that expressed the need to formulate positive images that would perform a public relations exercise for the community to which the artist belonged. But he has simultaneously found himself judged according to the tenets of a 1980s political agenda that sought to articulate raced subject positions in ways that prove them to be both heterogeneous and sophisticated. Kureishi has been caught between a rock and a hard place and he expresses this anomalous position through Karim's dilemmas in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, over his dramatic presentations of Changez and Anwar and his rendition of Mowgli. Karim strikes a number of poses and he takes on a number of roles but he always weighs his experiences against his conscience or spiritual loneliness, and the ways in which others act towards him or perceive him. It is only very late in the novel that he moves beyond his childhood friend Charlie, whom he has so revered and desired, and in an epiphany of self realization is left "discovering myself through what I rejected" (255). Many of the problems with which Karim grapples dramatize quite complicated debates over representation.

Problems arise when a Black artist is straitjacketed into the formulaic series of expectations—when he or she suffers the burden of representation. This containment leads to a desire to tell stories other than the ones expected of a writer. Expectations that he will carry the burden of representation have dogged Kureishi since his earliest work, most particularly as a result of films that reached a mass popular audience. Perminder Dhillon-Kashyap, in an otherwise thoughtfully argued piece, worries that in *My Beautiful Laundrette* Kureishi "has created a new victim, the white fascist—a victim of economic circumstances who is being exploited by petty bourgeois Asian businessmen." Dhillon-Kashyap is concerned about the possibility of Kureishi perpetuating pernicious stereotypes. Ku-

reishi, though, is unafraid of employing problematic paradigms to politicized effect. He entitled his feature in *Time Out on My Beautiful Laundrette* "Dirty Washing" and, in portraying Omar as an Asian "underpants cleaner" in the film he challenges, both figuratively and literally, the unspoken imperative that has always been necessary in maintaining an unassailable imagined community of Englishmen: "that we should never discuss our differences in public: that we should always delay our criticism and do our dirty laundry in private." Kureishi provides an ironic twist on the idea since the clientele of the laundrette are white British. It is they who wash their clothes publicly (as Nasser declares "There's money in muck. What is it the gorra Englishman always needs? Clean clothes!"), and Kureishi who takes the dirty laundry of the white British themselves as his subject matter.

Kureishi's rejoinder after the release of *My Beautiful Laundrette* was "the Asian community think that I'm perpetually throwing shit at them." He appears to remove himself from that community in this statement but rather than simplistically denying his own place within that community, he is questioning the idea of community itself. Kureishi refuses to see community in monolithic terms so that when critics maintain that his work is fragmentary and unstructured arguably they are perceiving Kureishi's artistic response to the "structure" of the Asian community (and of Britain) as *bricolage*; as an incredibly diverse, heterogeneous peoples yoked together under the political aegis of Asian or Black as a result of the Othering of their communities by white British institutions. Neither cultural nor national identity is organic but social institutions may operate hegemonically to make it appear so. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis worry that "Britain" constructs members of minority cultures as a homogeneous group, which speaks with "a unified

cultural voice." Taking the argument a step further, it becomes necessary to distinguish the "minority" voice from the "majority" culture in order for them to be seen as different. In this sense, the more distanced or alienated a community is from the center, the more "authentic" it is also seen to be. This is precisely the imagined construction of the community that Kureishi has been assessed from within and it is powerfully entrenched.

Gurinder Chadha, director of the short *I'm British But . . .* and the acclaimed *Bhaji on the Beach*, commented in 1989 that in her view for minority communities "having a British identity is not as important as having a cultural identity." She described making *I'm British But . . .* as a way of paying her dues to her own community, that is to say the Asian community in Britain. She assessed Kureishi as "quite isolated from the Asian side of himself. If there's one criticism of him, it's that he's used that side of him without real cultural integrity."⁸ Chadha has fallen into the assumption that aligns a particular culture with a particular ethnic identity and reflects the continued allure of ethnic absolutes, an idea that Paul Gilroy, among others, rejects in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* as a patent oversimplification of British experiences of raced identity.

Kureishi creates complex and contradictory hybridized citizens whose cultural identities are inextricably linked with class politics. He does not represent Asian peoples collectively or their communities as static; only if individuals that may be said to constitute an ethnically recognizable group are threatened and besieged do they consider that mass identity formation may serve a political and survivalist purpose. In *Buddha*, although British Asian culture is not presented as an ethnic absolute, Kureishi explores the ways in which it may be bound up with the projected negative identity that all citizens who are *not* white are subject to, as when Hairy Back calls Karim "a little coon":

"We don't like it," Hairy Back said. "However many niggers there are, we don't like it. We're with Enoch. If you put one of your black 'ands near my daughter I'll smash it with a 'ammer! With a 'ammer!"(40)

Kureishi succeeds in creating diverse-British communities of which characters of Asian backgrounds are members. This may no longer seem new as we read successful novels by Salman Rushdie, Meera Syal, and more recently Zadie Smith, but Kureishi was the first to explode onto the scene and break into what remains an underdeveloped area of British fiction.

CONCLUSION

For Kureishi, writing is bound up with inescapable and exciting issues around performed identity and identity politics and is fraught with pitfalls and problems. In the 1980s when Kureishi began work on *Buddha* this very predicament contributed to his vibrant engagement with issues of representation, including "Englishness." Kureishi is not constrained by any expectations that may be attributed to him and *The Buddha of Suburbia* revitalizes and broadens definitions of self and Englishness. Kureishi asserts his authorial control over any "cultural" responsibility he may be deemed to have and has said on many occasions that he really does not care what other people may want him to write. His apparently cynical hardness should not distract our attention from what is also a thoughtful, thoroughgoing analysis of his writerly position in Britain. Even in the same interview in which he derides those who assume what his appropriate subject matter may be, he confides:

You would flatter yourself if you thought you could change things by a film or a play or whatever, but perhaps you can contribute to a climate of ideas.

It may be that you write a film about Asians or gay people . . . people may see this as being a normal part of everyday life and not a sort of freak show on the margins. It is important to ask questions about how we live sexually, how we live racially, what our relations are with each other emotionally. Asking these questions seems to me to be the things artists can do rather than change society in any specific way.

Kureishi asks these kinds of questions in *Buddha* and he underpins each question with a recognition of how class politics affects sexual and interracial relationships and the ways that each dovetail into definitions of British democracy.⁹ *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a larger book than its immediate plot and preoccupations would imply. While it is specific to its 1970s South England setting, it opens out onto a vista of two continents, and explores pop and youth culture across the disappearing Sixties, the rough and ready Seventies and nods wryly towards the yuppified Eighties. Kureishi creates a perfect match between setting and subject and in Karim, he fashions a persona who cuts a swathe through a series of poignant and comic situations. Though ironic he is never scathing about his young protagonist's hopes and ambitions, mistakes or failures. The novel was and still is a huge critical, commercial, and popular success.