

The Novel's Reception

Hanif Kureishi's reputation as a spiky writer ensured that the publication of *The Buddha of Suburbia* would become the subject of considerable press coverage. But even Kureishi may well have been surprised to see the number of column inches reviewers devoted to his first novel. Two of the first reviewers off the blocks were the acclaimed novelist Angela Carter and the well-known literary critic Hermione Lee. Carter opens her review with "The narrator . . . is a child of Empire" but quickly unsettles any expectations of Raj revivalism by claiming that *The Buddha of Suburbia* may be "the first novel in what I trust will be a rapidly growing and influential genre, the novel designed on purpose to exclude itself from the Booker short list."¹⁰ In this way, the novel was immediately singled out in the British press as brave and controversial. Readers have continued to be drawn to Kureishi for these reasons down the years since he is always sardonic and often "taboo-busting."

Reviewers of his first novel have tended to focus, to varying degrees, on a very few key areas. Firstly, Kureishi's literary antecedents. For example, Hermione Lee asserts that Kureishi's first novel is reminiscent of a series of distinct literary "models": "This garru-

lous, confiding voice, full of 'can you believes' and 'I'm not kiddings', owes a lot to America: to *The Catcher in the Rye*, to Saul Bellow's Augie March . . . to Nathanael West's greenhorn astray in the nightmare world of *A Cool Million*, and to the black picaresque heroes of Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison." The American connection reflects the reading of his protagonist, Karim who returns to America of the 1950s and 1960s in his reading patterns, following his cousin Jamila's lead. More usually, a significant number of reviewers, as well as Kureishi himself, have been quick to point out how very English the novel feels. In an article for the *Guardian*, Frank Kermode argues that Kureishi's fiction is reminiscent of H. G. Wells' work. Wells, a sharp social critic who created aspiring members of the middle classes in *Kipps* (1905) and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910), was, like Kureishi, born in Bromley. Kermode elucidates his position by setting up a detailed example by which to compare the two writers: "Wells observed the struggles and antics of an underclass in search of personal and social fulfillment, and wrote about suburban drolls, mild grotesques, in what we think of as a quasi-Dickensian way. Kureishi thinks of his own kind of writing as in the tradition of the English comic novel, mentioning not only Wells but Angus Wilson and Kingsley Amis as varied representatives of that genre."¹¹ The underclass to which Kermode alludes is represented in *Buddha* by British Asian characters; Kureishi effects a shift in our understanding of the stock characters the English novel form generally encompasses. The "suburban drolls" he creates in 1990 are often members of a minority "outsider" population, embarking on the same search for personal and social fulfillment that has energized more "traditional" English writing.

The second area of interest, like the first, reflects the reviewers' task of locating the novel in terms of genre as well as literary influences. Reviewers wonder whether *The Buddha of Suburbia* may safely be labelled a comic novel, and left at that. Or, is it really

an urban tragedy, or a melodrama, or a treatise on race relations? It would be hard to contest the appellation of comic novel but critics have also recognized all of the aforementioned elements in their reviews. For Hermione Lee, *Buddha* is "one of the sharpest satires on race relations in this country" and Michiko Kakutani follows suit, stating in the *New York Times* that it is at once "a traditional comedy of manners" and "a scathing satire on race relations in Britain." However, Kakutani is not oblivious to the fact that life in Britain involves Asians finding themselves positioned as victims of white oppression. She compares Kureishi to V. S. Naipaul in this regard, "he has a gift for locating the hypocrisies that inform relationships between the white and nonwhite worlds, and absolutely no misgivings about exposing those hypocrisies on both sides. Patronizing white liberals, scheming third world hustlers, sycophantic immigrants and guilty ex-colonialists: all are depicted in uncompromisingly satiric terms." Kureishi has frequently bemoaned the fact that, traditionally, the British novel excludes precisely these sorts of topics, "Politics, the lives of immigrants, the changes in British society—and also pop culture, which isn't just a trivial sideshow."

A predictable area of focus is the intersection between British "race relations" and the author's biography, that is to say, Kureishi's heritage as a mixed race writer in contemporary Britain. Although critics do not stretch to examine this facet of his work in critical terms, they do acknowledge concepts like the politics of identity and hybridity as discussed earlier in this study. For example, Paul Bailey's review in the *Sunday Times* takes account of cultural hybridity without actually exploring how it functions: "the picture it offers of an Indian-English way of life in an always recognisable London... is of special interest." More typically, critics refer to cultural hybridity in order to reassure readers that this facet of the novel does not fix it as "minority interest", as demonstrated by M. G. Lord's comments in *Newsday*, "Like Kureishi, Karim... is an

Anglo-Asian. . . . But he is also a universal type." This denial of specificity can be annoying. At its worst, "universal" has become a coded way of expressing that with which white westerners can empathize so that ethnic specifics are rendered superficial. In an essay in *To Criticize the Critic*, T. S. Eliot, though frequently cited by those who espouse monocultural ideas of cultural identity, says "I doubt whether a poet or novelist can be universal without being local too" and he recognizes that writers may convey the local archetypally "in the mythology of men everywhere." Hermione Lee is perhaps the most perceptive reviewer on this topic when she acknowledges: "Kureishi's work . . . centres on an Anglo-Asian 'in-betweeners' love-hatred of Britain," though she fails to elaborate on the role of the in-betweeners in contemporary British society. The most cogent of reviewers in this context is Robin Epstein, writing in the *Courier Journal*, who believes that *The Buddha of Suburbia* "rightly undermines the impression some might have mistakenly picked up about British Muslims from the calls for the head of Salman Rushdie. . . . They are far from being a fundamentalist monolith of book burners." This reviewer recognizes the heterogeneity of British-Asians. However, the focus on his mixed-race identity is something that has come to haunt Kureishi: in representing him as both "insider" and "outsider," he has been called upon to speak for and to represent both communities and, sometimes, as a result, he has become a target for both groups.

Commentary on the novel's setting takes up quite a substantial part of many reviews. Kureishi has famously described himself as a Londoner and his first novel is as much about London as it is about the suburbs. However, not all reviewers believe that the second part of the novel (the London section) is as well-crafted as the first. Anthony Appiah in the *New York Times* calls *Buddha* an "extremely funny" read and its characters "both flawed and appealing." But he is also concerned that the novel "dragged" towards the end after a

"brilliant beginning." Ian Buruma compartmentalizes the novel in this way, stating in the *New Republic* that "the inner-city half of the book is less good than the suburban part." Richard Eder speaks of an "awkward and disappointing second half" in which the story "turns thin and cartoonish." Eder sees *Buddha* as a developmental stage in Kureishi's writing career, moving out from the screenplays to a novel about "England and her Third World." Reading past what is unhelpful, out-moded, and inappropriate in Eder's terminology, he basically contends that there are two Londons. One is "London as idea," a city of stereotypes endorsed by the heritage industry and by Eder himself: commuters in bowler hats, pearly queens, Big Ben, the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. Eschewing economics, Eder believes these features encourage immigrants and the consequent creation of a second London of mosques and Caribbean markets. Eder's is an awkwardly expressed review but it goes some way towards conveying Kureishi's success in weaving together a London that otherwise seems to be "terminally fragmented" in British fiction, where second-generation immigrants try "to cope with being English" and the (white) English seem to have "lost any real identity of their own."¹² In a similar vein, Larry Fineberg asserts the novel is at its most focused when it "concentrates on the rich and jumbled assortment of England's Asian and black population." The focus on alterity tends to concentrate on British Asians as part of a national imaginary rather than actual British citizens, with reviewers deliberately avoiding talk of "race" by covering it over in discussions of ways of "belonging" to the British nation. One is sadly reminded of Paul Gilroy's observations that what is generally called "new racism" operates across left and right political distinctions when some reviewers tangle themselves in knots and fail to re-orient traditional ideas of "nation" or "Englishness."

An aspect of the novel that deserved more attention is cross-

generational relationships and, most specifically, Karim's relationship with his father, as Felix Jimenez suggests in *The Nation*. It is a relationship Kureishi has spoken of openly and described as formative in a number of interviews. Recently, discussing his latest book, *Gabriel's Gift*, in a variety of fora, Kureishi confided he has always been interested in the father-son relationship. Jimenez traces what he sees as Karim's "unbearable fascination with phallic phantoms" back to Cat Stevens: "although musical references pop up throughout the book—everything from Nat King Cole to the Rolling Stones to Pete Townsend—the only song that really comes to one's mind is Stevens' syrupy 'Father and Son.'" This song, Jimenez contends, epitomizes their relationship: "Karim's politics are every bit as suburban as his father's, he just punks it out differently."

Not all reviews of *Buddha* have been positive. Novelist Bharati Mukherjee, while accepting that Kureishi is an "enormous talent" and ranking him alongside Salman Rushdie and Kazuo Ishiguro in his ability to encourage readers to rethink what "Englishness" means, is left feeling that *Buddha* is "profoundly unsatisfying." She fears it lacks focus and narrative momentum. Her view is determined by her expectations that there should have been a thoroughgoing analysis of Haroon, rather than Karim, a "smug, opportunistic, hyper-sensual, self-consciously charming, cruel adolescent." One can only imagine she feels he is too close to her own protagonist Jasmine in the eponymous novel of 1989. Mukherjee avers that Kureishi's *bildungsroman* lacks "emotional and moral resonance," the kind of criticism that has been directed at her own fiction. Like Fineberg, who contends that Karim is a *tabula rasa*, she feels Karim "never quite comes alive and is too often a vehicle for the author's opinions," one of the problems that surfaces for reviewers is that a novel based on first person narration is expected to conform to a socio-realist context. It would seem such criticisms fail to recognize the general literary consensus that a character's consciousness is a

construction rather than a stable "self": "a locus of relationships rather than an ego in the older sense," as Fredric Jameson summarized as long ago as the early 1970s.

Mukherjee, it seems to me, wishes that Kureishi had written a different book; namely one that explored "national anxieties about cultural mongrelization"—like *Jasmine*, in which her immigrant protagonist plays out a series of different roles as she flirts with her new American identity. Significantly, though, Mukherjee is one of the few reviewers to comment specifically on Jamila, finding her a "truly admirable character." Only Angela Carter praises all of Kureishi's female characters: "He can't find a bad word to say about women . . . which is a lovely thing in this period of fashionable misogyny." Kureishi finds avid supporters easily as often as he is excoriated by reviewers who balk at his supposedly controversial views. In Carter and Mukherjee, Kureishi's first novel held the attention of two leading contemporary writers on both sides of the Atlantic.

One of the qualities for which *The Buddha of Suburbia* has been consistently applauded is its evocative period detail. Fineberg adjudges a "mood and time is adeptly evoked without sentimentality" and Robin Epstein goes even further and suggests that Kureishi has a "wry appreciation . . . of fashion, literature, music, politics and spirituality." This quality is something that Kureishi consciously aimed for in depicting a time and place as precisely as possible without romanticizing either aspect. When reviewers think he fails, they tend to overbalance towards the political right wing, like *The Economist's* unnamed reviewer who believes that "politics weakens . . . Kureishi's touch—as was apparent in his didactic and dismal second film, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*." The reviewer pursues the point like a dog with a bone: "certain classes of people, the Rich and the Establishment, are Bad. Writing about these . . . Kureishi loses his sense of subtlety. But then he has also lost his peculiar

vantage point; that of an outsider who is in a minority." This oddly tautological review traps Kureishi in a double bind: he is and is not an "outsider," or "British," or "political," in the "right" kind of didactic ways. Dependence on labels hampers some reviewers from reading and enjoying fiction. In the same review, Adewale Maja-Pearce's novel *How Many Miles to Babylon* is considered and the pitfalls of reading fiction as sociology become even more clear. Maja-Pearce is castigated for writing about "issues" when "what white readers need" is "to be able to get under the skin of somebody who is living with the problems." It is, of course, reductive to see fiction by black writers as potential self-help manuals for white readers.

Many adjectives have been used to describe *The Buddha of Suburbia*: "rich and Rabelaisian" (Fineberg); "penetrating" (Mukherjee); "witty and exhilarating" (Eder). For Kit Reed and the vast majority of reviewers and readers of the novel, "Traveling with Karim is a little like taking a guided tour in which the guide has been replaced by an attractive, large child who's fun to be with but easily distracted by strains of music and flashes of light and color. You may miss one or two major monuments as he whisks you from place to place, but traveling with him is a pleasure." I am certain that this is indeed the case since more than 600,000 people have bought the novel in 25 different languages¹³ in order to experience the pleasure of traveling with Karim Amir.

The Television Adaptation

The adaptation of *The Buddha of Suburbia* was arguably Kureishi's biggest screen success since *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Kureishi really came to public prominence as the screenwriter of that highly successful film. So it is unsurprising that he agreed to adapt *The Buddha of Suburbia* for the screen. *My Beautiful Laundrette* is the story of two young men in Margaret Thatcher's Britain. Omar, who is Asian, and Johnny, who is white, embody Thatcher's call for entrepreneurism. In fact, Kureishi believes that the primary thing they have in common is "the desire to be rich . . . what they also want, which is one of the West's other projects, is to flaunt and demonstrate to others their wealth and prosperity."¹⁴ At the same time, their homosexual relationship defies the kind of homophobia that gave rise to Clause 28 in 1988.¹⁵ The film was a breakthrough success for the newly formed Channel 4, which was commissioning films by young writers and directors.

Kureishi's first film—like his first novel—has an exuberant energy through which it challenges fixed assumptions about the British Asian community and stereotypes of Asians as duty-bound, quiescent figures who long for a far-off homeland. Instead, the film

shows characters clearly carving out a place for themselves in England; the Asians are not only local shopkeepers but also important business entrepreneurs. Significantly, it also depicts Asians as sexual beings, with sexual appetites (Nasser's comforting yet erotic affair with Rachel; Tania's sexual awakening and appreciation of the sensuality of her own body, and the central homosexual relationship of Omar and Johnny). The phenomenal success of the film, I think, rests in its elevation and debunking of themes of racial and sexual identity, transforming them into politically exciting comedy. In this, *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a pertinent forerunner of the novel: critically, *Buddha* stirred up the same kinds of battling reviewers. Max Davidson in "There's More to *The Buddha of Suburbia* than Naked Flesh" got to the heart of the debate pretty quickly:

The integrity of the drama was so striking that it was almost as if its creator Hanif Kureishi was taking the mickey out of the people who want to jump on the bandwagon and label him a pornographer. . . . The people who haven't grown up are the armchair censors who take fright at the sight of a naked bottom and cry foul before they have thought what it is they are objecting to. It is the context, always the context, that matters; and anyone who has watched this series will attest that it has taken a serious, rounded look at the strains of adolescence.

Of course not all viewers are ever happy. In the United States *My Beautiful Laundrette* was attacked by some members of the South Asian community on its release, as Kureishi describes in the interview that prefaces this study. But for each disparaging comment there is a corresponding note of praise. Stuart Hall describes the film as:

one of the most riveting and important films produced by a black writer in recent years and precisely for the reason that made it so controversial: its

refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self contained, sexually stabilized . . . always and only "positive."

Examining the reception of *My Beautiful Laundrette* for a moment offers a wider context in which to understand the crucible of anxieties around race, sex, and class against which Kureishi has been judged. Kureishi's film and TV work has proved popular with a mass audience and this in itself gives rise to debates over commercial versus artistic success. June Givanni cites *My Beautiful Laundrette* together with Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* as examples of the very few "relatively low-budget" feature films that have successfully "'crossed over' from small art-house audiences to achieve commercial success in high street cinemas." British film critic Judith Williamson points out that those critics who sneer at *My Beautiful Laundrette* do so precisely because it proved so popular with audiences.

According to Kenneth Kaleta, Kureishi was initially reluctant to adapt *The Buddha of Suburbia* for the screen and only agreed to the project after several aborted attempts at adaptation resulted in bowdlerized versions of the text with deletions or additions he could not approve. In the end, Kureishi co-scripted with Roger Michell (*Notting Hill*, *Persuasion*, *Titanic Town*). At one point the BBC shelved plans to make a TV mini-series when they decided the book was too subversive and its sexual and political content might offend British licence-payers. In the period in which such discussions took place, in 1992, there appeared a rather idiotic piece of reporting when the *Daily Mail*'s Baz Bamigboye asserted that: "Much of the book is about Karim's bizarre sexual exploits, but the tome also deals with Karim's father . . . and various relatives. It is their rumblings about the state of Britain and exactly what should be done with the Conservative Government, which have caused concern." One imagines Bamigboye hadn't actually read the book, or that he

failed to grasp the fact that it has less to do with a political party that wasn't in power in the period the novel took as its primary setting, and more to do with the spirited thrill-seeking of the hedonistic 1960s as they mediated into the nervous and more complicated 1970s. When the BBC decided to go ahead with the project, mini-series' producer Kevin Loader (*Captain Corelli's Mandolin*) remembers that the Corporation was "very supportive of us. We had one meeting as a team before we shot anything and agreed the number of four-letter words we could have. If you want to use 'fuck' on the television, it has to be cleared at the highest level. Our first draft of the scripts, I think, had fifty-three 'fucks' in it, and it was then, and it still is, very difficult to put these in home-grown products."

The British press had a field day when the 2.9 million pound adaptation of *The Buddha of Suburbia* was first screened in November 1993 on BBC2 as a four-part mini-series and was watched by some 5 million viewers. A number of blinkered, childish, and prudish observations were played out in the right-wing press. Lester Middlehurst of the *Daily Mail* criticized the BBC's pre-transmission warning about the program's content, calling it an "extraordinarily worded voice-over." The voice-over itself is clear and alerts viewers to expect: "An unrestrained initiation into the excesses of the Seventies now on BBC2. Karim launches himself into the London scene and a variety of new experiences. There is strong language and explicit sex. Hey man, it's *The Buddha of Suburbia*." This is a fairly standard warning, and the program was transmitted after the watershed so minors should not have been watching without parental consent. Nevertheless, in his report of Thursday, November 18, 1993, the day after the third episode—containing full-frontal nudity and an orgy-scene—Lester Middlehurst was only one of the *Mail*'s commentators to be featured in a way that leans toward the outlandish. Each reviewer's comment is prefaced by whether he or she is single, married, or a parent, as if these "credentials" matter in this

case. For example, Graham Turner, "married with three children," calls the adaptation "seedy, sordid, violent and brutalizing" and he "fear(s) for the mental health of those able to sit through it" (one wonders, then, whether he actually watched the *whole* episode, or whether he has special powers that protect his own mental health). Turner goes on to castigate *Buddha* as a "degrading offering" and to berate the BBC: "who is directing its affairs to allow the transmission of such foulness? Sadly, it is not untypical of the diet which it increasingly serves up." Marcus Berkman ("single"), on the other hand, worries that "arguments about supposedly gratuitous sex should undermine such a clever, amusing and acutely observed series." But Mary Keeny ("married with two children") echoes Turner (of course) with, "It depressed me profoundly . . . the BBC once stood for culture, decency, dignity. And now, here it is portraying the sex act explicitly." She embraces the kind of rhetoric that finds Kureishi at the center of a watershed in British politics when she goes on to predict that, "One day the ordinary people will rebel against all this—either by voting for some extremely reactionary force or, even better, by turning their tellies over to something beautiful and sublime." Christopher Dunkley in "Up With Sex, Down With Violence" published the same week in the *Financial Times* enters the reviewing circle with a sensible observation that "attitudes to many subjects—Asians, contemporary music, mysticism—have been represented and variously parodied, ridiculed or attacked, and it would be odd, given the time and attention that so many people devote to it, if sex were to be left out." And one other reviewer from the *Daily Mail*, without marital designation, asserts "There was no way . . . that sex could have been avoided. The adaptation . . . was less—how can I put it?—action-packed than the novel, but it was unapologetic in its candor." Lynne Truss of the *London Times* is ecstatic: "Never has a novel waltzed so effortlessly on to the screen. The direction of Roger Michell is deft and hu-

mourous, the David Bowie soundtrack is an inspiration, and the casting is superb from Roshan Seth's embarrassingly emotional Haroon . . . to Vicky Murdock as the eager new girlfriend Helen."

The television series starred those actors already associated with earlier Kureishi or Kureishi/Frears film productions: Roshan Seth (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Gandhi*, *Mississippi Masala*, *A Passage to India*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*) as Haroon; Naveen Andrews (*Wild West*, *The English Patient*, *My Own Country*) as Karim; Steven Mackintosh (*London Kills Me*, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Land Girls*, *Prick Up Your Ears*) as Charlie; alongside Brenda Blethyn (*Little Voice*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Saving Grace*, *Girl's Night*) as Margaret; Susan Fleetwood (*Heat and Dust*, *The Krays*) as Eva; Nisha Nayar as Jamila and Harish Patel (*My Son the Fanatic*, *Essence*) as Changez. Kureishi and Mitchell stayed loyal to the book but the screen adaptation is no less successful as a result.¹⁶ Indeed, the TV adaptation brings the characters to life for those who have read the book and for those who read it as a result of watching the mini-series. As Kureishi himself admits in the interview for this book, the adaptation makes us see the actors in our mind's eye and we may well find that "the text is mediated though them. The actors have become superimposed on the text." For example, an accomplished actor like Roshan Seth can even alter the way in which a character is understood, as in the case of the *Daily Telegraph's* reviewer: "Roshan Seth was surprisingly sympathetic as his Buddhist father. In the book, this character comes across as an amiable charlatan, but here his sincerity was impressive and his moments of forced uxoriousness, appeasing his tight-lipped wife, were strangely affecting."

Of course, one factor that is lost in the screen version, as Kureishi also states in the interview in chapter one, is the first person narration. Traditionally, we understand first person narratives—the "I" as protagonist—to situate a character at the center of the narrative who

conveys events and experiences in his words and from his point-of-view. This type of narrative is also called homodiegetic narration, and this term often applies in discussions of television productions, where the narrator is a character in his own story. One of the main problems with homodiegetic narration is that the narrator cannot know everything; he is necessarily restricted to reporting only those events for which he is present, or interpreting what other characters may be thinking or feeling. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is semi-autobiographical, and Kureishi has often indicated that we should not assume an easy equation between self and story:

The Buddha was kind of autobiographical but it was revved up autobiography. One's childhood is mostly composed of very long tedious stretches when you mostly sit around wishing that exciting things would happen. In a book you put the exciting things one after another. When you read the book you think "wow this guy had a really good time down there in the suburbs." The relation between autobiography and your writing is a complicated one. . . . It came out of my experience in that sense, but it's not a direct one-on-one thing where something happens and you go and write it down. It's not like that . . . You mix all that stuff up together and then you get a good chapter.

In the case of the book's adaptation for television, the scriptwriters dispensed with first person narration. But, since the novel was conceived as a *bildungsroman* or rites of passage movement from adolescence to adulthood, they maintain a limited number of voice-overs. In an interview with Kaleta, Roger Michell acknowledges some of the difficulties they faced when adapting the novel, in particular, Karim who is "a prose character." On film Michell believes he becomes "more human." This is typically an audience response to realistic camerawork, continuity editing and the whole package that constitutes the conventions of classical narrative cin-

ema. In this case, it is reinforced by reviewer Maureen Paton who found "What sometimes seemed slightly outlandish in the book, when filtered through narrator Karim's jaundiced schoolboy caricatures, has been triumphantly brought to life by director Roger Michell's exuberantly funny production of this affectionate satire." Predictably enough, not all critics preferred the screen representation of Karim. Elaine Paterson complains that although:

Like many teenagers the character is vain, arrogant and self-centred. In the novel these shortcomings are redeemed by the humour, honesty, and unerring sense of irony with which Karim homes in on the ludicrous elements of the '70s culture. The detachment that made Karim such an unusually objective narrator in the novel makes for a rather unengaging character on the screen. Television can't put us into his mind and whereas Karim is at the heart of the novel, in the TV version he's in danger of being swamped by the many outlandish people around him. We're not looking at them through his eyes, we're looking at him and them from the outside.

Most notably, the TV series successfully captures the atmosphere of the 1970s; the mise-en-scene is full of cultural and period markers. This is one aspect of the mini-series that, according to Kureishi, would be very difficult for the BBC to get wrong since it has a history of making quality "period" dramas, "I think the Beeb did it really well. They're good at costume drama." While one usually thinks of adaptations of classic nineteenth-century novels like those by Jane Austen, or Charles Dickens or George Eliot, the idea of *The Buddha of Suburbia* as "period drama" helps us to understand the critical approval it won—here from Peter Paterson in the *Daily Mail*—specifically for its recreation of the 1970s: "Roger Michell's direction was fast paced and attentive to all the necessary Seventies' detail. And the photography by John McGlashan, was a hymn to the Betjamenesque splendors of South London domestic architec-

ture." One is reminded that when Kureishi was first interviewed on television on the publication of the novel, *Rear Window* and *The Late Show* included dramatized segments with "period" clothing, music, and scenes from TV, to create a sense of the 1970s. Similarly, Bowie's composition of an original soundtrack—with tracks including "Sex And The Church," "South Horizon," "Bleed Like Craze, Dad" and "Buddha Of Suburbia"—extrapolates on the novel and expands on it. Bowie has said "the narrative & 70's memories provid(ed) a textural backdrop in my imagination that manifested as a truly exciting work situation. In short, I took the TV play motifs and reconstructed them completely except, that is, for the theme song."¹⁷

The importance of historical and textual accuracy cannot be overstated, especially when the period under consideration and the novel are so very recent. The BBC decided to devote four hours to the program. The end result won the approval of the author and his mother: "It was a kind of period piece by the time it was finally made. . . . The BBC are very good at the wallpaper and the carpets. My mum said 'Cor, it's just like our 'ouse isn't it'. Which it was." Though tongue-in-cheek, Kureishi's comment captures the kind of empathy and identification that made for the dramatization's success. In one of the early scenes, where Karim is getting ready to leave with his father on their first journey to Eva's, his bedroom is conveyed as a veritable treasure trove of 1970s memorabilia. The walls are adorned with posters, there are piles of books including Jack Kerouac's cult hit *On the Road*, essays by James Baldwin, a Beatle's Sgt. Pepper's cut out, more piles of fashionable clothing of the era, and—in the middle of it all—Karim impersonating John Travolta's bedroom scene from *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). He dresses in time to Marc Bolan, the glam rocker of the 1970s, singing "Get it On," a song so suggestive it was re-titled "Bang A Gong" in the United States. Interestingly, in this scene Karim is the central

focus and the audience takes on the role that is usually assigned to his character, namely that of voyeur. We watch in fascination and horror his selection and rejection of the evening's attire and witness the adolescent pamper himself with talcum powder in anticipation for his "outing." Indeed, this bedroom scene is so reminiscent of the classic scene from *Saturday Night Fever* that it might be viewed as a parody of the earlier movie. However, what shifts it beyond parody is the way that the mise-en-scene packages Karim for viewer consumption. In the novel Kureishi presents less than a page of description of Karim's preparations for the evening's excursion, yet on the TV the camera's gaze takes over: the camera caresses the young man and serves to establish Karim's difference and exoticism (there is no first person narration to tell the viewer that he is "an Englishman born and bred, almost").

Karim becomes the primary object of the viewer's gaze and in this way becomes caught up in his preparation for launching himself into uncharted territory "out there." His identity is particularized as a hybrid embodiment of two cultures in this sequence, as further reinforced when Karim makes his grand exit: dressed in tight, crushed velvet flared trousers, platform shoes, a flower-patterned shirt, and a suede jacket topped with a multi-colored scarf that acts as a bandana to hold down his long unruly hair. All this prompts his father simply to raise an eyebrow before turning away and his mother to exclaim: "Don't show us up, Karim. You look like Danny La Rue." For the viewer, Karim may well be a 1970s fashion victim but many viewers will recognize themselves, if not in his clothes, then certainly in the statement of (youth-sanctioned) "individuality" that the clothes are supposed to signify. Indeed, the stereotyped image of many Asian young men in the 1970s was precisely one that embodied them in Karim's extravagant "eastern" attire, as his father recognizes. For the older viewer accustomed to weekend television variety shows, Margaret's reference to the flam-

boyant Danny La Rue will, no doubt have some resonance. However, these visual cues have a more sinister meaning for Kureishi and that is the suburbanite desire for conformity, anything to stop the twitching of the neighbours' curtains and their condemning this mixed-race family to being somehow-less-than-normal. Danny La Rue was, of course, a hugely successful drag artiste and the hidden subtext of Margaret's comments is a concern for her son's sexuality, as displayed, she fears, in his attire. Again, the novel reinforces what the screen adaptation misses; the first person narration informing the reader that Karim is looking for sexual action of any kind, which culminates in his masturbating of his friend and soon-to-be step-brother, Charlie. (Although he isn't looking for sexual action with a Great Dane even though he gets it in one memorable, visually comic scene.)

In the main, what the TV adaptation captures visually is that which Karim is attempting to subvert: the stale rigidity of the suburbs, that hinterland that would later be the heartland of Margaret Thatcher's Conservatism. This irony is not lost on the viewing public who, perhaps, do not hold out quite so much hope and optimism as Karim at the end of the series: with hindsight viewers in the 1990s know that the Conservative election victory did not herald an era of growth and progressive values; rather, it was a time of stultification and declension best embodied by the very suburbs Karim seeks to escape and that his yuppie younger brother so unquestioningly endorses. In his introduction to the 1992 collection, *London Kills Me: Three Screenplays and Four Essays*, Kureishi contends that Margaret Thatcher and the conservatives:

were afraid of anyone who saw Britain as a racially mixed run-down, painfully class-ridden place. For their fantasy was of a powerful, industrially strong country with a central homogeneous, consensual culture. There necessarily would be hinterlands, marginals, freaks, perverts, beggars, one-

parent families, and dissidents but these didn't matter. There could be no other versions of reality escaping into the world, poisoning the purity of their vision.

What Kureishi has to say in 1992, the period in which he was working on the adaptation of *Buddha*, about Thatcher and her government might still apply to certain anxious members of the Asian community. After the final episode of *Buddha* was screened, Tessa Boase reported in the *Daily Telegraph* the following response from a London-based Asian town councillor: "That series has done untold damage to the British perception of Asians living in this country. The older generation has been shown to be narrow minded and old fashioned, and the younger generation outrageously rebellious and offensively promiscuous. There is no middle ground. What is worse, people are applying these caricatures to Asians in the Nineties. Things are not so extreme." Kureishi will not be worried by this reaction, nor, indeed, by the reactions of any of the journalists mentioned above. After all, he once said that the poll tax riots were "terrific" and, despite the cliché, any publicity is good publicity. He even attacked the BBC over potential cuts to *Buddha*, calling members of the Corporation "a bunch of nervous Nellies." One can only guess at his reaction to the American television executives who refused to buy the series on account of its sexual themes. As Nicholas Hellen wrote in the *Evening Standard*, "They knew Kureishi . . . had carved a lucrative career out of his willingness to shock and that his trademark was a merciless eye on the hypocrisies of racism. But nothing had prepared them for the libidinous exploits of Karim Amir . . . who stars in the BBC drama." Despite a general reluctance to screen the show on American television, it is available to buy on video and was screened in its entirety at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. America's Canadian neighbors bought the show, prompting Greg Quill in the

Toronto Star to enthuse "Rarely in television have we had the chance to absorb a piece of original entertainment as complex, as wry and satirical, as beautifully executed, as good-natured as . . . *The Buddha of Suburbia*." I'll let him have the final word to those readers who have yet to watch the video of the novel: "Don't miss a minute. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a rare TV event."

Further Reading and Discussion Questions

This chapter complements the previous four by providing topics/questions for discussion and suggestions for further reading. Some of these topics grow out of issues discussed earlier, especially in chapter 2. However, this list of questions/topics is by no means exhaustive and readers may wish to develop their own questions and readings in light of having read *this* book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might *The Buddha of Suburbia* be compared with other "coming of age" novels? You might want to think of novels like J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* where the narrator has a similar adolescent voice. Is there an American "feel" to *Buddha*? Certainly, reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic seem to think so. How might you reconcile this idea with discussions of *Buddha* as a very "English" novel?
2. Research the *Bildungsroman* novel or "rites of passage" fiction (you might usefully consult Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice*)