

Hanif Kureishi and the Tradition of the Novel

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Hanif Kureishi's first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990),¹ follows on from his several plays and short stories,² showing to advantage the stagecraft and spoken language as well as the themes used in earlier works. His play *Outskirts* (1983), for example, considers the youth culture in a segregated society in language that approximates the broken, partial condition of society fallen on the hard hours. *Birds of Passage* (1983) discusses the attitudes to residence, belonging, ownership, and displacement in relation to the Pakistani/Asian and the English communities in present-day England. Purchase, programmed social communication, or repossession somehow fail in each case to bring about a society with common points of reference, a shared interest or heritage. Then there is a shift of vantage, what would seem to be the evolution of a device into a system. In *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986), the naturalistic approach leads to a new social harmony through a homosexual and interracial relationship between a Pakistani and an English youth; while *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1988) celebrates various kinds of sexual relationships to build a new society where all other devices to achieve the same have come to naught. Kureishi states his credo concerning a future British society, which will be free of racial antagonism, in an essay he published in the mid-1980s by way of a Shavian preface to the screenplay.³ The present fictional text echoes and examines these concerns likewise in a poised and respectable style: "And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and all its self-regard. . . . We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all bitterness and resentment, too. How was this possible when bitterness and resentment were generated afresh every day?" (227). There is the future, perhaps, as well as the crucial question for it; but Kureishi needed the stretch and maneuver of prose fiction to look into, read, and construct the present moment, and probe the artistic self, for which the novel rather than the film was a highly suitable form.⁴

In the novel, adolescent Karim Amir growing into manhood learns about himself and the world around him and discovers the current, operative rules of family, work, institutions, society, and culture. The personal and social similarities between "Cor" (Hanif Kureishi's familiar name) and Karim, however, have been per-

¹ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990). All page references in the article are to this edition.

² Hanif Kureishi: *Borderline* (1982); *Birds of Passage* (1983); *Outskirts, King and Me AND Tomorrow, Today* (1983); *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986); *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1988); "Esther," *New Statesman and Society* (London) 1 September, 1989: 19-23.

³ Hanif Kureishi, "The Rainbow Sign," in his *My Beautiful Laundrette and The Rainbow Sign* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 7-38.

⁴ Frank Kermode, "Voice of the Almost English" as reprinted from a British source in *The Frontier Post* (Lahore) 27 April, 1990: 9, 16.

ceived as one and the same thing, resulting in critical confusion between the author and the character—mistaking even closeness as identity—and in readings of the novel as an autobiography.⁵ Reading it as an autobiography, in turn, leads to evaluations of Karim Amir-Hanif Kureishi as man in society and inevitable negative judgments of both the man and his work. On the other end of the scale from the particularist autobiography is the misconception of a universalist representation in which, after *My Beautiful Laundrette*, all Pakistanis are taken to be homosexual.⁶ The work is vetted by reviewers for "verisimilitude" and "ultimate values";⁷ the hero, labeled the author's "alter-ego," is seen to have a weak grasp of the 1960s-1970s period combined with an excessive mockery of Asians by the "second-generation Asian Britons—especially the brat-packers who have made good as writers in their adopted country";⁸ and Kureishi is categorically accused of a "characteristic South Asian overkill."⁹

Evidently, strong sociohistorical assumptions and expectations at work in the act of reading have generally led to a false critical method and much nonliterary commentary. Above all, as the commentators have been consistently oblivious of the dual tradition to which Kureishi's novel belongs, both commentary and evaluation have been overly personally biased if not off the mark. Therefore, the novel is owed another reading, with proper attention to the text, its style, and tradition.

While as a bildungsroman the main interest of the novel lies in Karim Amir's development, its twofold plot also deals with Karim Amir's father, Haroon, who is rediscovering himself in his love for Eva and in the effort on his own and others' behalf "to reach [your] full potential as human beings" (13). He is the latter-day lecturing (contrary) Buddha, a traditional image recast in the suburbs of South London, who walks out of his marriage for another woman, believing himself and declaring to his son "we're growing up together, we are" (22). Karim Amir's own schooling and affairs with Eleanor, Jamila, etc., lead him out—to much excitement and learning away from the gloomy family home and boring suburban living, as he finds himself a place in the theater world as well as interesting people to base his characters on. The experience also leads to a mature self and the artist's conscience that will create (186-87). As the theatrical itself assumes a dimension of life, "playing" moves the plot, and searching for a "character" becomes both a structural and a symbolic device, the first-person narrative develops from the point of view of "a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories" (3); adding to its already colorful, lower-middle-class plinth and parlance offered as a cure for the latter-day *Raj-and-Daj* fiction of the Minerva Press variety. To gain a correct understanding of the present, Karim Amir finds himself placed at a distance from his father and takes a decision to construct time in the only personal and valid terms possible: "I felt ashamed and in-

⁵ Tariq Rahman, "An Unresolved Confusion," *Dawn Magazine* (Karachi) 28 Sept., 1990: 3-4; Ayesha Aslam, "Suburban Sprawl," *The Herald* (Karachi) Sept. 1990: 108-09; "Sex and Spying in Suburbia" (unsigned) as reprinted from *The Observer* (London) in *Weekend Post* (Lahore) 13 Sep. 1990: 3.

⁶ Kermode. (The article reports certain Muslim demonstrations in New York against such representation even though the participants had not seen the film.)

⁷ Rahman 3-4.

⁸ Aslam 108-09.

⁹ Akbar Ahmed, "Creating the Perfect Englishman," *The Friday Times* (Lahore) 17-23 May 1990: 5.

complete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd been colluding with my enemies . . . [Dad] was always honest about this: he preferred England in every way. Things worked; it wasn't hot; you didn't see terrible things on the street that you could do nothing about. 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 Asian radicals liked to do. So if I wanted an additional personality bonus [of an Asian past], I would have to create it" (212-13).

While England is spoken of as a "Kingdom of Prejudice"—with its routine racist and fascist marches and Asian and West-Indian lives imperilled beyond help, in his personal life Karim Amir finds something to sustain him: "I'd grown up with kids who taught me that sex was disgusting. It was smells, smut, embarrassment and horse laughs. But love was too powerful for me. Love swam right into the body, into the valves, muscles and bloodstream . . ." (188). His father remarries; Mum and Jimmy became friends; Anwar dies, helpfully; Jamila and Changez try to sort out their marriage; Charlie switches from "posh" to "cockney" in New York, "selling Englishness" (247) in the solemn belief that "it's only by pushing ourselves to the limits that we learn about ourselves. That's where I'm going, to the edge. Look at Kerouac and all those guys" (252). He himself leaves America after a visit and knows that there is hardly an Asia to turn back to but the entire experience has been worth the emotional and intellectual effort: "I could think about the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is" (283-84).

"To locate myself and learn what the heart is"—this suburban wisdom, however, is evidently shared by more than one Buddha by the end of the book, even if, except for Karim Amir and his father, the other characters remain shadowy figures portrayed in half tones. Margaret, the mother, is a very sympathetic if unfinished character; and Eva, Eleanor, Charlie, and Pyke, etc., are interesting but remain one-dimensional; the younger brother, Amar, "who called himself Allie to avoid racial trouble" (19), remains a name only. The "black-and-white" aspect of the social reality literally reduces them to certain roles which, howsoever they may modify them, they cannot reject or transcend,¹⁰ nor is there any motivation, it appears, to conceive of such a society without its brown gurus, breaking-down white spouses, profligate sons, radical Asian daughters, self-indulgent Buddhas, third-worlding white social-workers to help or comfort the blacks, and perverse though brilliant theater directors. Karim Amir meets them squarely, sometimes treats them roundly, and takes all life's possibilities in a stride, maintaining his sense of humor and detachment.

The contemporary sociocultural reference in *The Buddha of Suburbia* only skims the surface; it is the concern with human relationships and happiness that predominates. For this Kureishi yet again offers a provocative view of alternative life-styles and social models, (in)versions of saintly renunciation, a suburban love-crawl, and hearty viability of a residual selfhood in a composite culture. The energetic style and the quality of humor, particularly the sarcasm, are distinctly

¹⁰ On social determination as choice, see also my comments on the characters and language in Tariq Mehmood's *Hand on the Sun* (1983), *World Literature Today* 58:2 (1984): 327-28.

Pakistani; but the plebeian manner is worn with a panache that only a literary culture with a working-class tradition—such as Britain's—can make possible.

Both these aspects of style and design are explained by a particular socioliterary context. It must be noted that Hanif Kureishi's reference and debt to H.G. Wells are barely acknowledged by critics, much less examined in any purposeful manner. Within the novel, a kind of twentieth-century underclass tradition is paid a formal and personal obeisance by reference to "Bromley High Street, next to the plaque that said 'H.G. Wells was born here'" (64) while admitting a "closeness" to Wells that goes beyond the two authors' sharing Bromley as their common birthplace. Kermode reports that "Kureishi is sure of one thing: that the Great Immigration is our Great Unexplored Subject. The novel in England remains largely a middle-class, university-educated affair deeply ignorant of the poor."¹¹ Scantly a picture of abject poverty, Kureishi's design concentrates on the odd, the exotic, the typical, and the familiar according to the Wellsian laws of social probability. In fact, both Wells and Kureishi are easily seen to evince an interest in the study of suburban drolls, social mores, and people on the make, with a keen eye to their oddities and peculiarities.

The formal references are particularly to Wells's *Kipps* (1905), in which a draper's assistant suddenly finds a fortune by inheritance leading to a romantic problem; and to *The History of Mr Polly* (1910), in which Alfred Polly, 37, divides his life between the real but thwarted present and the imaginative (and less or more than real) but acceptable past. The family legacy, as for Kureishi's Karim Amir, is troublesome in this novel, too, and Polly's chronic indigestion is related to his marriage and cooking, of which Kureishi's Haroon also appears to make a point. Polly leaves home and takes to the road in search of freedom, adventure, and fulfillment. Karim Amir echoes Polly's predicament concerning the appalling education he has received in society to deal with his specific lower-middle-class or human problems. Another Wells novel that bears some comparison as an antecedent is *Tono-Bungay* (1909), which Wells described as "a social panorama in the vein of Balzac," and focuses on English society as a severe social incoherence. Kureishi lacks that sort of panoramic view but, like the Wells of the other two novels, is able to draw on his experience of the suburban lower-middle-class life to portray characters of an aspect without being autobiographical.

What is further shared not only with H.G. Wells but also with other recent British novels is the social realism enlivened and relieved by a sure comicality. Kureishi's satiric wit disallows compassion, but it is particularly evident in his portrayal of the character of the mother; and he shares these qualities along with the macabre and farcical elements with Angus Wilson. In fact, a further element is shared with Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956). In this novel, historian Gerald Middleton is separated from his grotesque foreign wife, as Haroon is from his foreign and grotesque wife, and he tries to "reconstruct and understand the past," which entails attending to a likely archaeological forgery. Karim Amir's mock-project to obtain "an additional personality bonus" (of an Asian/Pakistani past; 213) certainly turns out to be a forgery in essential ways as Anwar and Changez, who represent the earlier spirit, are left to die or be defeated. But Karim

¹¹ Kermode.

Amir is not the only character in recent English fiction to contemplate or harbour such projects; he has his other fictional relations in a fairly well-known tradition. The libertine manner may be that of Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975), but the story outline is shared with Wilson. Angus Wilson's *As if by Magic* (1973) is an adventure story of Alexandra Grant, the god-daughter of Langmuir, maker of magic rice. She is involved in a multiple affair and a search for purpose, while they both travel from place to place, internationally, without arriving at any satisfactory code of personal relations or a workable social harmony; what retains interest is the adventure itself and the illusions that it fosters. Likewise, in a slick structural division of his narrative, Karim Amir in the Suburbs dreams of being in the City as a final escape and an achievement only to realize, later, that he has still further to go in search of that which will suffice without corrupting or satiating.

And not only with Angus Wilson. Much postwar English fiction has been concerned with the ennui, antics, and struggles of the underclass seeking to find itself a personal paradise, and contributing to the serio-comic mix in a fairly reasonable if "slow" society, which is willing to accommodate an odd relation but is decidedly unwilling to change itself. Karim Amir has a comment about this, implicating the present century in terms of class and social relations in society as in British schools since the Victorian period and their portrayals in the English novel: "Fuck you, Charles Dickens, nothing's changed" (63). But soon enough the comicality takes over, with a look to the "fanatical shoppers in the suburbs" to whom shopping is "what the rumba and singing is to Brazilians" (65). Numerous postwar novels can be cited to illustrate the point of such social focus eased by a comic outlook.¹² The self-absorbed "New Men" (as from Cooper's *Memoirs of a New Man*, 1966) of these novels had indeed been born but not quite arrived yet, and the society was not ready for a positive change through it could take the individual quirk, the cheer, and the anger. Some of these novels have also been described as provincial novels, with underclass heroes who are ambitious, angry, anarchic, and romantic, seeking to find a change in their own lives. Often enough, the novels are also regional, urban, or suburban, and they engage in satiric social commentary. They are generally characterized by a low-key realism, which may be said to be the postwar fictional counterpart of "The Movement" in British poetry and its project against Modernism. While Alan Sillitoe's work¹³ also shares with these the provincial and the regional features, it differs much in style if not mode, and has real working-class characters and outsiders. For example, Arthur Seaton (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1958) knows as a working man that the political systems are devised to cheat him and he needs his beer and women—as nothing else can be done. Brian (*Key to the Door*, 1961) is more intellectually disposed and tries it elsewhere, in Malaya, even if it is another "system" to contend with there, too. Like D.H. Lawrence in Nottingham attempting to infuse a vitalist philosophy into the provincial and morally effete body, Sillitoe eventually contemplates a "revolution" in the political sense (*The Death of William Posters*,

¹² *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947) by Philip Larkin; *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1950), *Scenes from Married Life* (1961), and *Scenes from Metropolitan Life* (1982) by William Cooper; *Hurry On Down* (1953) and *Strike the Father Dead* (1962) by John Wain; *Lucky Jim* (1954) by Kingsley Amis; *Room at the Top* (1957) by John Braine; *A Kind of Loving* (1960) and *Ask Me Tomorrow* (1962) by Stan Barstow; and *Billy Liar* (1959) by Keith Waterhouse, with its sequel *Billy Liar on the Moon* (1976).

¹³ Particularly, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1959).

1965; *A Tree on Fire*, 1967; *The Flame of Life*, 1974), without changing, of course, the composition of this society. Frank Dawley's comrade dies in Algeria and he begins to even question his own commitment, let alone seek the complete life he has spent a lifetime looking for. But Karim Amir, rather like Arthur Seaton, would seem to laugh it off as too idealistic a view to be sustained in the face of the levity of fin de siècle suburbia.

Arguably, the only recognizable "revolution" that has taken place is the turn-of-the-century multiracial Britain itself, which Karim Amir bestrides both in love and disdain. No other change is realized as the protagonist readjusts focus "to locate [himself] and learn what the heart is" (283-84), instead of embarking on creating social change through the more activist options taken, say, in a working-class novel like *Hand on the Sun*.¹⁴ Nor does the protagonist's position represent the sort of human struggle, misery, and meek resignation, or alternatively, Adah's determination (*In the Ditch*, 1972) to find herself and her own life, as in the London novels of Buchi Emecheta.¹⁵ The jeering tone would almost undo any intent to alter states which provide for and are compliantly couched in irony as self-defense: "We lived in rebellious and unconventional times, after all. And Jamila was interested in anarchists and situationists and Weathermen, and cut all that stuff out of the papers and showed it to me" (82). This does not keep from observing the vast class differences, particularly the underclass where the language exists at levels of much less sophistication and the ironical mediation is not trusted: "What idiots we were! How misinformed! Why didn't we understand that we were happily condemning ourselves to being nothing better than motor-mechanics? Why couldn't we see that? For Eleanor's crowd hard words and sophisticated ideas were in the air they breathed from birth" (178). So Karim Amir sets about learning some of this language with Eleanor but finds the increasing familiarity with it even to be a drawback and a divisive, listless experience: "Life had offered these people [Eleanor's crowd] its lips, but . . . I saw it was the kiss of death; I saw how much was enervated and useless in them . . . that the ruling class weren't worth hating" (225). This degree of detachment must take its political toll and, paradoxically, encourage a kind of complicity. Joining the Asian "reply" march against English racism is a proposition continually considered and scuttled or postponed in favor of the more pressing sexual engagements. Karim Amir is indeed "funny," and has discovered as well as found out the society around him; now he must look inwards, in the liberal tradition, and "only connect."¹⁶

A direct axiomatic consequence of such self-discovery and knowledge of character is that the body—rather than any spiritual or political inducement or potion—is seriously indulged in as a basis of relationships to form a community, as other likely bases have proved more socially exclusive or less amenable to the demands of a cross-racial structure. But, in the novel's process, the enterprise is invariably undercut by a detached narratorial commentary, as if such communal security would be counteractive to the fragile beauty of personal transience in the

¹⁴ Tariq Mehmood, *Hand on the Sun* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

¹⁵ Buchi Emecheta, *In the Ditch* (London: Allison & Busby, 1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (London: Allison & Busby, 1974).

¹⁶ The phrase and motto, "Only connect . . ." is an imperative in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910), implied in the "personal relations" specifically focused on in *A Passage to India* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924).

frequent one-to-one relationships. To seek any more than this is preposterous and tantamount to entrapment by the same oozy-woozy values of the last century, which are here rejected as a socionarrative enclosure. Neither Zola nor Dickensian sentimentality, as I suggested in mid-1980s, can be usefully invoked to describe the hardcore form of the new realism of the novel based on societal conceptions far removed from those of the earlier works;¹⁷ a realism which is more perspectival than ideological. Gissing's work, too, say in novels like *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), describes simple Victorian ideals of (non-pluralist) society and (unilinear) progress, whereby its optimism rests on removing class differences and is then modified by certain inherent flaws of character. Social analysis, in such cases, has again devolved on the individual personality rather than finding an adequate explanation for the system. Even in a hypothetical turn-of-the-century state, such as that envisioned in Wells's American predecessor Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888)—in which the economic, political, social, moral, and cultural improvements of the new system have removed class difference—inveterate prejudice, boredom, and unhappiness will still be the questions to ponder or puzzle over. The heart and the soul, indeed the mind and the body, will still be with us; even in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and the post-1984 state, in which the mind is shut out or taken away, the body has its definite existence, and Hanif Kureishi only acknowledges this tradition. As in Sillitoe, the world is a jungle, through which we are lucky to be able to take away our bodies with us. Thus, what is actually denied in Kureishi is not the body—even when it does not connect much else—but rather the speculation that any interest or happiness might lie beyond it.¹⁸

Current uses of the body apart, an important aspect of the postwar English fiction has been the Asian contribution in terms of the form, theme, and character of the novel. Among the genres, comic fiction has been one of the more successful modes of literary and cultural synthesis. The Guru, as a prophet, seer, and guide, has been a familiar figure in English fiction for no less than a century, not to mention the Besants, the Webbs, J. Krishnamurti, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Mme Blavatsky, the heyday of Indian lore, and the respectful fascination of Theosophy in Britain and Europe. With R.K. Narayan, however, the Guru, Raju of *The Guide* (1958), became a comic figure, a cunning if helpless rascal formed into respect and awe by accident and by his own wish to fulfill other people's expectations of him. His spirituality is a utility in demand, and he can hardly refuse giving it—which leads to hilarious social discrepancy and even seeming compliance on the part of natural or divine forces. Such per-force-spiritual-East is a fictional trope by now, following Sasthi Brata's *The Sensuous Guru* (1976), Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1980), and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). In Tharoor's novel, taking an allegorical line from the *Mahabharata*, religious and political elements are fused together in a parodic union of the pious and the profane, the past and the present, and the real and the fictional in an unstoppable, self-conscious narrative, which also demolishes the distinctions between

¹⁷ See my review of Tariq Mehmood's *Hand on the Sun*: 327-28. See also Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990) for Dickens's views on India and America.

¹⁸ See also my article "Lord Buddha, T.S. Eliot, and What's Too Right with Our Poetry," *The Pakistan Times: Midweek Edition* 30 Jan., 1990: C; 6 Feb., 1990: C; 13 Feb., 1990: C, D; 27 Feb., 1990: C; and my poem about the Buddha, titled "Gautum," in Alamgir Hashmi, *My Second in Kentucky* (Lahore: Vision Press, 1981).

prose and verse as the Asian oral mythos takes over the literary textual precedent. The typical vein is suggested by such sections as "The Rigged Veda" and "The New Bungle Book—Or, The Reign of Error." Kureishi's Buddha is no less "contrary," "a porky little Buddha . . . vibrant, irreverent, and laughing . . . a smooth politician" (84), who can also use slang rhyme but relies on normal if rather precious prose order for his discourse. He has sufficient self-regard as a further sophistication and enlargement of a wonderful postcolonial character; but, as he "took off his raincoat, chucking it over the bottom of the banisters" (3) the first day of his transformation from a government official, he came to be as clear as the novel about his Asian line of descent into England.