

Tesi di dottorato di Ilaria Ricci, discussa presso l'Università degli Studi di Udine

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI UDINE

**CORSO DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA
IN SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERARIE
CICLO XXIV**

TESI DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA

**“IN THE CENTRE OF THIS OLD CITY THAT I LOVE”:
MOVEMENT, ABANDONMENT AND CHANGE
IN HANIF KUREISHI’S NOVELS**

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ANNO ACCADEMICO 2011/2012

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Introduction

Anglo-Pakistani Hanif Kureishi is one of the leading artistic voices who, in the past decades, have been battling with traditionally dominant anglocentric notions of British nationhood and who have called for a re-definition of Britishness and British literature. The author has deservedly received much critical analysis, nevertheless such critique has mainly focused on issues of race and ethnicity and has often been diverted from other equally important issues. Rita Felski, in regard to the *Buddha of Suburbia*, claims that little consideration has been paid to the shifting meanings of class¹ while Susie Thomas, one of the most productive scholars on Kureishi criticism, observes that critics have not “quite caught up with Kureishi’s middle works”² where the issue of race is usually disregarded. Even Kureishi’s most recent novel, *Something to Tell You*, needs more critical attention.

The present dissertation attempts to contribute to the filling of a gap in Kureishi criticism by not only exploring in four distinct chapters concepts of class, familial dysfunctionality, community and pop music as represented in Kureishi’s novels,³ but also

1 Rita Felski, “Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class”. *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 115 (January 2000), 134.

2 Susie Thomas ed., *Hanif Kureishi: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 5.

3 *Intimacy*, *Gabriel’s Gift* and *The Body* are commonly considered novellas. According to *A Handbook to Literature* the terms novella and short novel are virtually interchangeable. Moreover, Kureishi’s novellas perfectly fulfil the requirements David Daiches set for a piece of fiction to be considered a novel; therefore I will consider these three works as novels together with Kureishi’s three longer works. See

issues such as cultural malaise, shifting identities, generational gaps, processes of ageing and sexuality. The methodological approach deployed is interdisciplinary as it interconnects literary theory, Cultural Studies, Queer Studies and Community Studies⁴ addressing issues related to Postmodernism and Postcolonialism. In my opinion such an eclectic research framework which benefits from the ever-dilating permeability between literary and social sciences can prove to be particularly productive in studying a contemporary author whose writings and public speeches have the potential to influence, not just to reflect, societal behaviours, mentalities, and attitudes towards different Others.

My analysis centers on the themes of movement, abandonment, and change which are *leitmotifs* in the novels by Kureishi and metaphorically epitomise the postmodern condition his characters live in. All Kureishi's protagonists, in fact, both the South-Asian second generation immigrants and the white native Britons, are typically postmodern subjects who negotiate their multiple identities in the era of globalisation and consumer culture. They inhabit a world of dynamism that leads to the reconstitution of the self which no longer is perceived in terms of stability and fixity but in those of fragmentation, fluidity, and polyphony. Identity becomes a multilayered entity whose position is perpetually negotiated between the external dimension of society and the internal dimension of the self.

Kureishi's texts are filled with characters who are coming to terms with the inevitability of change and the productiveness of difference. People change social and economic status, dwelling spaces, accents, sartorial styles, relationships. Bonds may be chosen, not just determined by demographics, and the capital city constitutes the meeting space where people from totally different backgrounds get together and interact.

The space the characters decide to inhabit is representative of how they situate themselves within the world. For the protagonists, London especially represents an opportunity for social upward mobility, and their departure from the dull, immobilised, conservative suburbs where they were born and bred holds a distinct semantic connotation of personal transformation.

William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman eds., *A Handbook to Literature* (Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice Hall, 1996), and David Daiches, "Problems for Modern Novelists" in *Accent Anthology: Selection from Accent a Quarterly of New Literature 1940-45*, K. Quinn and C.H. Shattuck eds. (New York: Books for Library Press, 1946), 548-570.

4 Academic field drawing on both anthropology and sociology.

While celebrating the capital the author doesn't ignore its darker side and deals with the social and political issues inherent in Thatcherite Britain such as exasperated capitalism, rampant individualism, corruption, greed and the devastating effects all this has on ordinary people, especially on the working class, on minority groups and on traditional communities. Nevertheless the city also provides a contested space where the dominant hegemonic discourses must coexist with, and are counterbalanced by, alternative communities based on tolerance of difference and mutual support.

One of the privileged spaces of resistance to coercive, exclusionary and homogenising tendencies is pop music and the author infuses his novels with the rhythms and sounds of the capital. Popular culture is both employed as a narrative technique and is foregrounded as an area accessible to all in which a dynamic youth culture flourishes cutting across ethnic, sexual, gender and class divisions. The creative energy of pop has the power to inspire cultural, social and even political change.

Chapter One of this dissertation begins by providing a panoramic overview of Kureishi's *oeuvre* and points out the most relevant traits of his development as a writer and his remarkable contribution to the literary scene. It also introduces his vision of the dichotomic relation between country and city and the structure of feelings these two spaces embody for the characters of his novels.

Chapter Two introduces sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class distinction and how it relates to the social setting of Kureishi's novels. Kureishi's protagonists all belong to the suburban lower-middle class and all of them try and manage in different ways to advance their social position through the improvement of their 'cultural', 'economic' and 'social capital'. The Asian and British-Asian characters stage their ethnicity in order to win class mobility; in fact, by self-orientalising themselves they exploit the media's capitalistic need for exotic others and pass into the fashionable circle of the metropolitan upper-middle class. The theoretical framework of this chapter is based on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry. Thus it becomes obvious that while providing and exaggerating stereotyped images, the performances of these characters become performative in order to challenge essentialism.

Chapter Three begins with an overview of the effects that Thatcher's long lasting administrations and exclusionary politics have had on British society. Thatcherite and

post-Thatcherite England provides the backdrop to Kureishi's stories and this chapter examines family and community relations in the novels. The Prime Minister's promotion of a selfish entrepreneurial individualism and her dismissal of the welfare state, in fact, had a primary role on the disruption of traditional notions of family and social community. Kureishi's protagonists are always independent individuals who detach themselves from their families and communities; nevertheless subversive models of hybrid metropolitan communities set the example for a new, caring society based on appreciation of difference and mutual understanding while in some cases nuclear families who had split up are given a chance to reunite. The critical framework is based on Cultural and Community Studies, especially taking into consideration Stuart Hall's political essays, and Jeffrey Weeks' sociological studies on community.

Chapter 4 explores how music functions as a metaphor of movement and fluidity in Kureishi's novels, and how popular culture and style are employed as signifiers for subverting received values and essentialist visions of gender sexual, ethnic and class identities. The theoretical framework is again based on Butler's performativity and Bhabha's mimicry, and is enriched by postmodern, and sociological contributions.

Chapter One

A World Writer

This is why we have art, so people are able to say things that are challenging and that some may not want to hear.

(Hanif Kureishi)

1.1 The Author and the *Oeuvre*

Celebrated playwright, screenwriter, film-maker, novelist, essayist and short story writer Hanif Kureishi is nowadays considered one of the most outstanding renovators of the British literary scene. In 2008 *The Times* named Kureishi in their list of “The 50 greatest British writers since 1945”⁵ and the same year Queen Elizabeth II appointed him CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) for his services to literature and drama.

Born in 1954 in Bromley, England, Hanif Kureishi experienced first hand what it meant to be the mixed son of two different ancestries and cultures in white suburbia. The son of a Pakistani immigrant and an English woman, Kureishi drew the inspiration for his

5 “The 50 greatest British Writers since 1945,” *The Times*, 5 January 2008.

work from his own life's trials and grievances, his suffering from racism and his deep sense of rootlessness and unbelonging. His literary concerns often overlap with those of first-generation migrant writers of African, Asian and Caribbean origins writing about the difficulties of settling and living in a highly racialised Britain; nevertheless his experience proves to have been quite singular in comparison with that of these other writers. Kureishi, in fact, grew up in a white-collar family largely isolated from Pakistani or any other minority communities which instead generally gathered in the inner cities. The author describes his father's upper-educated family as anglophile and anglophone; he himself is monoglot and has only visited Pakistan twice. Even if Kureishi's half-Asian heritage constitutes a defining experience for him both on a personal and on a professional level, his formation and literary orientations are quintessentially Western. According to Kenneth C. Kaleta, in fact, Kureishi's writing "evidences the English sensibility, the English eccentricity, and the English regard for words. It displays the English sense of humor"⁶.

On the one hand his political and literary view reflects Rushdie, and Bhabha's ideas of a cultural and demographical subversion of the centre operated through a postcolonial migration to the metropolis foregrounding the celebration of cultural hybridity; on the other hand there is no nostalgia in his works for his father's homeland and, although Kureishi often satirises Western excesses, he seems to be totally immersed in its traditions. Although especially at the beginning of his career he has usually been categorised as a postcolonial writer, recently critics have turned away from reading Kureishi in such terms since a good number of Kureishi's work is not concerned with typically postcolonial issues. He has been labelled a black British writer,⁷ a migrant writer,

6 Kenneth C. Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 2.

7 Black British writing usually refers to the literatures written in English by people who originate from the ex-colonies of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. However, the label seems to be slippery and not totally fitting for ethnicities who, while not white, do not identify themselves as black. The label Black British is also problematic because while it toughens a conditional acceptance of being British, it still seems to create a barrier between whites and Others. Furthermore, unlike the standardised term African-American, Black British, is sometimes written black British, unveiling the lack of a single signified referent. Such an arbitrary use leaves it unclear if the terms 'Black/black' and 'British' are of equal weight or if the term 'black' merely serves as a modifier of a less easily defined identity. The term Black British is also controversial since there are several critics who prefer to divide Black and Asian British writers on the basis of their cultural or ethnic provenance, while some others would like to totally separate the word black from the word British. According to Kwame Dawes, in Britain the term Black is usually equated with 'non-white,' and this "would make writers like Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi as much 'Black Writers' as Ben Okri, John Agard and Q". Notwithstanding, Dawes claims that recent writings by several of these writers permit us to "begin to identify some patterns and trends that may help us to construct a proper critical framework for the writing that is emerging". Such patterns and trends can easily be

and even a “post-independence Indian writing in English”⁸.

On the one hand the author's endeavour to avoid being artistically marginalised by his biracial heritage is decisive as it results from his declarations:

I can't think about myself as a postcolonial writer. [...] I think the postcolonial label has always bothered me slightly because, to me, it is a narrow term. And so much of my work is not about that and so you feel that you're being squashed in a category that you don't quite fit and you fear that there are lots of other aspects of your work which people might then be ignoring. [...] Perhaps people will get bored with postcolonialism and carry on reading my stuff⁹.

On the other hand Kureishi admits he has exploited the interest that postcolonial criticism has shown in him, and has profited from being identified as a member of a conspicuous minority in Britain especially after minority writing became a fashionable topic and British criticism shifted its attention towards writers born elsewhere as sources of new and stimulating ideas for English literature.

The question of categorisation is always political as the implications of inclusion and exclusion are at stake. The author insists in being regarded simply as a writer and rejects any kind of label such as ‘ethnic’, ‘Asian’, ‘British-Asian’ or ‘minoritarian’ while he strongly asserts his right to be considered British: “Critics have written that I'm caught between two cultures. I'm not [...] I'm British; I've made it in England”¹⁰. Nevertheless, his idea of British literature is that of a new world literature which includes “people with names like Kureishi or Ishiguro or Rushdie, where it didn't before,”¹¹ authors from different ancestries who live in Britain and write in English about it, enriching its literary tradition:

But most of the critics in England don't understand that. [...] They think I'm, let's say, a regional writer or writing in a sort of subgenre. They think writers like [me] are on the

applied to the works of contemporary non-white writers who have been dismantling the monolithic view of black immigrants and have been representing them in their humanity, a quality which has no colour. See Kwame Dawes, “Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction” in *Write Black, Write British*, Kadjia Sesay ed. (Hertford, England: Hansib Publications, 2005), 259.

8 See Peter Childs, *Post-colonial Theory and English Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 23, 25.

9 Nahem Yousaf, “An Interview with Hanif Kureishi,” in *Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia: A Reader's Guide* (New York and London: Continuum, 2002), 15.

10 Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi*, 7.

11 Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi*, 7.

edges. We are still marginalized culturally [...] They don't see the world is now hybrid¹².

Kureishi's writings seem to be the product of a global process of migration and translation. He is a wry cultural commentator with both an insider and an outsider point of view and is mainly concerned with global themes such as the contradictions of English pluralistic society, the consequences of formal decolonisation, of capitalism and globalisation, and the way the already cosmopolitan city of London is being transformed into a world city. In addition, the fact that he feels that there is no single community he could be or would be spokesman for because of his in-between position, and considering that he defines his characters more by their human frailties than by their ethnicity, in my opinion, the best definition to describe Kureishi is that given by Bart Moore-Gilbert who sees him as a 'world writer'.

Kureishi's career started quite simply as a pornography writer under such pseudonyms as Antonia French or Karim while he was studying Philosophy at King's College in London. As he later declared, in the 1970s for a lower-middle class youth of mixed racial origins coming from the suburbs the film industry "seemed impossible to break into,"¹³ while the novel "was posh, written by gentlemen like Graham Greene, and published by upper-crust Bloomsbury types"¹⁴. The theatre, on the other hand, had always been a forum for criticizing social and political failures, thus young Kureishi focused on the minimalist form of fringe drama which fascinated him for its truly democratic thrust. From 1976, when his first play *Soaking up the Heat* was given a Sunday Night reading at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, until 1984, when he started to think about the script of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, drama was the only genre Kureishi dedicated himself to.

Borderline (1981) represents Kureishi's first significant play. Written from a British-Asian perspective, it concerns two generations of Indian immigrants to Britain and explores the fraught relationship between race, culture, identity and politics. The themes of minorities or racialism were not popular during Thatcher's conservative era, and Kureishi was frequently warned against entering "a writers' ghetto,"¹⁵ however he found his voice

12 Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi*, 7.

13 Hanif Kureishi, *Outskirts and Other Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), xiii.

14 Kureishi, *Outskirts and Other Plays*, xiv.

15 Yousaf, "An Interview with Hanif Kureishi," 9.

on the stage through the exploration of contemporary postcolonial London, soon proving to be skilled in dialogue and characterisation, with a fine line in satirical comedy.

Training in small-budget stage productions allowed the young author to experiment with his methods of storytelling and to develop his aesthetics. By the time he had written *Birds of Passage* (1983) and adapted Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1984) for the stage, Kureishi had acquired a reputation, but he had also started to feel that writing for the theatre was elitist and restricting while cinema seemed to be a more popular medium and could reach a wider audience. In his opinion contemporary cinema had to reflect social and political reality so he increasingly based the research for his stories on the streets of London.

The launch of Channel 4 in 1982 which broadcast and produced a remarkable number of low-budget independent films highly contributed to the 'British Renaissance', a great revival in British film-making,¹⁶ and gave courage to women and black film-makers, first time writers and directors, to work on material that wouldn't have been acceptable to the mainstream commercial world. Kureishi wrote his first script for Channel 4, and called it *My Beautiful Laundrette*. It is a play about racial conflicts, sexual experiences and experiments, and subverted clichés. Set in the backdrop of racism and recession in 1980s Britain, it tells the story of a young gay Pakistani who opens a laundromat and has his white English lover, a former National Front member, working for him. Although *My Beautiful Laundrette* was shot in London on 16-mm film in just six weeks and with a very limited budget, it became a great success establishing Stephen Frears as a major film-making talent and earning Kureishi an Oscar nomination for Best Screenplay. Quite unlike any other 'ethnic' film, it was shocking, sexy and funny, but what was really revolutionary about *My Beautiful Laundrette* was its representation of immigrants. "It was a new idea of being Asian", Kureishi says, "not the traditional notion of victims cowering in the corner. I wanted to show that Asians were not all progressive or nice – so I had an Asian as a vicious Thatcherite"¹⁷. Some Pakistani organisations felt that Kureishi had portrayed their community in a negative manner, as homosexuals and drug dealers, and they organised demonstrations outside the cinemas which were playing Kureishi's film, shouting that

16 See Emanuela Martini ed., *British Renaissance* (Milano: Il Castoro, 2008).

17 Kenan Malik, "Kureishi on the Rushdie Affair," April 2009: www.kenanmalik.com

there were “no homosexuals in Pakistan”¹⁸.

Stephen Frears is also the director of Kureishi's next screenplay, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, which is a blasting sum of counterpoints representing the lively and often contradictory relationships among a group of multi-racial characters against the backdrop of the inner city's 1980s race riots: “Sammy, Rosie, Rafi, Alice, a silky black man called Danny whom Rosie beds in his caravan, and an American photographer called Anna whom Sammy beds in her studio. Two lesbians, one of them Pakistani, and the other black, are also prominent”¹⁹. The film pays great attention to the social inequity which characterised Thatcher's Britain and it contests the government's repressive sexual morality and homophobia by emphasising interracial sexual promiscuity. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* received less critical acclaim than *My Beautiful Laundrette* but its good reception gave Kureishi enough confidence to take a new artistic challenge: that of writing his first novel.

The Buddha of Suburbia (1990), heavily autobiographical, is a coming-of-age novel about the life of a second generation immigrant growing up in the suburbs and moving to London. It is a celebration of pleasure and opportunity, and while narrating the formation of Karim, the young protagonist, it reflects the transformation of British society and its cultural institutions. *The Buddha of Suburbia* won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award for the first novel category of the Booksellers Association of Great Britain and Ireland. A TV adaptation of the book, was co-written by Kureishi for the BBC and brought *The Buddha* to a wider audience. The novel remains Kureishi's best-known and most successful longer fiction. Its popularity was provoked by the fact that it was a novel ahead of its time; it took traditional forms and themes of English fiction and deployed them to examine ideas of race, sex and personal identity that had rarely been scrutinised within the tradition.

After having been in complete charge of his prose story, Kureishi wished to take total control also of his new film story and, in 1991, he made his directorial *début* with *London Kills Me*. The film reflects Kureishi's everlasting fascination with London; thus, as Susie Thomas observes, “it does not offer a panorama of London as a world city but a close-up of Notting Hill, [...] before it became the uniformly glamorous and white setting

18 Malik, “Kureishi on the Rushdie Affair”.

19 Stanley Kauffmann, “Made in Britain,” 24. Quoted in Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi*, 54.

for the romantic comedy, *Notting Hill*, directed by Roger Michell²⁰. *London Kills Me* once more emphasises Kureishi's engagement with marginalised groups and while exploring street life, a world of drugs and gangs, suggests alternative forms of family to the suburban Thatcherite model. The film was received quite poorly and its distribution was so limited that nowadays it is incredibly hard to find. After this disappointing experience Kureishi turned back to the genre that best suits him, that of the novel.

Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1995), another *Bildungsroman*, is often as funny as *The Buddha of Suburbia* and it displays once again the author's exceptional talent for convincingly shaping very different characters. The story is set in 1989, the year of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, and it concerns a British-Asian teenager, Shahid, who moves to London from the suburbs in search of a sense of cultural belonging. Soon Shahid finds himself torn between his white postmodern lecturer and lover who introduces him to drugs, sex and raves, and a community of Muslim teenagers who turn out to be violent fundamentalists.

Kureishi, as "a man of strong opinions"²¹ and a good friend of Rushdie's had already taken a serious stand against censorship and terrorism by publishing essays of political analysis such as the illuminating *Finishing the Job*. The *fatwa* was so shocking for Kureishi that, as he declared:

[it] changed the direction of my writing. [...] I had never taken a real interest in Islam. I was an atheist, like Salman, like many Asians of our generation were. I was interested in race, in identity, in mixture, but never in Islam. The *fatwa* changed all that. I started researching fundamentalism. I started visiting mosques, talking to Islamists²².

While promoting *The Black Album*, Kureishi co-edited with John Savage *The Faber Book of Pop* (1995), an anthology that charts the course of pop music and culture from their underground origins to their current mainstream manifestations, passing through low and high art phases.

In 1997 the author wrote *My Son the Fanatic*, a short story later made into a film, about the difficult relationship between first generation immigrant Parvez, who keeps

20 Thomas ed., *Hanif Kureishi*, 92.

21 Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi*, 121.

22 Malik, "Kureishi on the Rushdie Affair".

trying to 'fit' into British culture, and his son Ali, who turns to Islamic fundamentalism to find a sense of belonging. The setting this time is not London, but Bradford (where the first British book burning of *The Satanic Verses* took place) and it displays a world of late night taxi drivers, drug dealers, and prostitutes. The film, directed by Asian director Udayan Prasad, was screened at 1997 Cannes Film Festival. The short story was included in *Love in a Blue Time* (1997), a prose collection which continued the evolution of Kureishi's themes and stylistics and added a melancholic, often bitter tone, to the comic voice of his earlier works. *Love in a Blue Time* gave Kureishi the opportunity to develop with more depth middle-aged characters. Although he had previously featured older characters in his earlier stories, the main ones had always been young men. Successful middle-aged, white Londoners questioning marriage and facing disillusionment were now given prominence. Notwithstanding this, race remains a significant issue in Kureishi's work, it

does not limit him to that theme or to Asian characters. [...] An assumption that he must write about race or should write about Anglo-Asians supports a labeling of storytelling that Kureishi refuses to acknowledge²³.

The same attitude also characterises his next works, *Intimacy* (1998), *Sleep with Me* (1999) and *Midnight All Day* (1999) where ageing, divorce and disillusionment increasingly become the peculiar object of investigation. The settings are prominently upper class since Kureishi, by that time, had become a celebrated writer and wanted the London he was writing about to reflect his new standpoint.

Intimacy is surely Kureishi's most contested work. It is a brutal account of a writer called Jay on the eve of leaving his partner and their two small children. Kureishi, whose work has always drawn quite openly on his own life, had just left Tracey Scoffield, the mother of their two twins, for a woman twenty years younger. For this reason, over the years Kureishi has been accused of having written a piece of cruel and vindictive autobiography masquerading it as fiction. Controversy only broke out with the release of Patrice Chéreau's film *Intimacy* (2001), loosely adapted from Kureishi's writings. While screening explicit sex scenes, the film groups together elements from *Intimacy*, and the

23 Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi*, 155.

short stories “Nightlight,” “Strangers When We Meet” and “In a Blue Time”. It won two Bears at the Berlin Film Festival for best film and best female actress Kerry Fox.

Sleep With Me (1999) is a theatrical play set over a weekend party in a country house. It stages a group of friends whose love and sex lives are deeply intertwined and it portrays for the first time mid-life crisis both from a masculine and a feminine point of view.

Midnight All Day (1999) is a collection of short stories that represent relationships as the main source of angst for their protagonists. Although Kureishi depicts bitter and angry abandoned wives, their former husbands’ new lives and the different degree of involvement allowed to separated couples in the raising of their children, *Midnight All Day* generally shows a lighter and more optimistic tone than *Love in a Blue Time* and *Intimacy*.

Gabriel’s Gift (2001) is a charming fable about talent and family relationships and it marks the author’s return to a cheerful and soft narrative. The book, set in North London, focuses on the fifteen-year-old Gabriel whose parents have just split up. Gabriel has a gift, his talent as an artist. This talent is immediately noticed by the Bowie-like superstar Lester Jones who gives the teenager the necessary encouragement to develop his skills and become a film-maker. At the end of the novel Gabriel’s parents surprisingly reconcile. For the first time in Kureishi’s fiction marriage is given a second chance. As Ranasinha notices “Kureishi seems to be over his immersion in misery and emptiness”²⁴.

Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics (2002) is a collection of non-fiction which includes essays and diary fragments where the author recollects his own experience of racial prejudice as a person of mixed race and investigates the impact of religious fundamentalism on Britain.

In *The Body* (2002), a picaresque short novel, Adam is a successful writer in his mid-sixties who secretly has his brain transplanted in a young and attractive new body. Adam leaves his wife, whom he loves, and his grown children, telling them he’s taking a six-months’ vacation. Assuming a new name, he sets off on a hedonistic trip across Europe where he discovers ecstasy and rediscovers sex but, in the end, Adam realises he misses the old things more than he imagined he would have. After his six-months experiment is

24 Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002), 120.

over, he plans to return to his old body, as well as to his family. Unfortunately something goes wrong and Adam ends up losing everything. *The Body* begins as a meditation on the miseries of ageing, and terminates as an affirmation that getting old isn't the worst thing one has to endure. What is really to be feared is the loss of the familiar, of the people and the things we love. Thus, the book leads the reader to reflect on the transience of life, the contemporary consumerist obsession with youth, and the nature of mature love.

The Word and the Bomb (2005) is a collection of fictional and non-fictional writings examining the complexities of British-Muslim identity and Islamic radicalism. It includes writings in response to the 2005 bombings in London and an essay providing a historical perspective for the current East/West conflict.

The Mother (2003), adapted into a film directed by Roger Michell, won a joint First Prize in the Director's Fortnight section at the Cannes Film Festival. It stages a cross-generational relationship between a seventy-year-old English lady and grandmother (played by Anne Reid) who, after her husband's death, moves to London and seduces her daughter's boyfriend (Daniel Craig), a fascinating craftsman in his thirties. *The Mother* is an intense and sensitive drama which asserts the right of older people to keep searching for happiness and feeling alive.

My Ear at His Heart (2004) is a memoir about Kureishi's father, a journey that starts from Rafiushan Kureishi's privileged childhood in Bombay and ends in the London suburbs where he settled down with his white English wife. During the day Kureishi's father worked as a Civil servant at the Pakistan Embassy in order to support his family, and during the night he stayed up to write, hoping someday to become a professional writer. His books always remained unpublished, but from the ashes of the father's attempts to achieve literary recognition, emerged the son's literary calling. *My Ear at His Heart*, gives a passionate account of Hanif Kureishi's professional life and, including pieces of Rafiushan's fiction edited by his son, represents the tender homage paid to a most beloved father and mentor.

The screenplay *Venus* (2007), sees Maurice, an ageing veteran actor, becoming obsessed with Jessie, a potty-mouthed provincial girl who is also the grandniece of his best friend. The inspiration for *Venus* came to Kureishi after reading Tanizaki's *Diary of a Mad Old Man*, the story of a dying man obsessed with his son's wife who treats him cruelly and

takes advantage of his money. While reading Tanizaki's novella, Kureishi felt "there was a surge of recognition"²⁵ with the Japanese author and started "to 'write around' his words"²⁶. Turned into a film directed by Roger Michell, *Venus* achieved several major award nominees, among which the Oscar nomination for Peter O'Toole in the Best Actor category.

Kureishi's last novel *Something to Tell You* (2008) centres on Jamal Khan, an Anglo-Pakistani Freudian analyst confronting unresolved and painful questions of his past. While fictionalising the London bombings which took place on 07/07/2005, the novel gathers together the most recurrent themes in Kureishi's repertoire (family relationships, love, casual and unusual sex, drugs, friendship, middle-age, Muslim fundamentalism etc.). The story which also includes incest and murder, is leavened by the author's usual sharp sense of humour and witticism. Omar from *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Karim and Charlie from *The Buddha of Suburbia* make cameo appearances in the novel in such a way as to enhance Kureishi's playful attitude towards his characters and readers.

In 2009 Kureishi adapted *The Black Album* for the stage and had it performed at the National Theatre while in 2010, he collected and published some of his most recent works in his new book, *Collected Stories*.

This panoramic overview on Kureishi's works allow us to divide his *oeuvre* into three phases. The first phase, which covers the period from his early plays until *Love in a Blue Time* (1997)²⁷ focuses on the exploration of race, class, gender and sexuality from a progressive perspective. The protagonists often are, as Karim says in the *Buddha of Suburbia*, "a new breed,"²⁸ second generation Asian immigrants living in Britain who are ambivalent and skeptical about their belonging to an ethnic community. They assert their independence and resist oppressive forms of identification that originate from an understanding of community exclusively based on ethnicity. Kureishi's first phase protagonists are young and ambitious, and they want to live different lives from those that their fathers lived. In order to affirm themselves as free and independent individuals, they have to detach themselves from the social setting they grew up in, and therefore leaving the family of origin and its *forma mentis* becomes compulsory.

25 Hanif Kureishi, "Mad Old Men: The Writing of *Venus*" in *Venus* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), vii.

26 Kureishi, "Mad Old Men", viii.

27 The exception to this course is *London Kills Me* (1991), which is not concerned with issues of race.

28 Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 3.

Caught between two often clashing cultural systems, Kureishi's protagonists identify themselves through fluid sexual identities. Sexual fluidity, desire and pleasure are seen as potentially liberating, powerful means of transgressing race, class and gender barriers. The emphasis on pleasure is clearly oppositional to the emphasis on duty in New Right discourse and to the strict traditions of the ethnic community. Kureishi politicizes sexual relationships, but at the same time, the protagonists' hedonistic attitude often distracts them from political commitment to action which becomes ambivalent and unstable. This attitude seems to be both maintained and criticized by the author; ironic distance in treating conflicting discourses and mockery of all positions are indeed peculiar to his style. Kureishi is thought-provoking and there are some deep truths within his fiction but, as all great writers, he only posits questions and, purposefully avoiding didacticism, leaves it up to the reader to choose on which side to stand.

Kureishi's second phase covers the period from *Love in a Blue Time* until *Venus* (2007). Among these works ethnicity and race are generally given little attention or, in some cases, are not even called into question; desire and pleasure, on the contrary, are still given prominence, and their constant pursuit is what keeps the protagonists in perpetual motion. The thematic shift from race to intimate relationships does not represent a new direction in the author's writing but a deeper and more explicit portrayal of his preoccupations with masculinity, family disintegration and the complexity of sexuality.

Something to Tell You, his most recent important work, represents his third phase and functions as a bridge between the former ones. It unfolds, in fact, contemporary concerns and anxieties about failed marriages, middle age, the human need for love, sexual promiscuity, racism and Muslim fundamentalism. The narration starts from 2005 and is continuously taken back to the mid-1970s through a series of flashbacks which allow the reader to perceive the protagonist both as a middle-aged professional and father, and as a college student.

All through Kureishi's *oeuvre* the author is strongly concerned with what the psychoanalyst Jamal of *Something to Tell You* investigates in his job:

The secrets of desire, of what people really want, and of what they fear the most. The secrets of why love is difficult, sex complicated, living painful and death so close and yet placed far away. Why are pleasures and punishment closely related? How do our bodies

speak? [...] Why is pleasure hard to bear?²⁹

Desire is praised for its disruptive power, for its ability to break up what's settled, to make people feel alive. But desire is also a furious blindness that inevitably causes much suffering since, in order to fulfil it, movement, abandonment and change are unavoidable. Jay in *Intimacy* calls the night before leaving his partner and children for another woman “the saddest night,”³⁰ and frankly confesses:

I have been trying to convince myself that leaving someone isn't the worst thing you can do to them. Sombre it may be, but it doesn't have to be a tragedy. If you never left anything or anyone there would be no room for the new. Naturally, to move on is an infidelity – to others, to the past, to old notions of oneself. Perhaps every day should contain at least one essential infidelity or necessary betrayal³¹.

The act of leaving functions as a *leitmotif* in the whole of Kureishi's *oeuvre* but in the novels it becomes an agency that fundamentally determines the narrative structure. *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *The Black Album*, *Intimacy*, *Gabriel's Gift*, *The Body* and *Something to Tell You* all centre on the story of individuals leaving an undesired place or condition in search of another more satisfying one. In these works concepts of motion, mobility or fluidity become fundamental for the growth of the protagonists. One of the methodologies used in analysing Kureishi's novels is precisely this concept of motion and how it affects social mobility, social relations and social integration.

29 Hanif Kureishi, *Something to Tell You* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 3.

30 Hanif Kureishi, *Intimacy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 3.

31 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 5-6.

1.2 The Novelist and the Novel: From Formation to Transformation.

When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people not characters. A character is a caricature.

(Hernest Hemingway)

The atmosphere of orthodoxy is always damaging to prose, and above all it is completely ruinous to the novel, the most anarchical of all forms of literature.

(George Orwell)

The novel is, in Kureishi's words, "the subtlest and most flexible form of human expression"³². The novel arises from the desire to depict and interpret the nature of human character, the lives and problems of people in society. As "the master Chekhov," a writer Kureishi deeply admires, teaches us: "it is in the ordinary, the everyday, the unremarkable – and in the usually unremarked – that the deepest, most extraordinary and affecting events occur"³³. For James Wood "fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude,"³⁴ fictional characters are "sites of human energy"³⁵ and represent the real. Therefore, the reader of a novel is both entertained and aided in a deeper perception of life's problems. Literature informs our understanding of the world and how we interact in it and literature is, in turn, informed by the world.

Kureishi focuses his writings on the emotional aspects of his characters' lives and their reaction towards events. The introspective approach he deploys and the hybridity of his point of view aim at underlining the universal truths of his stories as not depending upon people's ethnicity, culture, age, gender or social status; their humanity, in fact, provides a common bond. His characters therefore work as archetypes in whose features the reader can identify. Kureishi shows a masterly ability in shaping unconventional characters and their idiosyncrasies. His fiction is animated by a memorable cast of recognisable individuals, all of whom struggle with their own limits. Immigrants, drug dealers, writers, actors, academics, pop stars, prostitutes, students, terrorists, hippies,

32 Hanif Kureishi, "Something Given: Reflections on Writing" in *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 12.

33 Kureishi, "Something Given," 12.

34 James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), xiii.

35 Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 124.

social workers, activists, Kureishi's characters involve themselves in political, moral, and sexual situations as they speak, act, and operate without the author's editorial comment on their behaviour. Kureishi, in fact, refuses to classify his characters in terms of how they act out his philosophy.

The communication of human experience to the reader, as Raymond Williams has suggested, has to happen "in such a form that the experience is actively re-created [...] actually lived through by those to whom it is offered;"³⁶ in this sense the representation of context is fundamental, and Kureishi's mastery in depicting specific frameworks for his stories appeals to the reader historical, social and cultural background. His novels are all set in Britain, in a period ranging from the 1970s to the early years of the present century. The author creates colourful and credible portraits of the events that have characterised the past decades, drawing them from his own memories. The immigrant experience, the class struggles, the clash of cultures, the sexual revolution, the elitism of art and the gap between generations, are constantly recreated while explicit references to pop culture are employed as a device to recall the sounds, scents and atmospheres of London.

The deeply intertwining relationship of subject and society, as Kureishi acknowledges, allows the novel to "return the reader to the multifariousness and complication of existence"³⁷. This relationship, thus, constantly needs to be renegotiated since society is subject to continuous change, and a literature that can aptly identify altering structures of feeling is consequently needed. In this respect, Kureishi's first two novels, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*, where he appropriated the traditionally Western genre of the *Bildungsroman*, departed from its conventions and marked a shift in its traditional definition are a great literary achievement.

The birth of the *Bildungsroman* is normally dated to the publication of Goethe's *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister* (1795-6) and, according to Franco Moretti, this is the genre that dominated and made possible "the Golden Century of Western narrative"³⁸. J.H. Buckley has described the main characteristics of the genre and although he claims that no single novel follows the model in an orthodox way, none that disregards "more than two or three of its principal elements – childhood, the conflict of generations,

36 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Pelican, 1965), 51.

37 Kureishi, "Something Given," 22.

38 Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1999), 3.

provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy – answers the requirements of the *Bildungsroman*”³⁹. As Moretti notes, taking as examples Goethe and his British legacy, in the typical *Bildungsroman* the story leads the reader to a stable and final conclusion by means of the firm identity and self-awareness of its protagonist⁴⁰. The upheaval ends with a sense of achievement, happiness and meaning, and it comes together with social integration, so that the protagonist no longer doubts his role in society but perfectly fits in a world of shared values.

Postmodernism saw a remodelling of the social order in the industrialised West. The mid-century movements of decolonisation and civil rights, the rise of identity politics and feminism⁴¹ all largely contributed to the broadening of the creative potential of the *Bildungsroman* which thrived in the narratives of the marginalised subjects, becoming a new space of storytelling for what Bhabha calls “the deep stirring of the unhomely”⁴². Maria Helena Lima sees the encounter between postcolonial authors and *Bildungsroman* as almost unavoidable since no other genre could better satisfy the aim of narrating complex hybrid cultural heritages and negotiating new forms of identity within them;⁴³ while Marianne Hirsch describes the new kind of coming-of-age novels as the “most salient genre for the literature of social outsiders, primarily women and minority groups”⁴⁴.

Kureishi’s first works take this context as a starting point; the artistic perspective the author writes from is quite different though from that of many postcolonial writers to whom he is often assimilated. As Susie Thomas argues: “Unlike Salman Rushdie [...] or V.

39 Jerome H. Buckley, *Season of the Youth. The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 17.

40 An important exception is represented by Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, see Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 200.

41 Lazarro-Weiss questions the existence of “a separate female *Bildungsroman*”. See Carol Lazarro-Weiss, “The Female *Bildungsroman*: Calling It into Question” in *NWSA Journal* 2.1 (Winter 1990): 34.

42 Homi K. Bhabha, “The World and the Home” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 445. As known, the 19th century *Bildungsroman* had already been reconfigured by subsequent traditions (e.g. the early 20th-century avant-garde) which subverted and reinvented it. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that the earlier models of anti-*Bildungsroman* manifested an absence of confidence in the idea of progress inherent in the original. This way their (anti-)heroes went on with their lives without advancing, instead remaining at the relatively privileged social position where they had started their growing process. See Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 257.

43 Maria Helena Lima, “Decolonizing Genre: Jamaica Kincaid and the *Bildungsroman*,” *Genre* 26 (Winter): 431-59.

44 Marianne Hirsch, “The Novel of Formation as Genre: Between *Great Expectations* and *Lost Illusions*,” *Genre* XII.3 (1979), 300.

S. Naipaul [...] [Kureishi] is not a displaced postcolonial writing *back* to the centre; he writes *from* the centre;⁴⁵ his works, in fact, are the first salient ones by a British-born writer of Asian descent to appear on the literary scene. The author's concern, therefore, focuses more on contemporary multiculturalism as a result of mass immigration to Britain rather than on the shock on arrival experienced by first-generation migrants. Also on a linguistic level, while Rushdie worked towards a remaking of the English language, a hybridization in style and form, fusing indigenous Indian literary sources as a means for cultural contestation, Kureishi's syntax, grammar and lexicon distinctly conform to the norms of Standard Received English. His linguistic innovations, in fact, only reside in the introduction of a very small number of Urdu swear words, of a sexually explicit language and of various nuances of non-standard varieties of spoken English.

Karim and Shahid, the young protagonists of Kureishi's first two novels, are second generation immigrants negotiating their place in British society. Both of them pursue social upward mobility and understand the key to this is to be found in the improvement of what Pierre Bourdieu names 'cultural capital',⁴⁶ which encompasses a broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences, and orientations. As aspiring artists, Karim and Shahid seek independence and freedom. They both leave the suburbs and their original family⁴⁷ to move into cosmopolitan London, searching for self-realisation and self-understanding. Karim and Shahid go through a series of picaresque adventures which include queer sexual experiences and experimentations. Their fluid sexual identity is both taken for granted (Karim in his relationship with Charlie) and negotiated (Shahid's gender role reversal with Deedee), and such fluidity will be decisive for the protagonists' acceptance and understanding of themselves. After facing different kinds of bourgeois hypocrisy and racial intolerance, the two aspiring artists choose to keep on following their ambitions, and elaborate their own philosophy about the way of the world.

45 Thomas ed., *Hanif Kureishi*, 1.

46 Bourdieu identifies three variants of 'cultural capital': first, the *embodied state* incorporated in mind and body; second the *objectified state*, simply existing as cultural goods such as books, artifacts, dictionaries, and paintings, and third the *institutionalized state*, that is, institutionalised forms such as educational qualifications. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Richard Nice trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 47.

47 Karim leaves his mother, brother, uncle and aunt, but goes on living with his father who abandons Karim's mother in favour of fascinating Eva. Family roles and relationships will be investigated in Chapter 3.

Both novels satisfy all requirements posited by Buckley for a novel to be considered a *Bildungsroman*. However, neither *The Buddha of Suburbia* nor *The Black Album* end with the attainment of a stable personal and public identity. Their characters, instead, embrace what Homi Bhabha calls “the art of the present,”⁴⁸ maturity for them consists in accepting as their basic principle the hybrid, multiple and unstable nature of selfhood. Kureishi then, uses the *Bildungsroman* to subvert its generic assumption that there is an authentic self waiting to be discovered by the growing protagonist. Identity, in fact keeps changing at every stage of life and positions need to be perpetually negotiated.

As the narrator considers at the end of *The Black Album*:

There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. [Shahid] would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity⁴⁹.

The tangible reality of a generation of interracial subjects who became “a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories [...] and going somewhere,”⁵⁰ as underlined by Karim, makes urgent and compulsory the re-definition of Britishness and British citizenship. The greatest innovation made by Kureishi resides precisely in this. Whereas traditional novels of formation define society as a normative construct, the novel of transformation stages a dialogical process. The hero is no longer the only one who changes with the environmental shiftings, now it is also the environment that changes with and through the hero. The tumultuous *coming-of-age* of Karim and Shahid, indeed, mirrors Britain’s equally tumultuous *coming-to-terms* with the consequences of its colonial past⁵¹. It is not just the myth of an open-minded tolerant country that is swept away in Kureishi’s novels, but also the nostalgic myth of Albion⁵² and its homogeneous society, often evoked in racist discourse. In Kureishi’s view:

It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn’t what it was.

48 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

49 Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 274.

50 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 3.

51 For more on the novel of transformation see Stein, *Black British Literature*.

52 Albion is the oldest known name of Great Britain and has two possible etymologies: either *albho-, a Proto-Indo-European root meaning “white,” or *alb-, another Proto-Indo-European root meaning “white”.

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 attain⁵³.

Despite the fact that some critics have argued that the social function of the *Bildungsroman* had become dated by the time of the First World War,⁵⁴ in reality the novel of formation continues to flourish worldwide in postcolonial and diaspora writings, and the malleability of its form testifies that the genre is still alive and well. As Tobias Boes notes, “novels such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, [...] and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* demonstrate that the form can be adapted to suit modernist and post-modernist literary techniques”⁵⁵.

Since its original conception, the *Bildungsroman* has concerned the development of the protagonist, but its generic form can also participate in the *bildung*⁵⁶ of the reader. The *Bildungsroman* of contemporary global times provides the reader with metropolitan images of the most strikingly different variety of humanity in a progressive blurring of class, race, gender and sexual barriers as has never happened before. Such heterogeneity, of course is not unilaterally positive; the challenge of these days, in fact, seems to consist in resisting the oppressive homogenising effects of capitalism, globalisation and bleak consumerism. As a result, local communities can turn towards self-protective aggressiveness and perpetrate the hate of the Other through racism, discrimination or religious fundamentalism. *The Black Album* shows Kureishi’s deep understanding of the reasons that lie behind the current East/West conflict. By not taking any position and exploring his characters and their relations with society, he brings us to a deeper

53 Hanif Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign” in *London Kills Me: Three Screenplays & Four Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 36-7.

54 Moretti, for example, wrote that the genre had to be “declared impossible” by the outbreak of World War I. See Moretti, *The Way of the World*, xiv-xv, 257.

55 Thomas Boes, “Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends,” *Literature Compass* 3/2 (2006): 239.

56 According to philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt the concept of *bildung* (from *das Bild*: ‘image’ or ‘form’), in its first formulations, is both the collective culture of a people and the process by which one internalises the dispositions of that culture as part of a propulsion towards “self-perfection”. In *bildung* he sees the noble expression of humanity since: “It is the ultimate task of our existence to achieve as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person, both during the span of our life and beyond it, through the traces we leave by means of our vital activity”. Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Theory of Bildung,” in *Teaching as a Reflective Practice: The German Didaktik Tradition*, S. Hopmann, I. Westbury and K. Riquarts eds., Gillian Horton-Krüger trans. (Mahwah and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 58.

understanding of compelling social themes such as the sense of displacement that leads some British-born Asians to participate in acts of terrorism. The sociological value of Kureishi's fiction is undeniable, while the *Bildungsroman*, I would argue with Boes, "has [...] proven to be an unparalleled success as a model by which writers and critics alike can understand the world around them"⁵⁷.

Kureishi's literary impact in bringing the margins into the mainstream, has to be considered both an artistic and a political project; as he has considered:

A jejune protest or parochial literature, be it black, gay or feminist, is in the long run no more politically effective than works which are merely public relations. What we need now, in this position, at this time is imaginative writing that gives us a sense of the shifts and the difficulties within our society as a whole⁵⁸.

His work is in many ways indebted to Salman Rushdie, an early mentor, a friend and a supporter who strongly encouraged him to try the challenge of writing a novel for the first time. Nevertheless, magical realism does not appeal to Kureishi; the author, in fact, finds his best expressions in comic realism, following well-established Western satirical voices such as those of Kingsley Amis, Philip Roth and Evelyn Waugh.

Despite reaching literary and popular recognition owing to his new and revolutionary way of representing minorities, the author is still frequently accused by ethnic communities of failing to provide 'positive images' of immigrants. This attitude has led him to feeling oppressed by some sort of 'burden of representation', but he has continued to follow his personal artistic vision convinced that if contemporary ethnic writers ignored the central issues and conflicts of society at large, that would automatically determine a self-ghettoisation in the area of sub-genres. Kureishi's thematic shift away from the issue of race represents an assertion of artistic freedom: "I want to feel free to not only be an Asian writer but a writer who is also Asian,"⁵⁹ claimed Kureishi in an interview. While his previous works were quickly entering the academic debate, and some of them becoming 'best-sellers,' Kureishi was inaugurating a new, brilliant phase of his career expanding his already extremely wide range of preoccupations with contemporary issues.

57 Boes, "Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman," 242.

58 Hanif Kureishi, "Dirty Washing," *Time Out*, 14-20 November 1985, 25-6.

59 Colin MacCabe, "Interview: Hanif Kureishi on London," *Critical Quarterly*, 41:3 (1999), 37.

The author's strong belief in the creative possibility of exploring the common effort people make to live with change and how they communicate, relate and interact with one another responds to the concept of "new realism" praised by Williams⁶⁰. For Williams, in fact, we literally create the world we see and this human creation is dynamic: "[...] since the learning is active, and since the world [we are] watching is changing and being changed, new acts of perception, interpretation and organization are not only possible but deeply necessary"⁶¹. The essential growth of society happens in the interaction which then can occur, in the effort every individual makes to communicate what he or she has learned, to combine it with known reality in order to make it anew.

All of Kureishi's novels in different ways enrich and enlarge the realist tradition. *Intimacy*, overtly contested,⁶² takes stream of consciousness to its harshest and most shocking tones; it exposes fraught human relationships and difficulty of communication through the bourgeois domesticity Jay is about to flee. In this novel Kureishi uses the trope of betrayal to undermine its moral underpinnings by shattering, being suspicious and making fun of all that upholds its grand moral causes, such as family values, monogamy and commitment, and imagines a new narrative of 'singledom' unconstrained by the marriage/adultery dyad. *Gabriel's Gift*, originally conceived as a children's book, has developed into a coming-of-age novel praising the ability of people to change and the necessity to independently cultivate one's talent. *The Body* carries a science fiction-like premise, even if not deeply explored but just posed as a device to introduce a meditation on consumerism and contemporary youth-obsessed society. *Something to Tell You* is "a critique of the notion of limitless pleasure,"⁶³ operated through Anglo-Pakistani Jamal who had enjoyed the sexual revolution as a young man, but at middle age painfully experiences its consequences: divorce and sentimental displacement. It is also a serious reflection on the rise of fundamentalism among British-born Muslims in search for identity and belonging.

60 See Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 314-5.

61 Raymond Williams, "Realism and the Contemporary Novel" in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, David Lodge, ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 591.

62 Despite the author's efforts to defend the novella's artistic value and legitimacy, only a few critics and scholars have found it worthy of praise as they often perceived it as a misogynist piece of autobiography. In Chapter Three it will be shown that the novel has an undeniable literary value and, despite its dark tone, it offers a variation on one of the author's idiosyncrasies: a hopeful belief in love and humanity.

63 Rachel Donadio, "Interview: My Beautiful London," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2008: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/magazine/10kureishi-t.html?pagewanted=all>

The whole body of Kureishi's novels can be considered as pertaining to the "social formula"⁶⁴ type, where the setting is constituted by a fictional world based on a specific interpretation of society: "A particular pattern is abstracted from the sum of social experience, and a society is created from this pattern"⁶⁵. Kureishi's novels enhance the heterogeneity of the society the individual lives in, through the reduction of this multiplicity into two antithetic patterns. Thus, society becomes a scenario of conflict where desirable and despicable interpretations of it are counterposed. A specific setting becomes the signifier of a series of behaviours, opinions, feelings, objects to be pursued or to be left, to be longed for or to be dismissed. Kureishi depicts time settings and locations with unflinching precision, often departing from conventional representations, and recreating instead the *zeitgeist* fascinations, lures, conflicts and contradictions of each period. His novels are a 'condition of England' type, a sub-genre that originated in the early 19th century and that has flourished since then in the works of artists such as H. G. Wells, Orwell, Priestley, Sillitoe and Lodge, who have deeply influenced Kureishi's writing. Kureishi especially opposes urban and suburban culture as two contrasting structures of feeling. In his vision, while the urban society keeps evolving and producing different identities that overlap and challenge each other, the suburban one represents "our abstract ideas about society,"⁶⁶ which are more unlikely to change since they constitute the image a society constructs of itself. This image of course carries with it an idiosyncratic system of values and structures of feeling; it determines the understanding of relationships and social life.

At the beginning of the novels, teenagers Karim and Shahid are eager to move to London, where middle-aged Jay, Adam and Jamal have already settled long before, and where Gabriel, who belongs to a later generation, was born from parents coming from the suburbs. All the protagonists have in common the desire to enlarge their sense of self; they struggle against constraint, and feel the need for personal affirmation and independence. London is seen as a kaleidoscopic landscape of excitement, enjoyment and opportunity which sharply contrasts with the boredom, stillness, and narrowness of the suburbs.

The way characters belong to a specific setting, are shaped by it and interact with

64 Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 308.

65 Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 307.

66 Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 120.

it is central to the analysis of the motifs of movement, abandonment and change in Kureishi's novels.

1.3 “A leaving place”: The Country Versus City Dichotomy

In *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams shows how the perception of a country through the frame of an antithetic relationship between an urban and a non-urban society has always had a great appeal to the British and it belongs to a long literary tradition. The urban perspective sees the city as a symbol of progress, while the countryside village stands for unchangeability and backwardness. The nostalgic perspective, instead, depicts the rural society as an idyllic and natural condition compared to the turbulent and dissolute society of the city. From either point of view, as Williams notes, the countryside is identified with the past, a point of origin, whereas the city is the site where the future, for better or for worse, passes on. The contrast of country and city is “one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society;”⁶⁷ the dichotomy is therefore used as a kind of metaphor meant to render the world intelligible for the individual, and consequently, ‘country’ and ‘city’ become generally suitable terms for criticism of society which comprehend a whole structure of feelings, attitudes, values, objects and characters.

Kureishi's position in the conflict between social ideals that the country versus city dichotomy represents is unambiguous. The author clearly celebrates the urban environment and particularly the postcolonial metropolis where in the everyday intermingling of different ethnicities, cultures, social classes and sexual identities, hybridism is celebrated. The suburbs, instead, appear as J.G. Ballard defined them, “terrifying, because they are the death of the soul”⁶⁸. Most of the times they are only featured in short flashback sections recalling the protagonists' childhood and their

67 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 8.

68 James Goddard and David Pringle, “Interview with James Graham Ballard,” (30 October 1982) *Re/Search* 8/9 (1984).

parents⁶⁹. This stylistic device is meant to underline the vision of England as the past, a suburban country driven by suburban values, and to stress the conflictuality of generational difference. Often the author doesn't even bother picking a name for the suburban area his protagonists come from; he perceives all local specificities outside London in a homogeneous, undifferentiated old-fashioned society as much defined by what it is not as by what it is, constructed by difference and imitation rather than possessing original features. Suburbia only exists to enhance the fascination of what Williams calls "the capital, the large town, a distinctive form of civilization"⁷⁰.

Kureishi has often made clear that the opinion his protagonists have about London is actually his own; in an interview, with his usual tone of mockery he stated: "I don't think London bears any resemblance to England. It's a right crummy place without London. I think if England didn't have London, it'd be a fucking dump"⁷¹. In a similar fashion, Rex in *Gabriel's Gift* refuses to leave London; in his view, "the rest of the country [is] a wasteland of rednecks and fools, living in squalor and poverty"⁷². For Adam in *The Body* "London seems no longer part of Britain – [...] a dreary, narrow place full of fields, boarded up shops and cities trying to imitate London – but has developed into a semi-independent city-state,"⁷³ while for Shahid in *The Black Album* the narrow atmosphere of the suburbs is so suffocating that, as he says: "despite London, things could get small in England. You wanted to put your arms out and push everything open"⁷⁴.

The rejection of conventional values sets the individual on the move, enacting what Nasta have termed "local migrations"⁷⁵. The central, always masculine protagonist of all Kureishi's novels is depicted in a transition that is an escape, a moving forward, a dissociation from a stultifying socio-cultural condition. Movement functions as a trope for the human possibility to fulfil desires and find a meaning in life, and is opposed to stillness and the monotonous, impersonal repetition of ordinary gestures. The compulsion of

69 The exception is *The Buddha of Suburbia* which is divided into two long sections called 'In the Suburbs' and 'In the City'.

70 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 1.

71 Emma Broke, "Interview: When You're Writing, You Look for Conflict," *The Guardian*, 17 November 2003: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/nov/17/fiction.hanifkureishi>

72 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 28.

73 Kureishi, *The Body*, 6.

74 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 122.

75 Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 181.

repetition, as Freud explains in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, has a “daemonic character” and is associated with death⁷⁶. In this sense, Kureishi’s mother characters are usually those who better embody the suburban attitude. They resemble Miss Havisham-like figures, stuck in the past and unable to react to life. Jay’s mother, for instance,

[...] was only partially there. Most of the days she sat, inert and obese, in her chair. She hardly spoke – except to dispute; she never touched anyone, and often wept, hating herself and all of us: a lump of living death. She wouldn’t wash; there were cobwebs in all the rooms; the plates and cutlery were greasy. [...] All effort was a trouble and she lived on the edge of panic⁷⁷.

Similarly, the life of Jamal’s mother

[...] continued in the same way for years. The old-woman walk to the shop trailing her wheeled basket; continuous TV soap operas, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*: a stroll in the park if it wasn’t too windy; a worrying doctor’s appointment; a visit from a friend who’d only discuss her dead husband, the deaths of her nearby friends and neighbours, and their replacement by young noisy families.[...] Like a true hysteric, she preferred death to sex, and often insisted she was ‘waiting to die’. In fact, she’d add, with much sighing and many pathetic looks, she was ‘pining’ for death; she was ‘ready’⁷⁸.

Those characters who are shaped by a close-minded conformity, or just adapt to it for a while, remain stuck, paralysed, until an external unruly force, usually desire, brings them back to a new life. “Movement disturb[s]”⁷⁹ Adam’s mother, an obese suburban woman who turns away from physicality and intimate relationships even with her own son. Jay, while evaluating his unsatisfying life with his partner, holds that there is “no movement”⁸⁰ at home for him.

On the contrary, Lester Jones, after spending some time with Gabriel and encouraging him to cultivate his talent, feels the urgency to keep up with his own new projects and leaves the room exclaiming: “On we go! Forward, forward!”⁸¹. Karim states

76 Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18, James Strachey trans. (London: Vintage, 2001), 38.

77 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 59.

78 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 83.

79 Kureishi, *The Body*, 32.

80 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 132.

81 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 53.

from the beginning of *The Buddha* that he's "restless" and "going somewhere"⁸². Adam can't resign himself to stillness and monotony, even if his are golden ones, "if anything made life and feeling possible, it was transience,"⁸³ he admits.

The continuous presence in the plots of the abhorred spaces which give negative feelings or of people who embody them, never leaves any doubt that abandonment and change, whether of family, job, or place are a necessary and liberating agency for the individual. The element of space plays a decisive role in the stories; the vision of the world the characters have, in fact assumes spatial traits. Characters then can be divided, as Lotman states, into those who are mobile, who enjoy freedom with regard to plot-space, who can change their place in the structure of the artistic world and cross the frontier, the basic topological feature of this space, and those who are immobile, who represent, in fact, a function of this space⁸⁴. In order to fully embrace life all of Kureishi's protagonists have to abandon the finiteness of the suburb and embrace the infiniteness of the city.

According to Michel de Certeau to tell the stories of the city, you cannot approach urban space from on high but rather you have to begin with the footpath; the city, in fact, comes to life at the ground level and the stories of the city are told by a chorus of footsteps⁸⁵. Kureishi's prose has a frantic pace, a contemporary literary rhythm; in his novels the chorus is mainly of footsteps, but also of bicycle rings, bus and car screeches. Jamal, for instance, compares himself to a "Jean Rhys heroine in worn out shoes,"⁸⁶ while restless and enthusiastic Karim, declares: "I knew all the streets and every bus route"⁸⁷. All the protagonists fluidly cruise and wander through roads, squares, parks and lanes, taking possession of London, bumping into people and enacting varying modes of connectivity, surrounded by the joyful hustle of the streets. The metropolis becomes a lived-space where passers-by imprint their own expressive routes of circulation and connection and physically 'write' urban space by walking it.

In the first novels by Kureishi, set in the 1970s and in the late 1980s, the teenage

82 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 3.

83 Kureishi, *The Body*, 16.

84 See Juri M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspenskij. "Sul meccanismo semiotico della cultura" in *Tipologia della cultura*, Remo Faccani e Marzio Marzaduri eds. (Milano, Bompiani, 1975), 39-68. See also Juri M. Lotman, *La struttura del testo poetico* (Milano: Mursia, 1972).

85 Michel de Certeau. "Walking the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 102-112.

86 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 45.

87 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 7.

protagonists have a compelling desire to change their position in society and dismiss their lower-middle class background while following their artistic lead. The geographical itinerary undertaken by Karim and Shahid from the suburbs to the metropolis works as a synecdoche of their physical, social, mental and cultural journey. On the other hand Jay, Adam and Jamal, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, are middle-aged protagonists who have already left the suburbs to attend university. They improved their social and economic position and got married. In these novels the scenario of tension concentrates on the level of the family; the suburban boredom and suffocating castration is recreated by domesticity and its bourgeois structure of feeling. Only Gabriel's journey towards upward social mobility and familial reunion does not evolve from the suburbs to the city, because the boy is a natural-born Londoner, but it develops from depressed metropolitan areas to the shiny and glamorous surroundings of pop stars and TV producers. 'Swinging London'⁸⁸ becomes not just a place but also a state of mind whose objective is the avoidance of dull, conventional reality. All movement and mobility to or within London for the protagonists have started as "an immigration of class".⁸⁹

88 The label 'Swinging London' was coined by the New York TV columnist John Crosby who, in 1965, celebrated the city in an article published on the *Weekend Telegraph*. In Crosby's apotheosis of London, the place is: "the gayest, most uninhibited, and - in a wholly new, very modern sense - most wholly elegant city in the world". Swinging London soon became a catch-phrase, which even got on the cover of the *Time* magazine on April 15, 1966. See Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society, and Politics* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), 91.

89 Kaleta, *Hanif Kureshi*, 14.

Chapter Two

Class and Social Mobility

*But we're professional businessmen, not
professional Pakistanis.*
(Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, 77)

2.1 Kureishi and the Lower-Middle Class

The well-known obsessive relationship the English have with class has a long and widely documented tradition. Several authors, historians, sociologists and commentators, in fact, have often pointed out how, in George Orwell's words, England is "the most class ridden country under the sun"⁹⁰. Nowadays, class boundaries blur more and more, as a result of a process started during the post-war era⁹¹. This shift has been largely chronicled by Kureishi who is well-aware that class is an existing factor in people's subjectivity and it determines their way of situating themselves in society; nonetheless his strong personal and political belief in hybridism makes him claim that "there should be a fluid, non-

90 George Orwell, "England Your England" first published in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941). *England your England and Other Essays* (London: Secher & Warburg, 1954), 192.

91 For a historical perspective see for example: David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, (New York: Columbia University Press 1999); for a literary perspective see: Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2007).

hierarchical society with free movement between classes” and hopes that “these classes will eventually be dissolved”⁹².

In tracing the characteristics of the contemporary British novel, Philip Tew has noted that most middle class writers have the tendency “to pick obsessively over their own middle class identities to the exclusion of almost everything else”⁹³. Kureishi certainly belongs to this group of writers, indeed completely neglecting the representation of English aristocracy, and providing only marginal sketches of the working class.

In the internal hierarchies of the middle class, the lower-middle class “is a category usually applied from the outside, by those of higher status, or retrospectively, by those who once belonged to the lower-middle classes and have since moved beyond it”⁹⁴. Furbank agreeing with Felski, claims that if applied as self-description, the label ‘lower-middle class’ is a means for underlining one’s social progress, a conscious distancing from a former socio-cultural setting: “People will say that they were *born* into the lower middle class, but that will mean precisely that they no longer belong to it”⁹⁵. Kureishi’s novels convey this perception of class difference by always associating the lower-middle class status with the protagonists’ origins, and taking it as a starting point for their upward transition.

The lower-middle class suburbanite is an “‘uncool’ identity,” which “usually includes the traditional petite bourgeoisie of shop owners, small business people, and farmers and the ‘new’ lower middle class of salaried employees, such as clerical workers, technicians, and secretaries”⁹⁶. Karim’s father, Haroon, is a Civil Service clerk, his mother Margaret is a shoe shop assistant. Shahid’s parents own two travel agencies in Kent, but before they started their own business his mother had been a secretary and his father a clerk in a small agency. Jay’s father was employed as a clerk at Scotland Yard while his mother, forced to find a job since her husband did not earn enough to support the family, worked as a school dinner lady, then in factories, offices and in a shop. Rex’s father, Gabriel’s grandfather, had been a greengrocer owning a shop in the suburbs, and his

92 Hanif Kureishi, “Some Time with Stephen” in *London Kills Me*, 136.

93 Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2004), 67.

94 Felski, “Nothing to Declare,” 41.

95 Philip Nicholas Furbank, *Unholy Pleasure: The Idea of Social Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 23.

96 Felski, “Nothing to Declare,” 35.

mother an elementary teacher; Rex is presented as a former fashionable musician, now unemployed, moneyless, and devoted only to the pub. Gabriel's mother, Christine, initially worked as a tailor, "making party clothes for her young fab friends in the music business, and then for the bands, their managers and groupies,"⁹⁷ but after leaving Rex she finds employment as a waitress. Adam spent his childhood on a farm, his father being the headmaster of a local school and his mother a librarian. Jamal's mother after leaving the bakery, found work in the offices of a big company until she retired, his father, never quite fitting into English society, returned to Pakistan.

The Buddha of Suburbia and *The Black Album*, as earlier pointed out, are novels of upward social mobility and the aspirations of the young protagonists provide a critique of social values, especially exposing how race deeply affects class positions. Upper class migrants from postcolonial countries, in fact, automatically experiment downward mobility on arrival in England⁹⁸. Jeeta, a princess in her home-country, is seen as just another 'Paki' in a corner shop; aristocratic Haroon, in India went to school in a carriage and moved in quite elitist circles, but in Britain he results as being "insignificant"⁹⁹ and often the object of 'Paki-bashing'. The Hasans' family house in Karachi was often visited by the Pakistani intelligentsia and to Bibi, the idea that someone in England could disrespect and racially abuse her son Shahid is just unbearable. She reacts as if these episodes never really happened by turning "away from him"¹⁰⁰.

The sense of failure felt by the first-generation immigrants is underlined by the emphasis Kureishi puts on the fact that they are stuck in frustrating jobs, positioned way below the level that their education should consent. Haroon, for instance, has "ended up" in a "cage of umbrellas and steely regularity"¹⁰¹ while Shahid's parents "despise their own work"¹⁰². Such characterisations ratify Kureishi's assumption that "racism goes hand-in-hand with class inequality,"¹⁰³ a concept often stressed both in his fiction and in his non-fiction, and underlined by the fact that the English working class has always used the same

97 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 5.

98 However Kureishi also shows that upper class Indians feel no solidarity with poor uneducated immigrants from India. The hierarchy of the class system is maintained and the social ladder can only be climbed through improvement in 'cultural capital' which must be consciously gained.

99 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 7.

100 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 73.

101 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 26.

102 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 8.

103 Hanif Kureishi, "The Rainbow Sign," 26.

language of abuse about Pakistanis as the English middle class has about the working class with charges of ignorance, indolence, feebleness and dirtiness.

If race is just too heavy a burden in suburban provincialism, then social climbing may represent the way out of this oppressive situation. This is specifically the case of Haroon and Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia* who, with the help of Eva, Haroon's lover, manage to overcome class divisions reinventing themselves as marketable minorities and exploiting, in their favour, the white British Orientalist gaze¹⁰⁴. In a similar fashion Riaz, the Muslim fundamentalist leader in *The Black Album*, evaluates the new opportunities the media's capitalist need for different Others can bring to him. Omar, the protagonist of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, reappears as the multi-millionaire Lord Ali of Lewisham in *Something to Tell You*, having been made a Labour Peer by Tony Blair; while Mustaq, after his rich father's murder and the closing down of the family factory, goes to India only to return after a few years with a new identity, that of pop star George Cage, and his subsequent privileges.

Before investigating into the way these characters make use of their marginal ethnic condition in order to win themselves a chance, it would be useful to explore the relationship between the middle class hierarchies through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'social', 'economic'¹⁰⁵ and 'cultural capital'.

2.2 Class and Consumer Goods

Like the works of George Orwell, Sinclair Lewis, or others from a lengthy tradition of British fiction, Kureishi's novels describe the suburban middle class as

104 As Said explains, "Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined" Through this process of Orientalism, consistent groups of individuals with different histories become oversimplified into one monolithic, subordinate and ahistorical category. Orientalism posits that media, along with other central societal institutions, are able to dominate, reshape and have "authority over the Orient". The relationship between the Occident, in its capacity of media production, and the Orient, as a subject of that production, is one of power. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books 1978), 207, 3.

105 According to Bourdieu, the 'economic capital' is "immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights," while the 'social capital' is "made up of social obligations (connections), [...] [and is] convertible, in certain conditions, into 'economic capital' and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility". Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 47.

greedily desiring and collecting material goods as they are the most reliable signifiers of wealth and good standing. Since one's 'economic capital' is a defining element for the recognition of one's status in society, the relationship to objects is based on the notion of 'display'. The kind of prestige conveyed by objectification is seldom sought for an individual affirmation of identity; it is more likely to affect the entire nucleus of a family. For the lower-middle class, the primary goal of displaying goods is to gain respect and elevate the family's social standing *within* their own community, rather than to seek access into a different group altogether. Even if they have the financial means to elevate themselves to an upper class level, they often choose not to because they prefer to be more admired and envied in their present situation rather than be obscured at an upper social level.

Materialistic display typical of the lower-middle class is both ridiculed and looked down upon by the higher subclass members, although they unknowingly define themselves through a similar logic. This attitude can be explained through sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theories on class distinction. Bourdieu holds that the way one chooses to present one's social space to the world represents their status and distance from lower groups. For Bourdieu the aesthetic sensibility that orients actors' everyday choices in matters of food, clothing, sports, art, and music – and which extends to things as seemingly trivial as their bodily posture – serves as a vehicle through which they symbolise their social similarity with, and their social difference from, one another. Through the minutiae of everyday consumption, in other words, each individual continuously classifies him- or herself and, simultaneously, all others as alike or different. Aesthetic dispositions are assimilated at an early age and guide the young towards their appropriate social positions, towards the behaviours that are convenient for them, and towards a rejection of those they consider negative. Class fractions are constituted by a combination of the varying degrees of 'social', 'economic', 'cultural' and 'symbolic capital', which is the form that the other capitals take when they are perceived and recognised as legitimate. Society absorbs "symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, [...] [as] the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction"¹⁰⁶.

The upper-middle class in Kureishi's novels values objects that unmistakably

106 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 66.

symbolise their sophistication and high level of education such as prestigious books, music, art crafts, antique furniture, refined food and wines. Internal class differences are, thus, staged between two divergent systems of value. In this pattern, the class contrast takes place between a superficial materialism and a distinguished classy consumerism, and by extension, between the deplored suburb and the desired city.

Acclaimed writer Jay, living with posh editor Susan in the metropolis is well aware of this:

Being lower-middle class and from the suburbs, where poverty and pretension go together, I can see how good the middle class have it, and what a separate, sealed world they inhabit. They keep quiet about it, with reason; they feel guilty, too, but they ensure they have the best of everything, oh yes¹⁰⁷.

The lower-middle class, on the contrary, does not 'keep quiet' at all, and engages a sort of competition among neighbours played at the level of their fondness for "surface and façade"¹⁰⁸:

Look into the centre of the suburban soul and you see double-glazing. It was DIY they loved in Thatcherland, not self-improvement or culture or food, but property, bigger and better homes complete with every mod-con – the concrete display of hard earned cash. Display was the game¹⁰⁹.

All of the houses had been 'done up'. One had a new porch, another double-glazing, 'Georgian' windows or a new door with brass fittings. Kitchens had been extended, lofts converted, walls removed, garages inserted. This was the English passion, not for self-improvement or culture or wit, but for DIY, Do It Yourself, for bigger and better houses with more mod cons, the painstaking accumulation of comfort and, with it, status – the concrete display of earned cash. Display was the game. How many times on a visit to families in the neighbourhood, before being offered a cup of tea, had we been taken around a house – 'The grand tour again,' sighed Dad – to admire knocked-through rooms, cunning cupboards and bunkbeds, showers, coal bunkers and greenhouses¹¹⁰.

The evident parallelism between the above quotes suggests that the lower-middle

107 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 29.

108 Susan Brook, "Hedgemony? Suburban Space in *The Buddha of Suburbia*," in *British Fiction of the 1990s*, Nick Bentley ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 210.

109 Kureishi, "Finishing the Job," in *Dreaming and Scheming*, 88.

110 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 74-75.

class has a kind of prototypical catalogue associated with suburban materialism, and it pushes in the direction of ostentation.

In *The Black Album* Shahid's father, in his struggle for integration, perceives 'appearance' in a similar manner as those from white suburbia who embrace the consumerist steady offer of new, better objects as a means for reaching the status that the possession of these objects brings forth:

Papa had constantly redecorated [the house], the furniture was replaced every five years and new rooms were necessarily added. The kitchen always seemed to be in the front drive, awaiting disposal, though it appeared to Shahid no less 'innovative' than the new one. Papa hated anything 'old-fashioned,' unless it charmed tourists. He wanted to tear down the old; he liked 'progress.' 'I only want the best,' he'd say, meaning the newest, the latest, and, somehow, the most ostentatious¹¹¹.

Karim usually mocks the suburbanites' passion for objectification, calling it the "lower middle class equivalent of the theatre,"¹¹² however, when going to the wealthier neighbourhood where aunt Jean lives with uncle Ted, he imaginatively describes how he could have lived there:

'Ahhh' and 'oohh', we'd go [...], what times we'd have, and how we'd decorate the place and organize the garden for cricket, badminton and table tennis. Once I remember Mum looking reproachfully at Dad, as if to say: What husband are you to give me so little when the other men, the Alans, the Barrys and Peters and Roys, provide cars, houses, holidays, central heating and jewellery? [...] And Mum would stumble into a pothole, just as we were doing now, since the roads were deliberately left corrugated with stones and pits to discourage ordinary people from driving up and down"¹¹³.

This creates a typical sense of anxiety about status underlined by the fact that Karim is conscious that everyone he knows has big houses while his family owns a small one. Karim's family cannot afford such spectacularisation of wealthy comforts, and their visiting tour puts them in the position of an admiring audience longing for what they cannot have. In this instance, Karim and his family dream of moving up socially and economically, not of moving out of suburbia, but rather moving across suburbia into a more affluent zone.

111 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 39.

112 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 29.

113 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 29.

According to Bourdieu the development of an aesthetic disposition is largely determined by social origin rather than accumulated 'capital' and experience over time; thus, it is very likely that a community which has grown up in lack of intellectual challenge does not usually develop a sophisticated taste. Such a position is shared by Felski who notes that, on an aesthetic level, the lower-middle class "is despised [...] by the defenders of élite culture for its irredeemably bad taste"¹¹⁴.

Kureishi exhilarates the reader with his comic and partly caricatural descriptions of suburban bad taste, tightly linked with the obsession to preserve the newness of objects. On Sundays, Karim narrates, the suburbanites are always "hoovering, hosepiping, washing, polishing, shining, scraping, repainting, discussing and admiring their cars"¹¹⁵. Ted and Jean, in a totally unfashionable way keep the plastic covers over the seats of their car even though they've been using it for three years, while in their house, everyone has to take off their shoes, "in case [someone] obliterated the carpet by moving over it twice"¹¹⁶.

According to Felski the lower-middle class is widely feminised as many of the values and attitudes traditionally associated with it "are also identified with women: domesticity, prudery, aspirations towards refinement"¹¹⁷. In the critic's opinion, while the working class is often depicted in terms of a masculine proletarian component in left rhetoric, the petite bourgeoisie "is often gendered female, associated with the triumph of suburban values and the symbolic castration of men"¹¹⁸. Kureishi's novels perfectly mirror this view and the less sympathetic figures represented are usually the mother figures who are antipathetic precisely because of the rigid social roles and identities within which they confine themselves and to which they expect others to conform.

Kureishi symbolises the suburban mothers' traditionalism and shoddy taste through their clothing and food consumption, which according to Bourdieu are evident indicators of social rank. Bourdieu, in fact, believes that class distinction and preferences are most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday life which are particularly revealing of "deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions because, lying outside the scope of the

114 Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 41.

115 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 39.

116 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 41.

117 Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 43.

118 Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 43.

educational system, they have to be confronted, as it were, by naked taste¹¹⁹. The sociologist observes that meals are a meaningful indicator of the mode of self-presentation adopted in “‘showing off’ a life-style;”¹²⁰ in fact, their likes and dislikes should mirror those of their associated class fractions. While the lower end of the social hierarchy is predicted to pick heavy, greasy fattening foods, which are also cheap, opting for “‘plentiful and good’”¹²¹ meals, the upper classes are predicted to choose foods that are more original and exotic. These potential outcomes would reinforce Bourdieu’s “‘ethic of sobriety for the sake of slimness’”¹²² which is especially recognised at the highest levels of the social hierarchy and that contrasts the “‘convivial indulgence’”¹²³ characteristic of the lower classes. Demonstrations of the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity reveal a distinction among the social classes.

All suburban women who conform to their social setting in Kureishi’s novels are represented as fat, desperate eaters who pour out their frustration with a voracious consumption of fattening snacks. They do not enjoy the sensual pleasure of food; they just have a compulsive need to bite into something, usually sweet, to ease their depression. Quantity though, is largely more important than quality. For fear of the neighbours’ disapproval Margaret, whose typical outfit is an apron with flowers on it, “‘never hang[s] out the washing in the garden without combing her hair’”¹²⁴ as to convey an image of dignity but, in the privacy of her house, she eases her frustration by consuming chocolate and junk food. As Karim describes:

In the living room, Mum was watching *Steptoe and Son* and taking a bite from a Walnut Whip, which she replaced on the pouf in front of her. This was her ritual: she allowed herself a nibble only every fifteen minutes. It made her glance constantly between the clock and the TV. Sometime she went berserk and scoffed the whole thing in two minutes flat. ‘I deserve my Whip’, she’d say defensively¹²⁵.

In occasion of Haroon’s first public performance as the Buddha of suburbia,

119 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 77.

120 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 79.

121 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 79.

122 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 179.

123 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 179.

124 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 188.

125 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 6.

hippie Karim dresses up, and his mother reproaches him for his extravagant attire. Dressed in such a way he would make people murmur and question the family's respectability. "You look like Danny La Rue,"¹²⁶ she accuses him. Karim's original outfit responds perfectly to Umberto Eco's statement "I am speaking through my clothes" which opens also Dick Hebdige's youth celebratory *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979)¹²⁷. Clothes have a special meaning, they signify, and here specifically the message spoken through Karim's clothes is of subversion, criticism to the suburban social standard, and also possible homosexuality. Underlined by the juxtaposition with drag artist Danny La Rue, his effeminate look makes Margaret doubt and fear Karim's sexual identity, which, in fact, is multiple.

Jamal's mother, in her son's memories, usually wore under her dressing gown, "a pink bri-nylon nightie which crackled with static when she got up from watching TV,"¹²⁸ and after dinner she used to snack once again on cheese, cream crackers and pickles. Similarly, Adam's mother who always wore voluminous, ordinary clothes,

had no dealings with diets, except one, when she decided to go on a fast. She eschewed breakfast. By lunchtime she had a headache and dizziness; she was 'starving' and had a cream bun to cheer herself up. Mother was always hungry, but I guess she didn't know what she was hungry for. [...] Things can seem like that to some people, as if there is only scarcity and you should get as much down you as you can, though it never satisfies you¹²⁹.

According to Bourdieu one has to take into consideration all the characteristics of social condition which are (statistically) associated from earliest childhood with possession of high or low income and which "tend to shape tastes adjusted to these conditions"¹³⁰. In Kureishi's novels, the lower-middle class suburbanites who remain in suburbia keep classifying themselves and exposing themselves to classification by choosing in the space of available goods and services those that occupy a position in this space homologous to the position they themselves occupy in social space. On the contrary, those former lower-middle class suburbanites who pass over in the metropolis develop

126 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 7.

127 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

128 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 122.

129 Kureishi, *The Body*, 32.

130 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 177.

their aesthetic dispositions accordingly with the new space they occupy. This makes for the fact that nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies.

Londoners in the novels value a set of objects which points to a far more desirable situation for those who wish to leave suburbia. Display and preservation leave room to hedonism, careless enjoyment and refinement. Whereas Kureishi's suburb is "a world almost completely lacking in spontaneity, sensuality, or pleasure,"¹³¹ London's urban culture is the exact opposite. Upper-middle class educated professionals continuously seek for self-improvement of food, clothes and furniture. Consumer goods are most clearly not for display but for personal pleasure and sensual enjoyment. Whereas the suburb is seen as a place of dull traditional fast food, of "curled up beef burgers, chips and fish fingers,"¹³² the urbane Londoners, on the other hand, would throw "a fit if the milk wasn't skimmed to within a centimetre of its life and the coffee not picked from their preferred square foot of Arabia"¹³³. In Deedee Osgood's London house, Shahid comes into touch with a sophisticated multicultural cuisine. One of the first things he notices in his lecturer/lover's kitchen is the presence of French cheese and servings of "pumpkin and coconut soup with ginger,"¹³⁴ French bread, Greek salad and wine. Karim's London girlfriend, Eleonor, whose mother is a friend of the Queen Mother, prepares for him food he "had never experienced before"¹³⁵. The idea that the lower-middle class protagonist enters a new world of sensual indulgences is emphasised by the fact that in all novels, eating is a shared pleasure juxtaposed with mutual affection.

Compared with the catalogue of the suburbanites, the upper-middles seek the aesthetic or intellectual rather than the functional modern convenience. Susan often goes to auctions and she treats herself with daily deliveries of newspapers, books and even furniture. She and Jay

have a lot of lamps, cushions and curtains, some of which hang across the middle of the room, as if a play is about to start [...]. There are deep armchairs, televisions, telephones, pianos, music systems and the latest magazines and newest books in every room¹³⁶.

131 Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 36.

132 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 19.

133 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 8.

134 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 48.

135 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 175.

136 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 9.

The metropolis Shahid and Deedee enjoy exists “only to provide them with satisfaction”¹³⁷. Here, they roam the shops, browsing through the most stylish and sexy clothes, trendy jewellery, hot records, and famous books. Their spending is characterised by spontaneity, fashion consciousness and lack of restraint. In the same vein Eva drinks champagne in bed and enjoys the latest 1970s fashion details. In Karim’s view:

Unlike Mum, who took scarcity for granted, Eva bought whatever she wanted. If she went into a shop and something caught her eye – a book of Matisse drawings, a record, Yin and Yang earrings, a Chinese hat – she bought it immediately. There was none of the agonizing guilt over money we all went through¹³⁸.

All signs are combined in Kureishi’s novels to produce a uniform class culture. The material culture that the suburbs foreground testifies not only to economic status but also to a complex system of moral values and structures of feeling: respectability, frugality, social aspirations, and inevitably, for those who do not recognise themselves in such values, the upper-middle class environment represents the *locus amoenus* to head to.

2.3 Class and Culture

Bourdieu observes that “differences in cultural capital mark the differences between the classes”¹³⁹. Such a statement is perfectly mirrored, on a narrative level, by Kureishi’s descriptions of the unequal possession of legitimate culture and linguistic capital between upper and lower-middle classes; furthermore, their attitudes towards learning and literature determine the lines of conflict within the stories. Kureishi paints a harsh picture of the level of education provided by suburban state schools and of the

137 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 122.

138 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 114.

139 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 69. However, Bourdieu does not disregard the importance of ‘social capital’ and ‘economic capital’ in the formation of ‘cultural capital’. For example, the production of art and the ability to play an instrument “presuppose not only dispositions associated with long establishment in the world of art and culture but also economic means [...] and spare time”. See *Distinction*, 75.

cultural inadequacy the lower-middle class lives in. The author recalls how he himself in Bromley had to deal with his neighbours' suspicious looks towards his passion for learning and his desire to improve himself:

When, later, I went to college, our neighbours would turn in their furry slippers and housecoats to stare and tut-tut to each other as I walked down the street in my Army-surplus greatcoat, carrying a pile of library books. I like to think it was the books rather than the coat they were objecting to – the idea that they were financing my uselessness through their taxes. Surely nurturing my brain could be of no possible benefit to the world¹⁴⁰.

The intense sense of alienation that intellectuals from the lower-middle class frequently feel towards their original environment is particularly marked in Kureishi's descriptions of the suburbs as a space in which free thinking and argumentative discussions are not welcome and where close-mindedness induces “a Victorian fear of revealing so much as a genital of an idea, the nipple of a notion or the sex of a syllogism”¹⁴¹.

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim daily bears racial abuse in school, a school where woodwork is one of the main subjects because they “didn't think [the students] could deal with books”¹⁴². Such a deplorable promotion of a culture of reduced expectations is not only imposed by the scholastic institution, but is also foregrounded by the youngsters' silly superficiality and complicity in self-exclusion. This attitude, as underlined by Bourdieu, is passed on by the family from generation to generation since, through socialisation, agents¹⁴³ often unintentionally reproduce certain structural inclinations that are an integral part of their class *habitus*¹⁴⁴. The *habitus* orients thoughts,

140 Kureishi, “Eight Arms to Hold You,” in *London Kills Me*, 359.

141 Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign,” 31-2.

142 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 178.

143 Social agents, or actors are human entities, both individuals and groups, that are capable of acting in the world, and that typically do so.

144 “The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce ‘habitus’, systems of durable, transposable ‘dispositions’, structured structures predisposed to functioning as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations”. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72. Mediating between past influences and current stimuli, the habitus is both structured by the social forces producing it and structuring through its influence over human behaviour; according to Wacquant it is “the product of structure, producer of practice and reproducer of structure”. Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Malden: Polity Press, 2008), 268.

perceptions, expressions and actions, and is incorporated both in the mind in form of cognitive dispositions and in the body, in a physical manner (e. g the way we stand, walk, our style or discursive expressions).

As Karim reflects once he has detached himself from his original background:

We were proud of never learning anything except the names of footballers, the personnel of rock groups and the lyrics of "I am the Walrus". What idiots we were! How misinformed! Why didn't we understand that we were happily condemning ourselves to being nothing better than motor-mechanics?¹⁴⁵

This typical position the lower-middle class retains towards education leads to the perpetual 'reproduction of inequalities'; on the one hand unsuccessful agents pass onto their children small amounts of useful 'capital' and large amounts of useless 'capital', on the other hand successful agents pass onto their children a large amount of the right sort of 'capital' for the fields they are in. This process allows class inequalities to result with the view that social and economic inequality is natural and inevitable and thus a status quo is accepted without questioning its legitimacy; agents, in fact, regulate their expectations for the total sum of 'capital' they can acquire with regards to the practical limitations placed on them by the social position in the field. Therefore people with the least amount of 'economic/cultural capital' are the least ambitious and more satisfied with their position in the social hierarchy simply because they believe it is natural and inevitable.

The most striking attempt of generational reproduction of inequality in Kureishi's novels is exemplified by Deedee's parents in *The Black Album*. Deedee, blissful on receiving the news that she had been admitted to University after a troubled adolescence, informed her parents of the fact but as she will later tell Shahid: "My mother said, does that mean we have to support you? My old man said someone common like me didn't deserve an education"¹⁴⁶. The comments made by Deedee's parents, a secretary and a small shop owner in 1960s suburbia, reflect a typical and well-established structure of feeling that their non-conformist daughter rejects. She commits herself to hard studying and engages a personal battle of self-improvement against "the middle-class contagions: self

145 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 178.

146 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 114.

doubt, scorn for learning, ennui”¹⁴⁷. For Deedee, “not being stupid was – sort of – an everyday rebellion;”¹⁴⁸ after graduation she takes her teaching certificate and gets a job in London as a lecturer of English.

Within the lower-middle class milieu however, a different attitude towards education is also commonly shared. Bourdieu documents the particularly strong belief in education that a share of the petite bourgeoisie holds as a means to social mobility. Thus, the French sociologist emphasises the gap between ‘recognition’ and ‘knowledge,’¹⁴⁹ underlining that while this social subclass shows a holy, craven, respect for high art, it completely ignores the prevailing styles and codes of interpretation. The bohemian and avant-garde elements of modern art and criticism, for example, remain widely obscure to individuals from the petite bourgeoisie. Of the same opinion seems to be Felski, who describes her own original cultural milieu as “a world largely without books, or music, or knowledge of art that nevertheless affirmed, from a respectful distance, the vital importance of education and the improving value of culture”¹⁵⁰.

Sukhdev Sandhu observes that Kureishi “believes that suburbanites value education purely for its social cachet,”¹⁵¹ and Kureishi’s own teacher, Mr Hogg, as the author depicts him in *Eight Arms to Hold You*, is a prototypical example of this idea of culture as a sign of social superiority: “[He] had a somehow holy attitude to culture. ‘He’s cultured,’ he’d say of someone, the antonym of ‘He’s common’”¹⁵². However, the lower-middle class’ positive appraisal of culture is strictly connected to the practical vantage it can convey; one of Karim’s teachers, indeed, emphasises that a University degree “is worth £2,000 a year for life!”¹⁵³ while, as Jay remembers, one of his teachers used to say that “every extra year of education adds five thousand pounds to your income for life”¹⁵⁴.

The cultureless space of the suburbs is made evident in Kureishi’s novels both by the lack of interest its inhabitants show for stimulating social events and by the literary choices they make. The social life of the lower-middle class is almost non-existent; in

147 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 114.

148 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 114.

149 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 319.

150 Felski, “Nothing to Declare,” 40.

151 Sukhdev Sandhu, “Pop Goes the Centre” in *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: Harper Collins, 2003), 234.

152 Kureishi, “Eight Arms to Hold You,” 106.

153 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 7.

154 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 67.

Karim's view "no one went out, there was nowhere to go [...]. Mum and Dad went to the pictures maybe once a year, and Dad always fell asleep"¹⁵⁵. Shahid says of his parents that they "can't love the arts"¹⁵⁶ while in the homes of Jay and Adam the soap operas and the comic TV series are the dominant fictional genre. Jamal's mother finds out what the London Institute of Contemporary Arts is like only when her son is already middle-aged. The few books one can see in people's houses symbolise intellectual simplicity and practical-mindedness: "gardening guides, atlases, Reader's Digests,"¹⁵⁷ the latter collection being omnipresent, probably, as a consequence of the fact that people with a low educational level lack the necessary critical perspective to decide whether a book is valuable or not, but they are driven by the struggling desire to keep up appearances on a low income. Even in the house of Carl and Marianne, a couple belonging to the most cultured group of suburbanites whom Karim gets in touch with, the educational asset is represented only by a "row of fat books handtooled in plastic – abridged versions (with illustrations) of *Vanity Fair* and *The Woman in White*"¹⁵⁸.

Intellectual sophistication and genuine cultural interest are major ways to set characters apart from the suburban sphere and connect them with the glamorous metropolitan upper-middle class. The desired integration into urban society is thus based on the possession of a high level of culture, knowledge, eloquence and grace, and of course the ability and means to display these. The passionate love for literature and art felt by Kureishi's main characters, their desire for intellectual and spiritual challenge becomes the agency for class mobility; all protagonists, in fact, become somehow writers. By the end of *The Buddha of Suburbia* in a Proustian-like fashion Karim, the actor, has also become the author of the book we are about to read, Jay and Adam are acclaimed writers, Shahid is working on becoming one while Jamal has written some popular books. Gabriel is shooting his first film but he has also written its storyboard; his artistic choice can be connected to Kureishi's own assertion that most writers "fancy writing and directing their own films, or at least having their work made into films, which is a good way of [...] reaching a larger audience"¹⁵⁹. All Kureishi's main characters, in Bourdieu's terms, are

155 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 46.

156 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 8.

157 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 27.

158 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 30.

159 Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*, 263.

social actors shaped by a *habitus*, but who improve their 'cultural capital', and consequently even their economic and social ones. How successful people are in a particular 'field' (social context) depends, as earlier pointed out, on how appropriate their *habitus* and their 'capital' is for the game played in that field. Nevertheless the *habitus* is determining, but not deterministic, and it can be revised over time in response to a shifting environment¹⁶⁰. We can choose to make new practices habitual through conscious, purposeful revision, thus only a few people manage to be successful in doing it.

Felski suggests that "lower-middle-classness is not so much an identity as a non-identity"¹⁶¹ because it indicates a class one does not completely belong to and is certainly not proud of; it is a kind of in-betweenness state. Thus, the success of social mobility and its consequent sense of inclusion depend on the character's ability to display a rich 'cultural capital', but also on his/her connection with influential people. The young protagonists of Kureishi's novels are helped out in the pursuit of their goals by older inspirational figures: Karim is influenced and promoted by ambitious Eva, Shahid by postmodern lecturer and lover Deedee, Gabriel by pop star Lester Jones and media producer Jake Ambler, Jamal by analyst Tahir Hussein. All these mentors were once in the same social condition as their initiates and, having been successful in their class-climbing,¹⁶² they transmit to them their acquired skills in different ways.

In their apprenticeship to becoming an integral part of London's exclusive community of artists and media professionals, the suburban main characters inevitably face shame as they feel a sense of inadequacy for their original lack of 'capitals'. Social progress is therefore always double edged, juxtaposing the pleasure to escape the past with the feeling of being predetermined by it and inevitably driven to failure. Before Karim moves out of the suburbs, he lies in bed fantasising "about London and what [he]'d do there when the city belonged to [him]"¹⁶³. Undoubtedly, Karim believes that the multicultural and intellectual vivacity of the metropolis will give him opportunities for happiness, excitement and self-realisation that white, racist, atrophied suburbia cannot.

160 See Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; see also Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant., *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992).

161 Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 34.

162 Tahir was probably an Indian aristocrat but, as seen for the other displaced Asian upper class members, race inevitably affects the social perception of immigrants in Britain as they are considered inferior on the basis of their skin colour.

163 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 121.

London indeed harbours such a panoply of people with different backgrounds that the idea of a uniform class culture seems impossible but, on closer look, the city is hardly a space beyond class. Karim notices that, unlike the defeated lower-middle class, the upper one has maintained its superiority. The ashamed teenager intensely perceives his lack of 'capitals' when meeting Eleanor's rich, smart, highly educated friends. He sees them as "people who wrote books as naturally as we played football,"¹⁶⁴ and describes his feelings towards them as a mix of admiration, envy and anger:

What infuriated me – what made me loathe both them and myself – was their confidence and knowledge. The easy talk of art, theatre, architecture, travel; the languages, the vocabulary, knowing the way round a whole culture – it was invaluable and irreplaceable capital¹⁶⁵.

Shahid is even more worried about the quality of his intellectual formation; among all Kureishi's novels, in fact, *The Black Album* is surely the most concerned with the importance of higher education, with its foundational role in building up a more equal, inclusive, classless society, but also with the increasing ambiguous influence of the mass media and other new forms of popular culture. This latter aspect will be negatively hyperbolised a few years later in *The Body* where Adam doubts his own desire to keep participating to the world which he perceives as a consumerist image-driven environment where "to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and uninformed"¹⁶⁶; once "there was culture, now there is shopping"¹⁶⁷.

In 1989 Shahid, after his father's death, leaves Sevenoaks for London in order to go to University and in the multi-ethnic city he hopes to find a sense of belonging. Within his family Shahid has always been an outsider for his wide possession of books and his heart-felt pleasure in reading them whilst his Yuppie brother Chili, who prides himself of never having read anything, is their father's favourite as he doesn't waste time in effeminate readings. "Literature is a closed book to me,"¹⁶⁸ he boastfully claims. Chili is a typical product of the excesses of the 1980s, only interested in fashion, women and money

164 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 177.

165 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 177.

166 Kureishi, *The Body*, 5.

167 Kureishi, *The Body*, 35.

168 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 43.

and not ethically concerned about the way in which to obtain all of them. His character is a rework of the ambitious Thatcherite Pakistanis of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, who climb the social ladder through a great but often shady implementation of their 'capitals'¹⁶⁹. Chili's models are the gangsters seen in American films such as *Scarface* and *The Godfather*, and through his character, the narrator articulates a philosophy that ironically recalls Margaret Thatcher's (and Eva's) as a way of succeeding in Britain:

Chili's basic understanding was that people were weak and lazy [...] people resisted change, even if it would improve their lives; they were afraid, complacent, lacking courage. This gave the advantage to someone of initiative and will.¹⁷⁰

Kureishi's juxtaposition of the two brothers makes Shahid seem rather effeminate and his bookishness sharply contrasts with Chili and Papa's macho attitude; on one occasion, for example, Shahid's father asks him about a girl he had dated:

'Did you touch her?' Papa stabbed at his own wheezing chest. 'Or further down,' he continued, slapping his legs, as thin as a medieval Christ's. Chili was smirking in the doorway.

'No'.

'What have you been doing?'

'Reading poetry'.

'Speak up, you bloody eunuch fool'.

'Reading Keats and Shelley to her'.

'To the girl?'

'Yes.'

'Did she laugh at you?'

'I don't think so.'

'Of course she did!'

169 Note that Kureishi's vision of this kind of businessmen is that of semi-criminals. In "Some Time with Stephen," he wrote that he still thinks "in terms of the 'straight' world and the rest, the more innocent and lively ones standing against the corrupt and stuffy" (136).

170 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 51.

Papa and Chili couldn't stop laughing at him¹⁷¹.

For the practical and aggressive Papa literature is only concerned with “flowers and trees and love and all,”¹⁷² and he often remarks that Shahid's devotion to literature is not only unproductive but a crux for the whole family. For Shahid instead, as well as for Kureishi, literature has a high sociological value and is the best medium to improve one's knowledge, stimulate free thinking and free speech, explore different sides of human nature, and understand attitudes towards love, hate, racism, injustice, and political change.

In London Shahid befriends a group of British-born Muslim students (later to be discovered fundamentalists) who, like him have been racially abused. Shahid happily joins the group in its battle against racism and for the protection of the dispossessed, but he is disturbed by Chad's scornful attitude towards his passion for novels:

‘Why do you read'em?’

‘Why?’

‘Yeah, what's the point?’

Chad looked hostile. It wasn't an objective enquiry [...]. But it was exactly to discuss such subjects – the meaning and purpose of the novel, for example, its place in society – that he had come so keenly to college [...].

He began, ‘I've always loved stories’.

Chad interrupted: ‘How old are you – eight? Aren't there millions of serious things to be done?’¹⁷³

This coercive stance is part of a bigger plan the group has, which aims at censoring any kind of artistic expression in order to control people and politics. It is a more or less unconscious radical means to homogenise human beings and render them powerless, disguising ignorance with soberness and humility. The cultural and political conflicts which are central to the book tie in with the motif of class difference since limiting someone's ‘cultural capital’ (and consequently economic and ‘social capital’)

171 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 52.

172 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 75.

173 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 20.

means debasing them to a unique subservient working class. Shahid's enthusiasm for culture and eager desire to reach knowledge separate him both from his materialistic suburban family and from the Muslim Brotherhood, yet drive him to Deedee and the world that she represents.

Deedee, who teaches in a deprived college better known for "gang rivalries, drugs, thieving and political violence"¹⁷⁴ than for its academic reputation, tries to make her lessons as appealing as possible and modifies the traditional syllabus of English studies in order to bring it closer to the interests of her black and Asian students who constitute the ethnic majority of the students. While on the one hand she enriches the program with Black and Women's writing and she offers a course on 'colonialism and literature', on the other hand she begins to centre the curriculum on popular and postmodern culture. This attitude is not always welcomed by Shahid who begins to question whether Deedee's 'engaging' teaching methods will not in the end turn out to be a form of exclusion rather than empowerment of the minorities:

She and the other post-modern types encouraged their students to study anything that took their interest, from Madonna's hair to a history of the leather jacket. Was it really learning or only diversion dressed up in the latest words? Were students in better colleges studying stuff to give them the advantage in life?¹⁷⁵

Shahid also realises how deep and widespread around him ignorance is, even among the white Londoners. Considering the educational level of the supremacists living around college often unemployed and with no possibility of social rescue, he reads xenophobia as their haven, in Moore-Gilbert's words "a last, shrunken focus of identity"¹⁷⁶. "How could they bear their own ignorance, living without culture [...]?" - Shahid reflects - "they were powerless and lost"¹⁷⁷. Such considerations make Shahid's belief in a valuable higher education even stronger, and *The Black Album* abounds with references to the writers, artists and thinkers that accompany the protagonist in his formation (Rushdie, Proust, Dostoevsky, Kundera, Garcia Marquez, Popper, Miller, Laski, Freud, Lawrence, Wilde, Wright, and many others). When finally Riaz, the spiritual leader

174 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 24.

175 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 22.

176 Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 120.

177 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 113.

of the fanatic group, drives Chad and the other members to publicly burn Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and perpetrate acts of violence against anyone who might defend the book, Shahid definitely runs away from them. He is firm in his belief that violence, censorship and severe self-repression cannot be the way to fight Western imperialism, an issue that, instead, has to be exposed and subverted through the promotion of culture and social equality.

2.4 "Nothing more fashionable than outsiders": Marketing 'Asianness'

How social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life [...]. Representation, representativeness, representing have to do [...] with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.

(Richard Dyer)

Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centered. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be the representative modern experience!

(Stuart Hall)

Since his early plays and all through his artistic career Kureishi's writing has reflected the author's great concern with the process of Othering, going both ways, and daily nurtured by stereotypes and superficial images conveyed through various forms of representation, especially through the media. The recent and profound alterations within British media programming and broadcasting, in fact, have engendered an explosion of representations of cultural minorities which, on the one hand is indicative of an enlarged social acceptance of racial, cultural and sexual differences, but on the other hand also emphasises a global process of fetishisation of the Other for commercial purposes¹⁷⁸.

¹⁷⁸ As Bhabha observes, fetishism plays a pivotal role in colonialist fantasy structures. Bhabha defines the role of the fetish in the colonial fantasy as "what Fanon calls the epidermal schema – it is not, like the

According to Graham Huggan the fashioning of India is a product of “the globalisation of Western-capitalist consumer culture, in which ‘India’ functions not just as a polyvalent cultural sign but as a highly mobile capital good”¹⁷⁹. Several characters of Asian origins in Kureishi’s novels are cultural workers and join this process of fashioning of global solidarities by exploiting their ethnicity in order to appear in the western mediascape and take advantages of it. Race and ethnicity then constitute two variants that in the arts and in the media ease the accumulation of ‘capitals’ that allows upward social mobility. The Asian or British-Asian characters here taken into consideration, Haroon, Karim, Riaz, Mustaq, Omar and Miriam, all show, at different levels, highly theatricalised personal and/or professional behaviours. Some of these characters, as Kureishi shows us, through the practice, rehearsal and modification of their artistic performances which see their images shaped into essentialist terms, manage to challenge overimposed stereotyped identities and reinvent new ones for themselves; their mimicry¹⁸⁰ does, indeed, operate through performative reiteration.

In this paragraph I would like to investigate how marginalised ethnicities can be performed as ‘cultural capital’ and how such ‘cultural capital’ helps the ethnically and regionally outcasts break into privileged fields of cultural production managing to achieve upward class mobility. Applying Butler’s theory of Performativity¹⁸¹ as a critical

sexual fetish, a secret. Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype is the most visible of fetishes [...] it is a fixated form of the colonial subject which facilitates colonial relations, and sets up a discursive form of racial and cultural opposition in terms of which colonial power is exercised”. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 78. My focus here is mainly on commodity fetishism which describes the veiling of the material circumstances under which commodities are produced and consumed. In Western postmodern culture, commodity fetishism is not just rampant; it is the spirit of the age, a symptom of what Jameson calls the ubiquitous “aestheticization of the real”. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), x.

179 Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 67.

180 In mimicry, claims Bhabha (via the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan), “the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy [...]. Mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically”. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 131. For Bhabha, this self-conscious display or ritualised enactment of ‘partial resemblances’ may be disruptive; for if the simulated performance of obedience is seen as containing the traces of its own resistance, it then becomes possible to envision colonial subjects as tacitly resisting subordination by appearing to embrace it.

181 Performativity as a concept has been appropriated and redefined by various disciplines over the last decades. Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner dedicated a whole chapter in his book, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, to its definition, history and use. He says that as a noun, a performative – which is no longer necessarily spoken – “does something”; as an adjective – such as for example performative writing – the modifier “inflects [...] performance” in some way that may change or modify the thing itself. See Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York and

framework and linking it with Bhabha's concept of mimicry, I will analyse how Kureishi's characters challenge essentialism, unveiling and subverting the dominant culture's stereotyped images of minority subjects.

While a performance is, according to Judith Butler, "a bounded 'act',"¹⁸² "it is theatrical in the sense of miming or hyperbolising existing signifiers,"¹⁸³ performativity instead is "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names,"¹⁸⁴ a production that always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. Performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established, and in Schechner's words, it covers "a whole panoply of possibilities opened up by a world in which differences between media and live events, originals and digital or biological clones, performing onstage and in ordinary life are collapsing"¹⁸⁵. Performativity therefore reflects the contingent and arbitrary nature of social, political, economic, and cultural realities typical of Postmodernism and unavoidably connects to Homi Bhabha's postcolonial concept of mimicry. Whereas the masquerade describes an unconscious performance of a role, mimicry indicates a more conscious parodying of a part; mimicry, in fact, can always turn to mockery. Being a hybrid site it can lay bare the way in which the colonial presence "is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference"¹⁸⁶.

Performativity holds that, at the extreme, the individual has no core, 'natural' identity but chooses to perform an identity with which he or she identifies. According to Butler there is no essential gender but only a stylised repetition of acts and signifiers of

London: Routledge, 2002).

182 Judith Butler, *Critically Queer* in GLQ, Vol. 1, (1993), 24.

183 Moya Lloyd, "Performativity, Parody, Politics," *Theory, Culture, Society* 16 (1999), 202. See also the definition that Richard Schechner gives of performance, using a combination of anthropology, cultural theory, postmodern reflection, and his practice as a theatre director: performance "is a very inclusive notion of action; theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from ritualization in animal behaviour (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, and so on – to rites, ceremonies and performances [as] large-scale theatrical events". Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory, 1970-1976* (New York: Drama Books Specialists, 1977), 1. In his studies of ritual social drama Victor Turner suggests that social action requires a performance which is repeated. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 9.

184 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

185 Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 123.

186 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 91.

masculinity or femininity and she deploys the example of drag (a female impersonation) to reveal “the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency”¹⁸⁷. Through its exaggerated and stylised performance of femininity, the drag queen points out that there is no original or essential notion of ‘femaleness’. Butler claims that “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin”¹⁸⁸. Since all gender is performative and gender does not follow from sex, there is no true or original gender that one must consider as one’s fixed identity. Everyone can construct their own fluid gender. Butler’s notion therefore undermines the ‘naturalness’ of gender and proposes that gender identities are construed through cultural categories.

Both norms of gender identification and norms of race identification operate by compelling subjects to assume or identify with certain identity categories. In the case of gender, subjects are interpellated into the symbolic order as either men or women and thus compelled to identify as either one or the other. By compelling and encouraging women to live up to norms of femininity and men to attempt to embody masculinity, heteronormative regimes reinforce their hegemony. In the case of race, subjects are compelled to identify as either white or black, intending with black, as portrayed in white supremacist discourse, any kind of ethnic minority.

Bhabha sees race as performative much as Judith Butler sees gender as performative, and claims that “terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively”¹⁸⁹ and are the result of the intermingling of cultures and ethnicities during and after colonialism. The process of cultural change is unavoidable and it occurs through the performance of a conglomeration of identities. For Bhabha, the creation of a Third Space is fundamental: it “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated,

187 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 137.

188 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 138.

189 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 3.

rehistoricized and read anew”¹⁹⁰. If in the Third Space each one can be both/and, the oppressive relationship between “the West and the Rest”¹⁹¹ can be challenged by the oppressed through performative acts.

Kureishi’s work reflects Bhabha’s and Butler’s ideas with regard to blurring cultural boundaries and shows through his characters that no individual identity is stable or fixed. As a brilliant *zeitgeist* novelist Kureishi is particularly precise in capturing the many cultural, social and political changes England has been overcoming through the years, and in any of his novels concerned with racial conflicts, the increasing importance of the marketing of ‘Asianness’ is explored with close reference to the spirit of the era. This process of fetishisation of the Other for advertising purposes takes its start around the 1960s and 1970s, as described in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, when new ideologies and lifestyles progressively penetrate more and more into people’s houses through the influence of the mass media. Countercultures, subcultures, political and racial riots, New Age religions and philosophies, therapy, pop icons, teenagers, the sexual revolution, the gay movement make their way into press, radio and, especially television portrayals. Bourdieu registers the widespread dimension of such changes upon class fractions; new job opportunities in sales, marketing, and advertising areas, in fact, give life to a ‘new’ lower-middle class who enjoys a more hedonistic and expressive lifestyle heavily reliant on credit¹⁹². The contradictions of the decade provoke, within the same subclass, a clashing combination of conservative prudery and careless sexual freedom, of fierce racism and fascination with multiculturalism. Felski describes how “Buddhism is emerging as a fad among the progressive adults in the suburbs, while the sound of the Clash echo in teenage bedrooms around the country”¹⁹³. Quickly, a multitude of unusual cults, but also superstitious groups, seers, gurus and leaders of all species make themselves conspicuous. This phenomenon is an effect of what Fredric Jameson defines “postmodern schizophrenia,”¹⁹⁴ a generally Western sense of identity loss due to the characteristic effect of fragmentation brought by Postmodernism and capitalist mass culture.

190 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.

191 Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power,” in *Formations of Modernity*, Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben eds. (Oxford: Open University/Polity Press, 1992), 275-331.

192 See Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 354-71.

193 Felski, “Nothing to Declare,” 37-8.

194 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 26-7.

Kureishi's suburbanites, as Bertold Schoene observes, "seem desperate for the exotic,"¹⁹⁵ but their newborn passion for the Orient and its systems of belief has an exploitative origin rather than a purely philosophical one. Exoticism develops as a process of domestication of the foreign, it is a mechanism of aesthetic substitution which, in Edward Said's words "replaces the impress of power with the blandishments of curiosity"¹⁹⁶. An aspiring class-jumper like Eva Kay in *The Buddha of Suburbia* immediately understands the fashionable potential and subsequent marketability that 'Indianness' contains; as Karim informs us, in fact, Eva approaches him as if he were one of her new glamorous accessories:

The only thing she wore was a full-length, multi-coloured Kaftan, and her hair was down, and out, and up. She'd darkened her eyes with kohl so she looked like a panda. Her feet were bare, the toenails painted alternatively green and red [...]. She was a kind of human crop-sprayer, pumping out a plume of Oriental Aroma. I was trying to think if Eva was the most sophisticated person I'd ever met, or the most pretentious [...]. Then, holding me at arm's length as if I were a coat she was about to try on, she looked my all over and said, 'Karim Amir, you are so exotic, so original! It's such a contribution! It's so you!'¹⁹⁷.

Eva is depicted by Kureishi as the embodiment of capitalist ideals and energies and like Margaret Thatcher, perpetually hinted at in the novel, she is of lower-middle class origins. Eva, though, is highly determined "to scour that suburban stigma right off her body,"¹⁹⁸ and her passionate desire for Karim's father and her "[...] dream [...] to get him to meet with more responsive people – in London"¹⁹⁹ constitute the propulsive engine of the story. She takes Haroon away from his wife, hosts most of his guru performances, promotes him, markets him and launches his career. After that she moves to London with him, Karim and Charlie, where all four of them will fulfil their ambitions.

At the beginning of the novel Haroon, unsatisfied by his passionless marriage with conformist Margaret, humiliated by the debasing identity imposed upon him by the whites (Ted and Jean, for instance, name him Harry since "it is bad enough his being an

195 Bertold Schoene, "Herald of Hybridity: The Emancipation of Difference in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1.1 (1998), 110.

196 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 159.

197 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 9.

198 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 134.

199 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 170.

Indian in the first place without having an awkward name too²⁰⁰) and deeply frustrated by his Civil Service job where they “will never promote [...] an Indian while there is a white man left on the earth,”²⁰¹ begins leading sessions on spirituality for Eva’s white friends. Too bad this ‘wise Buddhist guru’ is actually an atheist renegade Muslim. Nevertheless Haroon, adopting a stylised Indian look, with eccentric garments, a fake thick accent, and well-rehearsed manners, makes his performances more and more charismatic. Although Kureishi ironically underlines Haroon’s lack of authenticity and mocks the clichéd ideas his followers have about India, the first performances of the self-shaped Oriental sage seem to work better and better and gain him a certain degree of authority. He transforms himself in the eponymous Buddha of Suburbia:

It was Dad’s presence that extracted the noise from people’s heads, rather than anything in particular he said. The peace and calm he exuded made me feel as if I were composed of air and light, [...] my mind was so empty and clear²⁰².

Haroon’s spiritual influence is only temporarily effective for cynical Karim who acknowledges that his father presents his ethnicity as an element the individual may or may not choose to endorse. During the day, in fact, Haroon dismisses his guru persona and continues playing the mimic-man taking orders from the whites, still working for the Queen, and wearing regular white collar clothes. Thus, Haroon’s white admirers, finding him credible mainly for his ethnic self-presentation and soft, relaxing tone of voice, become addicted to his ability to get them to slow down the pace of their lives. Ziauddin Sardar, who has concentrated a prominent part of his work on the Westerners’ appropriation and use of other cultures and religions, wryly defines these kinds of people: “the dupes of somnolent wishfulness who buy Karma Kola mysticism, quick-fix Hindu meditation schemes and perverted Sufism,” and adds that they are, in the end, only buying consumer products, because “the realities of Other cultures are not for sale in the supermarkets of postmodern nihilism”²⁰³. Sardar’s position might seem a bit too radical, but it is true that such an attitude is emblematic of the paradox of multiculturalism. On a

200 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 33.

201 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* 27.

202 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 36.

203 Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 42.

narrative level, in fact, Kureishi shows us that while the white suburbanites' efforts towards understanding minority cultures in a decade marked by ferocious episodes of racism is praiseworthy, their recognition remains superficial, predicated on stereotypes and patronising attitudes. These people do not manage to deepen their knowledge but seek for a confirmation of, and conformation to, the surface images they receive from the media.

The staging of "Haroon's DIY Buddhist wisdom"²⁰⁴ is subject to and mediated by the inescapable logic of consumer production and consumption where customer service seems to be a powerful retention tool for his bohemian followers:

Dad started doing guru gigs again, once a week in the house, on Taoism and meditation [...]. Eva insisted people paid to attend. Dad had a regular and earnest young crowd of head-bowers – students, psychologists, nurses, musicians – who adored him, some of whom rang and visited late at night in panic and fear, so dependent were they on his listening kindness. There was a waiting list to join his group. For these meetings I had to Hoover the room, light the incense, greet the guests like a head waiter and serve them Indian sweets. Eva also insisted on Dad improving the service: she got him to consult esoteric library books early in the morning before work and asked him at breakfast, [...] 'And what did you learn this morning?'²⁰⁵

Through Haroon, Kureishi explores the issue of commodification of culture emphasising the fact that, in the postmodern era, capitalism is inescapable because in any given economic system it is impossible to separate the 'field of economy' from the 'field of culture'. As Bourdieu tells us, in fact, they are 'systems of relations'²⁰⁶. Haroon's performances are part of an uprising popular movement towards a religious path which sees its appeal quickly shot up by pop culture and by the great influence the pop stars have on young generations²⁰⁷. In the years when the novel is set, the Beatles, probably the most famous English group of all times, became inseparable from their new Indian guru, Maharishi Maheshi Yogi, whose lectures on Transcendental Meditation had a profound influence on them. Kureishi, who has widely remarked the substantial influence that pop music, and especially the Beatles, have had both on his personal and professional life, is also aware of the powerful advertising element that underlies pop stars' lifestyles and

204 Adriano Elia, "Yaars in 1970s Suburbia: London in Hanif Kureishi's Fiction" *Le Simplegadi*, 6.6 (2008), 55. Available on www.all.uniud.it/all/simp/num6/articoli/art6.html.

205 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 15.

206 Bourdieu, *Reflexive Sociology*, 106.

207 This issue will be widely investigated in Chapter 4.

choices, and satirises them. In hippie Karim's eyes his father appeared

certainly exotic, probably the only man in southern England at that moment (apart, possibly, from George Harrison) wearing a red and gold waistcoat and Indian pyjamas. He was also graceful, a frontroom Nureyev beside the other pasty-faced Arbuckles with their tight drip-dry shirts glued to their guts and John Collier grey trousers with the crotch all sagging and creased. Perhaps Daddio really was a magician, having transformed himself by the bootlaces (as he put it) from being an Indian in the Civil Service who was always cleaning his teeth with Monkey Brand black toothpowder manufactured by Nogi & Co. of Bombay, into the wise adviser he now appeared to be. Sexy Sadie! Now he was the centre of the room. If they could see him in Whitehall!²⁰⁸

Haroon, like Karim, is strongly helped and guided by Eva in acquiring 'economic', 'cultural' and, most of all, 'social capital' that includes access to social networks which provide opportunities and advantage. As a consequence, Haroon automatically reaches an upward level of 'symbolic capital', which is the level of value attributed to cultural and 'social capital' that attracts prestige and respect by and within particular social realms:

Eva knew a man on the local paper, the same co-operative journalist who got Charlie on the front page of the *Bromley and Kentish Times*, and he interviewed Dad. Dad was photographed in his red waistcoat and Indian pyjamas sitting on a gold cushion. His commuter companions were impressed by this sudden fame, and Dad told me delightedly how they pointed him out to each other on Platform Two²⁰⁹.

Commodification in Kureishi's novel is not inherently corrupted but can be rendered fruitful as both Haroon and his adepts draw meaning from his spiritual activity. Haroon's sincere interest in his own and other people's hardships, his earnest desire to "discuss how we live our lives, what our values are, what kind of people we've become and what we can be if we want [...]"²¹⁰ his efforts in studying Eastern philosophies and religions, developing a true passion for "Lieh Tzu, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu" whom he reads "as if they'd never been read before, as if they'd been writing exclusively for him,"²¹¹ have finally liberated him from the stereotyped, restricting, and fixed identity of

208 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 31.

209 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 115.

210 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 266.

211 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 26.

the subjected Indian in a white supremacist environment. Eventually Haroon decides to give up his job in order to study and teach Buddhism on a full-time basis:

Apparently these kids from Dad's classes were always turning up at the flat, and he had to deal with them. This he considered to be 'compassionate activity'. He was now saying that, for the sake of 'harmony', each day of your life should contain three elements: scholarship, compassionate activity and meditation. Dad was teaching this several times a week at a nearby Yoga Centre. I'd always imagined that Dad's guru business would eventually fall off in London, but it was clear now that he would never lack employment while the city was full of lonely, unhappy, unconfident people who required guidance, support and pity²¹².

Haroon's class-climbing process is complete, and *habitus* in his case is performative²¹³.

Drawing example from his father, Karim also exploits and takes advantages of his own minority status; in fact, the British-born suburban boy self-orientalises himself in order to succeed in his acting career in the city. As Nahem Yousaf notes, quoting Spivak, both Karim and Haroon adopt "'strategic essentialism': performing ethnicity in order to achieve their own ends without, in this case, causing too much damage to those around them"²¹⁴.

Although Karim's accumulation of 'cultural capital' in the city starts growing conspicuously thanks both to Eva's precious reading tips and to the metropolitan cultural outputs he enjoys to the fullest, the reasons that allow Karim to get his first leading role in a play are quite different. Eva's social network include a close friendship with the unpleasant art director Shadwell, who, after meeting Karim, casts him exclusively for his (half-)Asian origin. As most white characters in the novel, in fact, Shadwell has a preconceived notion of ethnicity and since he sees Karim as a foreigner, he believes that he should act and behave in an 'authentic' way. Karim's first role is to play Mowgli, Kipling's *The Jungle Book* hero, for a small production. Kipling is an imperialist writer

212 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 279.

213 According to Mike Featherstone: "habitus not only operates on the level of everyday knowledgeability, but is inscribed onto the body, being revealed in body size, volume, shape, posture, way of walking, sitting, ways of eating, drinking, amount of social space and time an individual feels the right to claim, degree of esteem for the body, pitch, tone of voice, accent, complexity of speech patterns, body gestures, facial expression, sense of ease with one's body". Mike Featherstone, "Lifestyle and Consumer Culture," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 4 (1987): 64.

214 Yousaf, *Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia*, 49.

and the play seems to be staged as a cultural product of colonial nostalgia. Karim is forced to assume a fake Indian accent while, being born and raised in Bromley, he has a typical South London one; even worse, he has to wear a loincloth and cover his whole body with brown make-up in order to darken his skin and appear more convincing²¹⁵. Thus Karim becomes a commodified 'authentic' Indian character, a colonial stereotype, confirming Ian Chambers' assertion that "subordinate subjects have invariably been ordained to the stereotyped immobilism of an essential 'authenticity', in which they are expected to play out roles, designated for them by others"²¹⁶. Karim recognises the grotesqueness of the situation and feels humiliated when he realises that in his costume he "resemble[s] a turd in a bikini-bottom"²¹⁷. However, the ambitious teenager remains in the play, mainly because he knows that not having ever trained as an actor, experience is his only possibility to gain other roles and improve his social position. He decides to sacrifice his pride in order to obtain success.

After rehearsing at home and on stage, Karim feels more and more confident with his character and, while performing, he gains for himself a certain degree of artistic freedom by allowing his Mowgli to speak creatively. As he tells the readers: "I sent up the accent and made the audience laugh by suddenly relapsing into cockney at odd times"²¹⁸. The cockney accent is generally considered one of the broadest of the British accents and it's always been heavily stigmatised. It is considered to epitomise the London working class accent, a social class that, as earlier mentioned seems to be the one where the majority of openly racist people reside. Faking cockney is a form of mimicry and switching it with an exaggerated Indian accent while embodying an Oriental fetish, are performative acts that make manifest the idea that there is no essential notion of 'Indianness' or 'Englishness' one must consider as one's fixed identity. Each person can construct their own fluid self; race and class parodies reveal that, following Butler, the original identity after which race and class fashion themselves "is an imitation without an

215 This 'browning' of Karim, like Haroon's donning of exotic garments, brilliantly symbolises Bhabha's point that ethnicity, and cultural identity more generally, are, to some degree constructed rather than innate or given. Karim is, as Bhabha would define him, 'not quite/not white' and it is possible to see in his ambivalence and shifts of subject position a successful and deliberate process of subversion of foundational conceptions of Western and non-Western identity alike. He is a hybrid being who will 'translate' or negotiate between different cultures without privileging any of them.

216 Ian Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 38.

217 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 146.

218 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 158.

origin"²¹⁹. The semiotic markers of staged ethnicity can be turned back towards those who require them to reveal their prejudices, and marginality then can become a self-empowering strategy able to expose oppressive power structures.

After his successful performance Karim, who is familiarly called 'Creamy' for his 'beige' skin colour, is noticed by the famous fringe theatre director Matthew Pyke. Pyke recruits him because he needs "“someone black”"²²⁰ for his next play, foregrounding the issue often raised by Kureishi that to the white essentialist gaze dark-skinned people are all alike²²¹. The casting of Karim for such an important production bothers a lot the other actors, one of whom turns against the boy and tells him:

If I weren't white and middle class I'd have been in Pyke's show now. Obviously mere talent gets you nowhere these days. Only the disadvantaged are going to succeed in seventies' England²²².

This humiliates Karim who is tired of being racialised even after demonstrating he has the qualities to succeed, nevertheless, it does not stop him from accepting another 'ethnic' role.

Director Pyke embodies the kind of trendy, liberal, successful art worker more interested in the pseudo-political deployment of minorities in cultural arenas than in everyday reality, and turns out to be a sordid ethnic and sexual exploiter. Just like Haroon, Karim works within the cultural expectations others have of him; for his role in Pyke's play, in fact, Karim is asked to draw inspiration from his own 'black' background and work out a credible character. The first character he tries during rehearsals is based on his patriarchal uncle Anwar, who, although settled in England for more than twenty years, had recently forced his British-born daughter Jamila in an arranged marriage. Karim's characterisation is good but his acting group, formed by a politically conscious black girl of humble origins and some "“plump actors pretending to be working class,”"²²³ rejects his character because Tracey laments her unease with a representation of 'black people' who, in her opinion, reinforces prejudices. Karim objects, that he is not giving a portrayal of the

219 Judith Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," in *Gender Trouble*, 138.

220 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 170.

221 See for example Brownlow's incapacity to distinguish Shahid from Sadiq in *The Black Album*.

222 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 165.

223 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 160.

whole Asian community but he is just fictionalising one single old man, a position that reminds us of the one taken by Kureishi after the release of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, when he was highly contested by the most reactionary ethnic communities who asked for 'positive representations' to be conveyed to the whites²²⁴. Forced to work out another character, Karim takes inspiration from Changez, the lumpish South Asian immigrant who arrived in England to marry Jamila. The Changez character is a 'fresh off the boat' immigrant whose hobbyhorses become extremely comic to the white audience. The position exploiter/exploited, as Kureishi shows, is peculiar of all human relations and does not only work in essentialist white/black terms. Everybody (and this is a characteristic also of his second phase novels) exploits someone and is in turn exploited either by that someone or by somebody else. Karim, in fact, had promised his friend, whom he had already disappointed by sleeping with Jamila behind his back, not to use his character for the play; the protagonist of course doesn't keep the promise and stages his Changez with the name of Tariq. The group this time enjoys his performance which Karim had studied and rehearsed meticulously, and this earns him a big part in the show.

When Karim's mother congratulates him for his performance in Pyke's play she tells him:

You weren't in a loin cloth as usual, [...] at least they let you wear your own clothes. But you're not an Indian. You've never been to India. You'd get diarrhoea the minute you stepped off that plane"²²⁵.

Karim worries that someone could hear her because he is determined to keep exploiting his privileged theatrical marketability. The protagonist, in fact, has become fully conscious of the possibilities his Indian features could provide him and since he lacks a 'real' Oriental background, he knows that "if [he] wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, [he] would have to create it"²²⁶. Karim sees identity as something, in Rushdie's words, "at once plural and partial,"²²⁷ something that can be both inherited and invented anew, a provisional, fluid entity subject to change.

224 See section 1.1.

225 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 233.

226 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 213.

227 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 15.

What really makes Karim feel embarrassed is not his ethnicity anymore, but his class status; the novel, in fact, continuously traces the persistence of class distinctions, and the young lower-middle class protagonist constantly has to face the differences between his own background and that of his new friends. Since he starts dating upper-class Eleonor his sense of shame and inadequacy makes him desire to completely erase his past which, as he believes: “[it] wasn’t important enough, wasn’t as substantial as hers, so I’d thrown it away”²²⁸. Oxbridge and upper educated members of the ‘progressive’ upper-middle class in the novel perceive the petite bourgeoisie as “peculiarly resistant to the romance of marginality,”²²⁹ and subtleties of language such as accent, grammar, spelling and style remain a determining factor in the social recognition of class fractions. Eleonor’s posh friends represent for Karim a world of privilege, expensive education, and naturally sophisticated manners:

The voices and languages of those people reminded me of Enid Blyton, and Bunter and Jennings, of nurseries and nannies and prep school, a world of total security that I’d thought existed only in books. [...] I was frightened of their confidence, education, status, money, and I was beginning to see how important they were²³⁰.

Thus, the biggest humiliation which hits Karim arrives precisely from his beloved Eleonor when she says that his accent is “cute”²³¹:

I practically stopped talking at all, my voice choking in my throat [...].

‘What accent?’ I managed to say.

‘The way you talk, it’s great’.

‘But what way do I talk?’

She looked at me impatiently, as if I were playing some ridiculous game, until she saw I was serious.

‘You’ve got a street voice, Karim. You’re from South London – so that’s how you speak. It’s like cockney, only not so raw. It’s unusual, it’s different to my voice, of course’.

228 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 178.

229 Felski, “Nothing to Declare,” 42.

230 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 178.

231 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 178.

Of course.

At that moment I resolved to lose my accent: whatever it was, it would go. I would speak like her. It wasn't difficult. I'd left my world; I had to, to get on²³².

Bourdieu believes that language is not merely a method of communication, but also a mechanism of power. The language one deploys is designated by his/her relational position in a field or social space. Different uses of language tend to reiterate the respective positions of each participant so, if Karim wants to refine his way of speaking this is a process that has to be “consciously acquired,”²³³ a mimic act similar but oppositional to that of whimsical and spoilt Eleonor who, sometimes, adopts a radical chic working class accent enriched with a number of bad words as a stylish marker of self-representation. Eleonor also hosts in her house a Scottish street-sweeper, Heater, as the quintessentially authentic voice of the proletariat:

Heater was the only working-class person that most of them had met. So he became a sort of symbol for the masses and consequently received tickets to first nights and parties afterwards, having a busier social life than Cecil Beaton²³⁴.

As Karim in the suburbs had charming fantasies of a glamorous, bohemian, metropolitan world of open-minded intellectuals he could join, such intellectuals seem to have their romantic fantasies of the ‘authentic’ working class. The upper-middle class circle that cultivate Heater, who actually has the cultural and the ‘social capitals’ needed to improve his social condition, regards him as an entertaining storyteller of “knife fights, Glasgow poverty and louchness and violence,”²³⁵ confirming Felski’s opinion that: “it is the ultimate act of bad faith among left intellectuals to want the working class to remain poor but pure, untainted by consumer culture and social aspirations²³⁶.”

Karim, in the end, grows disenchanted both with Eleanor and with the other left wing poseurs who turn out to be, in Jamila’s words:

232 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 178.

233 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 178.

234 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 175.

235 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 176.

236 Felski, “Nothing to Declare,” 44.

vain fools. The world burns and they comb their eyebrows. Or they try and put the burning world on the stage. It never occurs to them to douse the flames²³⁷.

By the end of the book we learn that Karim is cast for playing the rebellious son of an Indian shopkeeper in a famous soap opera that is supposed to engage with political and racial issues. Kureishi's choice of the genre is significant in that it is exactly the TV production he usually mocks in his novels for its superficiality. Karim's success, then, inextricably bounded to his Asian features, is predicated on celebrity culture and money, not on political engagement and subversive attitudes. Through the protagonist's cameo appearances in *The Black Album* and in *Gabriel's Gift*, Kureishi keeps us informed about Karim's professional achievements until, in *Something to Tell You*, we find out that after playing "either torturers or the tortured in bad movies"²³⁸ in the USA and having spent some time in rehabilitation from drugs abuse, he is now ready to enter a reality show named "I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!"²³⁹.

Karim's development within the other novels reflects Kureishi's increased cynicism with regard to the legacy of the 1970s which has failed to produce the real changes foregrounded by the rise of identity politics. His fictional world is a post-politically correct one that reflects the contradictions of the era. Multiculturalism is contradictory and can't often deal with essentialist positions of minority communities and their religious belief, while sometimes is reduced by mainstream culture to a superficial celebration of stereotypes which oppressively tend to homogenise identities. The sexual revolution, as we will see in the next chapter, has turned into a "Thatcherism of the soul,"²⁴⁰ while the drug experimentations of the 1970s have nowadays led to a worrisome wide number of middle-aged professionals to abuse heavy drugs and anti-depressants, as becomes quite evident in Kureishi's last novel. Nevertheless, although Kureishi does not conceal the fact that Karim has largely kept exploiting and being exploited by consumer cultural production and its excesses, it is a matter of fact that the hero has become a worldwide famous superstar, and managing to make himself conspicuous in the

237 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 176.

238 Here probably underlies a reference to actor Naveen Andrews who played Karim in the four hours film adaptation of *The Buddha of Suburbia* for the BBC. Andrews, in fact, has played the part of a former Iraqi torturer in the American TV series *Lost*.

239 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 186.

240 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 68.

entertainment industry, he has brought attention to ethnic minorities and the possibility for them to achieve highly successful careers. Karim can provide, in and through fiction, a hope in the possibility of success for young marginalised individuals, as much as Kureishi has, in reality, become a role model for all those ethnic communities who, in Sandhu's words were "unknown material, off the cultural radar," "the butts, rather than the tellers of jokes,"²⁴¹ and lead the way to many British-born ethnic writers, actors and directors since *My Beautiful Laundrette* was screened for the first time²⁴². Low visibility, in fact, not only offers a limited number of images for minority groups to identify with, it also conveys to them the message that they are not valuable material for representation, neither for cultural producers, nor for the audience.

According to Richard Dyer, the legal and cultural rights social minorities can afford can be discerned from the modes of their cultural visibility:

How a group is represented, presented again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights society claims to ensure its citizens²⁴³.

Riaz, the British-born leader of the Muslim fundamentalists in *The Black Album*, doubts his right to have his religious celebratory poetry taken into consideration for publishing because he perceives the West as a quintessentially racist and corrupt entity who founds its supremacy on the oppression of minority groups. When he finds out that Shahid has had a short story published he seems to be surprised:

‘I would have thought that outsiders like us would have had trouble gaining acceptance. The whites are very insular, surely they won’t admit people like us into their world?’

‘Oh no, there’s nothing more fashionable than outsiders’.

241 Sandhu, "Pop Goes the Centre," 117.

242 e. g. Meera Syal had her first role in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and then wrote with Gurinder Chadha the screenplay of the hit film *Bhaji on the Beach* and gained mainstream TV success with the British Asian comedy *Goodness Gracious Me*; Ayub Khan Din, Sammy in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* after a few years wrote *East is East* which won the Evening Standard's best British film award; Rita Wolf, who played Tania in *My Beautiful Laundrette* co-founded with Rukhsana Ahmad the Khali Theatre Group.

243 Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

Riaz seemed puzzled. 'Why is that?'

Shahid shrugged. 'Novelty. Even someone like you, brother, could have a wide appeal if the media knew of you. Think how many people you could address'.

'The media, yes. That is the right direction for us to go in'²⁴⁴.

Shahid, who is stylish, smart and also a great fan of pop culture, is quick to understand the importance of embodying 'novelty' as an ethnic marginalised in order to be appealing to the media, and this dialogue, set in 1989 but written in 1995, is quite indicative of Kureishi's ironic perception of the latest trends in media programming. The author himself has taken advantage of these trends, following the lead of recently successful migrant writers and poets such as Rushdie, Naipaul and Linton Kwesi Johnson. As Ranasinha notes, in fact, "a hallmark of Kureishi's work is the way he both exploits and resists his ethnic identity"²⁴⁵.

Riaz's desire to gain widespread visibility is driven both by his thirst to assert radical Muslim religious and moral values like he already does in his lectures, and by his personal vanity which he tries to hide with the claim: "It's God's work!," to which Shahid replies: "With your name on the title page!"²⁴⁶. Riaz's narcissism is emphasised when he meets the opportunistic politician George Rugman for a question regarding the public exhibition of an aubergine. This aubergine is believed by part of the Muslim community to carry in its two halves some sacred inscriptions, a sign of Allah's greatness. Photographers and reporters come to the meeting point to testify through their medium the Labour Party's cultural openness (right before the elections) towards the requests of London's minority communities. Both Riaz and Rugman have taken several shots together and they both seem to enjoy quite a lot this glimpse of celebrity. The two leaders who, in their intimate thoughts profoundly despise each other's politics and background, make use of each other's position in order to get public recognition through the press.

Riaz's short experience with the media is no longer portrayed by Kureishi, probably because the radical leader conceives his identity as fixed, stable, existing only and exclusively in his fanatically religious role; he is not looking for change nor for

244 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 185.

245 Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, 12.

246 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 68.

encounter with other cultures. As a promoter of essentialism there is no Third Space in his visions, no hybridism, no 'panoply of possibilities' expressed by Schecnher, and his homophobic political ideas (he has written an essay entitled "Adam and Eve, Not Adam and Steve") are based on the repressive symbolic order that sees gender and sex as a monolith where one is compelled to identify as either male or female.

Something to Tell You, which is mainly set in 2005, when cable TV had already become a global reality, and the most influencing person "over our time [was] Rupert Murdoch – the author of the celebrity culture we inhabit"²⁴⁷ – is surely the novel that contains the larger number of Asians and British-Asians that turn in their favour the media fetishisation of ethnic minorities. Omar and Mustaq, both British-born South Asians, are also gay, while Miriam has an ambiguous sexual past which includes lesbianism. All three characters, then, have a bonus marginalised identity to exploit in order to enter, with different degrees of success, the media's realm; in fact, the election of Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997 marked the beginning of a sea change in cultural and political attitudes towards non-heterosexuality, witnessed by a number of queer-positive changes to existing policy and legislation in the years that followed and the broader elision of sexual difference within British media culture.

Terrestrial television and its great number of channels which, in order to survive have to differentiate from one-another and make themselves identifiable to the audience, have provided space for the negotiation of queer issues and identities. Recent changes to British law on sexual behaviour and identity have effected a radical impact on British culture generally and British broadcasting specifically. The abolition of Section 28, introduced during the repressive Thatcher era, which prohibited the representation or promotion of images hinting at homosexuality, the introduction of Civil Partnerships and the enforcement of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Act all occurred between 1997 and 2007. These important changes contributed to the creation of a cultural climate wherein the production and commissioning of gay, lesbian and queer-themed television material might be deemed viable²⁴⁸. Furthermore the fetishisation of non-

247 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 177.

248 The impact of recent broadcasting policy on programme-making is likewise significant. The creation of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in 1997, the passing of the 2003 Communications Act and the subsequent establishment of Ofcom, for example, all served to inform television executive and editorial decisions pertaining to programme content.

heterosexual identities have rendered queerness even more glamorous than non-whiteness, especially in the fields of fashion and arts.

Mustaq, the unappealing gay brother of Jamal's long-lost love Ajita, changes his name in that of George Cage and becomes a famous and talented song-writer and performer, "one of the first people to mix jazz, rock, Bollywood film tunes and Indian classical music"²⁴⁹. Thus Mustaq/George has to admit that 'Indianness' has only recently become fashionable in the media music industry while at the beginning of his career he had to disguise his Oriental origins:

It was only recently that I was able to get interested in the past. Because of my 'pop' name and fair skin I haven't been mistaken for a Paki for years – not unlike Freddy Mercury, another who 'disappeared' into fame²⁵⁰.

This statement endorses Stuart Hall's early assertion that "Blacks [and Asians] could gain entry to the mainstream – but only at the cost of [...] assimilating white norms of style, looks, and behavior"²⁵¹. Mustaq must have started his career around the early 1980s, under the Thatcher era, when despite the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and the minority rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s, the mainstream was still hard to break into for minority subjects if not approached through mechanisms of mimicry. As Jamal remembers: "There were few black or brown faces on TV"²⁵².

As a gay Muslim, Mustaq initially has to disguise his sexual identity, both with his father in England and with his family in India, where he marries the sister of the musician he actually is in love with. On the contrary, in the Western pop music realm, as will be seen in Chapter Four, homosexuality and sexual ambiguity become additional elements of style to be performed on stage; race and sexual orientation link together to ease Mustaq's upward professional and social mobility. In the end Mustaq manages to reinvent himself, as he tells Jamal, after years of studying and practising music and style.

249 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 155.

250 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 161. Farrokh Bulsara, aka Freddy Mercury was born in the British protectorate of Zanzibar by a Parsi couple from the Gujarat region of the then province of Bombay Presidency in British India. Mercury was bisexual and performed in a highly theatrical style. He eventually died of HIV in London in 1991 after a brilliant career.

251 Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall ed. (London: Sage, 1997), 279.

252 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 178.

He improves his 'cultural capital', including the stylisation of gestures and the adoption of celebrity poses as to make clear his new social status. Jamal, who last saw him as a fat problematic teenager in love with him, is amazed by his transformation and describes his well-rehearsed manners "as though he were a camp actor playing himself too seriously"²⁵³. Mustaq/George is even more performative than the drag exemplified by Butler, because his challenges towards essentialist visions of identity involve race, gender and class, and his newly acquired privileged position that sees him as friend with such icons as Mick Jagger is made possible both by the media's promotion of exotic subjects and by its strictly connected music industry.

At one of Mustaq's celebrity parties, we re-encounter Omar who the Kureishi reader had left as a young entrepreneur at the beginning of his career in the laundromat market. He reappears through the pages of *Something to Tell You* as a "plump Asian in a Prada suit with a lot to smile about,"²⁵⁴ and the narrator informs us that he had made a prospering business of his laundrettes and in the mid-'90s had sold everything in order to enter the media. Omar has built an empire making television "for, by and about minorities"²⁵⁵. As the narrator claims:

The 'Pakis' had always been considered socially awkward, badly dressed, weirdly religious and repressed. But being gay, Omar Ali was smart enough to know how hip and fashionable minorities – or any outsider – could become, with the right marketing, as they made their way up the social hierarchy²⁵⁶.

Omar's success and his political symbolic exploitability as a doubly marginalised figure committed to anti-racism (even though Omar is overintegrated in the British system and has Thatcher-like entrepreneurial attitudes) is ironically pointed out by the narrator who describes him as "protected by a political ring-fence. No one could bring him down but himself"²⁵⁷. He is even made a Labour Peer by Tony Blair and nominated Lord Ali of Lewisham²⁵⁸. As a minority subject Omar is encouraged by fellow politicians to perform

253 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 155.

254 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 158.

255 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 159.

256 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 159.

257 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 159.

258 Kureishi, who was nominated CBE in 2008, claims that such awards under the Blair Government were given away very easily and lost their original value. See Donadio, "My Beautiful London".

his ethnic or sexual identities in order to keep up with stereotypical perceptions of an exotic other; thus, he is himself a cunning exploiter of the system making money in not totally clear ways and supporting the war in Iraq:

‘As a gay Muslim I believe other Muslims must have the opportunity to enjoy the liberalism we do. I won’t be hypocritical –’

Henry interrupted. ‘So you urged Blair to kick the shit out of as many innocent Iraqis as he could?’

‘Look, these Iraqis, they have no science, no literature, no decent institutions and only one book. Can you imagine relying on just that? ... We must give them things, even if it means killing a lot of them. Nothing worthwhile was ever done without a few deaths.’

[...] Omar made a camp gesture and said, ‘I don’t know why I’m saying all this. I’m a moderate and I always have been’²⁵⁹.

Bourdieu sees ‘symbolic capital’ (e.g. prestige, honour, attention) as a crucial source of power; in this case Omar is using both his ‘symbolic’ and his ‘economic capitals’ to secure and empower his social position. Omar’s desire for integration as a teenager and his desire to make his way in Britain have ended up by turning him into a sordid exploiter who mimics the part of the marginalised individual foregrounding the rights of the marginalised community. Money has no color, as Nasser observes in *My Beautiful Laundrette*,²⁶⁰ and while Omar has brilliantly succeeded in his upward mobility process, the bigger are his achievements the greater his corruption. The inevitability of disillusionment marks today’s disposable society; moral and cultural opposites co-mingle, and Kureishi’s cynic criticism of the moral vacuity of the 21st century celebrity-obsessed society makes his fiction overlap with reality. As Mars-Jones notes, in fact, the character of Omar shares many similarities with the gay multi-millionaire media entrepreneur and politician Waheed Alli who also was made a Labour peer by Tony Blair²⁶¹. Still, as Kureishi shows us once again through his stories, we cannot perceive the relationship exploiter/exploited as built in terms of ethnicity, and this has to encourage any social collectivity not to think in terms of group homogeneous identities, but of individual

259 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 160.

260 This concept is also remarked by Zulma in *The Black Album*.

261 Adam Mars-Jones, “True tales from the couch,” *The Observer*, 24 February 2008, 6.

different people who can choose how to behave. It is not ethnicity who makes the person, it is their attitude towards human beings.

According to Bourdieu the value of each form of 'capital' is enhanced by its capacity for transformation into one of the others. Haroon, Karim, Mustaq and Omar all succeed in their attempts to win themselves a chance as ethnic outcasts in Britain, and all of them have in their own field a kind of talent. Miriam, Jamal's sister, also appears on TV, but as a completely untalented person:

At that time daytime was a huge vacant space soon to become even more vacant. Programmes were beginning to be made quickly and cheaply [...]. The contents were cut-price too, since the participants were not movie or even TV stars but 'real' people discovered by researchers, who could become enviable just by appearing on TV. To me it sounded like music hall²⁶²: television versions of the mad variety shows my grandparents used to take Miriam and I to on our holidays. At the end of the pier at the seaside we'd watch jugglers, knife-throwers and fat comedians telling risqué jokes²⁶³.

Everyday life and art intermingle at different levels and give birth to a range of products that business transforms into 'capitals', deciding whether the performers earn prestige or money. Miriam does not improve any of her 'capitals' through her TV apparitions, not even her economic one since she keeps illicitly trafficking in drugs, pornographic items and stolen clothes that provide her with the money needed to support her family. Her TV performances are pointless, cheap programmes made up to fill a gap in daytime programming; her 'agonies' are in fact just third-class shows she thinks herself to be famous for participating in:

She could appear on any programme involving weight problems, drug addiction, domestic abuse, tattooing, teenagers, rape, rage, race or lesbianism – or any combination of the aforementioned. If you wanted, and often if you didn't, she'd show you videos of the programmes. There was no way you could sneer at any of it. If I wanted to talk about the original confessionalists – those I read as a young man such as St Augustine, Rousseau, De Quincey, Edmund Gosse – she would refer to her 'agonies' as contemporary therapy for the nation²⁶⁴.

262 For more on the history and development of the music hall in to pop art see Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965).

263 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 177.

264 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 19.

Miriam's presence in the show is purely objectified, not politically conscious and not self-improving because no ability or talent is required. Miriam's reinvention of her identity and her advancement on the social ladder cannot take place through the vacuity of such a desolating media environment. Instead, they will happen through her odd but highly romantic love story with upper class white theatre director Henry, as will be explored in the next chapter. Through Henry Miriam acquires all 'capitals' required by Bourdieu to improve one's social status and in the end she will start rehearsing in his plays.

Thanks to the increasing demand for minority characters in the media, aside from commodification, more and more marginalised groups have entered the entertainment industry, taking representation into their own hands, creating more politically progressive and highly valuable cultural productions. Simply being visible does not mean that progressive social change will occur, but the recognition of minorities in entertainment is a key factor in bringing about awareness. Kureishi's fiction satirises the prejudice and contradictions of our times, but at the same time it suggests that oppressive power can be challenged everyday through contestatory performances. Exotic stagings can be seen both as parodies of the audiences' expectations (white or not) and as affirmations of the performative basis of all identity formation: a celebration of hybridity.

Chapter Three

Familial Dysfunctionality, Alternative Communities and the Individual

The only thing I'm going to do for you is to make you freer to do things for yourself. If you can't do it, I'm sorry. I'll have nothing to offer you.

(Margaret Thatcher)

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. [...] They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. [...] And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.

(Margaret Thatcher)

3.1 Thatcherite Individualism and the Disruption of the Traditional Community

Britain's historical, political and cultural landscape has changed radically and rapidly over the past 40 years, and Kureishi has been one of the few British writers to fully

keep pace with it. Margaret Thatcher's long-lasting Conservative administrations (1979–90) and the consequences they have produced on contemporary society represent the backdrop for Kureishi's stories. As the author declared, in his view, Britain's present socio-economic situation stems from Thatcher's politics and those pursued by the subsequent governments:

I am aware that the world we inhabit now was partly brought about by what [Thatcher] and her party considered in the 80s to be freedom. By this I mean deregulation, the liberal market and consumerism, notions much extended under Tony Blair and his government²⁶⁵.

Thatcher's election came after a high turnover of Prime Ministers; in fact, she was the ninth PM to be in charge since the end of World War II. This political instability was due to the fact that Britain was overcoming a deep economic crisis against which the government seemed to be impotent while national prestige was quickly declining. From the 1972 miners' strike to the International Monetary Fund loan of 1976, through the 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978-79, the decade was clearly characterised by chaos and social disorder. In dealing with this situation Thatcher adopted a political strategy aimed at recovering and reasserting authority. According to Leonard Quart, in fact, she aspired to "a much different social and political world than the one promoted in the fifties by the centrist consensual politics of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan"²⁶⁶.

Thatcher detected the main reason for Britain's economic downfall in the welfare state and sought to put an end to it by magnifying the virtues of the self-sufficient individual and foregrounding the return to a Victorian economic system. This system was grounded on the principle of *laissez-faire*, and Thatcher's administration intended to revive it, boasting that this was the way to make Britain great once again. Freedom was made equivalent to the free market, individualism was put at the centre of political ideology and collectivism relegated to the fringes of British society. Thatcher's administration encouraged the citizens to become active promoters of their own well-being and to enlarge their property and goods in order to strengthen the national economy. The government was not willing to intervene in the creation of economic equality or wealth redistribution. The

265 Hanif Kureishi, "Reaping the harvest of our self-disgust," *The Guardian*, 30 September 2006.

266 Leonard Quart, "The Religion of the Market: Thatcherite Politics and the British Film of the 1980s" in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, Lester Friedman ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 16-17.

idea of a caring society got totally lost under this new political drive and Britain's whole fabric underwent the effects of its system of values²⁶⁷.

Thatcherite political rhetoric was founded on the opposition of antithetical signifiers of desirable or deplorable situations: individual freedom versus state intervention, monetarism versus communism, strength versus weakness, 'us' versus 'them'. The Prime Minister's efforts against socialism as the progenitor of weakness were so great that, according to Howard Gardner, the term 'Thatcherism' "was coined and recognised, within Britain, to denote the conviction that socialism had failed and that Britain had to relinquish governmental interference in favour of privatization and individual initiative"²⁶⁸. The welfare state was mocked as the 'Nanny State', and it was declared "complicit in a more general erosion of individual responsibility and self-discipline, underwriting not just idleness but also immoral and even unlawful behaviour"²⁶⁹. Deftly equated to communism in Conservative discourse, socialism and its struggle towards an equal society were neutralised and the welfare state was quickly dismantled.

The aim of Thatcherism, according to Stuart Hall, "was to reconstruct social life as a whole around a return to the old values – the philosophies of tradition, Englishness, respectability, patriarchalism, family, and the nation"²⁷⁰. Although in her rhetoric Thatcher included the idea of a British community, this was defined in exclusionary rather than inclusionary terms. The British community in Thatcher's view was constituted by those already wealthy white Britons willing to aggressively chase financial improvement through enterprise. Hard-working citizens wanting to contribute to the Nation's economic readjustment were welcomed by Thatcherite ideology as true Britons. As Michael Bidiss claims, the Iron Lady presented herself as "the champion of those keenest to exercise personal responsibility, to exhibit self-reliance and initiative, to maintain the traditional

267 However, Hall suggested that a much wider global hegemony, of social, economic, political and cultural changes was settling into Western capitalist societies and Thatcherism was merely a manifestation of this phenomenon. See Stuart Hall, "The Meaning of New Times" in *New Times*, Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques eds. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), 116-133.

268 Howard Gardner, "Margaret Thatcher: A Clear Sense of Identity" in *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 230.

269 Chris Pierson, "Social Policy under Thatcher and Major" in *Contemporary British Conservatism*, Steve Ludlam and Martin J. Smith eds. (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 215.

270 Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 39.

structure and role of the family, and to recognise the demands of duty as well as the allure of entitlements²⁷¹. Those traditionally marginalised on grounds of gender, race, or sexual orientation, and those who relied on the welfare state were perceived as disturbing elements to be kept away and dismissed because, in the Prime Minister's view, they were largely responsible for Britain's economic decline. Thatcher's clear identification of the national identity in terms of whiteness, maleness, and imperialism categorised women, homosexuals, socialists, immigrants, and trade unionists, as the 'enemies within'.

Thatcher managed to present former political efforts against poverty as the reason for Britain's on-going financial crisis, and many British citizens ended up perceiving disadvantaged groups as burdens rather than human beings in need of support. The New Right presented indigence as a fact of life and the intervention to mitigate it as an imposition of socialist criteria of redistribution on the other social groups. Leaving low-income people in poverty, according to Thatcher, would encourage and invigorate their resolve to change their economic position. Stuart Hall observes that certain ranges of the population have always been poor but in Thatcher's Britain, "it is 'right and proper' that they should be poor, because, otherwise, how are they to toughen their moral fibres, acquire self-sufficiency, stop leaning on the welfare state, get on their bikes and off Tebbit's unemployment list, 'put Britain back to work' or 'start up a small business'?"²⁷². In this situation, Britons saw the pursuit of self-interest in order not to be cut out by the government's exclusionary drive as the only option left open to them. As Hall and Jacques put it: "the road to salvation [lay] through people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps"²⁷³.

Thatcher's authoritarian methods were addressed both towards the state and towards her own cabinet members. According to Leonard Quart, in fact, she operated as "an ideological, autocratic politician who polarized opponents and tolerated no dissent from her cabinet colleagues, invoking both hostility and devotion from members of her own party, rather than seeking to mute conflict and create a political consensus"²⁷⁴.

271 Michael Bidiss, "Thatcherism: Concept and Interpretations" in *Thatcherism: Personality and Politics*, Michael Biddiss and Kenneth R. Minogue eds. (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), 2.

272 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1998), 78.

273 Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, "People Aid: A New Politics Sweeps the Land," in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, 251.

274 Leonard Quart, "The Religion of the Market," 17.

Although the Iron Lady is often thought to have contributed to Britain's economic recovery in the mid-1980s, there actually was only one group who undoubtedly profited from her administrations' tax reforms: the very rich. This asset was totally oppositional to the redistributive politics which had characterised previous post-war governments and led to wider inequality during the 1980s and, in order to foreground the image of a much more positive social and economic situation, the government's functionaries expunged several jobless citizens from the unemployment rolls. These people were just erased and forgotten or ignored. Thatcherism acted as a sort of social Darwinism that promoted the avaricious search for personal profit as a moral virtue. Nonetheless, the government's efforts to hide from the rest of the population the hardships overcome by marginalised unemployed people did not completely work. Robert Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury instituted a research commission to investigate the living conditions of British urbanites. The 1985 final report they produced exposed a conspicuous state of crisis in the inner cities and spotted the main responsibility in Ms Thatcher's politics and ideologies. The wild promotion of individualism had led to the disruption of community and the death of the idea of collectivism and mutual support. Thatcher replied to the accusations claiming that the reason for the current socio-economic conditions in the inner cities was that families were not doing their fair share. However, after Thatcher's individualist ethos began affecting every field of society, community and family support seemed to have become outdated concepts in respect to "the self-reliant individual"²⁷⁵.

Thatcher's administration is also notorious for having revived imperialist and jingoistic feelings, especially after the victory in the Falkland Islands in 1982. The main reason for revivifying the idea of 'Englishness' in racist and exclusionary terms was to resurrect the glorious image of the British Empire. Paul Gilroy dedicates two chapters of his book, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, to a discourse analysis of the racial category 'black' under the 'new racism' paradigm and provides numerous examples of Powell and Thatcher's political rhetoric²⁷⁶. Salman Rushdie follows a similar line of argument when he links riots and manifestations of racism in Britain to the politicians' patriotic rhetoric, and writes that "there can be little doubt that in Britain [...] the refurbishment of the Empire's tarnished image is under way. The continuing decline, the

275 Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, 144.

276 See Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Routledge, 1987), 43-114.

growing poverty and the meanness of spirit of much of Thatcherite Britain encourages many Britons to turn their eyes nostalgically to the lost hour of their precedence"²⁷⁷. Zygmunt Bauman shows how important it was in nationalism to eliminate all other loyalties and divisions that would be in the way for the newly created national ones. Within the nation-state, cultural practices that did not conform to the norm were perceived as potentially subversive and as a failure of the order-building of the nation-state. The rise of nationalism led not only to a new intolerance, but also to a new perception of difference. According to Bauman, certain cultural traits became hegemonic and the right to define these traits was "monopolised"²⁷⁸.

As a reaction, minority subjects turned towards their ethnic communities to find protection from discriminatory behaviour and form a common bond against racial abuse. While on the one hand marginalised groups managed to create a network of mutual support, on the other hand as small circumscribed entities they reinforced their image of alien monoliths in the white British view, and they were easily controllable by the state. Additionally, the individual role of all members within the community was to concentrate their concerns towards the group and consequently to renounce their personal dispositions and goals.

During Ms Thatcher's long administration, a number of literary and cinematographic works focusing on class struggle and representing the devastating effects of extreme individualism on society animated and flavoured the cultural scene. As Kureishi declared:

The myriad tensions of life under Thatcher were irresistible to writers and film-makers. Here was the challenge of a Conservatism that had, at last, admitted to being an ideology. Here were ideas – at a time when the Left had none. [...] These were popular films wishing to reach a wide audience hungry for debate about the new age of money and what it meant²⁷⁹.

These novels and films depicted Britain as a nation whose social network had already deflated, and individuals were left to take care of themselves. Malcolm Bradbury claims that many of the writers of the age of Thatcherism and social discommunity saw it

²⁷⁷ Salman Rushdie, "Outside the Whale" in *Imaginary Homelands*, 91-2.

²⁷⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, "Modernity and Ambivalence" in *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (1990), 158.

²⁷⁹ Kureishi "The Alchemy of Happiness" in *London Kills Me*, 270-1.

as “a time of [...] decay, human neglect and lost wholeness”²⁸⁰. Dysfunctional families became a popular subject to the cultural products of this era. Divorce, family break-up and upheaval, showed that the family unit was disintegrating more quickly and frequently than ever before. Individualism had affected even the most traditional type of community and its capacity to offer assistance and support to its members. On the one hand the individual subjects lost reliance both from the social apparatus and from other individuals around them having to look outside of their families to develop communities of support; on the other hand familial communities could retreat so narrowly from society in their struggle for self-protection that their members’ individuality was sacrificed in favour of identification with the suffocating whole nucleus. According to Mark Poster, in this situation the family became “a private micro-world, a sanctum into whose hallowed chambers no outsider had a right of entry”²⁸¹. While Kureishi wrote that there was a refusal “to admit to humanity beyond the family, beyond the household walls and garden fence. Each family as an autonomous, self-sufficient unit face[d] a hostile world of other self-contained families”²⁸². As a result, this kind of community is doomed to failure because its members feel the need to flee restrictive boundaries in order to develop their own sense of self.

Iris M. Young holds that, although in opposing ways, individualism and community both function as mediums for the creation of homogeneity: “liberal individualism denies difference by positing the self as a self-sufficient unity, not defined by or in need of anything or anyone other than itself. [...] Community, on the other hand, denies difference by positing fusion rather than separation as the social ideal”²⁸³. Furthermore, those individuals unable to survive without support will either be in pain or give in to the demands of community.

Different types of family structures are presented in Kureishi’s novel; conventional marriages, arranged marriages, common-law marriages, and uninhibited communal lifestyles. Kureishi’s traditional families are always about to break down, if they have not already done so, personal loyalties having been discovered to be at odds

280 Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Penguin, 1994), 401.

281 Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (New York: Continuum, 1988), 170.

282 Kureishi, “Some Time with Stephen,” 181.

283 Iris M. Young, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda J. Nicholson ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 307.

with self-interest. Several forms of individualism against the traditional family and other homogenising groups, in fact, become central to the stories, especially in his early writings. The author privileges young protagonists who on the one hand struggle to set themselves in the world as free and independent individuals, and on the other hand assume a self-centred conduct as a life principle. Karim, Shahid, Jay, Gabriel, Adam and Jamal at an early stage of their life journey alienate themselves from their family of origin; the mature protagonists among these also detach themselves from the family they form later. Unhappy in their relationship with their partners, immature for family responsibilities or eager for sensual freedom, they betray or abandon the familiar nest and experience painful forms of mid-life crisis.

An important shift in Kureishi's work is marked when his main characters become fatherly figures themselves. After the disorientation and darkness of *Intimacy*, his fiction develops towards the fading of his initial faith in a purely hedonistic existence. In the most recent fiction, in fact, the nuclear family is given a hope to reconstruct itself from a different perspective after having disintegrated, and if this doesn't happen, as in *The Body*, the abandonment of the domestic sphere is highly regretted. However, adjustments need to be made to the traditional family in order to transform it into a functional and liberal kind of community through mutual tolerance and understanding.

In the reconstructed families the balance is exactly the same that keeps together the alternative communities which Kureishi sympathises with. Often not based on blood ties, these social groups manage to provide a sense of belonging, support and compassion in a world that no longer offers them these undeniable needs. Penelope Fitzgerald's novel *Offshore* (1979) anticipates the representation of this kind of 'post-community' that can emerge from the thrust towards individualism and the subsequent disintegration or degeneration of traditional families. Both Fitzgerald and Kureishi, and later also Mike Leigh with *High Hopes* (1988) and Nick Hornby with *About a Boy* (1998), depict examples of alternative communities constituted by very different types of individuals in terms of social class, political beliefs and ethnic origins.

Kureishi's communities differentiate themselves from homogenising communities because they do not tend to suppress personal identities and differences but they embody a kind of social organisation that reconciles the dichotomy between individualism and

collectivity, allowing both to exist simultaneously through the toleration and enjoyment of diversity of opinions, feelings, ideas or backgrounds. Kureishi's works are milestones in this sense. They often feature the communal co-existence of the most disparate subjects who group together and negotiate harmonious lifestyles. By describing with sensitiveness of touch and clear sympathy alternative communities which gather together people from different ethnic, class, gender and sexual ranks, Kureishi offers a subversive model of domesticity oppositional to Thatcherite Darwinism, traditional Asian patriarchalism, and suburban rigid codes. These alternative communes, which Sandhu calls an "attack on the cult of home,"²⁸⁴ often have some basis in hippie lifestyles like squats and communes of the 1960s which set the example for a new, caring society where human relationships are based on love, respect and friendship.

3.2 Domesticity and Stagnation: Leaving the Suburban Family

*At worst, one is in motion; and at best
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
One is always nearer by not keeping still.*
(Thom Gunn, *On the Move*)

Usually in every family break up represented by Kureishi, the women are left in the house, whereas the men move out. This holds for Margaret, Susan, Christine, Margot, Josephine and the mother of Jamal. The traditional household appears to be a female domain; in fact, while fathers and teenage sons are represented as 'stuck' in the domestic sphere, the mothers simply 'are' the domestic sphere. This feature can be explained through the psychoanalytic theory that identification with a particular place may be perceived as a mirroring between the subject and the environment; according to Christian Metz, in fact, the subject can be both screen and projector for in moments of identification we see ourselves in objects with which we have become familiar²⁸⁵. Metz has charted a

284 Sukhdev Sandu, "Paradise Syndrome," in *London Review of Books* 22.10 (18 May 2000), 33.

285 See Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Celia Britton trans. (London: MacMillan, 1982), 48. For more on recognition and identification through mirroring see also Lacan's theory of the mirror-

series of mirrorings that occur within the cinema that set up the basis of identification. These mirrorings depend upon the nature of vision itself. Vision functions with a double movement, being both projective and introjective. As one casts one's eye projectively, one receives and absorbs introjectively what has been illuminated. What happens then in the process of viewing is a series of mirror-effects. Multiple series of specular identifications take place in viewing a film, identifications that are connected with the mirror as the original site of primary recognition. At the same time we have introjected them into ourselves. The mother in Kureishi's novels, who is always depicted inside her house and very rarely walks through suburbia, mirrors these spaces of pettiness and restrictiveness and comes to embody them.

In *The Buddha of Suburbia* Margaret's physical appearance reflects the ordinariness of her house. Karim describes her as "a plump and unphysical woman with a pale round face and kind brown eyes"²⁸⁶. When Margaret makes her first appearance she's wearing an apron and she keeps wiping her hands "on a tea towel, a souvenir from Woburn Abbey"²⁸⁷. Margaret's gesture symbolises her work in the kitchen which is her usual dwelling space, her lower-middle class aesthetic taste for shoddy objects, and her suburban origin. Margaret rarely goes out, she has no social connections besides her antipathetic sister Jean who speaks on her behalf on several occasions, and she fears being gossiped about by her neighbours. She has locked herself into a self-made cage without distractions other than television and food, yet she occasionally draws and seems to be talented, but she always hides her drawings, probably fearing that her feelings could be exposed. Her lack of enjoyment and liveliness is also symbolised by the fact that she always hides her body which she regards as "an inconvenient object surrounding her, as if she were stranded on an unexplored desert island,"²⁸⁸ this way suggesting refusal of sexuality and intimacy.

From the beginning Margaret appears to be strikingly different from her husband Haroon. While she is shy and modest, he is good humoured and enthusiastic; as Karim observes "Mum's ambition was to be unnoticed, to be like everyone else, whereas Dad

stage: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

286 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 4.

287 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 4.

288 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 4.

liked to stand out like a juggler at a funeral”²⁸⁹. The image of the funeral is quite fitting in the Amir family where Karim laments “things were so gloomy, so slow and heavy”²⁹⁰. Stillness and monotony, in Kureishi’s novels are always associated with death, while motion and change symbolise life.

Margaret is not only sweet and timid; indeed, as a frustrated person, she can also become aggressive and nervous creating tension and discomfort among all the family members. Karim’s mother belongs to a generation where divorce was not an option and women were conceived as either occupying the ‘proper’ space of the house, or the ‘improper’ one of the street. Margaret conforms to the role expected from her but she feels that her husband and two sons are “three selfish men,” whom she even calls “torturers”²⁹¹. In the end her moral rigidity and tendency to self-pitying make both her elder son and husband leave the house. Perhaps the most charming image of Karim’s anxiety to escape the dullness and immobility of life back home is that of the boy cycling into South London,

nipping through traffic, sometimes mounting the pavement, up one-way streets, braking suddenly, accelerating by standing up on the pedals, exhilarated by thought and motion²⁹².

After moving in with Haroon and Eva, Karim sometimes visits Margaret who has fallen into depression after being abandoned, but his deep desire to enjoy freedom and carelessness makes him feel uncomfortable in her presence:

I was reluctant to kiss my mother, afraid that somehow her weakness and unhappiness would infect me. Naturally I didn’t think for a minute that my life and spirit could stimulate her. We sat for a while, saying little [...]. Her mind had turned to glass, and all life slid from its sheer aspect²⁹³.

Karim has learned from his father, since his first guru performance, that ambition and self-satisfaction might involve deception towards those to whom we are bound from previous ties and limit our freedom. As he declares, in fact, the night he sees the still

289 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 42.

290 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 3.

291 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 20.

292 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 63.

293 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 104.

married Haroon having sex with Eva signals his “introduction to serious betrayal, lying, deceit and heart-following”²⁹⁴. Nevertheless, for Karim the break up of his parents is painful; in fact, after the split, he confesses to his brother Allie: “everything went crazy. I didn’t know where I was”²⁹⁵. Karim has to adapt to a new home and environment, and has to interact within new social communities, but his initial sense of disorientation is soon transformed into opportunity for transformation. He doesn’t want to share Margaret’s passive attitude which “pinned her to the shadow-corners of the world”²⁹⁶ since for him the place to be, to get on and make it, is not the margins but the centre, “the city, London, where life was bottomless in its temptations”²⁹⁷.

Movement away from home has a distinct semantic connotation of moral and ethical transformation and is a necessary step towards self-development. On the move, away from the domestic sphere Karim finds his way in society. While in the suburb, he has no career aspirations and is so frustrated by the abuses he bears in school that he decides to retire and hang out waiting for something to happen, but once he begins his acting job and ventures into the polished cultural life of London his social ascent becomes unstoppable. Through an imaginary map of socio-spatial co-ordinates Karim progressively ‘takes possession’ of the city. The horizontal and circular trajectories through which he moves in the inner city cross the vertical axis of upward social mobility. He settles in West Kensington, “an area in between where people stayed before moving up,”²⁹⁸ and through Hammersmith and Earl’s Court he reaches the upper class areas of London’s privileged intelligentsia.

Michel de Certeau’s theory of territorialisation through spatial tactics claims that through habitual processes of movement, by covering and recovering the same paths and routes, we come to familiarise ourselves with a territory, and thereby find meaning in that territory²⁹⁹. This is exactly what Karim does. He enjoys “invigorating walking rhythm[s]”³⁰⁰ across the river Thames, he cycles “like a maniac,”³⁰¹ and “loaf[s] around”³⁰²

294 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 253.

295 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 269.

296 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 169.

297 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 8.

298 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 127.

299 See de Certeau, “Walking the City,” 102-112.

300 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 233.

301 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 185.

302 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 241.

desolated Brixton, sometimes he gets lost, but keeps negotiating spaces, positions and standpoints to achieve a both/and rather than an either/or location:

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 connected, and eventually to walk through all of them³⁰³.

To Karim, London becomes his home and just as Margaret embodies the suburb and its structure of feeling, Karim comes to embody the metropolis and its semantic space:

The city blew the windows of my brain wide open. But being in a place so bright, fast and brilliant made you vertiginous with possibility³⁰⁴.

The imagery suggests an analogy between the self and the city as home. The window, as the divide between the internal and the external space, and as a virtual passage that leaves his mind free to look beyond, signifies his opening up to the city and his final overcoming of Lotman's frontier which had sealed his passing from one spatial dimension to the other³⁰⁵.

Karim meets a lot of people in London but he remains disappointed by most of them and recognises that it is only with Jamila and Changez that he feels to be part of a family. As he observes, the three of them are "bound together by ties stronger than personality, and stronger than the disliking or liking of each other"³⁰⁶. Jamila is the British born daughter of Karim's uncle Anwar and aunt Jeeta. Through her character Kureishi brilliantly describes generational conflicts, and the tension between India's patriarchal family obligations and Western individualism. Jamila is a politically conscious, cultured, and strong-willed young woman, but she has to submit to her father's imposition to marry an Indian man she has never met before, Changez. At the beginning independent Jamila

303 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 126.

304 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 126.

305 According to Lotman the literary work is structured on binary semantic oppositions. The frontier represents the overcoming of the limit and consequently the hero's passage from the internal to the external spatial dimension or the opposite. See Lotman and Uspenskij, "Sul meccanismo semiotico della cultura"; see also Lotman, *La struttura del testo poetico*.

306 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 214.

resolutely refuses to be wedded, but eventually Anwar finds the way to make her give up her resistance by going on a hunger strike.

Changez is a caricature figure, fat, ugly, clumsy and lazy, and his marriage to Jamila is never consummated. Nevertheless Anwar's coercive familial imposition leads the way for Jamila to abandon the oppressive family of origins and join a totally different kind of community. Jamila takes up residence in a commune and Changez follows her even if she makes it clear that she will never touch him. She has a baby by white Simon, another member of the commune, and a lesbian affair with another woman when Simon is not around. Changez, who has started a relationship with Shinko, a Japanese prostitute, lives up to the symbolic overtones of his name by happily assuming the role of the affectionate baby's nursemaid. Shinko becomes close friends with Jamila and she will eventually be integrated also into Karim's extended family. This almost farcical new domesticity seems to work, even if Changez is frustrated by Jamila's total unwillingness to have sexual contacts with him. Lazy and apolitical as he is, Changez is also a bit annoyed by the frequency of the meetings he has to attend but confesses to Karim his sense of liberation in living in the commune where there is the loving atmosphere of a family but "without the nagging aunties"³⁰⁷. This alternative community gives a voice to those who would be denied it in the 'aunties' history', and a sense of belonging to those who can fit neither into a wildly individualist environment nor into suburban restrictiveness.

This multicultural, multi-class, multi-gender and multi-sexual extended family represents a different model for Karim in his transition to adulthood and helps him understand from a different perspective both prior and present affiliations. Even if the disruption of emotional ties can be brutally painful and the traditional family falls apart, the protagonist learns that from the break-up of old ties, new ones can develop if people open themselves up to the fluctuating changeability of life. Margaret finally overcomes her depression; she loses weight, she changes style, she renews her house and she acquires a new boyfriend. The final scene sees a big joyous reunion where almost all the characters are present and two important announcements are made: Eva and Haroon will be getting married and Ms Thatcher is about to start her first administration.

Both Jamila's commune and Karim's new extended family represent the

³⁰⁷ Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 222.

possibility for people from different backgrounds and with different aspirations to live harmoniously together, and challenge homogenising authoritarian policies and traditions. Karim finally feels relieved and hopeful for the future:

And so I sat in the centre of this old city that I loved, which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn't always be that way³⁰⁸.

The kind of communities Shahid finds himself to be part of in *The Black Album* are of a wholly different kind. Kureishi's second novel, in fact, clearly illustrates the ways in which social groups can oppress and turn against the individuals that constitute them.

Shahid's family is wealthy but their skin colour inevitably demotes them to the rank of second-class citizens, corroborating Rushdie's statement that "Britain is [...] two entirely different worlds, and the one you inhabit is determined by the colour of your skin"³⁰⁹. Shahid is so wounded and frustrated by the racial abuses he bears in white suburbia that for a certain period he almost loses his mind and starts to violently deny his Pakistani heritage. He fantasises about becoming himself a racist in order to ease his rage and locate himself on the side of the powerful instead of the powerless. He wishes he could join the British National Party, which reveals his underlying feelings of self-loathing, and plans to go around "abusing Pakis, niggers, Chinks, Irish, any foreign scum"³¹⁰. The confused teenager is in reality a sensitive believer in social equality but he literally does not feel home anywhere, and the family environment is no exception. The strict demands and high expectations Shahid's Thatcherite family has for him, in fact, make him feel anxious and out of place.

The Hasans are active participants in Britain's late 1980s enterprise culture, even if social integration for them has not yet come. Shahid's family expects him to follow in their footsteps and run and expand their travel agencies, making money and collecting goods. Ambitious Zulma, Chili's wife and Shahid's sister-in-law, is convinced that the family's good standing will in the end earn all of them social recognition in Britain and the

308 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 284.

309 Salman Rushdie "The New Empire within Britain" in *Imaginary Homelands*, 134.

310 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 19.

same privileges they have always benefited from in Karachi. Shahid does not share his family's desire to accumulate property and wealth, and for this reason they accuse him of being lazy, useless, weak, in other words a failure. Zulma is the harsher one towards Shahid and his socialist beliefs; like Chili she is "an arch-Thatcherite"³¹¹ and a strong supporter of rampant individualism:

Zulma could reduce him to near-tears of frustration if he talked about fairness or equality or opportunity, or the need to reduce unemployment. She'd laugh; the world couldn't be like that. What was needed was the opposite – enterprising people (like her and Chili, presumably) – who weren't afraid to crush others to get what they wanted"³¹².

Shahid tries to shatter Zulma's unrealistic hopes regarding her position in British society, and underlines how Thatcherism is a racist ideology and how foolish it is of her to believe that their skin colour would be rendered irrelevant by their wealth:

She might imagine she was an intelligent, upper-class woman, but to them she'd always be a Paki and liable to be patronized. She appreciated the truth of this, but it was a colonial residue – the new money knew no color"³¹³.

Zulma's pressure on the boy to enter the family business becomes imperative after the death of Shahid's father and renders his need to leave his oppressive and homogenising familial community even more compelling. Shahid moves to London in order to go to University, to search for a sense of belonging and, as the narrator underscores, "to distance himself from the family"³¹⁴. However, his first impression of the metropolis is quite disheartening. Before leaving Sevenoaks, Shahid dreamt about the roughness and multicultural texture of the metropolis, and his brother Chili lent him films such as *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* to train him on what to expect. Thus, what Shahid wasn't ready to face was the "mundane poverty"³¹⁵ of the capital and the devastating impact of Thatcherism on the lowest ranks of the population:

311 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 87.

312 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 87.

313 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 87.

314 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 7.

315 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 3.

On his first day he had seen a poor woman, wearing only plastic sandals on her feet, drag three children across the street and, there on the other side, remove her shoes and beat them across the arms. He wondered, too, whether a nearby asylum had been recently closed down, since day and night on the High Road, dozens of exhibitionists, gabblers and maniacs yelled into the air. [...] Derelict young men – Shahid had at first presumed they were students – clutched beer cans like hand grenades; later, he'd see them crashed out in doorways, with fluids seeping from them, as if they'd been pissed on by dogs³¹⁶.

Even when he wanders around the busy and young-populated areas of Covent Garden and Leicester Square Shahid doesn't feel comfortable. His rootlessness and sense of not belonging to any place or community dispirit and sadden him. As the narrator says: "He had never felt more invisible; somehow this wasn't the real London"³¹⁷. Shahid is particularly vulnerable when he first meets Riaz and his followers. His isolation is painful, and Riaz's kind consideration and friendly behaviour make him feel significant for the first time:

Riaz spoke to him as if it had been some time since he liked someone so much or understood anyone so well. [...] Shahid, who had barely received or been able to give an amicable smile in the weeks since he'd started college, was warming³¹⁸.

Nevertheless, the interest Riaz has in Shahid resides exclusively in the boy's ethnicity and in the possibility to play on his sense of displacement in racist Britain in order to include him and homogenise him into the Muslim brotherhood. Religious unity, in fact, has become the solution to all its members' identity issues, confirming Marina Kurtén's remark that "one feature of the former homeland that is used to reinforce identity is religion"³¹⁹. Claiming to be "originally"³²⁰ from Lahore, even if his accent betrays a Northern English birth and upbringing, Riaz addresses Shahid with the epithet 'fellow countryman' on the basis of his physical features, this way excluding *a priori* the possibility of a self-identification in non-essentialist terms. In Riaz's opinion, Shahid's identity is an either/or proposition. Either he embraces his Pakistani self and rejects all

316 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 3.

317 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 5.

318 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 2.

319 Marina Kurtén, "Negotiating Identities: Expressions of 'Culture' in British Migrant Literature," *Atlantic Literary Review* 3.2 (April-June 2002), 48.

320 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 6.

connections with his 'Englishness', or he loses himself and becomes a "dissipater"³²¹ assimilating Western costumes and betraying 'his people'. At first Shahid doesn't quite understand the radical drive the brotherhood and their leader follow, and he willingly joins their activity of assisting racially abused immigrants. Within the group he finally ceases to feel indistinct, marginalised and misunderstood, and he gets so attached to his new companions that he becomes closer to them than to his own family. One night Shahid, after taking drugs with Deedee, even has his life saved by Riaz who prevents him from choking on his own vomit. The community becomes an alternative to the self-serving culture of Thatcherism that Chili and Zulma represent, and provides their members with mutual care. Riaz and the group seem to believe in a humanistic approach. The duty of the believers has to be towards one another rather than to themselves, and if the community members forsake other Asian people's needs, then it means they have "absorbed the Western morals, which are totally individualistic"³²².

However, after a while Shahid recognises the disadvantages of being part of such a community which insists on every member's conforming to the same thought patterns, obeying strict rules of abstinence and prayer, and privileging unity over difference. The brotherhood's members are always told what to do, and their personal life is highly interfered with. Chad's manipulated account of the story of a young British-born Muslim woman who turns away from her family and religion and eventually dies is supposed to function as a didascalical moral example for Shahid, whose loyalties are always questioned:

One of our girls was twisted against the truth by the postmodernists. They made her flee her loving parents, who contacted brother Riaz and myself. She had been taken into hiding. These poor people were distraught. The young girl was forced to say the religion treats women as second-class citizens. Riaz personally took up their case. The girl went into a hostel and agreed to meet her parents for discussions³²³.

Chad suggests Deedee Osgood played an important role in brainwashing the young woman by pushing her to reject an idyllic life with caring parents who educated her on sober religious principles. He initially states that the girl was murdered but, under Shahid's pressure for details, he admits that she killed herself. Holding on to the purity of

321 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 7.

322 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 183.

323 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 220.

religious principles is the way towards salvation and happiness according to Chad; in fact, if one is confused about his/her identity and belonging, he/she is condemned to fall: "That is what happens when somebody doesn't know who they are,"³²⁴ he concludes.

As sociologist Jeffrey Weeks observes, groups and communities become "potentially undemocratic, as fundamentalists of whatever flavour do, when they begin to proclaim the universal truth of their particular experiences. The freedom to live your own life in the way you choose must imply an acceptance of other ways of life"³²⁵. Shahid believes in respecting other people's systems of values or creeds, and most of all, he believes in freedom of thought, argumentative discussion and negotiation of all positions as necessary agencies towards the making of a more tolerant society. One day Shahid finally expresses in front of the group his honest opinion about the right of writers and storytellers to freely express their thoughts and play with serious issues, creating a voice of dissent: "'A free imagination', Shahid said, 'ranges over many natures. A free imagination, looking into itself, illuminates others'"³²⁶. A discussion follows between Shahid and Riaz where the latter harshly asserts, in fascist-like tones, the necessity of privileging the group and shutting out any disturbing or provocative stance: "[...] these corrupt, disrespectful natures must be caged as they were dangerous carnivores"³²⁷.

Although Riaz insists that he is a champion of his people, in foregrounding the monolithic nature of the community and the inflexibility of its rules, he ultimately disrespects and disempowers the individuals that constitute the brotherhood. As James F. English states, it is "by controlling and policing [the] line of racial difference that the nation sustains the myth of its own (horizontal) community,"³²⁸ and Riaz's insistence on separation from 'impure' Westernised people inevitably leads to self-segregation and plays in favour of the government's control and exclusion of minority groups. Furthermore, by preaching purification Riaz endorses the National Front's violent attitude which he claims to fight, and fosters racial discrimination going both ways. Shahid finally realises that Riaz's promotion of an absolute truth that regulates people's lives is what makes him

324 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 220.

325 Jeffrey Weeks, "The Value of Difference" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 98.

326 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 183.

327 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 183.

328 James F. English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 219.

powerful among the others; therefore, in the protagonist's opinion, the brotherhood's leader becomes an almost pathetic figure who empowers himself by disempowering others and has confined the meaning of his existence within a self-repressive and dictatorial system.

Weeks observes that behind the search for identity distinct and clashing values lie: "By saying who we are, we are also striving to express what we are, what we believe and what we desire. The problem is that these beliefs, needs and desires are often patently in conflict, not only between different communities, but within individuals themselves"³²⁹. After Shahid learns not to fear his internal coalescence of different identities but to look at it through positive eyes, even London appears different. If Kilburn at the beginning of the novel was "an area of thieves, hundred carat cunts and ruthless detritus,"³³⁰ later it turns into "his manor"³³¹. As in *The Buddha*, the young protagonist sees himself reflected in London and identifies with this image; in fact the disorienting and alienating potential of the metropolis mirrors Shahid's internal turmoil, but if chaos is accepted as a lifestyle it can be turned into creative and vital energy.

Once Shahid has fled the climate of violence and darkness that the fundamentalists have engendered, the novel ends on a positive note with an open finale. The author's stylistic choice to end the story with a train journey symbolises the protagonist's desire to embrace the future and move forward. As a love ode to the power of imagination and storytelling *The Black Album* is more focused on the need for the writer to follow his artistic path and investigate the nature of human experience rather than to find a stable place in society. In his life journey he finds loving figures and fellow-companions such as Deedee, but Shahid remains a figure in movement. Rejecting oppressive communities and selfish individualism he asserts the fluidity and provisionality of identity. His role as a writer, as an observer of society, and as a detective of human relations, sorrows, and desires must be to describe and celebrate difference as a valuable asset. For Shahid books stimulate thinking, therefore they have the potential to participate in changing Britain's fractured landscape and promote mutual comprehension among different people and communities.

³²⁹ Weeks, "The Value of Difference," 89.

³³⁰ Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 17.

³³¹ Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 193.

3.3 Domesticity and Stagnation: Leaving the Metropolitan Family

People speak of the violence of separation, but what of the delight?

(Hanif Kureishi, *Midnight All Day*, 48)

Although the middle-aged characters of Kureishi's second and third phase novels have all settled in the city, the dull, unexciting atmosphere of their suburban childhood is recreated by the bourgeois domesticity of the families they have formed there. Jay, Rex, Adam and Jamal all belong to a generation that experimented the freedom and excesses of the '60 and '70s and, contrary to the generation of their suburban parents to whom divorce was not an option, they leave their wives and children for different reasons setting new movement in their lives. From the 1950s characterised by a certain prudery and respectability through the almost delirious lack of inhibition of the '80s, '90s and 2000s, Britain has been going through a series of quick changes in terms of ethical behaviour that have proved to be confusing and disorienting for those who have enjoyed forms of over-indulgence to the fullest. In Kureishi's last four novels the protagonists no longer need to move from the periphery to the centre as they have already established a personal space in London, but rather the excesses of their malaise force them to turn inward to perform a personal voyage towards self. What Malik says about Jay can be applied to all three characters from the other novels as they all belong to "a lost generation of men: those shaped by the Sixties, disoriented by the Eighties and bereft of a personal and political map in the Nineties"³³². As Jay claims: "I am of a generation who believes in the necessity of satisfying oneself,"³³³ and this attitude determines a lack of commitment towards the family which is perceived as a coercive and restrictive community one is chained to. Because of this, an inner search is necessary.

The frustration and immobility of the suburban parents still stand as an awful warning to their now middle-aged children; their conformity and self-denial, in fact, make them appear "loyal and faithful to one another. Disloyal and unfaithful to themselves"³³⁴. Kureishian wives or longtime female partners very often are associated with the male

332 Kenan Malik, "Review of Intimacy": <http://www.kenanmalik.com/reviews/kureishi.html>.

333 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 79.

334 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 44.

characters' mother figures and convey an image of repressiveness and lack of sexual enjoyment. Duty to family becomes incompatible with individual freedom and desires and Kureishi depicts this aspect both as a selfish and a necessary assertion of autonomy.

Susan is right when she thinks that this is the age of self-indulgence and self-centredness:

She talks of a Thatcherism of the soul that imagines that people are not dependent on one another. In love, these days, it is a free market; browse and buy, pick and choose, rent and reject, as you like. [...] Susan would say that we require other social forms. What are they? Probably the unpleasant ones: duty, sacrifice, obligation to others, self-discipline³³⁵.

These social forms that Jay calls unpleasant and that all Kureishi's middle-aged characters seem to have problems in maintaining, are exactly those that Zygmunt Bauman indicates as the means to achieve happiness. According to Bauman, in fact, in contemporary individualistic and consumerist Western society we have started to perceive happiness as something to be perpetually pursued, a changing station on an endless journey rather than a condition to be carefully raised and cultivated. We are so used to obtaining instant pleasures and passive entertainment that undertaking sacrifices in relationships seems to be a hazardous investment which gives no guarantee of success. For Bauman we have rendered our lives so self-centred that we hardly recognise the obligation to live for something different from ourselves³³⁶. Through his characters Kureishi stages the difficulties to hold on to our bonds in the age of global capital when everything seems to be available and everything seems to be subject to turn into consumer goods, even relationships.

Among all the novels, *Intimacy* is certainly the one where family is represented at its worst, an intolerable suffocating kind of community where Jay has resisted for years but from which in the end he needs to escape. Jay observes: "I can think of few more selfish institutions than the family"³³⁷. Family is selfish because it is homogenising; according to Jay, in fact, it is a repository of remissive citizens that disseminates and haunts people with an "Arcadian fantasy that there will be a time when everyone will

335 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 68-9.

336 Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

337 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 101.

finally agree”³³⁸. Familial domesticity is sustained by the bourgeois idea of happiness achieved through the accumulation of middle class certainties and material goods. Marriage is a conventional social arrangement that leaves rapture and intensity aside; it is a living together not with intense passion but with restrained respectability³³⁹. For Victor, Jay’s dearest friend who has just gone through a painful separation and now lives like a hedonistic, if not a grotesque Peter Pan, the institution of marriage is similar to a fundamentalist religious faith:

I believed in it without knowing how much I believed in it. It was blind, foolish obedience and submission. Probably it was the only kind of religious faith I’ve had. I used to think I had some radicalism in me, but I couldn’t smash the thing that bound me the most³⁴⁰.

Victor’s position echoes Jay’s and the spirit of *Intimacy*, the gloomiest, darkest and most disillusioned of Kureishi’s works, is that of privileging individual freedom and lack of commitment against collective living. The only counterbalancing voice is provided by Asif, another friend of Jay’s, who tries to discourage him from abandoning Susan. Asif romantically reads Christina Rossetti’s poems to his wife and expresses his positive understanding of marriage and familial life as “a reason for living”³⁴¹. Asif claims that “with a real love there is little movement. You are going round and round, but further and further,”³⁴² a statement with which restless Jay cannot agree. The protagonist is so frustrated by the sight of Asif’s serene familial equilibrium that he suddenly feels the shameful destructive urge to violate his friend’s wife:

I wanted to kiss her and push her into the bedroom, thereby, it seemed to me, smashing everything up, or testing it, or trying to see what was there, what the secret was³⁴³.

338 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 82.

339 This is a characteristic of several other works by Kureishi, mainly pertaining to his second phase of production. For example, in the short story “D’accord, Baby” Bill claims that marriage cannot satisfy most human needs, therefore infidelities would obviously occur in most relationships; in “Nightlight,” the anonymous male protagonist says that London abounds with people leaving their partners for others, turning from person to person, looking for someone who can make the difference.

340 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 49.

341 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 34.

342 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 132.

343 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 40.

All through Kureishi's *oeuvre* the concept that "openness and choice in sexual behaviour is liberating"³⁴⁴ seems to be dominant and in *Intimacy* it becomes the propelling force that sets the protagonist on the move, abandoning his previous situation in search of a more satisfying one.

People don't want you to have too much pleasure; they think it's bad for you. You might start wanting it all the time. How unsettling is desire! That devil never sleeps or keeps still. Desire is naughty and doesn't conform to our ideals, which is why we have such a need of them. Desire mocks all human endeavour and makes it worthwhile. Desire is the original anarchist and undercover agent – no wonder people want it arrested and kept in a safe place. And just when we think we've got desire under control it lets us down or fills us with hope. Desire makes me laugh because it makes fools of us all. Still, rather a fool than a fascist³⁴⁵.

This passage, together with Jay's statement that "deliberate moral infringement" is necessary in order to "preserve the idea of justice and meaning in the world,"³⁴⁶ closely recalls two concepts that Freud expresses in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). In the first place Freud claims that what is bad is not at all what is "injurious or dangerous to the ego" but often "something which is desirable and enjoyable to the ego"³⁴⁷. In the second place, civilisation controls the individual's perilous desire for pleasure and aggression "by setting up an agency within him to watch over it"³⁴⁸ (the superego). In conclusion, for Freud "the creation of a great human community would be most successful if no attention had to be paid to the happiness of the individual"³⁴⁹.

For Jay the belief in the importance and legitimacy of sexual gratification is strong and deep-rooted, and he provocatively asks:

why do people who are good at families have to be smug and assume it is the only way to live, as if everybody else is inadequate? Why can't they be blamed for being bad at promiscuity?³⁵⁰

Jay's question is a challenge towards traditional conceptions of monogamy and of

344 Kureishi, *Sammy and Rosie*, 77.

345 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 44.

346 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 45.

347 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, James Strachey trans. (New York: Norton, 1989), 85.

348 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 84.

349 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 105.

350 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 33.

the status quo. Kureishi's attempt to mitigate the moral stigma of infidelity reflects Adam Phillips' insights in *Monogamy* (1996) where he wonders why the opposite of monogamy is "not just promiscuity, but the absence or the impossibility of relationship itself"³⁵¹. Phillips claims that monogamy cannot be the end of our life stories, since monogamy is "too wishfully neat, too symmetrical for the proper mess that a life is"³⁵². We are forced to settle down in monogamy not because we have trust in it, but because we are afraid of excess: "an excess of solitude and an excess of company"³⁵³. Jay has frequently cheated on Susan who often denies him sexual intimacy, and seems to have done it as a desperate act of rebellion and as a safety valve. Imagining to be speaking with his partner, Jay reflects: "I have lied to you and betrayed you every day,"³⁵⁴ but instead of feeling guilty for his unfaithfulness, he affirms the moral value of lying which is "a kindness"³⁵⁵. Lying has protected Jay and Susan's union until this moment and he feels he has done all he could to make things work in their relationship, even if sometimes he asks himself if he could have tried harder. On the night before leaving, Jay decides it is time to really be faithful to someone: "Yes; myself"³⁵⁶.

One of the women he has had an affair with is Nina, with whom he eventually falls in love also because of the strong sexual passion that inflames their relationship. Thus, Jay does not leave Susan as soon as he realises that he and Nina are in love but he tries to have the best of both worlds for a while. In the meantime, the much younger mistress suffers terribly in her clandestine relationship with Jay and thus the two decide to split temporarily. Although Nina remains obsessively in Jay's mind representing a much longed-for presence, his final decision to leave Susan is not only determined by this. Jay abandons the familial dimension, in fact, in order to dwell in what Adam Phillips psychoanalytically calls the realm of 'flirtation' which "keep things in play, and by doing so lets us get to know them in different ways"³⁵⁷. The night before leaving Susan, in fact, Jay goes looking for Nina in a club she often frequents but not finding her he tries to pick

351 Adam Phillips, *Monogamy* (New York: Random House, 1996), 98.

352 Phillips, *Monogamy*, 75.

353 Phillips, *Monogamy*, 98.

354 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 136.

355 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 104.

356 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 42.

357 Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), xii.

up a young woman for a one-night stand. Eventually he gets punched in the face by the girl's boyfriend and returns home to Susan.

Faithful less to his mistress than to the desire to “re-open, to rework, the plot”³⁵⁸ of his life, Jay, I would argue, calls into question the simplistic binary division between good and bad which sets the limits in heteronormative society. Jay's betrayal, in fact, is at the basis of a new ‘ethic’ of constant search for the most pleasant and hedonistically satisfying situation, therefore *Intimacy* moves beyond the simple account of sexual infidelity and takes the shape of a study of betrayal ethically promoted as a form of self-renewal. In this respect the book creates a new genesis in the tradition of the novel of infidelity because it breaks away from the binary peremptory marriage/morally branded adultery.

Even if the ‘marriage and its discontents’ type of narrative is a common subgenre in post-war British fiction, film, and drama, its critique of the institution of marriage fails to subvert the contract³⁵⁹. The majority of adulterers, in fact, finds in extramarital affairs a momentary escape from a squalid or unhappy reality, but their choice is invariably between monogamy and infidelity. The adulterer is neither a radical rebel nor a victim of an unruly desire that drives him/her to destruction, as it was instead in classic novels of adultery such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873-77). For instance, John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957) and Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), stage respectively Joe and Arthur, two young working class dissidents who get sexually involved with married women as an act of rebellion against the conformity of the late 1950s Affluent Society. However, in both novels the protagonists eventually get married to proper domestic virgins, becoming respectful members of the bourgeois society. Also female authors such as Doris Lessing, Penelope Lively, Iris Murdoch, and Anita Brookner have thoroughly examined through their works the often ruinous and frustrating effects of marriage, but the wife/mistress, coupledom/spinster binaries are left untackled.

In *Intimacy*, instead, Jay has a firm faith in betrayal as a way of moving on for the better and rejects the idea of being stigmatised for this. Jay's fidelity is to flirtation and

358 Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 25.

359 For more on this topic see Elizabeth Hardwick, *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* (New York: TNYRB, 2001); and Davida Pines, *The Marriage Paradox: Modernist Novels and the Cultural Imperative to Marry* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

non-committed love, because they allow desire to flourish and desire is the only ethical value Jay seems to be willing to submit to.

Kureishi has always been an unconventional writer interested in challenging orthodox values and behaviour, and *Intimacy*'s attempt to destabilise the marriage/adultery antithesis challenges conventional morality. The book has been defined "almost unbearably sad"³⁶⁰ for its crude description of the falling-out-of-love process, while Jay has been depicted as a "middle-class, heterosexual misogynist"³⁶¹ and even "a vain, sex-obsessed man"³⁶². What has infuriated reviewers most is Jay's characterisation of Susan, so wry that at times it can be perceived violently offensive. Susan is a Cambridge graduate with a brilliant career that still finds the time to organise family life and take care of the children; but for the protagonist she is also small-minded, aggressive, coercing and dominating; as he says, she "thinks she's a feminist but she's just bad tempered,"³⁶³ and for Jay the act of leaving her represents the rejection of the bourgeois values she embodies.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, Jay's characterisation of Susan has no bearing on misogyny. Kureishi is not writing about the politics of gender per se, but, as usual, is inviting the readers to identify with unconventional characters by enhancing the humanity of their actions. The author vividly depicts an innovative form of contemporary masculinity, but he remains far from promoting it, and has stressed that he has "no ambivalence about feminism; it's obviously the most important social movement [...] absolutely crucial to what's changed in the West"³⁶⁴. Furthermore the least likeable character in *Intimacy* appears not to be Susan but Jay, whom Kureishi presents as self-absorbed, self-pitying, childish, and disloyal. Jay evades responsibility and hurts people in the name of commitment to personal freedom. He doesn't even have the courage to tell his partner or the children he has decided to leave; he just walks out in a cowardly way while she's at work. Kureishi sometimes puts into his protagonist's mouth pathetic and shockingly cruel statements that inevitably render him unpopular to the readers, such as "if

360 Polly Rance, "Review of *Intimacy*," *The Richmond Review*, 3 October 2008:

<http://www.richmondreview.com>

361 Frederick Luis Aldama, "Review of *Intimacy*," *Callaloo* 22.4 (1999), 1097.

362 David Sexton, "What do these authors have in common? They all hate women: Review of *Towards the End of Time*, *Europa*, and *Intimacy*," *The Evening Standard*, 14 May 1998.

363 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 79.

364 Susie Thomas, "Something to Ask You: A Conversation with Hanif Kureishi," *Changing English* 14.1 (2007), 7.

[Susan] lets me fuck her, here, now, on the floor, I won't leave,"³⁶⁵ or even: "[...] there are some fucks for which a person would have their partner and children drown in a freezing sea"³⁶⁶. Nevertheless, Jay's meanness is usually counterbalanced by his vulnerability and self-reflection; at some point he feels sorry for Susan because, for so many years, she has had to put up with him, a "morose, over-sensitive, self-absorbed fool"³⁶⁷. Jay also deplores the excesses of capitalism and consumerism that bring to an unavoidable dissatisfaction by fooling people with the "promise of luxury that in fact promote[s] endless work"³⁶⁸. In blaming his own hypocrisy and that of his hippie generation for having in the end elevated "greed as a political credo,"³⁶⁹ Jay looks for a haven from the bitterness of society in "individualism, sensualism, creative idleness," and in "human imagination: its delicacy, its brutal aggressive energy, its profundity and power to transform the material world into art"³⁷⁰. Some aspects of Jay's personality denote sensitiveness and even romanticism; in striking contrast to its general dark tone, in fact, *Intimacy* is infused with the importance of love, because, as Jay observes: "without love, most of life remains concealed. Nothing is as fascinating as love"³⁷¹. Jay is powerful and passionate in his feelings, yet what he just cannot deal with is the institution of monogamous intimacy. Looking forward to enjoying "the pleasures of being a single man in London,"³⁷² the protagonist finally frees himself from marital obligations and starts a process of reinvention of his own self; as he says: "I am not leaving this unhappy Eden only because I dislike it, but because I want to become someone else"³⁷³. Jay leaves the house as an act of relief; he embraces the city, its essence and energy which make him feel drunk with a sense of possibility and future. He finally springs out from chilled confinement:

I walk downstairs and open the front door. Tired but determined, I step outside. It hasn't rained for weeks. The blossom is out. London is in bloom; even I am in bloom, despite everything³⁷⁴.

365 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 103.

366 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 120.

367 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 61.

368 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 54.

369 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 54.

370 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 100.

371 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 77.

372 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 12.

373 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 101.

374 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 152.

Kureishi, as usual, leaves the ending of his book open; thus the last scene suggests that Jay starts over again with Nina and walks with her towards the future:

together, lost in our thoughts. I forgot where we were, or even when it was. Then you moved closer, stroked my hair and took my hand; I know you were holding my hand and talking to me softly. Suddenly I had the feeling that everything was as it should be and nothing could add to this happiness or contentment. This was all that there was, and all that could be. The best of everything had accumulated in this moment. It could only have been love³⁷⁵.

Intimacy represents an unconventional artistic project, a rough book which, contrary to the previous joyful novels, makes it harder to be liked and understood by the majority of the readers. The prose the author deploys is concentrated and intense, as if to reflect the angst which torments the protagonist's mind. The underlying message that in taking our pleasure we inevitably damage other people is characteristic of all Kureishi's *oeuvre*, but here it is overwhelmingly crude. While the author's provocative suggestion that Jay's behaviour and ethic constitute a counter-perspective to heteronormative values can be particularly disturbing. Nevertheless, as Buchanan argues, Kureishi's fiction aims to show that to see human beings at their worst does not mean that we are seeing "humanism at its weakest; on the contrary, where complex people such as Kureishi's are displayed at their least attractive, we are forced to recognise the many traits we share with them and consider the degree to which we share their degradation. It is not a pleasant prospect, but to refuse to face it is, in Kureishi's view, a failure of the mind, heart and imagination"³⁷⁶.

After the melancholic bitterness of *Intimacy* which also caused Kureishi to lose a part of his readers, *Gabriel's Gift* represents a return to a more cheerful kind of fiction. Familial preoccupations remain central, as the story begins, with the break up of Rex and Christine, but the tone is optimistic and for the first time in Kureishi's *oeuvre*, a broken family gets back together. Rex and Christine, having fallen away from the exciting and glittering world of the '70s rock scene, find themselves outpaced by change as they hardly manage to conform to the grey reality of paying rent and taking care of the house. While

375 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 155.

376 Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi*, 164.

investigating the parents' hardships in coping with adult life, Kureishi takes this theme forward, and in this post-millennial novel, he also describes what effect the hedonism of this generation is likely to have on the next. Fifteen-year-old Gabriel is a teenager growing up with parents who continue to act like teenagers themselves, and since he has more sense than either of them the child/parent dichotomy becomes reversed. Although in age Gabriel is very close to the hedonistic Shahid and Karim of the first two novels, he cannot experience the same excesses they, and the whole previous generation of Kureishi's protagonists have enjoyed; in fact, he has to take on the responsibilities of the adult world at a very early age. Like all other Kureishian main characters, Gabriel is always described in movement; he zips about the city going from one place to the other, going to school, visiting his father's shabby accommodation, walking him to work, going to Speedy's restaurant, hustling to fix his parents' childish behaviour and cycling, taking buses, walking back and forth along the city's innumerable streets. To walk, notes de Certeau, "is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper"³⁷⁷. Gabriel, like Shahid and Karim, is trying to enter the art world and his journey towards maturity is reflected in his wandering around the city, taking possession of it while fixing his life from the breakdowns which have occurred. Gabriel is secretly consoled in his walk of life by the guiding voice of his twin brother, Archie, who died at two years old and whose death deeply affected Rex and Christine.

The book then, starts with Rex getting kicked out of the house by his common wife because of his helplessness, laziness and total absence of collaboration in family duties. The disintegration of the core family seems to hold the potential for each of its members to develop a more independent life, and it does, but all of them react differently. At the beginning Christine feels a certain sense of optimism and possibility in the future, having got rid of the burden of her useless partner: "Look at me, don't I have some energy? Even more now, since he's gone"³⁷⁸. She remembers how she has had to support the family as a seamstress for rock bands, working even at night, and not receiving any help in the household chores from selfish and self-concerned Rex who, right after breakfast, would "read the paper on the couch and ask what was for lunch"³⁷⁹. Christine is

377 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 103.

378 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 115.

379 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 158.

so embittered by the frustrating sacrifices she has had to undertake for her family that, when asked by the manager of the restaurant where she applies for a job if she has experience as service personnel, she poignantly answers: “Experience [...]! I’m a mother and wife. I am used to wait on ungrateful, detestable people”³⁸⁰. Christine gets the job, starts working as a waitress until late at night and hires a caricatured Eastern European au pair, Hannah, to look after Gabriel. Christine throws herself into a new life where she thinks she can finally regain the freedoms and pleasures of her younger age. She becomes hard-drinking and starts a relationship with a much younger man, a smug artist called George who comes to the house late at night to drink and party with her. Gabriel is often awakened by their noise and has to drag his drunk mother’s body into bed, but when he expresses his unfavourable opinion on Christine’s new lover, she bursts out: “I’ve looked after you and now you’re nearly grown. That was my duty and I’ve done it. Surely, now, I can live for myself a bit, eh?”³⁸¹. Christine’s momentary confusion is indicative of her weariness, having had for so many years to be the only bread-winner in the house, hard-working and now trying to support with a modest job her son, herself and even the hairy, big-eating au pair that Gabriel despises. Christine’s out of time indulgences in drinking bring her closer to depression than to hedonistic enjoyment; this happens because she, like Rex, is a hostage to the past and runs after it instead of looking for newness with the perspective her age offers her. Being so occupied with her job during the day and with her boyfriend during the night, Christine sometimes fails to adequately stand by her son who is experiencing the painful consequences of the family break up. As the narrator says:

Dad had gone and was living somewhere else. If the world hadn’t quite been turned upside down, it was at an unusual and perilous angle, and certainly not still. [...] Mum didn’t want to worry about him more than she already did³⁸².

Nevertheless the relationship between Christine and Gabriel is a special one, Christine is the most sympathetic among Kureishi’s mothers and her son knows that he has a “wonderful power”³⁸³ over her that makes him command her attention. He loves her

380 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 7.

381 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 148.

382 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 3.

383 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 76.

tenderly and is protective towards her. This is particularly evident when Christine experiences relationship difficulties with George; Gabriel comforts her as they “put their pyjamas on” and eat chocolate “from their ‘emergency’ supply”³⁸⁴.

Rex, who as earlier mentioned, at the beginning of the novel is not of any use to his wife, still sees himself as the head of the family when arguing with Christine and tries to assert his role:

When I’m gone, you won’t know what to do without me,’ Dad used to say. ‘When you’re gone, Rex, we’ll know exactly what to do. Our souls will soar. You’re the ballast in our balloon, mate. We’ll be better off in every way,’ his mother replied³⁸⁵.

This passage enhances an aspect that characterises all of Kureishi’s second phase novels; the depiction of what Moore-Gilbert terms “a contemporary ‘crisis of masculinity’ in a post-feminist era”³⁸⁶ where the male partners expect their female ones to be strong but sometimes feel diminished by their independence and effectiveness. Rex, like Jay, even if with totally different predispositions, belongs to the type of male subject that Josette Alia names the ‘infantilized man’ that, together with the ‘new man’ and ‘the feminized man’ types constitutes the different models of masculinity determined by the effects of feminism on society³⁸⁷.

After leaving the family house Rex feels paralysed and totally unable to participate in the world; he festers in a cheap room, trying to avoid the delinquents and fellow bums he’s borrowed money from, and falls into deep depression and hard-drinking. Gabriel makes many efforts in order to take him out of the squalid room and get him to earn a living. At the beginning Rex just doesn’t want to grow up and when a rich movie producer, Jake Ambler, offers him a job as a private music teacher for his adolescent and rebellious son, Rex says he intends to refuse: “We’re not so desperate that we’re going to start working for a living”³⁸⁸. A lot of responsibility falls on the young protagonist, especially because he is conscious of being his father’s only hope to resurrect to normal

384 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 147.

385 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 6.

386 Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 171.

387 Gill Allwood, *French Feminisms: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 53.

388 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 97.

life.

Gabriel wanted to go to Mum's bar and ask her to try to get Dad out of bed. But she wouldn't be prepared to do it; she'd given up on him. Everyone had, now³⁸⁹.

The strong-willed and pragmatic teenager forces his moneyless father to accept the job informing him that Christine won't let the two of them meet anymore if Rex keeps depressing his son with his disheartenment and sadness: "What kind of future will I have watching you sit on your arse and drink all day?"³⁹⁰. To make his argument more valid Gabriel takes one of his father's beers and threatens to drink it all, to which Rex apprehensively responds by finally getting up and ready for work. The teenager also undertakes the responsibility to walk his father to work every day, or put him safely on the bus since he knows that otherwise he would stop at the first pub and borrow money from anyone in order to get drunk. He remains with him at Jake's house to make sure he doesn't make a mess of things and lose his job. The lexicon used by Kureishi enhances the adult/child role reversal as it describes Gabriel as carefully watching his father "hopping and tripping behind him,"³⁹¹ or holding the guitar in one hand and Rex's hand in the other "for fear he would slip away"³⁹². Gabriel also has to cope with his father's envy for the son's greater talent, an autobiographical detail that Kureishi explores in depth in *My Ear at his Heart* where he remembers the mix of frustration and pride felt by his own father at his son's professional success.

Carlo, Rex's pupil, is enthusiastic about the lessons he receives from his new music teacher and spreads the news among his upper-class spoiled friends so that Rex starts working with regularity, increasing livelihood and monetary reward. As Rex starts earning money and feels appreciated for his skills he finds a new purpose in life and finds the courage to try to get back with Christine who, in the meantime, has been dumped by George and realised she can do better with her life. Symbolically their reunion starts from the world they had left behind, that of the music and art industry, but this time they both have a perspective towards the future instead of a nostalgic look towards the past.

389 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 101.

390 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 101.

391 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 56.

392 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 102-3.

Christine offers to organise Rex's working agenda and to sort out the practices inherent in contract and taxes Rex is totally unaware about. The two of them go to a celebrity party organised by Jake Ambler and afterwards they spend the night together. The reintroduction of sexuality between the couple signifies the rebirth of feelings between them and the successful transformation of the family. Rex, in fact, used to complain that Christine "could be a beautiful lover. [...] That was when she bothered. But she stopped. It all stopped, and she started wearing those big grey knickers"³⁹³. Sexuality accompanied by love always represents a new beginning among Kureishian couples, a symbol of life and the ideal situation they can find themselves in.

Gabriel feels relieved and happy, but also a bit tired. Finally freed from familial preoccupations the boy regains his teenage identity and follows his creative instinct. At the end of the book the protagonist acquires a more hedonistic attitude, or maybe just states his teenage typical desire to avoid the intricacies of domesticity in favour of a career and sex in a short exchange of ideas with Zak:

'Still, it's worse to think that we're going to turn out like our parents, don't you think?'

'I've never thought about that,' replied Zak. 'Christ, that's a hell to look forward to. Never marry, I say!'

'Never marry!'

'Just screw and work!'

'Screw and work!'³⁹⁴.

The responsibility of looking after his parents and favouring their reconciliation has proved to be a great strain for Gabriel in what is already a difficult time, that of his own adolescence: "He saw now how bored he'd been recently, at home; he'd just about had enough of being alone and worrying about his parents"³⁹⁵. In going to a great deal of trouble to resolve family matters Gabriel has delayed his collaboration with Zak for making their first film; the family then, has wielded a retarding influence over his

393 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 95.

394 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 169.

395 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 155.

ambition, an aspect that corroborates Kureishi's vision that individuals, especially artists, always have to follow their aspirations independently in order to develop their own sense of self. This is also exemplified in the words of Gabriel's artistic guide, Lester Jones, who states: "sometimes I think I became an artist because it was the only way I could avoid my parents"³⁹⁶. Kureishi's position can be linked to Freud's as the father of Psychoanalysis believed that the group represents a loss of independence, rationality and discipline for the individual. He counterbalanced the group to the individual as a fall into unrestrained emotionality and lack of creative, intellectual ability³⁹⁷.

When he was a bit younger Gabriel had felt the necessity to detach himself from his parents and for some time he spent his afternoons in a 'drum', a circle driven by small criminal businesses. Yet Gabriel did not have much in common with the troubled kids in the commune who indeed were refugees who had escaped from the North of the country and to whom "terrible things had happened"³⁹⁸. Gabriel's choice to rebelliously hang around a place he knew his parents wouldn't have approved of emphasises that the separation from the family is a necessary and universal step in the process of maturation; Gabriel went there because he "required other worlds and needed to move away from his parents"³⁹⁹. The episode in the commune might be seen as a first instance of the boy's process of self-realisation, but also as a reason for Gabriel to act so protectively towards his much beloved father. Rex, in fact, knowing that children need their independence, but only at an appropriate age, goes out looking for him and takes him away from the filthy squat, not fearful of the criminal gangs that inhabit the flat filled with stolen goods and drugs, and forbids him to hang out with these people again. Gabriel is so grateful to his dad for having rescued him that when later he has to find the determination to force Rex to get out of bed and go to work he recalls to his memory this precise moment.

The novel ends with Rex finally becoming the head of the family and providing it with financial support, in order to give poor Christine a rest. His acquired self-confidence leads Rex to abandon the self-centred attitude that characterised him at the beginning and allows him to become generous and protective.

396 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 53.

397 Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, James Strachey trans. (New York: Random House, 1965), 26.

398 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 16.

399 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 17.

Your mother suffered a lot over Archie. She deserves a break. I don't like her being a waitress. What I want is to support her financially, so she can do what she wants⁴⁰⁰.

Everybody seems to be happy, Rex and Christine finally get married and move to a new, better house which symbolises their social growth and their movement towards a better life. The forced break up has brought new movement into the family, and also if a period of assessments had to be undertaken, a new equilibrium has been settled; even Archie's angelic voice is finally calm and steady in Gabriel. *Gabriel's Gift* beautifully stages how every character defines him/herself within the group, and how positions can be changed if we negotiate our point of view. Alongside the reunion of the family, in fact, a larger group of characters are also bound together by their mutual support and affection, showing that these are the necessary ingredients in order to constitute a harmonious community of different people. Hannah, not being needed any more at Gabriel's house is employed by Speedy, a gay middle-aged restaurant owner, who needs a housekeeper. This makes her blissful since her new employer is wealthier than Gabriel's family and, as she observes, at his place the fridge is always full. Gabriel finally stops behaving badly towards the clumsy Hannah whom he used to make fun of by teaching her bad English on purpose and whom he had even threatened to have deported back to her own country (which he mockingly calls 'Bronchitis') because she had spied on him. He is now willing to befriend her and gives her a walk-on part in his film. Christine also is employed by Speedy and starts a career as the restaurant manager. Rex keeps giving music lessons to Carlo who, having found the way to ease his teenage rage through music, starts getting along with his rich father and collaborating in Gabriel's film by making the sound. Jake Ambler gives Gabriel a professional camera and the equipment needed to shoot his film, and he even supervises the editing.

The book doesn't have the effervescence and hilarity of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, but nonetheless it is tender, witty and wry. It portrays some very funny images like the one when Gabriel, pretending to guide his mother's drunk boyfriend to the toilet, throws him out of the house instead, jacketless, in the freezing cold of the night, and locks the door

400 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 160.

behind him; or that of Hannah, who is learning English by watching Australian soap operas and generally has troubles with even simple syntax, but surprisingly reveals an amazing vocabulary when asked to express her food preferences: “Ice-cream [...] and burgers. Pigs’ trotters. Pies. Rabbit stew. Jam. And...and... and...”⁴⁰¹.

Kureishi’s experimentation with a kind of magic realism which gives an atmosphere of fable to small sections of *Gabriel’s Gift* is reiterated in *The Body* as a device that allows the author to explore more widely the possibilities of transformation, investigating issues of age and sexuality from an original perspective. Susie Thomas observes that since in Kureishi’s work there is a lack of interest in “the medical or mechanical aspects of brains being implanted into recently deceased bodies, ‘The Body’ does not read like science fiction but rather allegory or fable”⁴⁰². The description of the technology behind Adam’s metamorphosis, in fact, is elegantly skipped while the protagonist’s ethical choice reminds us of Phaedrus’ fable “The Dog carrying some Meat across a River,”⁴⁰³ which teaches the moral lesson that ‘He who covets what belongs to another, deservedly loses his own’.

Adam’s choice to temporarily abandon his family also exemplifies Amitai Etzioni’s idea that individualism has an appealing ideal to contemporary society, and feeds on its being a highly flattering view of human nature: “Individualism promises those who believe in it that they are free-standing agents, able to formulate their own conceptions of the good [...] and render rational decisions in their self-interest. And, as bearers of inalienable rights, they have a long list of entitlements, but no inherent duties or obligations unless they choose to embrace them”⁴⁰⁴. Although the individual may convince himself that he is a distinct, separate, or self-sufficient person, in reality he is merely viewed as one part of a group of individuals with the same rights, the same responsibilities, and the same tendencies as all other separate individuals. Because individualism reduces difference, Etzioni declares it a fiction, and Adam/Leo, together

401 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 10.

402 Thomas ed., *Hanif Kureishi*, 154.

403 In this fable a dog who is swimming while carrying in his mouth a piece of meat, sees his own image reflected in the watery mirror and thinks he is seeing more meat carried by another dog. In order to steal the meat from his mouth he drops his own. His greediness then remains disappointed as he is unable to reach what he desires and loses what was already his.

404 Amitai Etzioni, “Individualism within History” *The Hedgehog Review* 4.1 (Spring 2002), 49.

with the other 'Newbodies', represent the impossibility of a society based on a dream of ultimate independence and lack of commitment to others.

Sexual and familial dynamics are always complicated in Kureishi's works and *The Body* is no exception. Adam is married to Margot whom he loves: a love that is reciprocated. The two of them form an almost ideal couple because they not only get along with each other very well but above all they allow their partner his or her freedom; as Adam observes:

We needed each other, Margot and I, but we didn't want to turn our marriage into more of an enclosure than necessary. We had agreed that I, too, could go on 'walkabout' if I wanted to⁴⁰⁵.

Adam and his wife are the only mature couple present in Kureishi's novels whose sexual attraction and understanding have remained active and solid through the years although Adam vainly notes that Margot likes to tease him by accusing him of not being "toned", of being, in fact, 'mush'⁴⁰⁶. Their marriage seems to be a solid and enviable one; nevertheless, Adam feels the urge to pursue his capricious dream of an individualistic journey into hedonism and when he tells his wife that he is going to take a six-months sabbatical from their relationship Margot is understandably hurt for the length of time he wants for himself, but lets him go without complaining. Adam carefully avoids informing her, or their grown children, that he is going to trade his old body in for a new one, as he intends to experience rejuvenation and re-enjoy to the fullest an exciting part of his life that has already slipped away. Kureishi makes it evident that Adam wants to rid himself of his old body, even just for a short time, in order to escape ageing and the physical pain that constantly bothers him, and more than anything, to restore his lost curiosity about the world and infuse his tired life with liveliness. Adam seizes the opportunity to temporarily escape his own decay, but this self-reinvention is a rather expensive one, and he does not hesitate to pay for his operation with the inheritance he would otherwise have left to his children. This is not the only occasion in which the protagonist's pursuit of self-satisfaction gets the better of his generosity towards others. Like most of Kureishi's main

405 Kureishi, *The Body*, 19.

406 Kureishi, *The Body*, 17.

characters, Adam experiences an intimate conflict in questions of marital fidelity as he admits: “From the start of our marriage I had decided to be faithful to Margot, without, of course, having enough idea of the difficulty”⁴⁰⁷. In fact, once he settles into his new handsome body and becomes a ‘Newbody’ under the identity of Leo, faithfulness is no longer maintained since his newly gained possibility to change into another self automatically offers him a liberation from any form of self-control. The libidinal nature of his individualist choice is affirmed by the way Adam immediately conforms to Ralph’s ‘Newbody’ philosophy: “It’s okay to be unfaithful [...]. It isn’t you doing it”⁴⁰⁸. The first thing Adam/Leo does in his new guise is pick up an unknown woman and have sex with her with no further complications. Afterwards, overexcited by the newness of this ephemeral emotion that he finds extremely satisfactory, he yearns to have more similar occasions as he ruthlessly considers: “How love interferes with fidelity at times! What were refinement and the intellect compared to a sublime fuck?”⁴⁰⁹. The fact of hiding his true social identity from the world allows Adam/Leo to enjoy copious sex without inhibition, a habit that becomes particularly easy to maintain given the attractiveness of the body he has acquired. In this respect the basic conceit of *The Body* is made evident: in a contemporary image-obsessed and consumerist society, artificial and surgical interventions on our bodies are meant to make us as appealing as any consumer good that we are daily attracted to in shops, and that even if superfluous we buy. Similarly, the selection process of the new body that Adam undertakes when he picks his favourite among “rows and rows of bodies”⁴¹⁰ in a kind of body supermarket recalls to his memory, as he narrates, “the rows of suits in the tailor’s I’d visit as a boy with my father”⁴¹¹. This disposal of human flesh for sale is a metaphor for the almost pornographic daily proliferation of commodified images of young women and men in commercials and various types of TV shows. The kind of body chosen by Adam is indicative of this logic:

Stocky and as classically handsome as any sculpture in the British Museum, he was neither white nor dark, but lightly toasted, with a fine, thick penis and heavy balls. I would,

407 Kureishi, *The Body*, 48.

408 Kureishi, *The Body*, 40.

409 Kureishi, *The Body*, 49.

410 Kureishi, *The Body*, 23

411 Kureishi, *The Body*, 24.

at last, have the body of an Italian footballer: an aggressive, attacking midfielder, say⁴¹².

While the image of the statue may refer to an object of culture, even if it evokes inanimateness and impersonality, the emphasis put on the male sex organs enhances a pragmatist view that one would expect in valuing a covering animal; a hint that gains strength when Adam/Leo later joins and enjoys what he calls a “pornographic circus of rough sex; the stuff that resembled some of the modern dance I had seen, animalistic, without talk,”⁴¹³ and begs “to be turned into meat, held down, tied, blindfolded, slapped, pulled and strangled”⁴¹⁴. The comparison of the body chosen with that of an Italian footballer conveys an idea of healthy attractiveness, but also shallowness and superficial womanising since, in these past few years, several famous Italian footballers have become more widely popular in the media for their love affairs with pretty showgirls, for their frequent appearance in commercials as testimonials for clothes and beauty products, or in calendars as sexual icons. As a consequence of these sexually enticing images depicted in this consumer-driven society, which Kureishi underlines in one of the opening scenes of the book where Adam, still in his old body, attends a fashionable party and remains puzzled by “how well groomed”⁴¹⁵ the young men are, he reflects: “Apart from the gym, these boys must have kept fit twisting and untwisting numerous jars, tubs and bottles. They dressed to show off their bodies rather than their clothes”⁴¹⁶.

The vivid and uninhibited depiction of sex images is a hallmark of Kureishi's work and has resulted in a good deal of his popularity. In his production up until *Intimacy* the author shows a strong belief that “numerous accretions of sexual guilt and inhibition are psychologically damaging,”⁴¹⁷ and his protagonists fully enjoy sexual freedom. Thus, in *The Body* and in *Something to Tell You*, while the value of sex is still endorsed, the perspective seems to have changed. *The Body* shows that, even if for an attractive person it is easy to have sexual encounters, it doesn't mean that people are really interested in having intimate relationships other than sexually exploitative ones. Life as a ‘Newbody’ is

412 Kureishi, *The Body*, 25.

413 Kureishi, *The Body*, 67.

414 Kureishi, *The Body*, 58.

415 Kureishi, *The Body*, 9.

416 Kureishi, *The Body*, 9.

417 Kureishi, “Some Time with Stephen,” 144.

not as desirable as Adam had first thought because of the impossibility of making valuable connections, of letting people comprehend his real intimate self, that of a middle-aged cultured man who has to erase his own past history and behave according to the new image he conveys to others. Forming authentic social relationships for the protagonist becomes utopistic; despite all of his sexual adventures, in fact, Adam/Leo feels “like a spy, concealed and wary”⁴¹⁸. As Buchanan notes, the name ‘Newbody’ “sounds perilously close to ‘nobody’, a word which Adam finally accepts as a self-description”⁴¹⁹.

In his hedonistic tour of Europe in search of emotions, Adam/Leo comes in contact with the gay culture in different modes. As a youth, he remembers how he enjoyed “being an admired boy [...] surrounded by older men,”⁴²⁰ and ironically discovers that his newly acquired body that everyone admires, formerly belonged to a homosexual. Furthermore, two gay men who had known Mark (the original owner of the body) mistake him for their long lost friend of whom they had not had any news. Adam/Leo learns from them of Mark’s profession and that his newly acquired body was previously used for professional modelling, for playing in a boy band, as well as for “the other thing [...] for money,”⁴²¹ which undeniably refers to male prostitution. Initially Adam/Leo confesses he had always looked with admiration at what he believed to be the spontaneity of gay life:

Like many straights, I’d been intrigued by some of my gay friends’ promiscuity [...]. I’d long admired and coveted what I saw as the gay’s innovative and experimental lives, their capacity for pleasure. They were reinventing love, keeping it close to instinct⁴²².

And as a ‘Newbody’ he transgresses in his sexual encounters with couples, but this wild abandonment to such ambivalent experiences only constitutes the preface to the gender reversal degradation he will undergo in Greece. In fact, although his stunning physical features gain him sexual vigour and desirability, ironically, after the body-switching, Adam/Leo loses much of his masculine power and authority. While as Adam the protagonist was a famous writer, as Leo he only finds badly-paid non-intellectual jobs. He briefly works as a model, suffering from gender discrimination since, as a man, he

418 Kureishi, *The Body*, 69.

419 Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi*, 98.

420 Kureishi, *The Body*, 52.

421 Kureishi, *The Body*, 44.

422 Kureishi, *The Body*, 56.

doesn't "earn anything like as much as the girls"⁴²³. Afterwards Adam/Leo ends up as a mistreated oddjobber in a 'spiritual centre' on a Greek island, a women's retreat run by a tyrannical 'wise woman', the old, fat and hateful Patricia, who humiliates him in several ways. The protagonist, in fact, has to submit to her sexual voracity and is regarded by her as a sexual object at her disposal. Patricia makes him have sex with her, debasing him with her spiteful, violent manners. As Adam/Leo narrates:

Patricia howled, 'Adore me, adore me, you little shit!'; she dug her fingers into me, scratched and kicked me, and [...] thrust her tongue into my mouth until I almost gagged⁴²⁴.

The protagonist is feminised by the coercing head of the centre who professes to be a feminist but acts exactly like the masculine oppressors she boasts of fighting. This unpleasant experience makes Adam/Leo feel so disgusted and embarrassed that as soon as he gets away from her he feels the urge to throw himself into the sea to wash off his humiliation. Although Adam/Leo claims to be furious about the semi-rape he has experienced and his own incapability to avoid it, he realises that the old woman's physical decrepitude has the power to evoke in him the sense of authenticity he has lost. Later, in fact, when he finds himself at a party peopled by celebrities and 'Newbodies', he dances with her and perceives her as his only momentary connection with the real world he used to know:

I began [...] examining the folds and creases of her old neck and full arms, the excesses of flesh of her living body, [...] there was something in her I didn't want to let go of. Her soul and body were one, she was 'real'⁴²⁵.

The description of Patricia's body can be linked to that of Margot at the beginning of the book: "Her flesh creased, folded and sagged, its colour altering, but I had never desired her because she was perfect, but because she was she"⁴²⁶. This reveals Adam/Leo's profound loneliness and discomfort, his pining desire to have his life back and be reunited

423 Kureishi, *The Body*, 52.

424 Kureishi, *The Body*, 81.

425 Kureishi, *The Body*, 103-4.

426 Kureishi, *The Body*, 61.

with his loving family. The accidental encounter with Matte, a quintessentially mean and cynical 'Newbody', accelerates Adam/Leo's return to London. Matte, in fact, starts haunting him to take possession of his acquired corpse as he wants it for his dying brother in order to save his life, even if this involves killing Adam/Leo. The protagonist hides in a room close to his family house and, in a very touching sequence, he spends a few hours with his wife, who of course, thinks he's just a beautiful stranger. While dancing with her Adam/Leo painfully re-experiences the pleasure of touching someone he really loves and faces the absurdity and vanity of his rejuvenating experiment: "I knew where to put my hands. In my mind, her shape fitted mine. I didn't want it to end. Her face was eternity enough for me"⁴²⁷.

In order to regain his old body and identity Adam/Leo returns to the illegal medical centre where he had his body-switching operation but finds it empty and abandoned. His old body has disappeared together with the medical facilities and Adam/Leo, to his greatest horror, becomes aware of the fact that he has to spend the rest of his life as "a stranger on the earth, a nobody with nothing, belonging nowhere, a body alone"⁴²⁸.

According to the protagonist London is a space that "has begun to come to terms with the importance of gratification,"⁴²⁹ and it would have represented a perfect location for his sexual experiments and transgressions as a 'Newbody', as it has for almost all other Kureishian main characters. The fact that Kureishi sets the ultimate lowering of Adam/Leo on a Greek island has, in my opinion, a symbolic connotation. Adam, in fact feels that in contemporary society "all the meanings, the values of Western civilization since the Greeks, have changed,"⁴³⁰ ethics have been substituted with aesthetics, in an unnatural, dehumanised process which centres human relations on superficiality. He slowly comes to understand that his surgery is an extreme of this tendency and starts calling himself and the others like him "mutants, freaks, human unhumans"⁴³¹. The Ancient Greeks would have called his choice an act of *hubris*, an act of extreme arrogance and haughtiness that challenged the gods or their laws and which would have resulted in the protagonist's fall.

427 Kureishi, *The Body*, 118.

428 Kureishi, *The Body*, 126.

429 Kureishi, *The Body*, 6.

430 Kureishi, *The Body*, 97.

431 Kureishi, *The Body*, 120

In fact, the process Adam/Leo has gone through is something that goes against nature and the biological order of things, thus eventually he ends up lonely and desperate. As usual in Kureishi's novels, the end of the story is only the closing of a period and the opening of a new one for the protagonist, but for Adam this is a bitter one since he is "condemned to begin again, in the nightmare of eternal life"⁴³².

Kureishi's use of the introspective first-person narration conveys a sombre feeling of solitude and loss, and an awareness of the caducity that runs all through the novel. *The Body* raises several questions, especially with regards to issues of identity and authenticity: the notion of what it is that makes us human, the idea of ageing and decaying, the importance these notions have to us and how we do not want to accept death. As a mature writer Kureishi seems to have endorsed a more moralistic point of view, and the negative ending of this novel underlines his rejection of cultural vapidness and youth obsession, in his words, of "a society in which everyone would be the same age"⁴³³.

The excesses of contemporary society are also exposed in *Something to Tell You* but the tone of Kureishi's third large-scale novel is much more cheerful. Even if the narration is often veiled by a note of melancholy, the irreverent humour that characterises the book makes it an entertaining mix of personal reflection and social critique. The novel's historical backdrop ranges over three decades through continuous flashbacks: from the mid-1970s, where a strike inspired by the turmoil of the Grunwick dispute is staged, with Asian employees striking over pay, through the 1980s and 1990s Thatcherite flaunt lifestyle and the inauguration of a self-obsessed society characterised by "competition, consumerism, celebrity and guilt's bastard son, charity; bingeing and debt,"⁴³⁴ up until the Bush-Blair coalition and the New Labour ostentations that re-elaborated and endorsed Thatcherite values while trying to draw attention away from the ethical unjustifiability of the Iraq war and the fearful menace of terrorist attacks.

Something to Tell You was conceived as an artistic project in the same vein as *The Buddha of Suburbia* but Kureishi wanted it to be narrated from a more mature perspective. While touching on themes as varied as ageing, decay, friendship, marriage, fundamentalism, drugs and the callous anti-intellectualism of postmodern culture, the book

432 Kureishi, *The Body*, 126.

433 Kureishi, *The Body*, 37.

434 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 271.

undertakes a re-examination of the sexual revolution. The ebullience of Karim's teenage experimentations gives way to the anxieties of Jamal's middle age alienating and often meaningless sexual indulgences; Kureishi in fact explores the post-'60s with huge wit and a certain empathy, but from the honestly disenchanted standpoint of someone who is old enough to see what the idealism of those years has actually produced. The author rhetorically asks in an interview: "Is this what we thought we would be in the '60s when we were dancing around with flowers in our hair wanting a more erotic and a more sexual life?"⁴³⁵. Kureishi realises that sexual freedom in his heyday was rebellious and liberating, and that an unrepressed world seemed like a merry prospect but the hedonism that he and many of his generation had grown up with has become very instrumental, empty and worthless; an inferno of consumerism and postmodern sexuality where human relationships have come to resemble the market. Desire is still the substance of humanity, but it can also become the means to remove humanity; as Kureishi says, in fact: "In the 1950s we repressed sex, and now we repress love"⁴³⁶.

London is depicted as a gigantic sexual playground where everything is available. An indulgent world of prostitution, bondage clubs, strippers, and drug use where a range of idiosyncratic, vividly drawn, exaggerated but persuasive characters embody the potential for human folly. All of them act oddly or present themselves in an eccentric manner in order to get the attention of those they love. Most of them are recovering from failed marriages, disappointments and regrets and the general image they convey is that of a society torn apart by solitude, egotism and fear of responsibility.

Jamal Khan, a distinguished Freudian therapist who is separated from his wife Josephine, spends his days listening to his patients' secrets and manias and tries to tease out what lies behind human behaviour while also investigating his own subconsciousness. The son of a white English mother and a Pakistani father who abandoned his wife and children to return to Pakistan, Jamal is seeking a way to overcome the end of his own marriage but at the same time he is also still mourning another lost love, Ajita, his girlfriend from college days who left Britain after the death of her father. Ajita's father was an Indian factory-owning capitalist who had been expelled from Uganda at the time of the

435 Donadio, "My Beautiful London".

436 Joan Hari, "Hanif Kureishi on the couch," *The Independent*, 2 February 2009:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/hanif-kureishi-on-the-couch-1522837.html>

purging of the Asians. He repeatedly raped his daughter after his wife had returned to India, and in order to make him stop, as a boy Jamal and two of his friends had tried to scare the man in his garage with a knife. On this occasion Ajita's father died of a heart attack, and thirty years later Jamal continues being tormented by the memory of how he had been indirectly responsible for his death. This secret has had a huge destructive power on the protagonist's interior life and it constitutes the main reason for his seeking therapy and then later undertaking it as a professional career. The question of redemption is a pressing one in the book's ethical wasteland and it will finally be resolved with the return to London both of Ajita and of Wolf, an accessory to the murder who reappears in order to blackmail Jamal. Wolf and Ajita start a relationship and he finally confesses the truth to the woman who had always ignored the reasons for her father's death. Jamal admits his guilt and liberated from his burden and forgiven by Ajita, he finally feels relieved and ready to start anew and fix his marriage with Josephine.

Jamal's difficulty in forgetting Ajita during so many years is due to the fact that the two of them hadn't fall out of love, but rather their relationship had been suddenly interrupted as they were separated by external events. Jamal says that his suffering over Ajita's abandonment made him "phobic of romantic proximity"⁴³⁷ and this influenced all his following relationships. Karen, another ex, describes Jamal's difficulty in committing seriously to a woman as a mixture between superficiality and fear of being hurt; in fact Jamal hardly accepts adult responsibility and keeps nostalgically looking back to his college days and to the pleasures, joys and laughter of his late adolescence, feeling unstable and uneasy in other relationships. After Karen, in Jamal's words, Josephine seems "the unfortunate cure for my restlessness"⁴³⁸ because even though there exists freshness, passion and beauty in their love, living with her soon appears to be "hard work"⁴³⁹. Josephine, in fact, is obsessed with her own physical illness and death and this hypochondriacal obsession overwhelms them both:

What did preoccupy her were her 'illnesses' – cancers, tumours, diseases. Her body was in a perpetual state of crisis and breakdown. She adored doctors. A donkey with a medical degree was a stallion to her. But her passion was to frustrate them, if not to try to drive

437 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 181.

438 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 114.

439 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 167.

them mad, as I knew to my own cost. The hopeless search for cure was her vocation. [...] Josephine was dreaming while awake, and her adventures as a somnambulist were something else, too. During her excursions out of the house and into the night, she would smash her face against trees. Of course, when you love the unwell, you constantly have to ask yourself: do I love her, or her illness? Am I her lover or her healer?⁴⁴⁰

Josephine's fixation renders her vulnerable and constantly needing attention; it is no surprise then that after her separation from Jamal she starts dating a psychologist. While on the one hand Josephine's hypochondria may be interpreted as an effect of her perpetual anxiety caused by the trauma of a car wreck in her younger years, on the other hand her attitude reflects our modern society's incapacity to deal with the natural cycle of life and our attempt instead to remove the idea of death and decay by assuming a prolonged adolescence. This last stance gains strength when Jamal says that when he first met Josephine she was "virtually a teenager, and she had remained so"⁴⁴¹. Even the fact that she had been the first of the two to have escaped from domestic arguments and hardships in an extra-marital relationship shows Josephine's incapacity to grow and mature. As Jamal bitterly remembers, there were

long bad days before and after the separation from Josephine, when she was still lying about her affair and destroying my dream of her, though I told her repeatedly I was aware of what was going on⁴⁴².

Both characters then seem to refuse to undertake full responsibility for their actions and obligations towards each other as they are endlessly driven to make self-centred choices. Josephine searches for constant support in other men only to discover that she misses her estranged husband, and Jamal keeps immersing himself in the nostalgia of his youth and acts like a post-sexual revolution teenager even though the only 'sixties' he's proximate to are those he is approaching.

Jamal and Josephine have been separated for eighteen months when the narration begins, and Jamal recognises that he should have tried harder with his wife, and that he misses the domestic atmosphere with her and their son Rafi whom he only sees on the

440 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 13.

441 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 13.

442 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 17.

weekends. Nevertheless, Jamal has numerous erotic adventures before his catharsis with Ajita. His favourite mistress is a young high-class prostitute whose 'art-name' is the Goddess. Jamal does not merely have an isolated encounter with this prostitute, but he becomes an affectionate customer and entwines a kind of mutually affectionate affair without the constraints of family obligations or social responsibilities. In one of their encounters the girl confesses she is working toward a master's degree on "decadence and apocalypse, always a turn-of-the-century preoccupation, along with calls for a 'return to the family'"⁴⁴³. While the Eastern European immigrant whores/escorts in the novel are trying to make a living working in filthy, cheap clubs that Jamal often attends, the fact that the Goddess, along with her British high-class colleagues are University students holds a double potential for social critique. On the one hand, the fact that a beautiful and intelligent girl who could select any proper job in order to pay for her education chooses such a degrading but also highly lucrative occupation is symptomatic of an amoral society where sex is a saleable skill like any other and abundance of money is fundamental. On the other hand, Kureishi also throws a not so veiled polemic against the wretchedly high University fees in the United Kingdom that, according to the *Daily Mail*, have led a great number of students to become also lap dancers or other kinds of sex workers. The *Daily Mail* estimates one in five lap dancers in Britain are students while an official students' guide website estimates the percentage to have risen by 25%⁴⁴⁴. Kureishi personally took a stand in favour of the November 2010 student strike in London, the largest one since 1998, which was set against the Government's planned spending cuts to further education and an increase in the cap on tuition fees.

Besides the Goddess Jamal has other lovers and he even participates in an orgy under the effect of drugs. His ease in kissing one ex or the other and in entertaining himself with anyone available including his best friend's daughter, as well as the fact that Josephine starts frequenting kinky swinger clubs⁴⁴⁵ might appear a little disturbing to the

443 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 218.

444 [Uncited, "Increasing Number of Students Turning to Sex Industry to Pay their Way through University, NUS Warns," *The Daily Mail*, 14 December 2011: \[www.dailymail.co.uk/increasing-number-students-turning-sex-industry-pay-way-university-NUS-warns.html\]\(http://www.dailymail.co.uk/increasing-number-students-turning-sex-industry-pay-way-university-NUS-warns.html\)](#); Uncited, "25% Strippers and Lap Dancers are Students in UK," 15 December 2011: www.heystudents.com

445 Sex clubs that sponsor social activities for those with unusual sex proclivities seem to have become more prevalent in modern times. Clubs were originally formed in opposition to the Church's condemnation of pagan festivals in 16th century France. Two of these organisations, the Joyous Society

reader. This provocative representation of Dionysian excesses is meant as a challenge to a society Kureishi wishes to shock by conveying a sensation of an inner emptiness, a sense of loss, an absolute separation between sex and love, and a desperate search for cohesion in a disconnected world. Finally the slow repair of Jamal and Josephine's fractured marriage testifies to the survival of love bringing new liveliness and equilibrium to their existence. The message is one of hope as relationships can be seen as never falling apart completely, but only re-assessing to accommodate what life brings along.

Henry, Jamal's best friend, is a white upper class award-winning playwright-director. Pompous, priggish and extremely cultured but momentarily blocked in his creativity, he is a separated father approaching his seventies who cohabits with his adult son while maintaining an amical relationship with his snobbish wife Valerie, a member on the board of the Tate Modern.

Henry's block does not only assail his artistic activity, but also his emotional and sexual ones; he hasn't had a relationship in the past five years and confesses to Jamal he's always been incapable of fully enjoying erotic pleasure for fear of the disorderly power of passion. As the novel starts Henry becomes obsessed with the idea of his body decaying and his death, and regrets not having experienced the most extreme sensations human desire could provide. As these feelings grow in him his longing for lewdness is hardly to be restrained and Kureishi brilliantly portrays some hilarious scenes in which the mature theatre director feels he is about to become crazy when his son's beautiful girlfriend walks around his flat in mules and red satin dressing gown "which falls open to expose more shimmering flimsies and worse"⁴⁴⁶. Henry covets the girl and thinks she behaves that way

and the Society of Dijon, rescued the Feast of Fools under the guise of its being a social activity. The Feast of Fools itself was offensive to the Church because it included cross-dressing, complete mockery of Church rituals, flagellation, wearing masks, and the throwing of black pudding (some say feces) into the crowds. In the 18th century an Englishman named Sir Francis Dashwood began the brotherhood of Medmenham and purchased and remodelled an abbey in Medmenham for this purpose. In 1760 this group began holding their meetings there and the once stoic abbey now displayed sexual statues and paintings with lewd inscriptions throughout the interior and exterior. They also had a library that contained a comprehensive collection of erotic literature. The members entered the abbey dressed as friars and their lady guests dressed as nuns. The Grand Master began club services at an altar with a cursory sacrament being offered to their baboon deity. This was followed by other simple rituals. The food served was elaborate and libations abundant. Once members satisfied their initial hunger they selected a nun with whom to consummate revelry. This brotherhood met twice a year and survived 20 years.

446 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 25.

only because she doesn't regard him as a man but as "an impotent grandfather"⁴⁴⁷. He, who once declared that culture is the only thing against death and authoritarianism, and that "any clown can fall in love or have sex,"⁴⁴⁸ now wishes he was that 'clown' because, as Jamal observes quoting a passage from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*:

The sexual passion is the kernel of the will to live. Indeed, one might say man is concrete sexual desire; for his origin is an act of copulation and his wish of wishes is an act of copulation, and this tendency alone perpetuates and holds together his whole phenomenal existence. Sexual passion is the most perfect manifestation of the will to live⁴⁴⁹.

The re-birth and persistence of desire in Henry is a tribute to its strength, and reminds us of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's aged protagonists of novellas such as the *Diary of a Mad Old Man* (1961) or *The Key* (1956)⁴⁵⁰. In these books the elderly protagonists, who also have health problems, become so passionately involved with a particular woman (in *Diary* this is the protagonist's daughter-in-law, in *The Key* it is the protagonist's own unfaithful wife) that, in order to reach satisfaction, they undergo any kind of humiliation and family complication. Their physical illness stands as a metaphor for their sexual corruption and the force of their desire leads them to disregard their precarious health in favour of the satisfaction of their lewdness. In *Something to Tell You* Henry is said to have had a heart attack but this doesn't stop him from the pursuit of pleasure which he amplifies through the consumption of drugs and alcohol. While Tanizaki uses fetishism in his novels so as to emphasise the unconventionality of the protagonists' mad passion, Kureishi uses sadomasochism and swinger sex clubs. Both Utsugi from *Diary of a Mad Old Man* and the unnamed protagonist of *The Key* eventually die, Henry, instead, embraces a new life with Miriam who is the one who introduced him to no-hold barred practices. The affair between Miriam and Henry is quite odd, unlikely, but also very touching and has the power to alter and shake the lives of all those around them.

447 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 25.

448 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 51.

449 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 67.

450 While Kureishi was writing *Something to Tell You* he also worked on the screenplay *Venus*. He admitted he got his inspiration for the latter from reading Tanizaki's novels.

According to *The Encyclopedia of Unusual Sex Practices*, the term sadomasochism now refers primarily to the consensual exchange of power between two people whether the method used to achieve this is psychological or physical⁴⁵¹. S/M is a consensual and negotiated game between two or more people which may be stopped at any time by any partner. The purpose of the game is to push the masochist to the same level of emotional and physical exhaustion found in an extremely passionate love affair. Submission and suffering can both be components of a strong love bond. In sadomasochistic practices gender roles are often reversed. Male masochists willingly give up all their power, masculinity, and demands for sex to prove, by sometimes extreme methods, the intensity of their love. Conversely, female masochists tend to abandon sexual inhibitions displaying or offering their bodies willingly; thus, sex becomes the sacrifice that provides love for a partner.

Miriam, Jamal's sister is a pierced and tattooed single mother of five children from different men. She is ten years younger than Henry, huge, mixed-race, bright but uneducated and vulgar. She lives in a shoddy house bursting with children, animals and vitality. She even boasts that she has spiritual powers. Despite the image she tries to project of herself through her style and attitude Miriam is fragile and sensitive. Valerie Steele writes that getting a tattoo or a piercing is often about attracting people's attention; it is about stating that you are not like everybody else⁴⁵². The decoration of the body is meant to create a shock effect and Miriam's innumerable decorations render visible her struggling and never ending desire to be noticed by her careless father who had never paid attention to her and had fled back to Pakistan when she was still little. She even goes to Pakistan with Jamal to meet him, but her father keeps ignoring her and even insults her for her Western manners. After her father dies Miriam, not having been able to reach him on earth, tries to make an improbable contact with him through some crazy form of

451 Brenda Love, *The Encyclopedia of Unusual Sex Practices* (London: Abacus, 2002), 297. Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1905) was an aristocratic Austrian novelist who wrote sexual tales of men being dominated, humiliated, and disciplined by beautiful women. His book *Venus in Furs* gave him the most notoriety. Sacher-Masoch courted many women and was able to persuade several to oblige him by acting out his fantasies. The notoriety he received for his novels gained the attention of Richard von Kraft-Ebing, a neurologist and psychologist, who decided to label his popular passion as a disease; along with nymphomania, fetishes, homosexuality, and masturbation. Kraft-Ebing's decision to use the term masochism was disturbing to Sacher-Masoch who was only one of many through history who wrote of this type of sexual proclivity.

452 Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 118.

spirituality. Also, having been in perpetual contrast with her mother, as an adolescent Miriam used to cut herself, an element that, as brilliantly portrayed in Steven Shainberg's *The Secretary* (2002), lies at the origins of people's tendency towards sadomasochistic experiences. These two complementary acts bring inner pain to the surface. The sight of bruises and cuts reminds the person who carries them that he/she is alive even if he/she feels deadly alienated, while the sight of the healing of such bruises and cuts gives a sense of relief as it is a visual symbol of the parallel healing of the inner pain. As Brenda Love explains, the reason people feel a need to convey love in this manner often lies in their past environmental conditioning: "many were neglected or had emotionally distant parents. Some of these people use masochism to win the love of their partner because, to them, love and nurturing were never given freely. In addition, these people probably only received nurturing from their parents when they were injured or ill, therefore they may feel that the only time they are permitted to receive nurturing is when they are weak or injured"⁴⁵³. Given the peculiarities of this sexual practice it is easy to detect why both the excess-seeker Henry and the tormented Miriam find a common interest and passion in it. However, big problems start when the two of them are discovered by Henry's son and his girlfriend engaging in their unusual activity. The boy, totally shocked, reports everything to his sister Lisa and to Valerie creating great havoc among everyone. As Henry confesses to Jamal:

'Sam says his fiancée will never be able to look at me again without thinking of me tied to a chair leg with a butt plug up my backside. I said that it was as good a memory of me as any. I wish I'd had a photograph. In fact I think I do somewhere'⁴⁵⁴.

The family being a system, every change made by one of its members changes in some way the system itself. Everybody else has to respond; they have to have an attitude; their lives change, too. Henry's adult children revolt against him calling him "perverted" and saying they are "grossed out"⁴⁵⁵ by his behaviour. Sam returns to his mother's and Lisa, who believes her father is trying to regress to another adolescence, blames Miriam for Henry's disturbing indulgences. She goes to her house, abuses her verbally, humiliates

453 Love, *The Encyclopedia of Unusual Sex Practices*, 297.

454 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 96.

455 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 97.

her and even offers her some money not to see Henry again. The two women eventually get into a fight.

Regardless of other people's concern the couple remains together and keeps enjoying private and public experiments; in fact, Miriam and Henry also haunt kinky swinger clubs in order to fulfil their unusual sexual fantasies. Kureishi's comic verve in describing the wildness of emotion and gesture of his characters provides, through Henry in particular, a brilliant portrait of a well-meaning yet self-indulgent life in the sphere of London's cultural élites; nevertheless the fact that the mature theatre director and the Muslim single mother fall desperately in love with each other also renders their affair romantic and tender. Transgressive relationships in Kureishi are usually represented through miscegenation and the crossing and blurring of class boundaries; yet, through this couple Kureishi also challenges the common idea that sex and pleasure are something only for the young. Henry laments the fact that his children do not want to accept that at his age he still needs erotic satisfaction:

‘They want to cast me as the benign old grandad: impotent, repetitive, making no demands, sitting in the corner with nothing better to do than rub whisky in his gums. A position I can only spit at. My indignity is my only pride now’⁴⁵⁶.

Valerie had always expected Henry to come back to her someday as she wished to spend her old age with him in an idyllic, tranquil way whether by the sea, or just talking reading and painting. But Henry has found happiness with Miriam, and is surely not coming back. Even when the odd couple's rakish interest in Dionysian rituals starts to fade the two of them remain together and make plans for the future. Miriam says that from her first date with Henry she started feeling blissful for the feelings that suddenly sprang in her: “I felt like I was lying on a cushion of air. It's been years since I've had any real love. I kept singing”⁴⁵⁷. With Henry Miriam loses weight and adopts a less rebellious and exaggerated look. She begins reading Russian literature aloud for him while he, now out of his erotic and emotional block, finds in his love for her a renewed creativity resulting in his planning of a new production of *Don Giovanni*. Their relationship represents one of the

456 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 96.

457 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 74.

most beautiful expressions of acceptance and productiveness of difference ever written by Kureishi and stands as a message of hope for older people to find meaning in existence and passionate love even when they think there is no longer any possibility for transformation in their lives.

In Kureishi's previous novels the main characters mostly move horizontally into the city while in *Something to Tell You* the movement is often directed downwardly as to parallel Jamal's insights into the depths of his own and of his patients' psyche⁴⁵⁸. The fact that the brothel that Jamal visits to meet the Goddess is hidden in a London basement and that the *Sootie*, the first club Henry and Miriam visit, is situated under a railway arch symbolises the characters' penetration into a grimy underworld of lust and pagan rituals, a trip into the carnivalesque, in the liberating anarchy of human excesses. However, in the book, underground spatiality also includes the public transport area bombed by terrorists on July 7 2005, fundamentally by those who, brought up in secular Britain, had turned to a radical form of belief that denied them the pleasures of the society in which they lived. According to Kureishi these two worlds, which represent two antithetic aspects of London's marginalia, intersect: radical Islam and radical sexuality, in fact, generate one another. As Jamal observes through his psychoanalytical lens:

Of all perversions, the strangest [is] celibacy, the desire to cancel all desire, to hate it. Not that you could abolish it once and for all. Desire, like the dead, or an unpleasant meal, would keep returning⁴⁵⁹.

What is ironic for Kureishi is the return of the repressed, the religious fundamentalists, to the West, a place that according to the author had realised the Nietzschean project: "to drive out religion and to produce a secular society in which men and women make their own values because morality is gone"⁴⁶⁰. While Henry in *Something to Tell You* claims that the most significant innovation of the post-war era is "the pill, divorcing sex from reproduction, making sex the number-one of

458 *The Black Album* is the only other novel in which there is a consistent movement under the ground through the use of the tube. This can be seen as a parallel for Shahid's discovery of unusual sexuality and his inner conflict between fundamentalism and postmodern sexuality.

459 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 30.

460 Donadio, "My Beautiful London".

entertainment,”⁴⁶¹ Muslim fundamentalism appears as a kind of rebellious movement against “an oversexualised but sterile society”⁴⁶². Kureishi notes how, like racism, fundamentalism feeds itself with fantasy of the Other. As portrayed, for instance, in works such as *My Son the Fanatic* and *The Black Album* the West is re-created as an atheist orgiastic environment of immorality and limitless copulation, while in an essay entitled “Sex and Secularity” the author writes:

If the black person has been demonised by the white, in turn the white is now being demonised by the militant Muslim. The fighting couple can't leave one another alone⁴⁶³.

In *Something to Tell You* Kureishi fictionalises how, after the recent terrorist attacks, a sense of Islamophobia has been rising in the West and how this stance has also taken place in linguistic terms, with the coinage and rapid spread of new abusive names against Muslims based on religious belief rather than skin colour:

‘Muslim’ – or ‘Mussie’ – was a new insult, along with ‘ham-head’ and ‘allahAllah-bomb’. In our youth it had been Paki, wog, curry-face, but religion had not been part of it⁴⁶⁴.

For the author, the alternative to this continuous projection of hate going both ways is to be found in culture as it controverts the domination of either materialism or puritanism:

If both racism and fundamentalism are diminishers of life – reducing others to abstractions – the effort of culture must be to keep others alive by describing and celebrating their intricacy, by seeing that this is not only of value but a necessity⁴⁶⁵.

Kureishi’s last novel, provocative and full of human messiness as it is, reminds us that what we have in common as human beings is more important than what divides us as individuals or members of different collectivities. Our present reality is one of division,

461 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 93.

462 Donadio, “My Beautiful London”.

463 Hanif Kureishi, “Sex and Secularity” in *The Word and the Bomb* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 87.

464 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 320.

465 Kureishi, “Sex and Secularity,” 87.

but strict bonds and productive relationships can still be entwined and fill our lives with joy and mutual acceptance. For instance, Jamal's old mother, the typical suburban lower-middle class woman in the Kureishian repertoire, who is initially portrayed as unhappy, frustrated and caged in her cultural milieu restrictions, suddenly operates a striking revolution in her life. In fact, when her children have reached middle age and she already is a grandmother, she sets up house with a woman friend, Billie, turning to a non-declared lesbianism, and starts enjoying a sparkling metropolitan cultural and social life:

Now the two women got up early and went to the studio. They cooked, bought furniture and travelled, often spending their weekends in Brussels or Paris, or going there for lunch and an afternoon stroll. They were talking of renting an apartment in Venice or holidaying in Barcelona. Mother didn't want us to think her strange, individualistic or radical; she had just moved house. Whether they were lovers or not we didn't ask. Certain words were not promoted here; Mother referred to Billie as her 'friend'. Sometimes I called Billie her companion and she didn't object. It was the best relationship of Mother's life⁴⁶⁶.

With this uncommon representation Kureishi asserts the right for older women, mothers and grandmothers, from whom selflessness, passiveness and immobility are socially expected, to reject this role, and to have, instead, an independent and active sentimental, sexual and cultural life, enjoying the pleasures their generation denied them. This is a theme not often brought forward by contemporary writers, but it is likely to become more and more popular since people live longer and the interests and needs of a growing section of society constitute precious research material for realist writers. In giving increasing importance to revolutionary older characters in his fiction, here with Henry and the two old ladies, earlier with May in *The Mother* and Maurice in *Venus*, Kureishi confirms his role as renovator of the contemporary literary scene.

The inauguration party for the artist's studio that the two old ladies have built in their garden constitutes the social occasion for representing what perhaps is the most beautiful example of a harmonious gathering of totally different people among all Kureishi's novels. Not only are barriers of gender, race, class, sex and age overcome, but also disabled people are included. The image of Alan in a wheelchair accompanied by his boyfriend Mustaq who expresses his desire to marry his lover "in a few months' time,

466 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 87.

when the law changed to allow civil partnerships,⁴⁶⁷ hoping Alan wouldn't die first is heartbreaking. While watching the unfortunate couple Jamal's mother observes: "We're all shuffling towards the exit, one by one," to which Billie positively responds as an ultimate assertion of joy and vitality: "Yes' [...]. 'And some of us are singing!'"⁴⁶⁸. The atmosphere is delicately cheerful. Music is played and champagne is served. Jamal, Ajita, Rafi, Miriam, Henry, Karen and many others are there to celebrate the two old girls, only a few days after the terrorists' bombs had scattered death, disruption and fear in London and in the whole world. But human bonds are stronger and allow life to continue hoping for a better future. In Kureishi's community as portrayed in *Something to Tell You* each character creates connections on the basis of human solidarity: Mustaq, for example, calls his celebrity architect to design the artist's studio of the two old ladies, Henry gives them free tickets for theatre plays, Miriam comforts Ajita in her post 7/7 identity crisis, Jamal comforts Karen in her illness and so on. All these relationships that are based on positive mutual affirmation involve some kind of balance between unity and diversity. Globalisation has made rethinking community all the more necessary. As Jeffrey Weeks observes, "if ever-growing social complexity, cultural diversity and a proliferation of identities are indeed a mark of the postmodern world, then all appeals to our common interest as humans will be as naught unless we can at the same time learn to live with difference"⁴⁶⁹.

467 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 340.

468 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 341.

469 Weeks, "The Value of Difference," 92.

Chapter Four

London Calling: Kureishi and Pop

When 2nd Generation was formed we decided to use the Union jack as a symbol of our pride. [...] I am proud of the Britain that produces bands like Earth Tribe, that plays White Town to No1 without care for the colour of his skin, the Britain that votes curry its favourite food. [...]. Our Britain is not the suburb of Surrey, or a quiet leafy lane in Yorkshire but the chaos and funk of the Inner City. The Britain I really love is meeting in Whitechapel kebab houses, talking dubplates in Brixton record shops.

(Imran Khan)

4.1 “There was a sound that London had”

A peculiar trait in Hanif Kureishi's writing is his considerable use of popular culture, especially pop and rock songs, as well as the sartorial styles that accompany particular youth movements. His thematic and stylistic choices are due to the fact that pop afforded a whole range of new unexplored areas to investigate, as the author explains in the introduction to the *Faber Book of Pop*:

writing about pop introduces us to the fringes of the respectable world, to marijuana, generational conflict, clubs, parties, and to a certain kind of guiltless, casual sex that had never been written about before. Pop, too, has enlivened and altered the language,

introducing a Jonsonian proliferation of idioms, slang and fresh locutions⁴⁷⁰.

Inspired by the 'fringe world' of metropolitan culture, Kureishi sets his stories in those subversive youth subcultures and countercultures which Dick Hebdige has so aptly described and praised. As Stuart Hall claims, popular culture "links with what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'the vulgar' – 'the popular', the informal, the underside, the grotesque"⁴⁷¹. For this reason, it has always been considered as oppositional to high culture and has been both counterpoised and feared as a location of alternative stances, of chaos, of excesses, of the bizarre, and as a collective challenge to power.

The Faber Book of Pop collects more than a hundred and fifty pieces from a wide range of punk reviews, key texts of pop history and the weekly music press, interviews, pictures and even a few anti-pop pieces, in order to provide a chronicle of England's past decades from the point of view of pop, "which is as good a position as any to look from,"⁴⁷² and to underscore its role in foregrounding inclusive attitudes towards different sexualities, races and social classes. It is specifically for this reason that pop features in all of Kureishi's novels which equally aspire to break boundaries between dominant and marginalised groups. Kureishi celebrates the way pop culture has undercut the dominant class' pretension on exclusive visibility and praises pop's democratic drive since, as Savage writes, it "continues to grant visibility and audibility to voices often excluded from the mainstream – Afro-Caribbeans, homosexuals, women, outsiders of all types"⁴⁷³:

Music was our common culture in the 1960s and 1970s [...]. The only thing we talked about was pop and in those days it was exciting and new – there was Hendrix and The Rolling Stones and so on, and a whole culture went with it [...]⁴⁷⁴.

Pop music, seen as a leveller of minority and marginalised individuals, reached its highest point for Kureishi with the Beatles' LP *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Its collage cover, a masterpiece of Pop Art designed by Peter Blake, is a graphic meeting point between East and West, high culture and low culture; it is a joyful

470 Hanif Kureishi and John Savage eds., *The Faber Book of Pop* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), xix.

471 Stuart Hall, "What is Black in Popular Culture" in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Stuart Hall, David Morley, Kuan Hsing-Chen eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 469.

472 Kureishi and Savage eds., *The Faber Book of Pop*, xix.

473 Kureishi and Savage eds., *The Faber Book of Pop*, xxxiii.

474 "Music was our common culture in the 1960s and 1970s," *The Guardian*, 16 March 2001.

celebration of hybridity⁴⁷⁵. Kureishi insists that the Beatles “were at the centre of life for millions of young people in the West”⁴⁷⁶: they represented hedonism, happiness, freedom and the dismissal of received values of commitment and responsibility, but they also embodied opportunity and possibility. As the author says, “they were career officers, a myth for us to live by, a light for us to follow”⁴⁷⁷. The ‘Fab Four’ were, in fact, of lower-middle class suburban origins and their astonishing success gave a whole generation of teenagers the hope that they too could improve their socio-economic position. Barry Langford rightly argues that suburbia is the location from which “many subcultures originate”⁴⁷⁸ as a reaction to dullness and fixity: as a matter of fact even rock and glam rock icons such as Mick Jagger and David Bowie, not unlike the Beatles, were lower-middle class youngsters from the English suburbs before they moved to London and appeared on the metropolitan scene attending fabulous parties, meeting personalities such as Harold Pinter, Bertrand Russell and Richard Hamilton, dictating style and establishing tendencies. Sukhdev Sandhu has pointed out that much of the pop music of those years “was shot through with a disdain for suburbia”⁴⁷⁹ and the urge to get rid of the shackles of domesticity was, and still is, resonating through hit songs such as The Kinks’s *Autumn Almanac* or The Rolling Stones’ *The Wanderer*.

In his critical collection, *Eight Arms to Hold You*, Kureishi shows that popular culture and music can be a site of transgressive political commentary and emphasises the power of music to speak honestly and directly to the listeners by contrasting the “aggressive and combative” but nonetheless “attractive” voice of John Lennon to the “cold, pompous, and clearly insincere” voice of Margaret Thatcher⁴⁸⁰. Nowadays the role of subcultures as oppositional to dominant traditions is certainly more blurred than it was in its peak years, the 1960s and 1970s; however popular culture and style, in their several

475 The collage depicted more than 70 celebrities, including writers, musicians, film stars and a number of Indian gurus. The grouping included: Aldous Huxley, Aleister Crowley, Marlene Dietrich, James Dean, Bob Dylan, Sigmund Freud, Edgar Allan Poe, Marilyn Monroe, Carl Gustav Jung, William S. Burroughs, Marlon Brando, Oscar Wilde and many others.

476 Kureishi, “Eight Arms to Hold You,” 367.

477 Kureishi, “Eight Arms to Hold You,” 363.

478 Barry Langford, “Margins of the City: Towards a Dialectic of Suburban Desire” in *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton eds. (London: Routledge, 2000), 65.

479 Sandhu, “Pop Goes the Centre,” 237.

480 Kureishi, “Eight Arms to Hold You,” 369.

variations, are still “a site of continuing struggle,”⁴⁸¹ and Kureishi employs them in order to comment on notions such as essentialism and authenticity, and to describe his characters' identity negotiation.

The space where most pop culture can prosper, flourish, and feed on new propulsions, possibilities and meanings is the inner city. London has always been the major point of attraction for immigrants going to the United Kingdom from any part of the globe, and has been studied, described, anatomised from different perspectives by several critics and writers. John Clement Ball has called it a ‘semi-detached metropolis’; Iain Chambers an ‘obscured metropolis’, V. S. Naipaul views it as a ‘belated’ and ‘ruined’ Imperial City. Kureishi's London, even if it can sometimes be shabby, dangerous, messy or confusing, doesn't have much to share, for example, with Sam Selvon's racial enclaves described in *The Lonely Londoners* (1985). Kureishi depicts, instead, multiracial and multicultural communities where, even if not without difficulties, “new kinds of possible order, new kinds of human unity [are achievable] in the transforming experience of the city”⁴⁸². Kureishi's metropolitan landscapes are populated by young people of different ethnic backgrounds who freely move from one end to the other of ‘Swinging London’, a site where communication and transformation are possible, where, in Bhabha's words “we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves”⁴⁸³. It is an easier England to identify with for diasporic populations than the rural, industrial and suburban realities outside the metropolis because it avoids the demand of assimilation into an English homogeneous community and all kinds of identities can live side by side more or less peacefully:

There was a sound that London had. It was, I'm afraid, people in Hyde Park playing bongos with their hands; there was also the keyboard on the Door's ‘Light My Fire’. There were kids dressed in velvet cloaks who lived free lives; there were thousands of Black people everywhere, so I wouldn't feel exposed; there were bookshops with racks of magazines printed without capital letters or the bourgeois disturbance of full stops; there were shops selling all the records you could desire; there were parties where girls and boys you didn't know took you upstairs and fucked you; here were all the drugs you could use⁴⁸⁴.

481 Kureishi and Savage eds., *The Faber Book of Pop*, 672.

482 Williams, *The Country and The City*, 151.

483 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 39.

484 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 121.

Kureishi's London is totally immersed in popular culture images because "English pop," Paul Gilroy observes, "is one of the few areas where class, race and background become subordinated to the eternal 'now' that is at the heart of pop music and where [...] it ain't where you're from – it's where you're at"⁴⁸⁵.

Colin MacInnes was the first English writer who focused his attention on youth pop culture and who represented it together with the newly settled immigrants in 1950s London, in a period when, as Caryl Phillips observes, "'the colour problem' was debated in parliament, on television, in newspapers, magazines, on the radio"⁴⁸⁶ but literature was completely eluding the issue⁴⁸⁷. In *Absolute Beginners* (1959) MacInnes described the phenomenon of the baby singers and the astonishing growth of the music market and consequently of the music-oriented fashion market, due to the fact that for the first time in history teenagers had the economic possibility to buy things for themselves thanks to the post-war economic boom. In an illuminating article entitled *Pop Songs and Teenagers* the author well summed up this phenomenon:

now all the young have gold. Earning good wages and living for little, like billeted troops on poor harrassed Dad and Mum, the kids have more 'spending money' than any other age group of the population. [...] The two nations of our society may perhaps no longer be those of the 'rich' and 'poor' [...] but those of the teenagers on the one hand, and on the other, all those who have assumed the burdens of adult responsibility. Indeed the great social revolution of the past fifteen years may not be the one which redivided wealth among adults in the Welfare State, but the one that's given teenagers economic power. Pop music industry [is] entirely their own creation; but what about the new clothing industry for making and selling teenage garments of both sexes? [...] Or the radiogram and television industries? Or the eating and soft-drink places that cater so largely for them?⁴⁸⁸

Kureishi's novels capture the effects of this transformation and depict teenagers making music, adopting sartorial styles and living lives that challenge the repressive mores (and melodies) of their elders. The author describes the flourishing multiplicity of British subcultures (hippie mysticism, Punk, Rastafarianism etc.), which represent "in a spectacular fashion the breakdown of consensus in the post-war period," and "go 'against

485 Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), 120.

486 Caryl Phillips, "Kingdom of the Blind," *The Guardian*, 17 July 2004.

487 The only exception, beside MacInnes's novels is represented, according to Phillips, by Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958).

488 Colin MacInnes, "Pop Songs and Teenagers," in *England, Half English* (London: Penguin, 1996), 49, 50, 56.

nature' by interrupting the process of 'normalization'"⁴⁸⁹. As such, subcultures express themselves through gestures, movements and features that turn the world upside down; they challenge the harmony and conformism of mainstream society and subvert the myth of common consent⁴⁹⁰. Kureishian characters either join or feel affinity towards different subcultures by turning into young iconoclasts and inventing new identities for themselves. Their development mirrors Britain's coming to terms with cultural plurality and shows how urban cultures, music in particular, can be retrieved, theorised and redeployed as instrumentalities through which the urban space can be transposed and used to re-imagine citizenship within the greater global cultural imaginary. Pop provides an opportunity to reshape both the self and society.

Song titles, music groups and genres pervade Kureishi's fiction acting as cultural and historical references of the era in which each story is set. The pop culture Kureishi formed himself with had mainly Western roots, so there are not the Bollywood elements that instead inform Rushdie's novels or Syal and Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) in his fiction, but English and American pop references resulting from the hybrid intermingling of black and white, Eastern and Western influences. His prose style is itself musical; as Kaleta notices, in fact, "Kureishi sees his stories in movement,"⁴⁹¹ and his novels actually develop through a highly episodic structure which reminds the reader of a music album, and run with the rhythm of rock and pop music, vibrating and sexy, lively and melancholic.

The music industry tends to appropriate countercultures and subcultures because "it's the nonconformists, not the conformists, who are driving consumer spending"⁴⁹². Subversion, in fact, as Thomas Frank explains, has become a marketing ploy of record companies and other popular culture producers,⁴⁹³ but this is actually what keeps the value of subcultures alive since as soon as their symbols and meanings become part of the mainstream, newer symbols, newer meanings have to be created and new linguistic means have to be coined in order to convey them. Still, plenty of acts that have challenged

489 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 17, 18.

490 For more on this argument see Gavin Grindon, "Carnival Against Capital: A Comparison of Bakhtin, Vaneigem and Bey," *Anarchist Studies* 12.2 (2004), 147-61.

491 Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi*, 10.

492 Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 103.

493 Thomas Frank, "Why Johnny Can't Dissent," in *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland eds. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 38.

normative social values have entered the mainstream as well, and maintained their carnivalesque value thanks to the continuous self-reshaping of their visionary music performers. As Jon Savage claims, in fact, “the music industry is, in general, not in the position of initiating trends, but reacting to them [...] [it is] in the position of attempting to catch the lightning. [It] can never predict exactly where it will strike, nor with what power”⁴⁹⁴. Command over music contents and strategies then resides only in part in the hands of the major labels; the other part is strongly held by the fans and subversion is the expression of their feelings towards the establishment rather than simply a strategic marketing commodity. It is a politically radical fusion of art and life. Being the fan of a group and regarding a pop star as a role model and therefore spokesperson of certain politics, beliefs, attitudes is a common way people, use to define themselves to others, especially among youngsters.

Performativity is a primary constituent of popular culture, not only in the traditional sense of artists performing music, but also in their stylised repetition of acts and signifiers, whether linguistic or visual, that holds the potential to undermine and subvert essentialism. This vision is linked to Judith Butler’s analysis of the performativity of gender in drag culture which, she claims, challenges the traditional idea that gender descends from biological sex. The effective change that pop musicians and artists are prized for effecting through their performative use of cultural signs can only happen, as Marvin Carlson posits, through an appropriate interpretation in the viewer’s eyes of such cultural signs; in fact if the interpretation fails, change does not occur⁴⁹⁵. The risk of any performative gesture, as a double-agent, is that its message of resistance may be misunderstood unless complicity and subversion are linked together in the eye of the viewer; this is the case, for instance, of the use of the swastika in punk rock which was not generally meant as an affirmation of white supremacy, but it was supposed to signify the rebellion of youths against the values of their parents’ generation, or it was simply a declaration of nihilism⁴⁹⁶. Kureishi praises the quality of subcultures to express forbidden

494 John Savage, *England’s Dreaming: Sex Pistols, Punk Rock and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001), 205.

495 See Marvin Carlson, “Resistant Performance,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin eds. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 310.

496 James J. Ward, “‘This is Germany! It’s 1933!’ Appropriations and Constructions of ‘Fascism’ in New York Punk/Hardcore in the 1980s,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 30.3 (1996), 160. For more on punk’s fascination with the swastika see also Savage’s *England’s Dreaming*, and Simon Reynolds’ *Rip it Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

contents in forbidden forms and to operate through the creation, the reinvention and the deconstruction of signs and images, but he also underlines the misinterpretations that can occur, in order to challenge the reader to negotiate his or her own stereotypes and misconceptions. Pop works as a means to dismantle the fetishising of authenticity, and foregrounds an 'in-between' space that rejects traditional dichotomies such as coloniser/colonised, heterosexual/homosexual in favour of a more hybrid and fluid perception of identity. In the light of these introductory notes, the subsequent sections will analyse how various forms of pop music and its British transformations enhance and define his works.

4.2 From Hippie to Punk: *The Buddha of Suburbia*

The Buddha of Suburbia is one of the novels where Kureishi extensively employs pop music and subculture signifiers to express both the joyful, playful and entertaining nature of pop and its mingling with political protest. In line with the principle of *decorum*, Kureishi conforms the spirit of the novel to that of the music his main characters associate with: both are idealistic, drug-fuelled, bawdy, anarchistic, hopeful, sometimes tender, and ultimately, a paean to youth. The heyday of pop music coincides with Karim's (and Kureishi's) teenage years when the hero sees pop as a way to express his desire to flee from limited mores and opinions into a world of infinite possibilities. On one hand, Karim negotiates his dual white English and South Asian descent, while, on the other, he jauntily plays with his bi-sexual identity, thus confirming Kureishi's statement that "pop was made for the moment, to embody exhilaration; and it sprang from a momentary but powerful impulse: teenage sexual longing"⁴⁹⁷.

At the beginning of the novel we find Karim as he gets ready for his father's first guru performance at Eva's house where there will also be Charlie with whom he is infatuated. As always in Kureishi's novels, the act of getting dressed is very theatrical and becomes a sort of sacred rite of preparation, celebrated with the appropriate soundtrack,

⁴⁹⁷ Kureishi and Savage eds., *The Faber Book of Pop*, xix.

which the hero chooses depending on his mood. While getting dressed Karim listens to Bob Dylan's *Positively 4th Street*, a song written in 1965 and inspired by New York City's 4th Street, at the heart of Manhattan, in the residential district of Greenwich Village, where Dylan once lived and probably left because of the mean rumours that the community members made behind his back about his departing from traditional folk styles towards the electric guitar and rock music. The similarities with Karim's situation are quite clear. He is still living in the suburbs, where, as his mother had just pointed out, the neighbours spy on their house with their binoculars in order to gossip about the 'mixed' family's untraditional behaviour, and especially about Haroon's yoga oddities. Right after the grooming scene, however, Margaret reproaches her son for his eccentric outfit that will surely be criticised by the white suburbanites who live around them. Dylan's song then is both evocative of a restrictive and provincial community and anticipatory of Karim's imminent and necessary departure from this place in order to develop his own artistic career.

In his room Karim has just donned

turquoise flared trousers, a blue and white flower-patterned see-through shirt, blue suede boots with Cuban heels, and a scarlet Indian waistcoat with gold stitching around the edges, [...] a headband to control [his] shoulder-length fizzy hair⁴⁹⁸.

His outfit perfectly matches that of the Beatles in their late 1960s hippie phase when they

started to wear clothes designed to be read by people who were stoned [...]. John Lennon in 1967 [...] was reported wearing a green flower-patterned shirt, red cord trousers, yellow socks and a sporran in which he carried his loose change and keys. These weren't the cheap but hip adaptations of work clothes that young males had worn since the late 1940s [...]. Democratic styles practical for work. Like Baudelairean dandies they could afford to dress ironically and effeminately, for each other, for fun, beyond the constraints of the ordinary [...]. Wearing shimmering bandsman's outfits, crushed velvet, peach-coloured silk and long hair, their clothes were gloriously non-functional, identifying their creativity and the pleasures of drug-taking⁴⁹⁹.

Karim participates in the Beatles' sartorial performativity; through him, Kureishi establishes that style is a mode of expression that signals one's attitudes, beliefs and

498 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 6.

499 Kureishi, "Eight Arms to Hold You," 366-7.

sensibilities to others⁵⁰⁰. Nevertheless, when later that same night Karim has a chat with Charlie whom he intensely desires, he finds out that the hippie style he has embraced is already outdated:

'You've got to wear less.'

'Wear less, Charlie?'

'Dress less. Yes.'

He got up on to one elbow and concentrated on me. His mouth was close. I sunbathed under his face.

'Levi's, I suggest, with an open necked shirt, maybe in pink or purple, and a thick brown belt. Forget the headband.'

'Forget the headband?'

'Forget it'

I ripped my headband off and tossed it accross the floor.

'[...]You see, Karim, you tend to look a bit like a pearly queen.'

I, who wanted only to be like Charlie – as clever, as cool in every part of my soul – tattooed his words on to my brain. Levi's, with an open-necked shirt, maybe in a very modest pink or purple. I would never go out in anything else for the rest of my life⁵⁰¹.

As a glamorous musician soon to be famous, Charlie knows that sartorial tendencies change extremely quickly and once they become popular they have to be changed in order to remain evident and transgressive. Karim's 1960s style, then, is already outdated, even if in the suburbs it is still perceived as subversive. His musical preferences need to be refined as well; in fact when Karim enthusiastically praises the latest Rolling Stones album, Charlie, eye-rolling, immediately extinguishes his friend's ebullience and makes him feel like "an animal, a philistine, a child"⁵⁰². The newest musical trend for Charlie is epitomised by a Pink Floyd record, *Ummagumma*, a more cutting-edge choice, since Pink Floyd was a psychedelic/progressive rock band that moved away from the

500 Kureishi's scrupolous concern with fashion details becomes even more evident in the BBC movie production of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which Kureishi describes as a "costume drama" for the richness of its 1970s outfits.

501 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 16.

502 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 14.

Stones' blues-oriented rock and roll.

As the novel evolves through the 1970s, Karim continues to be very concerned about his clothing as a marker of identity, accordingly to Hebdige's claim that the challenge of subcultures "is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs"⁵⁰³. The hero switches from a progressive rock style to the New Wave style which was spurred by the punk movement of the mid-to-late 1970s and when he goes to one of Charlie's performances he sneers at the rock executives who dress as he had very recently:

As a concession to the New Wave I wore a black shirt, black jeans, white socks and black suede shoes, but I knew I had uninteresting hair. Not that I was the only one: some older men in 1960s expensive casual clothes, Fiorucci jeans and suede boots, with Cuban heels for Christ's sake, were chasing the band, hoping to sign them⁵⁰⁴.

Karim's New Wave outfit is from the more commercially friendly outgrowth of punk since he chooses the more mainstream variation of pop style while Charlie, instead, enjoys the most outrageous sartorial excesses. This different approach to styles perfectly reflects the two characters' attitudes towards society. Karim wants to be fashionable and admired because he likes being looked at and longs for young people's acceptance; Karim, in fact, being half-Asian, is conscious that in the 1970s white England, as Sandhu observes, Asians are seen as "dull and rather backwards-looking,"⁵⁰⁵ provincial and unfashionable. Karim's rebellion is against racist prejudice and stereotype, and against the suburban system of values that excludes difference. Charlie, on the contrary, is so used to embodying the role of the trend-setter among his peers that his choices have to be more original and immediately associated with newness. Charlie is also the only child of a totally absent father who never appears in the novel, and who had made Eva depressed and unhappy during their marriage. Eva, on the other hand, is an affectionate mother, but she is too obsessed with her new career, with the managing of Haroon and Karim's job opportunities, and with her immense network of relationships to dedicate enough time to

503 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 20.

504 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 152-3.

505 Sandhu, "Pop Goes the Centre," 230.

her own son. Charlie's rebellion then needs a shocking, theatrical style in order to make him conspicuous and catch people's attention.

I agree with Wendy O'Shea-Meddour when she argues that the tendency of many critics such as Schoene to focus on Karim has marginalised other characters in the body of criticism on *The Buddha of Suburbia*⁵⁰⁶. Charlie, for instance, has often been neglected or even ignored but, I would suggest that it is mainly through his character that Kureishi offers his most thorough commentary, as well as his most scathing humour, on the issues of popular culture and identity. In his effort to achieve success as a rock star, Charlie morphs into a number of pop/subcultural incarnations reflecting Douglas Kellner's statement that "postmodern identity contain[s] a level of reflexivity, an awareness that identity is chosen and constructed. In contemporary society, however, it may be more 'natural' to change identities, to switch with the changing winds of fashion"⁵⁰⁷. Charlie's self-shaping as different types of rock stars is not as superficial as one might first believe; yet he morphs so quickly and abruptly that the reader acknowledges, as Jamila does, that in him "there was iron ambition under the crushed-velvet idealism which was still the style of the age"⁵⁰⁸.

In the first part of the novel Charlie has long hair, wears jeans and "a wide-collared shirt with pink flowers on it"⁵⁰⁹; shortly thereafter, he completely reinvents his look:

He stood out from the crowd in his silver hair and stacked shoes. He looked less winsome and poetic now; his face was harder, with short hair, the cheekbones more pronounced. It was Bowie's influence, I know⁵¹⁰.

In trying to construct a more noticeable and shocking image of himself as a musician, Charlie takes inspiration from David Bowie's style. Bowie and Kureishi attended the same Bromley school and, in conversation with Colin McCabe, Kureishi highlighted the big influence that the pop star and his message of fluidity and hybridity

506 Wendy O'Shea-Meddour, "The Politics of Imagining the Other in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*," in *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary*, Neil Murphy and Wai-chew Sim eds. (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008), 33-34.

507 Douglas Kellner, "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities" in *Modernity and Identity*, Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 153-4.

508 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 75.

509 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 88.

510 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 68.

had had on him since his adolescence⁵¹¹. The author fictionalises his great admiration for Bowie on several occasions, and in particular in *Gabriel's Gift*, as will be discussed below. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Bowie has an almost divine status for the suburban schoolboys who, in front of his portrait, “were often to be found on their knees before this icon, praying to be made into pop stars and for release from a lifetime as motor-mechanics”⁵¹². Bowie embodies possibility of a better future: his escape from suburbia and from lower-middle class sexual restrictions and definitions into the wider metropolitan realm of free play and multiple identities closely resembles the trajectory of Kureishi's main characters and of the author himself. The fact that Bowie wrote and sang the music for the television adaptation of *The Buddha of Suburbia* further amplifies this tie of the story to Kureishi's autobiography⁵¹³.

Although, Bowie is an elegant and poignant provocateur, his performances are so personal and complicatedly metaphorical that they are hard to be made convincingly workable by other performers who lack his genius. Charlie copies his formula but does not achieve widespread success with it; he is too angrily energetic to embody such a sophisticated style as that of Bowie, and when he and Karim see a punk rock band performance for the first time, Charlie has his epiphany. The band's powerful rage immediately electrifies him:

Charlie was excited. ‘That’s it, that’s it’, he said as we strolled.[...] His voice was squeaky with rapture. ‘The sixties have been given notice tonight. Those kids we saw have assassinated all hope. They’re the fucking future.’

‘Yeah, maybe, but we can’t follow them’, I said casually. [...] ‘Obviously we can’t wear rubber and safety-pins and all that. What would we look like? Sure, Charlie’.

‘Why not, Karim? Why not, man?’

‘It’s not us’.

‘We got to change. What are you saying? We shouldn’t keep up? That suburban boys like us always know where it’s at?’⁵¹⁴

511 MacCabe, “Interview: Hanif Kureishi on London,” 48. In 1993 Kureishi also interviewed Bowie for *Panta*.

512 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 68.

513 Bowie also sang the theme music for *Absolute Beginners* (1986), the film version of Colin MacInnes's novel that, as mentioned earlier, in its focus on youth, its celebration of speed and sex, its registration of teenage slang, and its portrayal of multi-racial London anticipates Kureishi's own work.

514 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 131.

John Storey claims that “the consumption of music is one of the means through which a subculture forges its identity and culturally reproduces itself by marking its distinction and difference from other members of society”⁵¹⁵; Charlie recognises that punk music, with its live sound of “broken glass and rusty razor blades”⁵¹⁶ is a reaction against the idealism of the 1960s since in the following decade the UK was beginning its economic decline. The punk movement had mainly working class origins and began as a libertarian response to the establishment seen as responsible for Britain’s disadvantageous social and economic conditions. The Sex Pistols, the most famous punk rock band, was created in this spirit. Its manager, Malcolm McLaren, an artist and entrepreneur who wanted to create a subaltern voice in the rock world, and his partner, the great-to-be designer Vivienne Westwood, both of whom were of working class origins and lived in a council house, felt that “the claims of hippie culture to have changed the world were false”⁵¹⁷. The Sex Pistols were a loud, creative, disruptive, exaggerated but also talented means to comment on the status quo. Its sound, now very familiar, was absolutely surprising for that time. As Jon Savage claims, in fact, “with their sound alone the Sex Pistols drove a wedge into the musical standards of the time”⁵¹⁸. McLaren and Westwood created the garments and gears for the band, topping them with slogans of anarchism and political protest, and gained enormous success. The fascinating element of punk and the Sex Pistols for teenagers was that they could express their personal alienation as it paralleled the political and economic conditions to which it was responding. As Hebdige points out, soon the rage of the punk movement became somewhat manufactured because of its highly commercial potential⁵¹⁹.

After attending a captivating gig with Karim, chameleonic Charlie changes his style once again and modifies his music: he assumes the stage name Charlie Hero⁵²⁰ and

515 John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 119.

516 Savage, *England’s Dreaming*, 206.

517 Savage, *England’s Dreaming*, 9.

518 Savage, *England’s Dreaming*, 206.

519 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 65.

520 Kureishi takes punk rocker Billy Idol as the inspirational living character for Charlie Hero. Billy Idol (born William Broad) also was a schoolmate of Kureishi’s in Bromley, and the resemblances between the real and the fictional punk singers are several. Both Idol and Charlie are good-looking and lower-middle class, both their bands, Charlie’s The Condemned and Idol’s Generation X were regarded as posers by other punks. Charlie becomes hugely successful after he moves to New York; Idol made a similar move

evocatively re-baptises his band 'The Condemned'. His new look includes wearing black eyeliner, while, as Karim describes him,

his hair was dyed black now, and it was spiky. He wore, inside out, a slashed T-shirt with a red swastika hand-painted on it. His black trousers were held together by safety-pins, paperclips and needles. Over this he had a black mackintosh; there were five belts strapped around his waist and a sort of grey linen nappy attached to the back of his trousers⁵²¹.

Additionally Charlie completes his image with a new villainous attitude becoming abusive towards his mother, people in general, and, as an astute marketing move, towards the media. Charlie is exaggerating his usual behaviour (he's always been a bit spiteful) in order to play his new role. Kureishi creates Charlie's character in clear resemblance to Johnny Rotten, the Sex Pistols' lead singer, whose working class rebellion against the establishment was conveyed through a series of verbal abuses against the system's mouthpiece, the media. Kureishi's account of "two outraged parents [...] reported as having kicked in TV screens"⁵²² after the early evening broadcast of an interview in which Charlie Hero publicly swore and abused the audience, was probably inspired by the episode which occurred in 1976, when the Sex Pistols' TV appearance in Bill Grundy's early evening BBC show, *Thames TV*, led to the sacking of the presenter and, according to the *Daily Mirror*, to a man kicking in the screen of his TV⁵²³. However, before the triumph of 3D technology, special effects motion pictures, and digital photography, punk's visual and musical performances on stage are the most theatrical and vividly rebellious manifestations of the decade. Charlie then rightly aspires to the role of star and Karim enviously observes that punk has transformed his suburban friend "into what the *Daily Express* called 'a phenomena' [sic]"⁵²⁴. The Condemned in the novel get a record deal in record time just like the Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Damned who were the first three bands to market an album as 'punk'. Charlie, like Johnny Rotten, is certainly not politically involved before his transformation, and Karim sees through his artificiality and

in 1981 and gained superstar status. Both Charlie and Idol also lead similar self-destructive lifestyles. Idol has led a life of extremes and excess, including addiction to drugs; Charlie also uses heavy drugs and in the US experiments with extreme sexual practices.

521 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 151-2.

522 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 153.

523 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 46.

524 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 152.

negatively comments on his friend. Thus Karim, for his part, is also more interested in his career than in political action and disappoints Jamila for his lack of commitment to race politics. When Charlie sees punk rock music as a suitable vehicle towards success, Karim rejects his idea saying: “‘It would be artificial,’ [...] ‘We’re not from the estates. We haven’t been through what they have’”⁵²⁵. Karim is unwilling to consider his friend a real rock star when he becomes famous, but only “a temporary, borrowed persona,”⁵²⁶ because his popularity in the United States stems from the audiences’ stereotyped perception of ‘authentic’ English working class singers. Charlie is from a wealthier family than Karim, and in New York he plays the part of the working class Briton by “going in for cockney rhyming slang” and this way “selling Englishness,” even if in school he had been made fun of for “talking so posh”⁵²⁷. Charlie both commodifies and fakes his ‘Englishness’ just as Karim does with his ‘Indianness’ when, in his Mowgli role, he fakes a humiliating sonorous accent in front of the white audience and causes both Jamila and Haroon to feel offended. Karim’s scepticism is, after all, quite hypocritical considering that he gets his first role exclusively for his Asian features, not having had any acting training. Karim and Charlie commodify and exploit both their ‘cultural capital’ and the media market’s need for saleable ‘authentic’ identities, in order to win a better social position, earn money and feel satisfied with their own achievements. Through the commodification of white Charlie and his ethnicity in the eye of the American audience, Kureishi complicates the vision of the West putting the East in the position of otherness, or the colonial subject exploiting the postcolonial one. Westerners, as the author suggests, can stereotype other Westerners because of the desire and expectations to recognise in the Other the images generically and superficially received from the media. Kureishi, once again, subverts social categories and essentialist assumptions. In Kureishi’s fiction no character in the end acts better or worse than the others, no one is essentially good or essentially bad; as the author says: “All my characters are laughable in the way that all the world is amusing to me. We’re all amusing.”⁵²⁸.

Performing an identity in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is not only expected but is the

525 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 132.

526 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 246.

527 Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 247.

528 Laurence Chua, “Interview with Hanif Kureishi and Gurinder Chada,” *Bomb* 48 (Summer 1994): <http://bombsite.com/issues/48/articles/1788>

ticket to success because identity is fluid and provisional, and the characters, in order to actively participate in life have to keep being in movement, abandon old habits and embrace change.

For Simon Frith and Mark Slobin our musical tastes are not the result of an essential identity: “if identity is always somehow constrained by imaginative forms, it is also freed by them: the personal is the cultural, and [...] we are not necessarily restricted in terms of such cultural imagination by social circumstances”⁵²⁹. According to this anti-essentialist vision, Charlie’s choice of punk rock as his ideal means of artistic expression is not automatically inauthentic, but punk rock is just what he chooses. Charlie is one of many punk performers (both artists and audiences) who picked the image and the lifestyle close to their sensibilities, and even though Charlie is impersonating a role, his participation is a contribution to a movement that marked the history of music, art, fashion, culture and even politics providing a voice to young people for expressing their disenchantment with social inequalities.

Besides the fact that Charlie has the quality of the leader and trend-setter even off stage and his star still rises when he takes off the eye-liner and safety pins, an important element has to be taken into account. Although he is not a very sympathetic character because he is not as self-ironic and funny as Karim, in real life Charlie gives a living example of heartfelt interracial friendship. In a historical period marked by race riots and rampant racism, where the political scene was dominated by openly racist figures such as Enoch Powell with his infamous anti-immigration speech ‘Rivers of Blood’,⁵³⁰ and Margaret Thatcher with her intolerance and reactionary government, the strict, and at times conflictual, bond between Charlie and Karim is itself performative. Kureishi privileges this couple of friends above all other characters in his entire oeuvre; in fact, through short intertextual references in *The Black Album*, *Gabriel’s Gift* and *Something to Tell You*, the author informs us that they will both have brilliant careers, and they will still be inseparable friends thirty years later.

529 Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1996), 122.

530 Powell’s speech, pronounced in Birmingham on 20 April 1968, evoked a passage of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, “et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno” (6, line 87), where, according to a prophecy, on his return to Italy Aeneas would find war and ‘foaming blood’ in the Tiber. See Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Harper Collins 1998), and Enoch J. Powell, “Immigration,” in *Freedom and Reality*, John Wood ed. (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1969), 213-9.

4.3 Prince, Madonna and Rave Parties: *The Black Album*⁵³¹

If I can't dance, it's not my revolution.

(Emma Goldman)

As a riposte to the Beatles' 1969 *The White Album*, in 1988 Prince named his new LP *The Black Album*, but it was withdrawn from sale for unknown reasons. Kureishi entitled his second novel after Prince's repressed LP as a metaphor for the censorship imposed over Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* which, as Kureishi fictionalises, was publicly burned after a *fatwa* was issued against its author.

In the book Kureishi employs the pop phenomenon of gender-bending as a metaphor for the fluidity and indeterminacy of identity, opposing it to the coercive fixity of fundamentalist Islam. During the 1970s and 1980s artists like Prince, Marc Bolan, Brian Eno, Boy George and David Bowie symbolically re-invented the concept of masculinity by deconstructing the complex issue of gender, no longer considered as a biological matter but as an essentially cultural aspect of life. All of them wore heavy make-up and eccentric clothes, including feminine lingerie, and represented themselves as a new sexual category, totally hybrid and sharply in contrast with the male chauvinism of the rockers. In Kureishi's *The Black Album*, Prince comes to represent those mercurial qualities of instability and change that Kureishi associates with the new cosmopolitan English identity⁵³²; in fact, as Deedee says, the pop icon is:

half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho too. His work contains and extends the history of black American music, Little Richard, James Brown, Sly Stone, Hendrix⁵³³.

Being himself a celebration of plural identities, Prince embodies hybridity. Shahid deeply admires the American singer because he mixes different musical genres (rock,

531 For more on this, see also my essay "Sign o' the Times. Pop and Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*," in *Identities in Transition in the English-Speaking World*, N. Vasta, A. Riem Natale, M. Bortoluzzi, D. Saidero eds. (Udine: Forum, 2011), 243-9.

532 For more on Prince, see Dave Hill, *Prince. A Pop Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

533 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 25.

funk, disco or rap) and intermingles black and white roots, innovation and tradition, so that his sound is both home-grown and exotic. He keeps changing personas, identities, even names⁵³⁴ and, as Sandhu observes, “polymorphous, perverse, self-transforming, limitless in ego and imagination [...], Prince [is] an understandable idol for Asians who felt themselves constrained by the order of things”⁵³⁵.

When Shahid first meets his new lecturer, Deedee, he notices that in her small office, “pinned over her desk were pictures of Prince, Madonna and Oscar Wilde, with a quote beneath them, ‘All limitations are prisons’”⁵³⁶. Oscar Wilde is surely the most emblematic figure to have defied Victorian values concerning sexuality, and was convicted and imprisoned to two years of hard labour for having committed “gross indecency with other men”⁵³⁷. Madonna, instead, is famous for her cross-gender and androgynous experimentations, and the eclecticism of her music expresses the liberation from essentialist affiliations. In 1989, the year when the novel is set, Madonna was highly contested for her provocative performances against the Catholic religion in videos such as *Like a Prayer* which featured stigmata and burning crosses leading the Vatican to condemn it. The public simulation of sexual practices she enacted on stage was, like Prince’s, inscribed in her spectacle of masking. Bringing the obscene on-stage, the two artists provided a public context where the performance of sexuality was cloaked in an image of glamour. According to Sonya Andermahr, Madonna represents “the quintessential female icon of the 1980s” who “has transcended her particular roles as pop star, dancer, actress and [...] captured the popular imagination in a way no woman has achieved since Marilyn Monroe”⁵³⁸. She has re-written female sexuality within mainstream popular culture, boldly acting out the feminist concept of sexual liberation. Madonna has the ability to both exasperate her femininity and transcend gender classifications. She represents sexuality as a sort of transvestitism, a performance, a game of indeterminacy where multiple roles can

534 The most famous of his aliases is the acronym TAFKAP, The Artist Formerly Known as Prince.

535 Sandhu, “Paradise Syndrome,” 32.

536 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 33.

537 The Labouchere Amendment, also known as Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 made gross indecency a crime in the United Kingdom. It was broadly used to prosecute homosexuals who could not be proven of actual sodomy. For a detailed account of the influence that the figure of Oscar Wilde had on glam rock see Pierpaolo Martino *Down in Albion. Studi sulla cultura pop inglese* (Roma: Aracne, 2007), 69-79.

538 Sonia Andermahr, “A Queer Love Affair? Madonna and Lesbian and Gay Culture,” in *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous*, Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge eds. (London: Pandora, 1994), 28.

be played. She constantly blurs the boundaries between aggression and tenderness, decent and indecent, male and female, straight and gay, sacred and profane. Through her postmodern eclecticism she wittily deconstructs sexual difference.

Deedee's literary and musical tastes and associated gender politics make her personify, in the eyes of the Muslim Brotherhood, the apotheosis of Western depravation, and the group names her "pornographic priestess"⁵³⁹. However, for Deedee music is also a research field; in class she often plays music to examine it semiotically with her students, so that pop music and culture are brought into the area of intellectual, linguistic and political discussion. When she lectures about the Civil Rights Movement in America, for example, she plays Jimi Hendrix's version of *The Star Spangled Banner* and Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On?*⁵⁴⁰. Deedee often uses her students as the informants of youth culture, and even Shahid contributes to her research by providing her with the sample of music he listens to and by accompanying her to clubs and rave venues where the two of them take drugs together. In the suburban British-Asian protagonist's eyes, Deedee, with her appeal, excesses and intellectualism embodies the fascination of London; she is the music which he wishes to "listen to"⁵⁴¹ or to "play"⁵⁴². As an intellectual Deedee does not underestimate the value of literature and high culture, but she recognises that valuable learning requires a big effort, while music is more spontaneously enjoyable and has a much more democratic and inclusive value:

Serious reading required dedication. [...] And how many people knew a book as they knew *Blonde on Blonde*, *Annie Hall*, or Prince, even? Could literature connect a generation in the same way? Some exceptional students would read hard books; most wouldn't, and they weren't fools⁵⁴³.

Although her argument regarding the validity of teaching popular culture is a solid one, it is also true that Deedee, since she is highly concerned with style and image, and she likes having her female students try to imitate her by "dressing as she did and studying her as she were Madonna,"⁵⁴⁴ includes popular culture in her teaching.

539 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 228.

540 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 27-8.

541 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 126.

542 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 108.

543 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 134.

544 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 167.

Sharing several of Prince's and Madonna's characteristics, Shahid and Deedee in their relationship perform and politicise their sexuality. It is through their mutual interpretations of such cultural icons as emblematic of the practice of explicit liberation politics that the two lovers begin their affair. In her flat Deedee convinces Shahid to let her make up his face to have him look like a woman. At first this troubles Shahid but soon he begins to enjoy the experience of having a new feminine appearance, and ascribes a feeling of liberation to the experience:

he liked the feel of his new female face. He could be demure, flirtatious, teasing, a star; a burden went, a certain responsibility had been removed. He didn't have to take the lead. He even wondered what it might be like to go out as a woman, and be looked at differently⁵⁴⁵.

Deedee does this while Madonna's song *What are you looking at?*, from the CD *Vogue*, is playing in the background, and she continues directing the show making Shahid pose and walk like a model. He totally enters into the spirit of the masquerade and enjoys being seen as her multiple-identity sexual commodity:

Beyond embarrassment, in a walking dance, he swung his hips and arms, throwing his head back, pouting, kicking his legs out. [...] As he went she nodded, smiled and sighed. He bowed, took an orange from the bowl beside the bed and started to peel it⁵⁴⁶.

The theatricality of the scene is emphasised by the fact that Shahid ends his performance with a bow and then grabs an orange which is a reference to the centuries-long traditional presence in English theatres of young orange sellers, who often were also prostitutes⁵⁴⁷. The cross-dressing performance allows Shahid to free his imagination and consider what it would be like to be a woman, exhibiting Butler's theory that gender is performative and is not tied to biology. On another occasion it is Deedee who, going out with Shahid, dresses in man's clothes, and enjoys the strange look people give her when they see her kissing Shahid. The opening up of a Third Space in which the body becomes a performative reinscription has the potential for subversive challenges to the normative

545 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 117.

546 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 118.

547 The most famous orange seller in history was Nell Gwynne who became an actress of the Restoration theatre and one of the mistresses of King Charles II.

order, and these practices of transformation can be considered as different modes of identification with otherness, a process of aestheticisation in which the boundaries between reality and play are fuzzy and unclear.

At the beginning gender-role switching is central for the relationship between Shahid and Deedee. She, not he, is the dominant partner, and likes to play the role of the masculine aggressor. As Bart Moore-Gilbert notices, the sexuality of the 'Oriental male' in Kureishi's novels "plays ironically [...] off the figure of the colonised male subject as over-sexed, even a potential rapist of white women, which is an enduring trope in metropolitan literature of empire"⁵⁴⁸. Kureishi, in fact, subverts this trope by enhancing the vigorous desire of white women for oriental Others. In *The Black Album*, Deedee is depicted as an exploitative lover longing for Shahid's exotic body and "café-au-lait skin,"⁵⁴⁹ but her libertine attitude itself alludes to a mode of self-construction by emphasising the performative and changeable nature of identity⁵⁵⁰. It is part of the show just like the performances of self-sex simulation given by both Prince and Madonna during their concerts. Shahid and Deedee prove that sexual fantasy and political role reversal can co-exist and give life to a fluid, spontaneous, romantic love story where there are no fixed categories.

Kureishi sets this performativity of Western, secular free play of identity in opposition with Shahid's forced performance of Islam, dramatising a confrontation between those who seek pleasure and freedom from constraints and those who vigorously deny them in the name of commitment to faith. While for Shahid and Deedee, music is essential as their ears "long for music much as one's stomach complains for food,"⁵⁵¹ we learn from Chad that the most radical among the old members of the Muslim community run out of grocery stores if there is music playing. Chad is the most violent of the Muslim Brotherhood and highly reproaches Shahid for his corrupted habit of listening to pop which is, in his view, the reason for his lack of commitment to Islam:

548 Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 123-4.

549 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 210.

550 See Spivak's analysis of the discourse concerning the prohibition of *sati* in 19th century colonial India organised, as she claims, around the image of "white men saving brown women from brown men". Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in Spivak, Gayatri C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman eds. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993): 210.

551 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 64.

We are not dancing monkeys. We have minds and sense. Why do we want to reduce ourselves to the level of animals? I am not descended from an ape but from something noble. [...] Get clean! Gimme those Prince records! [...] We are slaves to Allah, [...] He is the only one we must submit to!⁵⁵²

Chad's soul "got lost in translation"⁵⁵³. As the unhappy adopted child of an English white couple, his name was Trevor Buss; he changed his identity after meeting Riaz at University, and consequently abandoned the excesses of popular culture to dedicate himself to the strict observance of Islamic practices. Before then he felt "homeless," with "no country,"⁵⁵⁴ rejected by white society, yet the brotherhood provided him with solidarity, unity, and a strong sense of identity. It is no surprise then that for a recently converted religious fundamentalist like Chad the effect pop music has on its listeners is similar to that of drugs alcohol and sex; it is something addictive which overwhelms one's soul, it disrupts order and calls into question the fixity of inherited identities. Riaz's group is unable to tolerate difference and denounces all pop culture as equivalent to pornography. Their choice to abstain from all kinds of Western pleasures and entertainments reflects a strong element of self-hatred, a desire for the masochism of obedience and self-punishment. For Chad, who before the conversion was a great consumer of pop music, it is particularly hard to tear himself away from music; in fact when he goes with the other 'vigilantes' to defend a flat where a Bengali family have been attacked, as he makes his way through the block of flats he recognises a song that moves him, but doesn't want to let his companions notice it:

Shahid recognized the weeping brass of 'Try a Little Tenderness' coming from an open window. Chad heard it too and stopped dead. [...] Chad bent down and tied his shoelaces, twice, for as long as the music played. Getting up he saw Shahid regarding him. Chad's eyes were wet. Shahid wanted to put his arms around him, but he marched on⁵⁵⁵.

The novel has an almost constant soundtrack to accompany it, and the choice of a song such as *Try a Little Tenderness* is particularly fitting in this situation since the fundamentalist group has armed itself with knives, machetes, clubs and knuckle-dusters

552 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 80.

553 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 107.

554 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 108.

555 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 89.

getting ready for a possible fight with the skinheads that inhabit that part of the city.

Shahid does not have faith in anything but education, love and pop culture, and has joined the Muslim Brotherhood only in an attempt to ease his sense of displacement; nevertheless he is not able to oppose the request of wearing the *salwar kamiz* Chad has bought for him to try and promote Shahid's commitment to their group. The outfit is referred to as the “national dress”⁵⁵⁶. Even if Shahid's ethnicity is Pakistani, his nationality is British since he was born and bred in Kent. In Chad's essentialist view, however, ethnicity determines nationality and predetermines identity. Chad is orientalising Shahid, and through this scene Kureishi shows us how even Eastern people exploit other Eastern people for their own purposes. Ironically the oppressed colonised and racialised subject who ideologically fights for the marginalised, becomes himself the oppressor.

Shahid's donning of the *salwar kamiz* surely does not make him an 'authentic' Muslim. As soon as he gets away from Chad he sits on a wall and, listening to Prince's *Sign o' the Times* on his headphones, he writes an erotic story for Deedee entitled 'The Prayer-mat of Flesh'⁵⁵⁷. However, his dress conveys a precise message. Indeed, on meeting Shahid, Strapper, a displaced white working class drug dealer who adopts a "Jamaican attitude"⁵⁵⁸ as a clear signifier of his repulsion towards the whites that abused and rejected him, takes his outfit as a clear act of hostility towards the West and says:

'The white capitalistic civilization has come to an end'.

'Yeah?'

'You know that, don't ya? That's why you're dressed against it'.

'Righ'⁵⁵⁹.

Shahid's discomfort in wearing the *salwar kamiz* reflects his discomfort in taking on the role of a fundamentalist Muslim. The narrow mindedness of the Islamic fundamentalists is even more suffocating than the suburban conservatism he fled from. Shahid never gives up listening to pop music which, because of its hybrid characteristics

556 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 141.

557 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 134.

558 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 141.

559 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 141.

becomes a symbolic and ideologic site of resistance, a continuous reminder of the fluid and ultimately provisional nature of identity.

The Black Album highlights the value of music as an inclusive, young-driven, cultural phenomenon also from the standpoint of electronic dance music. On their first night out, Shahid and Deedee go clubbing and raving and, in a sort of trance Shahid

started writhing joyously, feeling he was part of a waving sea. He could have danced forever [...]. Electric waves of light flickered in the air. Fronds of fingers with flames spurting from them waved at the Djs[...] sitting in their glass booths⁵⁶⁰.

The impact that digital technology had on British pop in the mid-'80s was astonishing. Pop production changed forever after sampling and home recording enabled talented kids to turn themselves into producers and change the base of pop music from rock to dance. Technology and education meant that more people were able to create and disseminate music of a greater range and quality than ever before. The new music was saturated in absence, loss and distance, both physical and emotional. It was secluded and alienated, but also had flashes of beauty. It could explode into prolonged sequences of machine repetition, where people could dance or wander in technical ecstasy. Clubs quickly flourished in the United Kingdom since club tunes use certain techniques and technical resources to intensify the already compelling effects that music can have on individuals as well as on groups. Music moves you physically, emotionally and mentally and clubs can deepen these properties. This also gave birth to rave parties, which, according to former *Face* editor Sheryl Garrat, “gathered up all the separate strands of the 80s youth culture and knitted them together. Black and white, male and female, indie rockers and dedicated soul boys, crusties and Sloanes all met in the fields. [...] Anyone could go on an adventure to wonderland: all they needed was a ticket, some transport and perhaps a pill”⁵⁶¹.

European rave and techno cultures were likewise seen to manifest the transformation of gender roles and the opening up of sexual boundaries. Researchers stressed the weakening of the divide between straight and gay club boundaries in favour of a new, non-discriminating atmosphere, in which sexual identity categories could be

⁵⁶⁰ Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 60.

⁵⁶¹ Sheryl Garrat, *Adventures in Wonderland: A Decade of Club Culture* (London: Headline, 1999), 25.

rendered irrelevant, and the fixity of identity could be challenged⁵⁶².

In one of the rave venues Shahid and Deedee visit, the atmosphere is transgressive but not violent. There is a carnivalesque feeling of liberation from social constructs and established order; all barriers seem to be suspended:

There was a relentless whirlwind of interplanetary noises. Jets of kaleidoscopic light sprayed the air. Many of the men were bare-chested and wore only thongs; some of the women were topless or in just shorts and net tops. [...] Others were garbed in rubber, or masks, or were dressed as babies. [...] People blew whistles, others screamed with pleasure⁵⁶³.

The Criminal Justice Bill declared rave parties illegal in the UK, and then they became clandestine but even more transgressive because taking pleasure also represented a defiance of the law, and carnivalesque experiences occupied a more provocative status.

Bourdieu argues that legal transgression in cultural events gives carnival both a class location and a potentially insurrectionary political one. Since the social rank is partly constituted by 'cultural capital', a lack of this capital in the shape of the transgression of these rules is related to the working class. Often it takes the form of an active insolence towards 'cultural capital' "using obscenity or scatology to turn arsy-versy, head over heels, all the 'values' in which the dominant groups project and recognise their sublimity"⁵⁶⁴. Simon During, then, is right in observing that the coalescence of techno music, mega-parties, and drugs was linked to a discourse of "paganism, nomadism and spirituality which clearly remembered the sixties hippie movement and which, for many, was, like punk before it, a conscious repudiation of Thatcherite/Reaganite neo-liberal individualism"⁵⁶⁵.

562 See Phil Jackson, *Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiments in the Art of Being Human* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004).

563 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 59-60.

564 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 491.

565 Simon During, *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 131.

4.4 “That’s how good it was”: *Intimacy* and *The Body*

As seen in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and in *The Black Album*, music and style constitute a fundamental space in the experience of growing up; they are, in fact, ways of defining self-identity. Jay and Adam represent the post-war generation of baby boomers who were more or less teenagers when Karim and Shahid were, and who are middle-aged by the time their stories are narrated. Older fans, as Vannini and Williams point out, constitute “the first true and complete audience”⁵⁶⁶ for rock and pop music, and although Kureishi often stresses the close link between pop and youth culture, it is possible to detect through his writings that popular music is also a key feature of adult culture and it functions as a major source of everyday meanings for the generation which grew up with it. Nevertheless, as the pop/rock fan grows older, several of the captivating aspects of the earlier self become harder to maintain. Youthfulness, appearance, energy, spontaneity, even sensuality become less available and, as such, either less or more desirable, depending on personal dispositions.

Both *Intimacy* and *The Body* are narrated from the point of view of ageing men desperately trying to grasp the last sparks of youth. Fearing age and the idea of a monotonous life with no movement, fluidity or newness, they try to recreate a lost youth in different ways and to win themselves another chance. While Jay’s painful abandonment of his family stems from his hatred for a spiteful partner and he simply walks away from her, Adam commits an act of *hubris*. He leaves a loving and beloved wife to trade his body in for the gorgeous corpse of a younger man, thereby trying to go against the natural process of life. Although switching an entire physical body is surely the most extreme form of transformation, the gap between what Adam still thinks and feels inside and what his physical appearance communicates to others is too wide. Adam ends up as a mature man trapped in a young body he no longer enjoys.

As Buchanan notes, by the time Kureishi wrote these novels he began “to recognize mortality”⁵⁶⁷ and therefore could not fully enjoy the carelessness of youth as in

566 Phillip Vannini and J. Patrick Williams eds., *Authenticity in Culture, Self and Society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 153.

567 Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi*, 29.

his previous writings. Indeed, Jay sometimes seems to view most forms of cultural and social life from a doubtful 'semi-senile' point of view, and comments: "I think I have become the adults in *The Catcher in the Rye*"⁵⁶⁸. When going to a club to look for his beloved young mistress Jay realises how out of place he feels in such a dark location overpopulated by much younger people. When at home he surfs through his innumerable Cds, he finds a wide variety of choices from very different genres: "dark Beethoven, my God; jazz, mostly of the fifties; blues, rock 'n' roll and pop, with the emphasis on the mid-sixties and early seventies. A lot of punk"⁵⁶⁹. His music is both the one his father listened to and the one he enjoyed during his own adolescence. It is the music through which he has formed his present identity. Now at middle age Jay sees things from the nostalgic perspective of someone who feels lost and displaced, and does not accept the idea of having reached the stable and fixed role as the head of the household:

I have begun to hate television as well as the other media. I was young when the rock 'n' roll world - the apotheosis of the defiantly shallow - represented the new. It was rebellious and stood against the conventional and dead. Television, too, remained a novelty throughout my youth - all those flickering worlds admitted to one room, Father making me hold the aerial up at the window on tiptoe [...]. Now I resent being bombarded by vulgarity, emptiness and repetition. [...] if you turn on the TV and sit down hoping to see something sustaining, you're going to be disappointed - outraged, in fact, by bullying, aggression and the forcible democratization of the intellect. I am turning off; rebelling against rebellion⁵⁷⁰.

Perhaps it is the fate of every generation as it ages to believe that today's tunes, lyrics and cultural products are no match for those of its youth; but it is also true that, since TV channels have proliferated greatly since the introduction of cable, many TV programmes actually lack substance while advertising promotes an increasingly bleaker consumerism. Jay's sense of frustration with the reality of mass production is echoed by Adam:

I no longer believe or hope that book knowledge will satisfy or even entertain me, and if I watch TV for too long I begin to feel hollow. How out of the world I already believe myself to be! I am no longer familiar with the pop stars, actors or serials on TV. I'm never sure who the pornographic boy and girl bodies belong to. It is like trying to take part in a conversation of which I can grasp only a fraction. As for the politicians, I can barely make

568 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 146.

569 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 58.

570 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 22-3.

out which side they are on⁵⁷¹.

It is Adam in particular who finds it troublesome to fit into contemporary youth culture. At the party where he meets the man who tells him about the possibility of having a body-switching operation, the venue seems to be full of glamour and fascination: “There was a jazz combo, food, animated conversation and everyone in minimal summer clothing”⁵⁷². He then realises that neither education nor experience are required to be part of that superficially fashionable environment. In contemporary youth society the highest value is given by the social information displayed through appealing bodies. This conclusion seems to be ratified by the fact that, as the narrator notes, in the inner city apparently older people “have been swept from the streets”⁵⁷³. London is claimed by the creative, loud and lively young generations; older people, instead, prefer the calm monotony of the suburbs. Adam does not share this tendency; he continues to be fascinated by the vitality and fluidity of the metropolis and agrees with Kureishi that in London there is always a sense of possibility which remains constant at any age. Although Adam seems to be so critical of the cultural vapidness of young generations, his surgical operation is an extreme product of the voyeuristic tendency that lies behind popular culture. Adam appropriates in practice what he despises and criticises in theory, confirming Simone de Beauvoir’s statement that in Western thought old age is and has been considered “a kind of shameful secret that is unseemly to mention”⁵⁷⁴.

On the other hand, as a youth, Jay was so totally involved in pop culture, music and ideology that when he left his parents’ home the only thing he describes as having carried away are his records. Now he deplores the disruption of his own post-hippie generation whose political commitment against Thatcherism broke down: “some remained on the left; others retreated into sexual politics; some became Thatcherites. We were the kind of people who held the Labour Party back”⁵⁷⁵. In both his fiction and non-fiction, Kureishi underscores the failure of his own pop-leftist-pacifist generation to have

571 Kureishi, *The Body*, 5.

572 Kureishi, *The Body*, 8.

573 Kureishi, *The Body*, 7.

574 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, Patrick O’Brian trans. (New York and London: Norton & Co., 1996), 1.

575 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 59.

maintained political commitment, and nostalgically remembers the strong anti-war political messages that events like the Woodstock festival epitomised. Particularly important in the author's memories is the foundation of Rock Against Racism in order to enhance the egalitarian lead lying behind pop and rock music. The campaign started as a *riposte* to the episode in which, in 1976, Eric Clapton interrupted a concert to make a speech in support of Enoch Powell. As Kureishi claims, the use of pop music as a medium of solidarity and resistance "was an effective movement against the National Front at a time when official politics – the Labour Party – were incapable of taking direct action around immediate street issues"⁵⁷⁶. The mid to late 1980s manifestations such as Live Aid, Farm Aid and the like crystallised the concept of rock and pop as ideologically coherent subcultures larger than music or entertainment in their recurring, perhaps naive, but deep and vitally important, theme of 'changing the world'. Kureishi also condemns the 'old Left' for its contempt for pop culture which was based on the assumption that pop was an expression of capitalism, and for not having understood and supported youth culture:

The Left, in its puritanical way, has frequently dismissed pop as capitalist pap, preferring folk and other 'traditional' music. But it is pop that has spoken of ordinary experience with far more precision, real knowledge and wit than, say, British fiction of the equivalent period⁵⁷⁷.

Although Jay and Adam (and Kureishi himself) have faced political and social disillusionment, their process of self-development does not end with maturity, but it remains constant throughout life. Phases, happenings, relationships, events, approaches, visions of the past and of the future change, and together with them even the experience of self has to change. According to Andrea Fontana the means one uses during adulthood to make sense of the self are likely to be the same kinds of means one uses to make sense of ageing⁵⁷⁸. Since the post-war baby boom generation was the first in the West to grow up totally surrounded by pop and rock music and culture, it often used such cultures and their ideologies as guidelines for their own life. Kureishi and his protagonists can surely be counted among them; in fact, pop music and culture, as integral parts of their *habitus*,

576 Kureishi, "Eight Arms to Hold You," 372.

577 Kureishi, "Eight Arms to Hold You," 372.

578 See Andrea Fontana, *The Last Frontier: The Social Meaning of Growing Old* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977).

remain central to their self-identity when approaching old age.

After having had his brain transplanted into a new body and assumed the identity of Leo, Adam enjoys walking around listening to music on his headphones, which he describes as always having been his “greatest passion,”⁵⁷⁹ now even more enjoyable because in his previous body he had suffered from a slight deafness. Adam/Leo goes dancing every night and recognises that the music he and the other people love most is that which originated in his days “1950s rock’n’roll, and 1960s soul”. As he says, it: “sounded fresher and more lasting than the laboured literary work of me and my contemporaries”⁵⁸⁰. However Adam/Leo now treats his female dancing partners from the Centre in Greece with the attitude of a gentleman: “Most of them were older than forty, some were over fifty. [...] I danced with them, but I didn’t touch them. If I’d been a ‘real’ kid, I probably would have gone to bed, or to the beach, with several of them”⁵⁸¹. Now that Adam/Leo is experiencing an identity crisis because his mental and his physical selves collude and clash with each other continuously, listening to the music of his youth makes him feel relieved; he recognises the beats and lyrics which have guided him through the years. Adam perceives he has turned himself into what Bryan S. Turner defines “a representational self, whose value and meaning is ascribed to the individual by the shape and image of their external body, through their body-image”⁵⁸². Music, then, becomes a map for self-recognition; it reminds him of his youth but also of the steps towards maturity he has made during his life. Through music he manages to touch his wife once again while dancing, even though, since he is under the guise of another man, she cannot recognise him.

Music often links people together in Kureishi’s stories, even different generations. Adam, for example, enjoys the memory of having been to a Prince concert with his son while Jay loves “dancing to the Rolling Stones”⁵⁸³ with his two little children. The music the two protagonists have grown up with is now approached from a different perspective but remains precious. It has become the soundtrack of their lives.

When he is about to leave his family, Jay wants to take a picture of John Lennon with him, maybe as a reminder of who he was as a youngster, of his ideals, of how much

579 Kureishi, *The Body*, 56.

580 Kureishi, *The Body*, 78.

581 Kureishi, *The Body*, 78.

582 Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 23.

583 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 12.

he has changed since he has aged, of how much love and freedom he still needs in order to feel alive:

I remove my signed photograph of John Lennon from the wall and slip it into the empty bag. That is something to take. A handful of CDs too. Alfred Brendel or Emil Gilels? Marvin Gaye or Otis Redding? Perhaps I should remind myself that I am absconding, not appearing on Desert Island Discs. Yet I still can't hear the beginning of 'Stray Cat Blues' without wanting to hitchhike to Spain with a teenager⁵⁸⁴.

For Jay the Beatles are as necessary "as kisses on the back of [his] neck and kindness"⁵⁸⁵. The Lennon picture and the CDs become small fetishes, portable encouragements to start over again, to abandon his paralysing condition and walk towards a new life, and towards a girl who loves him passionately. A girl that makes him feel desired, who plays the guitar, sings in a group and dedicates all the songs to him.

Similarly to Nick Hornby's pop loving adult characters, Jay and Adam represent the idea that pop is accessible to all. It is not only a channel of communication among teenagers but an apt vehicle for conveying everyone's feelings, and for foregrounding the subject's exit from imposed social roles. As Dominique Strinati observes, pop culture signs and images "increasingly dominate our sense of reality, and the way we define ourselves and the world around us"⁵⁸⁶. Pop culture then, represents a lifestyle choice in which age becomes irrelevant.

584 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 66.

585 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 53.

586 Dominique Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 205.

4.5 David Bowie and Glam Rock: *Gabriel's Gift*

*You've got your mother in a whirl
She's not sure if you're a boy or a girl
(David Bowie, Rebel Rebel)*

As the father of three small kids, in the late '90s Kureishi had already written a short story for children, *Ladybirds for Lunch*, where the two young protagonists were musicians, and through their music prodigies happened. *Gabriel's Gift* was also originally conceived as a children's book for David Bowie to illustrate. Although the book still hints at the author's first intentions in its optimism and surreal, dreamy details, it clearly turned into a short novel for adults which the author set around the 1990s. There are no illustrations in *Gabriel's Gift*, but the pop star character, Lester Jones, is modeled on David Bowie⁵⁸⁷.

Bowie was one of the most sophisticated leaders of the early 1970s glam rock movement that concentrated its subversive power mainly on sexuality and gender typing. The popularity of glam rock occurred contemporarily to the gay liberation movement⁵⁸⁸; nevertheless, most glam rock artists did not totally identify with homosexual identities, but preferred to complicate the issue performing blurred genders regardless of their sexualities. Their songs, shows, and style were meant to break the divide gay/straight by staging ambivalent forms of sexuality in order to subvert essentialist visions. During his career Bowie morphed into several incarnations of beautifully artificial personas such as Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, Mr Newton, the Thin White Duke or the Blond Führer as exemplary transformations that put the anti-essentialist stance of pop into practice. The creativity of his genius in finding new and experimental styles is widely recognised by critics. According to Simon Reynolds, Bowie was “forever chasing the next edge, always

587 Kureishi's fictional character closely resembles the real one: Lester's eyes are one blue and the other one brown, as Bowie's. Lester has bright red hair, and Bowie is known for having dyed his hair bright shades of red and orange several times. Furthermore, both have sharply chiseled facial features and skinny physiques. As for the choice of the name, Bowie was born Jones, and later chose the stage name Bowie after an American brand of knives. The first name Lester probably comes from Bowie's 1993 song *Looking for Lester* featuring a musician named Lester Bowie on trumpet.

588 After the famous Stonewall riots (1969), when gay men and lesbians fought back against a police raid on a gay bar in New York City, increasingly vocal gay and lesbian liberation movements took shape both in the Usa and in the UK. In the 1970s, literary theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Bonnie Zimmerman, Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, Louie Crew had began to define a gay and lesbian studies movement based on the identity politics that had served both feminists and civil rights activists.

moving on. More than anyone else, it was Bowie who was the touchstone inspiration for postpunk's ethos of perpetual change"⁵⁸⁹. Each one of the icon's looks and concept albums were dissociated from the previous ones, in a restless celebration of postmodern donning and doffing identities. Bowie's assertion of the liberating force of performativity, with regard to gender and sexuality, was largely made through style, through superficial images. The surface detail is fascinating, hypnotic, it's a near-universal language of pure transcendence where the curious, the whimsical have their place, for they are an important part of the pop process. However, to many like Kureishi and Savage, Bowie was not only a pop star, he was also a "cultural hero"⁵⁹⁰. As Watts reports, in an interview Bowie said of himself: "I'm gay," but with "a secret smile at the corners of his mouth," therefore evading any certainty, and pointing to the "confusion surrounding the male and female roles"⁵⁹¹. It was January 1972, and it was the first time in history that a performer publicly admitted to being homosexual.

The capitalist economy certainly plays its part in Bowie's relationship with the media, as it does with any successful character. Thus, Bowie's chameleonic qualities prove that commercial pop and authenticity are not antithetical. Bowie managed to employ his theatrical morphing to spectacularise and glamorise marginality, and his ambiguous declaration to promote a more tolerant vision of diversity, encouraging fans to challenge normative behaviours, conventional conceptions of identity and coercive expectations of gender roles.

Probably the most famous among Bowie's personas, Ziggy Stardust,⁵⁹² was invented by the artist as a symbol of radical alterity. The fictional hero of the 1972 concept album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* is the human manifestation of an extraterrestrial being who is attempting to give humanity a message of hope in the last five years of its existence.

Tricia Henry describes how Bowie presented himself in his Ziggy Stardust features:

589 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 5.

590 Kureishi and Savage eds., *The Faber Book of Pop*, 377.

591 Michael Watts, "1972: Oh You Pretty Thing," in *The Faber Book of Pop*, 394.

592 In a 1990 interview for *Q Magazine*, Bowie explained that the name Ziggy came from a tailor's shop called 'Ziggy's' that he passed on a train, and was particularly fitting because it had "that Iggy [as in Iggy Pop] connotation but it was a tailor's shop". Paul Du Noyer, "David Bowie Interview 2002," 2 December 2010: http://www.pauldunoyer.com/pages/journalism/journalism_item.asp?journalismID=249

an elegant, exotic, androgynous creature with delicate features and petite stature; short, spiky orange hair; painted face; painted fingernails; and clinging, bespangled, futuristic costumes. Bowie brought an element of sexual ambiguity to rock that it had never seen before⁵⁹³.

Kureishi repeatedly and extensively invokes Bowie in his fiction because in the shape of Ziggy Stardust, as a character coming from another planet, he also provides a metaphor for the immigrant condition of aliens coming from other countries and immediately recognisable by his/her features and clothes. The references, then, become the meaning or, in broader terms, style becomes the substance, as Catherine Constable posits⁵⁹⁴.

In *Gabriel's Gift* Lester Jones is a rock star who reshapes himself time and time again and, like Bowie, he is a former glam rock idol who “used to wear glitter and make-up”⁵⁹⁵:

Like most pop heroes, Lester contained the essential ingredients of both tenderness and violence, and was neither completely boy nor girl, changing continuously as he expressed and lost himself in various disguises⁵⁹⁶.

In his analysis of the image of the male pop star from the 1950s to the mid-1990s, Jon Savage observes that androgyny “has haunted pop since the late fifties and [...] has always been present in British popular entertainment, whether in music hall or pantomime or in phenomena such as J. M. Barrie’s Peter Pan”⁵⁹⁷. The example of Peter Pan is particularly apt, because it draws the attention to issues of age, gender, and sexuality, and is emblematic of the requirements for a male pop star to be marketable. Barrie’s character is eternally stuck between childhood and adolescence, he can never become a grown man and, on stage, is usually interpreted by a young woman⁵⁹⁸; therefore Peter Pan becomes the

593 Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules!: Punk Rock and the Making of a Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 35.

594 Catherine Constable, “Postmodernism and Film,” in *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* Steven Connor ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47.

595 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 48.

596 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 54.

597 Savage, “The Simple Things You See are All Complicated,” in *The Faber Book of Pop*, xxiv.

598 Also in Marc Forster’s film *Neverland*, starring Johnny Depp and Kate Winslet, the Peter Pan character is played by a young woman. See *Neverland*, M. Forster (2004), Buena Vista Home Entertainment.

archetype of the pop icon who, still nowadays, is typically young, effeminate and has delicate traits. This is the case, for instance, of worldwide famous pop singers and boy bands as different as Justin Bieber, Take That, the Backstreet Boys, Justin Timberlake, Ricky Martin, Enrique Iglesias, Cliff Richards, Usher, Adam Levine, The NSYNC or Michael Jackson⁵⁹⁹. If we take Peter Pan's characteristics as a paradigm of marketability in the music industry, we can easily understand why Gabriel's father, a talented musician, at the beginning of the novel is largely unemployed.

Rex used to play in Lester Jones' band in the 1970s and he also used to wear effeminate theatrical clothes; old pictures, in fact, show him in a glitter suit, earrings, eye shadow, and platform silver heels. Nevertheless, Rex never completely managed to embody a real gender-bender icon, and never achieved true stardom. Kureishi depicts Gabriel's father as distinctively more masculine than Lester, and underscores the fact that although he usually wore a silver medallion, his hairy chest revealed a *macho* appearance. Rex's career tragically ended up when he broke his ankle on stage with Lester, because he fell from his platform boots. After recovering, Rex asked to be re-hired but Lester refused because "he wanted a different sound and less hirsute musicians"⁶⁰⁰. Rex even offered to shave his body, but his masculine clumsiness automatically excluded him from the highly theatricalised and sophisticated performances characteristic of Lester's style.

The narrator underlines Rex's talent by informing us that, before the fall, a rock star such as Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones asked for his advice; however, Rex is unable to reinvent himself with a stage identity that reflects his real self, and quickly slips into anonymity while reminiscing about and sighing for the heyday of his career with Lester. He intermittently collaborates with minor musicians but in the pop and rock music world, which communicates both through music and through superficial images, stars like Charlie Hero (the same character featured in *The Buddha of Suburbia*), would not let Rex be in his videos because he is "too ugly"⁶⁰¹. In the end, Gabriel's father falls into depression and finds himself only playing "in pubs or at parties and weddings where no one listened and middle-aged people danced without moving their bodies"⁶⁰².

Gabriel, who is a painter, also plays musical instruments and dreams about

599 Michael Jackson even owned a theme park named 'Neverland'.

600 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 56.

601 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 56.

602 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 27.

becoming a film-maker. He is artistically inspired by Lester's creative talent and gender experimentations and, when at home, Gabriel likes to play with his image. While listening to Lester's music, he admires himself in front of the mirror while wearing an exotic waistcoat and pretending to be a film star.

According to Valerie Steele the fascination with underwear and lingerie as both fetish and fashion and their use as outerwear take a special place in the eroticism of clothing because a person in underwear is neither dressed nor undressed⁶⁰³. As underwear comes into direct contact with the skin, wearing it as outwear expresses comfort with sexuality, and wearing underwear generally associated with another gender is a sign of comfort with different sexualities. In the glam rock context the use of lingerie is to be seen as a taboo-breaking attempt to demystify sexuality in our culture, and especially the binarism homo/heterosexuality. Gabriel cross-dresses and experiments with female signifiers performing, like Butler's drag, an exaggerated femininity which reveals the imitative structure of gender as well as its contingency:

Adjusting the angle of the mirror, he could pretend to be someone else, any woman he wanted to be or have, particularly if he had painted his toenails in some dainty shade and was wearing his mother's rings, necklaces and shoes⁶⁰⁴.

According to Freud, every human being is in his or her origin bisexual. In bisexuality there is no homosexuality involved, but rather a combination of two heterosexual desires within one person. Bisexuality is associated with psychological immaturity; therefore, boys and girls who have a 'normal' childhood learn that they have to repress same-sex desire in adult life and consequently only opposites attract. Freud recognises the potential of adult bisexual desire, but in his opinion bisexuality is a psychological neurosis⁶⁰⁵. Although not exactly pursuing Freud's thesis on the matter, a similar view on bisexuality is foregrounded by philosopher Otto Weininger. For Weininger "males and females are like two substances combined in different proportions, but with either element never wholly missing"⁶⁰⁶. This implies that there is a dynamics in every

603 Steele, *Fetish*, 118-25.

604 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 17.

605 See Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, James Strachey trans. (London: Vintage, 2001), 141-8.

606 Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (New York: AMS Press, 1975), 8.

human being between masculinity and femininity or, as Weininger puts it, between male and female conditions. According to the philosopher, all human beings find themselves in a permanent bisexual condition; yet, it is Weininger's opinion that, in order to achieve Plato's idea of the perfect society, all human beings must strive to become ideal types of men and women instead of living in a chaotic bisexual order. Gabriel then, through his cross-dressing experiences, breaks the essentialist idea that lies at the basis of the 'perfect society' and works towards the creation of a Third Space, a place of translation and negotiation, a hybrid site where the difference between wanting 'to be' a woman or 'to have' a woman is rendered irrelevant:

He preferred the [shoes] with straps and heels, or anything that resembled a cross between a dagger and a boat. Low-heeled sandals did nothing for him. Perhaps they were an acquired taste⁶⁰⁷.

Steele explains the strict relation between shoes and sex and adds that shoes play an important role in the creation, but also in the violation, of gender stereotypes⁶⁰⁸. A highheeled shoe can symbolise the male sexual organ, but also the feminine one into which the phallic foot slips. According to Steele, in Western cultures high heels are usually associated with dominance and with sexually sophisticated women, which is probably the reason why they are favoured by prostitutes and cross-dressers. On the contrary, low heels are associated with the absence of female sexual allure. Butler, like a number of postmodernists, particularly valorises these, often 'less serious', spaces of play, because it is in these manifestations that cultural constructions become visible as such and therefore open to challenge.

When Gabriel meets Lester Jones for the first time, the music icon is wearing a silk kimono, a garment very similar to the one Gabriel likes to wear when cross-dressing. After exchanging a few words with the teenager and seeing him draw, Lester immediately recognises in the boy a similar soul, and a young talent. Lester was himself a painter before becoming a singer, and bestows on Gabriel the present of an original artwork made at the moment and signed. Gabriel treasures what he believes is the rock star's recognition of a kindred spirit, a signifier of empathy that can function for him as an everyday reminder of the experience, and an encouragement to keep following his imagination. In

607 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 17.

608 Steele, *Fetish*, 102-9.

the novel Lester represents initiation and guidance. Gabriel who is the lower-middle class son of a dysfunctional couple and has to take care of his immature, abashed and self-concerned parents, finds a mentor and a paternal figure in the pop star. Similarly, David Bowie represented for urban and suburban teenagers of the '70s, '80s and '90s the possibility of success and the personification of a free and productive creativity:

With his face close to Gabriel's, Lester began to talk of himself as a young man, before he was known or successful, and the difficulty of keeping alive self-belief when there was no one to confirm it. That was the hardest time for any artist⁶⁰⁹.

Christine and Rex's attempt to seize Lester's drawing as their means to escape from poverty and obscurity leads Gabriel to secretly make two copies of the art work and hide the original from his unknowing parents. One of the copies is sold by Rex to Speedy without Gabriel's permission. In order to have it back Gabriel is requested by Speedy to make a portrait of him. When Speedy poses naked before him, Gabriel is disturbed, mainly because he perceives the older man has a keen interest in him. Issues of pedophilia aside, Gabriel shows himself to be brilliantly able to follow Lester's example and teachings, urging himself not to be "held up by inhibitions, terror and self-loathing"⁶¹⁰ towards different sexualities. Gabriel is tolerant and even when previously approached by Speedy he managed to be calm and negotiate. The hero calmly ignores Speedy's nudity and proceeds with his art. This episode shows an obscure side of the music and media industry (Speedy was in the music business and his restaurant is hit by the major celebrities in town). As Kureishi says in an interview:

There's no doubt that pop and children have gone together, and the commodification of their bodies, you see that. Pop is owned and manipulated by older people, who have sort of owned and used the bodies of young people to a lesser or greater extent, so it's teaching relationship with a greater or lesser erotic edge to it⁶¹¹.

Accordingly, Jon Savage claims that "homosexuality was always hinted at in this new relationship between manager and artist, and the shade of Oscar Wilde hovered in this

609 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 51.

610 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 190.

611 Buchanan, "Author Interview" in *Hanif Kureishi*, 116-7.

new dandyism”⁶¹². The commodification of young bodies in contemporary pop is brutally noticed also by Rex who spitefully holds that “pop nowadays is panto for young people and paedophiles”⁶¹³. Nevertheless Speedy is not a bad man. When he realises Gabriel’s lack of interest in him, he immediately puts his clothes back on and assures him: “I won’t hustle you,”⁶¹⁴ keeping his promise.

Kureishi does not explicitly define Gabriel’s sexuality. Towards the end of the novel, the hero meets a girl he seems to like, but we don’t get to know if Gabriel is straight or bisexual, or if his interest for the girl is non-sexual in nature and thus he might be gay. The boy not only lives out the fluidity of gender identities, but he also epitomises the acceptance of queer sexualities. With *Gabriel’s Gift*, Kureishi suggests that the 1970s pop subcultures’ efforts towards the blurring of gender identities have positively influenced the next generations’ perception of sexual difference. The book also emphasises the nature of artistic imagination which, the more it is freed from preconceived ideas and social constructs, the more it is creative and fruitful. If artists can play with their own identity and assume subject positions, they will see the world from different perspectives and incorporate other realities into their art more effectively.

4.6 Global Pick ’n’ Mix: *Something to Tell You*

In Kureishi’s last novel Jamal’s fictional meeting with Mick Jagger in the after-party following a Rolling Stones concert was inspired by the author’s real meeting with the famous rock star which really electrified him⁶¹⁵. In *Something to Tell You*, the short episode constitutes the narrative device that introduces the figure of George Cage, the British-Asian pop star formerly characterised in the novel as the clumsy Mustaq who, as seen in Chapter Two, becomes famous in the music realm because he is “one of the first

612 Savage, “The Simple Things You See are All Complicated,” xxiii.

613 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 137.

614 Kureishi, *Gabriel’s Gift*, 189.

615 Mick Brown “Hanif Kureishi: A life laid bare,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 2008:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3671392/Hanif-Kureishi-A-life-laid-bare>

people to mix jazz, rock, Bollywood film tunes and Indian classical music”⁶¹⁶.

Several productive phenomena, like the alliances formed between rude boy ska and skinhead stomp or the reggae-punk axis in the 1960s and 1970s, had already broken into London’s subcultural music scene, giving evidence of the increasing hybridising process of art forms stemming from the collaboration between immigrants and natives in the inner city. The Asian communities, though, initially seemed not to participate much in this process. There are two main reasons for this. In the first place in the mid-1960s only 30% of Asians lived in the Greater London Area, while the West Indian component, for example, was more than 60%⁶¹⁷. In the second place, as Sandhu posits, Asians did not have a real indigenous youth culture; because of their strong work ethic and their Muslim traditions, in fact, “they spent more time reciting theological scripts at after-school temples than hanging round street corners or piling in at the rucks that blew up every Saturday afternoon when the local footie team clashed with away supporters”⁶¹⁸. The second generation of Asian immigrants completely lacked cultural models with whom they could identify, but they knew that the solution to the elusion of the stigmatised ‘Asianness’ was to work out a viable up-to-date identity and to claim their right to represent themselves and be represented, their “right to a voice”⁶¹⁹.

The 1980s revisited Bhangra was the first expression of cultural identity for Asian kids that they could really perceive as ‘theirs’. Originally conceived as a folk music from the Punjab,⁶²⁰ this new home-grown British-Asian sound rose primarily in an area where the National Front was becoming more and more popular among the white, largely unemployed, working class and the skinheads were often perpetrating acts of violence against minorities. Bhangra, in fact, saw its rebirth in the deprived Southall, West London, the area with the largest population of South-Asian immigrants. This kind of music

616 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 155.

617 Sandhu, *London Calling*, 226.

618 Sandhu, *London Calling*, 228-9.

619 Suresht R. Bald, “Negotiating Identity in the Metropolis: Generational Differences in South Asian British fiction” in *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, R. King, J. Comell, P. White eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 84.

620 Bhangra dance began as a folk dance conducted by Punjabi farmers in 11th century to celebrate the coming of the harvest season. For more on modernised Bhangra see Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk and Ashwani Sharma eds., *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (London: Zed Books, 1996); see also:

<http://www.cs.cuw.edu/csc/csc175/project/hrpsingh/historyoffolkdance.html>

<http://www.desihits.com>

<http://www.punjabonline.com/servlet/library.history?Action=Bhangra>

became very popular as an affirmative movement in the formation of an Asian identity discourse and quickly started to represent the means for Asian youth culture to acquire visibility in the public domain. It was not only a site of resistance, but also a form of self-assertion. 1980s modernised Bhangra filled a demand amongst 'Br-Asians',⁶²¹ enabling them to enjoy a musical genre that was at once contemporary yet distinct from mainstream pop in such a fashion as to express their translated identity in innovative ways.

Kureishi recalls his first listening to Bhangra music as an extraordinary experience:

After years of colonialism and immigration and Asian life in Britain; after years of Black American and reggae music in Britain comes this weird fusion. A cocktail of blues and r'n'b shaken with Indian film songs in Hindi, cut with heavy guitar solos and electric violin runs and African drumming, a result of all the music in the world being available in an affluent Asian area, Southall, near Heathrow Airport – it is Bhangra music! Detroit and Delhi in London!⁶²²

Bhangra became more and more popular in the 1990s when it was often played in alternative inner London clubs. Thanks to the new technologies, talented Djs kept this music alive by mixing and remixing it with electronic, rock and hip-hop sounds creating innovative and original musical intertexts. By the beginning of the 21st century though, Bhangra had moved into mainstream youth culture and began to be more and more influenced by hip-hop and reggae sounds, as a reflection of a more complex set of international cultural flows, records, acts and style.

The mixing of different ethnic influences seems to have become fashionable, as Nadine Gordimer has ironically represented in her brilliant collection *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories*, and it has become the new currency in popular culture. According to Imran Khan, the editor of *2nd Generation Magazine*, youth culture and music have made it evident that there is not a homogenous Asian culture “to tap in to. There is, however a rich Second Generation culture; [...] of people who have been raised in Britain’s cross-cultural society. [...] The most exciting music made today comes soaked in Tablas, in Dub Reggae and in Hip-Hop beats”⁶²³. It is in the realm of the creative element

621 Neologism used as a means of disrupting settled notions of the South Asian experience in Britain. See Sanjay, Hutnyk and Sharma eds., *Dis-orienting Rhythms*.

622 Kureishi, “Some Time with Stephen,” 179.

623 See www.outcaste.com

that the hegemony of the West over the category of 'global' is constantly being challenged.

The power of popular culture as a formative and identifying space is reflected in the changes the metropolitan landscape displays. Pop culture in the postmodern era has a modelling potential,⁶²⁴ since it shapes different kinds of social relations and can determine the way we define ourselves and the world around us. Pop's clear agenda against discrimination and exclusion, and against the supremacy and elitism of high culture, greatly contributes to the social and cultural changes that have been occurring in metropolitan areas. London has transformed, revolutionised itself through the years, and pop culture is one of the means through which different communities have been interacting with each other. For Jamal the ghetto now is represented by those traditionally white and posh areas such as "Belgravia, Knightsbridge and parts of Notting Hill"⁶²⁵. Indeed, while the inhabitants of these zones try to stick to old notions of Englishness, London has become "a world city"⁶²⁶.

In *Something to Tell You* Jamal's son Rafi, is not second, but third generation. Although Jamal, like Jay and Adam, is still linked to the music of his youth, he often exchanges CDs, shoes and clothes with his son because they both like the most innovative genres and styles, confirming Nick Hornby's assertion that youth "is a quality not unlike health: it's found in greater abundance among the young, but we all need access to it"⁶²⁷. Rafi is learning to play the electric guitar and has his father tune it for him. He makes Jamal listen to the music he has on his computer – Mexican, Afro-American and Jamaican rap and hip-hop – and asks for his approval. Rafi also glamorises himself assuming a Jamaican accent and, as Jamal points out, he is "bilingual"; at home he is usually "middle-class; on the streets and at school he use[s] his other tongue, Gangsta"⁶²⁸.

Certainly contrasts, racism and acts of violence among different cultures have not disappeared. As Kureishi has often remarked, in Western countries formal religion has waned as a source of inspiration and consolation particularly for young people and, in many respects, pop has concurred in filling the void, providing a forum for shared

624 See the concept of culture as "a secondary modelling system," in Juri M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspenskij, "Sul meccanismo semiotico della cultura," in *Tipologia della cultura*, Remo Faccani e Marzio Marzaduri eds. (Milano, Bompiani, 1975), 39-68.

625 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 10.

626 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 10.

627 Nick Hornby, "Rock of Ages," *The New York Times*, 21 May 2004.

628 Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, 14.

experience. Nevertheless, some of those second generation immigrants who could not find a sense of identity and belonging in Britain have turned to fundamentalism yearning for an Islam they have never actually experienced. In *Something to Tell You* the fictional representation of the terrorist attack which took place in London in 2005 testifies to an ongoing conflict between growing Eastern radicalism and Western secularism. Facing such tragedies, pop can only provide a form of consolation and in the novel it represents the means for Sam, Harry's son, to start over again after his fiancée gets killed because of the 07/07 London bombings. The book ends with Sam starting a group with the daughter of a famous rock star whom he starts dating, and with Rafi. Songs, as Rex in *Gabriel's Gift* says, have a great function: "to make us feel better [...] when things are so hard"⁶²⁹.

Even in the light of criminal acts, social injustice, violence, exclusion or incomprehension, Kureishi's final message is still of hope and faith in the power of youth cultures, ideologies and talent to create a space where change can occur, to work towards the building of an alternative city, a dimension where, as John McLeod suggests "divisive tensions are effectively resisted, and progressive, transformative kinds of social and cultural relationships are glimpsed"⁶³⁰. All the characters of Kureishi's novels analysed in this chapter prove that, although in our postmodern world we experience different selves in different situations and different social contexts, pop music and culture can impact all these selves at different times and in different ways. Music becomes the soundtrack to one's life, and both an anchor for an ever-drifting self, and a vessel for a life's journey. Pop celebrates hybridity and overcomes race, class, gender and sexual barriers. Pop has an inestimable sociological value which has to be recognised, because, as Salman Rushdie beautifully wrote, it is

in the waking dreams our society permit, in our myths, our arts, our songs [that] we celebrate the non-belongers, the different ones, the outlaws, the freaks. [...] [I]f we did not recognize in them our least-fulfilled needs, we would not invent them over and over again, in every place, in every language, in every time⁶³¹.

629 Kureishi, *Gabriel's Gift*, 35.

630 John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

631 Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), 72-3.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate specific issues in Kureishi's novels, in order to enrich the existing literary criticism on the author, and to shed new light on topics and works often overlooked. This has been done from an inter-disciplinary vantage point which has seen the participation of both literary and social sciences in the textual analysis. Such analysis has focused on three main topics: class and social mobility in Chapter Two, familial dysfunctionality and community in Chapter Three, and pop music and culture in Chapter Four. These themes are inseparable from concepts of movement, abandonment and change along with sub-themes such as the crossing of cultural borders, unstable identities, sexuality and ageing which lie at the basis of Kureishi's fiction and infuse his stories with vitality, hope and possibility, but also with a sense of loss and melancholy.

It has been shown how movement, abandonment and change become central elements in the definition, redefinition and reshaping of the characters' identities which are fractured, multiple and fluid. This postmodern conception of identity leads to the recognition of performativity in identity politics, and since identity politics focus on representation, it follows that an exploration of how style and images convey aspects of individual identities is an apt and privileged instrument for the investigation of contemporary subjects and society. Both in Chapter Two and in Chapter Four a reading of the images and styles adopted by the main characters and of the contradictory meanings

that these hold in the novels has been undertaken. The adoption of such images and styles works, in reality, as an exercise in depth as it represents a challenge to the inequities of the status quo. Kureishi adopts visual images to question issues of authenticity and dismantle processes of othering. This happens both through self-orientalised styles that ease upward social mobility for ethnically marginalised individuals and through pop-culture elements that promote inclusiveness and hybridisation while entertaining and shocking through a carnivalesque atmosphere of play and subversion. Much of Kureishi's humour comes from his characters' popular culture identifications and from his own formation in the productive intermingling of high and low culture. Humour creates cognitive dissonance and allows readers to rethink their assumptions about dominant and minority cultures and, most of all, to detect the laughability of human nature.

Kureishi's texts decisively retract from any claim to represent 'authentic' or representative portraits, yet, the stories of his characters, their idiosyncrasies, desires, vices and behaviours reflect in light and shade the evidence of human nature. The characters' stories function as commentary on the ways in which, in these past decades, British political institutions have reinforced difference among citizens in order to perpetuate a wealthy white middle class, along with a politicised patriarchal heteronormative hegemony. In Chapter Three it has been shown that, despite Thatcher's belief that "there is no such thing as society,"⁶³² Kureishi often depicts alternative communities based on racial, ethnic, class and sexual diversity where even age difference can shatter monolithic perceptions of social groups and develop a much more inclusive definition of Englishness. In the novels examined, society is depicted in fundamentally personal terms and people, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms. Independence for individuals requires the necessity to constantly negotiate and renegotiate their positions in correlation with others, which involves the ability to cope with the break up and the dysfunctions of contemporary families. These families are always abandoned by the masculine protagonists, but in some cases they can be reconstructed if a clear balance between individuality and commonality is set, each as informing the other, and where familial love wins over selfishness and conflict. In other cases old ties give way to new ones and the erotic element reveals itself to be determinant in this sense. The ending of each novel by

632 Gardner, "Margaret Thatcher," 236.

Kureishi is always connected with the closing of a stage of life and a transition towards a new beginning: a metaphor for the necessity of renewal of the self and of society at large which are approached in very different ways in respect to the structural and thematic variety of the novels and their different time setting.

In analysing the real and imaginary travels made by Kureishi's characters from distinct perspectives, it has been possible to trace a common path which links together all the chapters and projects the necessity of creating a more tolerant, hybrid society where difference is neither erased nor valorised, but multiplied and dispersed. London offers a space for individuality to be balanced with commonality and Kureishi's writing is a declaration of love to the metropolis. His characters develop a feeling of belonging and eventually identify with the city because of its unique capacity to produce and intermingle a range of polyphonic physical, intellectual and creative energies.

Since the time when the author started his artistic career much has changed in terms of representation by and of minority subjects. Writing in the vanguard of second generation British-Asian fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, Kureishi with his compelling and controversial novels, short stories, plays and films opened the way for a new generation of non-white British-born writers and artists. Zadie Smith's best-selling *White Teeth*, for instance, carries evident similarities with *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and Smith, one of the youngest and most talented contemporary novelists, warmly recalls that at fifteen years old she read *The Buddha* in one sitting and skipped all her classes not to interrupt the amazement. As she observed: "It's a very simple pleasure that white readers take absolutely for granted: I'd never read a book about anyone remotely like me before"⁶³³. Deran Adebayo claimed that *My Beautiful Laundrette* gave him the inspiration for becoming a writer while Ayub Khan Din, after playing the male protagonist in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, tried the writing career and packed out the Royal Court Theatre in 1997 with *East is East* which was later also made into a well-known film. Meera Syal, who played Rani in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, has become both a successful writer and a TV star as a leading actress in the popular all-Asian television comedy series *Goodness Gracious Me*. In a similar manner Rita Wolf, who played Tania in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, later developed her career in the theatre while Gordon Warneke, Omar in *My*

633 Donadio, "My Beautiful London".

Beautiful Laundrette continued his professional career in theatres or films confirming the advantage of playing first in Kureishi's films.

Kureishi's early success and the subsequent interest of the media in his work has favoured the emergence since the 1990s of an ever increasing distinctively British-Asian contribution to all areas of cultural production. Brilliant visual artists such as Anish Kapoor, popular musicians such as Asian Dub Foundation, Nitin Sawhney or Cornershop who included a song called "Hanif Kureishi Scene" in their first single, film directors such as Gurinder Chadha constitute today a leading presence in the contemporary international art scene.

Twenty years after a masterpiece such as *The Buddha of Suburbia* helped change the landscape of British fiction and society, Kureishi still proves to have plenty to say but it is difficult to predict what artistic challenge the author will undertake next. After his detachment from the issue of race and his concentration on a more intense, condensed and self-reflective kind of writing he has brought his work full circle with *Something to Tell You*. Here he has entwined coming-of-age drama with mid-life crisis, marking a return to the preoccupations and comic verve of the earlier novels but also holding tenaciously to melancholic reflections. Although Kureishi's work has always maintained a considerable autobiographical dimension and a clear projection towards constructions of masculinity, various forms of love and domesticity, and the politics of personal relationships, the author has always shown himself to be a bold writer, willing to take risks in experimenting with different genres, styles and artistic projects. As Kureishi continues to create, his themes continue to expand and deepen, his craft continues to evolve, his message continues to shock and to stimulate a productive climate of ideas that lead in the direction of social change. He has deservedly gained his place in the history of literature and hopefully he will continue to enrich it for years to come with his wry but also sympathising look at human frailties.

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Sinossi

“Nel cuore di questa vecchia città che amo”. Movimento, abbandono e cambiamento nei romanzi di Hanif Kureishi

Romanziere, drammaturgo, sceneggiatore e regista, Hanif Kureishi è uno degli scrittori contemporanei più conosciuti a livello internazionale. Figlio di un immigrato pakistano ma di cultura e formazione inglese, ha tracciato nelle sue opere un quadro globale della società britannica sfruttando le potenzialità di rappresentazione derivanti dal suo punto di vista ibrido. La sua opera riveste un ruolo fondamentale all'interno del panorama artistico e culturale sia perché rappresenta il primo rilevante contributo alla letteratura prodotta da figli di immigrati nati e cresciuti in Gran Bretagna, sia perché affronta il problema della rappresentazione dei soggetti *black-British* rifiutando con decisione di fornire di essi delle “cheering fictions,” ossia delle immagini forzatamente positive e rassicuranti che contrappongono un soggetto nero/colonizzato/buono ad uno bianco/oppressore/cattivo. Tali immagini, come spiega Kureishi, mettono lo scrittore nella posizione di agire come un “public relations officer, a hired liar,”⁶³⁴ e altro non fanno che riprodurre, soltanto invertito, il binarismo essenzialista che sta alla base della discriminazione e della divisione sociale. Kureishi si distingue invece per le sue caratterizzazioni realiste e provocatorie che svelano vizi, eccessi, difetti e debolezze dei suoi eccentrici personaggi, di qualunque razza, classe sociale, genere, orientamento sessuale o religioso essi siano, evidenziando così la natura comune di tutti gli esseri umani.

Pur non trascurando il peso dei conflitti etnici, dei rinascenti fondamentalismi,

⁶³⁴ Kureishi, “Dirty Washing,” 25.

delle perduranti ineguaglianze di classe e di genere che caratterizzano l'era della globalizzazione, Kureishi si prende gioco degli stereotipi attraverso cui ogni gruppo sociale interpreta gli altri con una pungente ironia, un umorismo cinico e di denuncia, e con l'utilizzo, a volte scioccante, di un linguaggio caustico e irriverente. L'ironia di Kureishi gli consente di affrontare, con le tonalità della commedia, anche le tematiche più scabrose e gli avvenimenti più tragici che hanno caratterizzato la storia delle ultime tre decadi; l'arco temporale in cui l'autore ambienta le sue storie, infatti, spazia dagli anni settanta al primo decennio del ventunesimo secolo.

Dopo un'attenta ricerca bibliografica si sono evidenziate alcune lacune nel complesso della produzione critica riguardante l'opera di Kureishi. L'oggetto d'indagine privilegiato in tutti i generi in cui l'autore si è espresso risulta essere quello della differenza etnica, tanto da farne in molti casi un criterio selettivo. Si è dunque riscontrato un forte squilibrio sia tra il numero di studi dedicati alle opere che eludono il concetto di razza e quelle che invece lo esplorano approfonditamente, sia, in riferimento a queste ultime, nella quantità di materiale critico che analizza anche tematiche diverse.

Questa tesi si propone di contribuire a colmare la lacuna del panorama critico in relazione ai romanzi di Kureishi, e si basa su un punto di vista che, pur tenendo nella dovuta considerazione la componente etnica dell'autore e di molti personaggi, non fa di essa l'elemento cardine ma la prende in esame contestualmente a tematiche precedentemente sottovalutate. Basandosi su un approccio metodologico interdisciplinare che arricchisce con nuove competenze i tradizionali strumenti d'indagine, il presente studio intende valorizzare il ruolo della letteratura come fattore di trasformazione capace di plasmare nuove forme e soluzioni sul piano culturale e sociale. La sociologia e l'antropologia partecipano ad un'analisi testuale che si fonda su studi postmoderni, postcoloniali e culturali, e che prende in esame tematiche come la classe sociale, la disgregazione della famiglia nucleare, il ruolo della comunità, la cultura e la musica pop all'interno dei romanzi di Kureishi. La fluidità e l'instabilità del concetto di identità sono elementi cardine della scrittura kureishiana e per questo motivo si è scelto di orientare questo studio attorno alle tematiche di movimento, abbandono e cambiamento che fungono da filo conduttore di tutti i romanzi.

Il primo capitolo presenta la figura dello scrittore, la sua posizione all'interno del panorama letterario internazionale e la sua visione del romanzo realista come mezzo privilegiato per narrare la fluidità della società postmoderna, composta dalla sovrapposizione di culture diverse, ibrida e in perenne evoluzione. Il contributo innovativo dell'opera di Kureishi viene illustrato attraverso il genere del *Bildungsroman*, a cui i primi due romanzi di Kureishi, *Il Buddha delle periferie* e *The Black Album*, appartengono. L'autore, oltre a rivisitare la struttura classica del romanzo di formazione, ne sottolinea la capacità di trasformazione sulla società. Kureishi vuole sottolineare che, così come gli individui ripensano alle loro identità, allo stesso modo debbano farlo le nazioni, e che la definizione di ciò che significa essere *British* in un paese ormai postcoloniale, multiculturale ed in rapido cambiamento debba essere sollecitamente ripensata. Sebbene la maggior parte dei britannici riconosca come dato di fatto il mescolarsi di ceti, razze, lingue, religioni, orientamenti sessuali che caratterizza i grandi centri urbani del loro paese, molti, come appare dai romanzi di Kureishi, ne sono sconvolti e, avvertendo la presenza di soggetti altri come un sopruso, una contaminazione, un'invasione, li rifiutano e rimangono nostalgicamente ancorati ad un'idealizzata, omogenea e rassicurante "Orwellian idea of England"⁶³⁵.

L'opposizione dicotomica tra realtà suburbana e realtà metropolitana e quella tra personaggi che si riconoscono nelle caratteristiche dell'una o dell'altra personificandone i valori costituiscono un'isotopia che sottende anche ai successivi capitoli della tesi. Se la periferia, luogo d'origine di tutti i protagonisti, è rappresentata da Kureishi come uno spazio ristretto, statico, conservatore e culturalmente limitato, la città al contrario costituisce un universo in continuo divenire, vitale, foriero di nuove possibilità e di stimoli intellettuali. Solo le figure non simpatetiche restano bloccate in uno spazio fisso, ed in particolare le figure materne, la cui immobilità fisica simboleggia anche un'immobilità morale e culturale. I protagonisti, invece, siano essi immigrati di seconda generazione alla ricerca di un senso di appartenenza o nativi britannici bianchi, si stabiliscono a Londra in età adolescenziale desiderosi di migliorare la propria posizione sociale.

Agglomerato in continuo divenire, la metropoli rappresenta lo spazio per eccellenza della convivenza e della relazione ed è il risultato in termini topografici

635 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 89.

dell'interazione tra gruppi diversi, ridisegnandosi costantemente a partire da un'identità collettiva costantemente negoziata. Londra si svolge, si estende come un origami dalle mille strade, dalle mille piazze, dai mille vicoli, dai mille parchi e ponti che i protagonisti della prosa kureishiana percorrono e ripercorrono piano piano facendoli propri. Si spostano instancabilmente lungo gli assi della capitale in un continuo movimento che diventa metafora di trasformazione. L'atto del camminare rappresenta il primo metodo di conoscenza del mondo, un modo per misurarlo ed esplorarlo. Michel de Certeau sostiene che ogni singolo passo, ogni singolo movimento che si compie percorrendo le strade della città diventa “una forma di organizzazione dello spazio, costituisce la trama dei luoghi;”⁶³⁶ per questo motivo l'atto di camminare “sta al sistema urbano come l'enunciazione [...] sta alla lingua”⁶³⁷. Camminare in un luogo, percorrere uno spazio, diventa uno dei tanti sistemi di appropriazione della città e gli spostamenti fisici di Karim, Shahid, Jay, Gabriel, Adam e Jamal ci danno testimonianza dei continui processi di de-territorializzazione e ri-territorializzazione che essi operano lungo tutta la rete urbana.

Il secondo capitolo si apre con l'analisi delle caratteristiche tipiche della *lower-middle class* britannica come descritta nei romanzi di Kureishi. Tale analisi viene condotta principalmente attraverso alcune teorie del sociologo francese Pierre Bourdieu che, in *La distinction* (1979), afferma che “la base dei sistemi di classificazione che strutturano la percezione del mondo sociale e che designano gli oggetti del piacere estetico”⁶³⁸ debba essere ricercata nella struttura delle classi sociali. Le pratiche di distinzione simbolica che si applicano alle disposizioni personali verso il cibo, l'abbigliamento, l'arredamento della casa, gli stili di vita, la cultura, l'arte e così via comportano una sotterranea logica di inclusione e di esclusione, veicolata attraverso il gusto. I giudizi estetici, le concezioni opposte del bello e dell'utile, così come i consumi che solitamente ne dipendono, sono radicati e radicano nella posizione occupata all'interno della stratificazione sociale, e sono espressione di una ricerca d'identità perseguita attraverso mutevoli posizionamenti nel sistema di differenze sociali. Sia la coerenza di classe che le differenze tra classi in termini di stile di vita possono essere spiegate come l'“*habitus* di classe”, ovvero un sistema di disposizioni inconscie e socialmente interiorizzate proprie di ogni classe. L'*habitus* non è

636 Michel de Certeau, “Camminare per la città” in *L'invenzione del quotidiano*, trad. it. Mario Baccianini (Roma: Edizioni Lavoro, 2001), 150.

637 de Certeau, “Camminare per la città,” 150.

638 Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinzione. Critica sociale del gusto*, trad it. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), xi.

un “destino,” poiché la riproduzione dell'ordine sociale avviene attraverso strategie e pratiche che lo mettono costantemente a confronto con esperienze nuove ed è da esse costantemente trasformato; così, l'habitus acquisito nei primi anni dell'educazione primaria, familiare e scolastica può sia essere rinforzato che, al contrario, modificato dalle esperienze di socializzazione secondaria che si accumulano durante l'intera vita.

Tutti i protagonisti dei romanzi di Kureishi, bianchi e non, appartengono alla piccola borghesia e cercano ed ottengono di migliorare la propria condizione sociale. Essi infatti, grazie ad un'implementazione di quelli che Pierre Bourdieu chiama ‘capitali’ (culturale, economico, sociale e simbolico), riescono ad evadere dal loro status originario, a modificare il loro *habitus* e ad ascendere alla *upper-middle class* londinese. Le professioni a cui tutti i protagonisti aspirano, e che raggiungono con successo, sono legate al mondo della scrittura: Karim di *Il Buddha delle periferie* diventa un'attore, ma alla fine diventa anche scrittore della storia che abbiamo appena letto; Shahid in *The Black Album* si immerge totalmente nel mondo della narrazione, che considera chiave di lettura privilegiata, per svelare le contraddizioni dell'animo umano; Jay e Adam, rispettivamente in *Nell'intimità* e *Il corpo*, diventano acclamati scrittori e drammaturghi; Jamal in *Ho qualcosa da dirti* è uno psicanalista che ha pubblicato diversi libri di successo; l'omonimo protagonista di *Il dono di Gabriel* si accinge a girare il suo primo film, dopo averne scritto lo *storyboard*.

Tra i vari personaggi che migliorano la propria posizione sociale, particolare importanza viene data a quelli asiatici o anglo-asiatici che sfruttano la loro condizione di minoranza etnica in suolo britannico per entrare a far parte dell'alta borghesia e del mondo dei *media* londinesi. Come diversi critici del postmodernismo hanno osservato, nell'era della globalizzazione e del consumismo imperante il rapporto di spendibilità commerciale tra minoranze e mezzi di comunicazione si è fatto inestricabile. Questo fenomeno si è sviluppato a partire dagli anni sessanta e settanta ed è cresciuto in maniera esponenziale con l'introduzione della TV via cavo che ha alimentato la domanda di personaggi ‘diversi’ rendendoli ‘alla moda’.

I mezzi di comunicazione di massa, che traggono il loro maggior profitto dalla pubblicità, spesso trasmettono messaggi commerciali che, per loro natura, devono essere rapidi e facilmente comprensibili e si basano quindi su immagini superficiali e

stereotipate. Un tale sistema semiotico favorisce il controllo della traduzione culturale che, come afferma Edward Said, conduce all'addomesticamento del soggetto minoritario alle esigenze della cultura dominante, ossia alla sua feticizzazione⁶³⁹. Questo sistema, tuttavia, risulta imperfetto e non riesce mai, come i personaggi di Kureishi ci mostrano, ad attuare la completa ri-semantizzazione dell'Altro. Essi sfruttano a proprio favore lo sguardo orientalista che Said colloca alla base dell'esotismo; consapevolmente, infatti, forniscono di sé stessi un'immagine esotica del tutto costruita, così da rendersi mediaticamente spendibili, ma lo fanno attivando in maniera mimetica dei meccanismi sovversivi che rivelano infine la natura performativa dei concetti di razza e di classe. Kureishi, dunque, sottolinea come attraverso le ambivalenze di questo meccanismo di mercificazione globale dell'alterità sia possibile rendere il lettore consapevole del carattere costruito delle categorie culturali e delle relazioni di potere che possono sottendere alla percezione e alla rappresentazione transculturale. Fondamentali per l'analisi di questo argomento si sono rivelati i concetti di *performativity* di Judith Butler e di *mimicry* di Homi K. Bhabha.

Il terzo capitolo si apre con la ricostruzione del contesto storico, politico e sociale della rivoluzione liberista degli anni del governo Thatcher (1979-90) che ha portato, tra le altre cose, al progressivo disfacimento del concetto di comunità tradizionale e di famiglia nucleare nella società contemporanea. L'ex primo ministro, infatti, nella sua lunga amministrazione incentrò la sua retorica sulla demonizzazione del *welfare state* sulla promozione di uno sfrenato capitalismo e di una cultura fortemente individualista che, facendo gli interessi di pochi ricchi, ha portato all'esclusione sociale e al depauperamento sia della tradizionale *working class* britannica, sia del nucleo familiare tradizionale, sia delle minoranze etniche, sessuali e di genere.

Di fronte alla dissoluzione di forme di vita sociale precostituite, come afferma Zygmunt Bauman,⁶⁴⁰ l'individuo acquisisce un certo livello di autonomia ed è chiamato a compiere delle scelte. La società odierna, tuttavia, è caratterizzata dall'incertezza; il mondo è percepito come malsicuro, privo di solidità, e ciò determina un permanente senso di inquietudine esistenziale, di disorientamento e di mancanza di un centro di gravità personale. Con il materialismo introdotto dalla *deregulation* thatcheriana ed espansosi poi con Tony Blair in un becero consumismo, la società appare votata al piacere e alla

639 Cfr. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

640 Zygmunt Bauman, *La società dell'incertezza* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001).

realizzazione di sé e, nel campo dei sentimenti e delle relazioni, la tensione tra felicità individuale e responsabilità familiari si fa stridente. Nei romanzi di Kureishi le famiglie di tutti i protagonisti subiscono una frattura determinata dalla dipartita dei personaggi maschili dal nucleo domestico, solitamente in cerca di una situazione più appagante.

Kureishi indaga il caos dei rapporti personali della contemporaneità, dedicando particolare attenzione a quei personaggi che da adolescenti hanno sperimentato gli eccessi del post-rivoluzione sessuale, come Jay in *Nell'Intimità*, Adam in *Il Corpo* e Jamal in *Ho qualcosa da dirti*, e che ormai adulti, al tempo della narrazione, si trovano in un vortice di narcisismo, di vuoto morale e di implosione delle aspettative giovanili. Mentre negli anni settanta il sesso era visto da questi personaggi come una liberazione, un'emancipazione dai tabù, una forma di progresso che avrebbe reso l'Occidente più felice, nel presente è diventato invece un rituale vuoto, un bene di consumo come tutti gli altri, un'espressione del "Thatcherism of the soul"⁶⁴¹.

Sebbene la rottura dei legami affettivi si traduca per i personaggi in uno *zapping* carico di sofferenza, essa si rivela indispensabile per la ri-negoziazione dei rapporti interpersonali. In alcuni casi il distacco diventa necessario per la maturazione dei protagonisti, per il ripensamento delle rispettive responsabilità di un partner verso l'altro e per la riunione finale della coppia separata sotto presupposti diversi; in altri casi i distacchi più dolorosi dono sempre seguiti dal gioioso inizio di importanti relazioni; solo nel caso di Adam in *Il Corpo*, il protagonista, a causa della sua superficialità, finisce per perdere e per rimpiangere amaramente il bellissimo rapporto con l'amata moglie.

La famiglia, non è l'unica forma di comunità avvertita come coercitiva e limitante nei romanzi di Kureishi; altri tipi di comunità tradizionale, infatti, vengono percepite dai protagonisti come monolitiche, omogeneizzanti ed antidemocratiche come la fratellanza musulmana in *The Black Album*. Tali tipi di gruppi sociali vengono rifuggiti in nome della libertà legittima dell'individuo di sviluppare un proprio percorso personale, di esprimere liberamente la propria opinione e di svincolarsi dalle aspettative imposte dal gruppo. Un elemento distintivo dei romanzi di Kureishi è invece la rappresentazione di tipi alternativi di aggregazione che sottolineano la possibilità di creare un *Third Space*, come lo intende Bhabha, uno spazio interstiziale tra quello dell'oppressore e quello dell'oppresso dove si

641 Kureishi, *Intimacy*, 68.

produce un atto ri-creativo, un nuovo nascere di soggettività destabilizzanti. Queste comunità, infatti, sono composte da membri appartenenti a classe sociale, etnia, genere, orientamento sessuale e religioso differenti e sono costituite da reti di relazioni fondate sul rispetto e sull'affetto reciproco. Esse trovano la loro produttività nella differenza e, offrendo un esempio di ideale di vita comune da trasporre nella realtà di tutti i giorni, costituiscono una risposta alla demagogia thatcheriana fondata sull'intrinseca paura del diverso, alla violenza fondamentalista e ai rigidi codici morali suburbani.

La struttura critica di questo capitolo si basa su influssi diversi, tuttavia particolare rilevanza viene data ad un nuovo campo di studi di recente formazione che prende il nome di *Community Studies* e si fonda sull'interazione tra sociologia e antropologia.

Il quarto capitolo prende in esame le espressioni artistiche proprie della cultura pop riscontrate nei romanzi ed investiga simboli e significati legati ai vari movimenti musicali. Tutte le opere prese in esame sono infuse da elementi appartenenti a questa cultura, non solo come artificio stilistico atto a ricreare un particolare periodo storico o un particolare contesto culturale, ma anche come espressione 'carnealesca' che fa il verso alla cultura ufficiale e mette in discussione pregiudizi e stereotipi.

Leggere una cultura attraverso il pop, ovvero a partire dalla pratica sociale dell'ascolto e della condivisione dei suoi molteplici linguaggi, ne evidenzia la duplice identità. Da un lato il pop ha un carattere prettamente ludico, si colloca come fonte di puro intrattenimento che non sfugge alla logica capitalista in quanto merce da vendere e acquistare insieme ad una serie di *commodities* ad esso correlate (abiti, accessori, riviste); dall'altro, il pop rappresenta uno spazio di resistenza in grado di dar voce al malcontento e allo spirito di ribellione giovanili. Kureishi ha più volte sottolineato come il pop abbia anche un importante significato politico, perché è un genere inclusivo che riunisce gruppi sociali e culturali diversi e che ha incarnato, soprattutto con i Beatles, ragazzi della periferia appartenenti alla *lower-middle class*, un'ideale di opportunità e di possibilità per i giovani della loro generazione.

Nei romanzi la musica funziona come metafora di movimento, di spostamento, di trasformazione che determina un'atmosfera di libertà, dove le strategie identitarie sono flessibili. Il clima stimolante e creativo della capitale favorisce lo sviluppo di sottoculture

e controculture che sono vere e proprie fucine di espressioni artistiche ibride ed innovative, le quali si sviluppano al di fuori della rete manipolata del *mainstream* per poi assumere in molti casi importanza globale. Kureishi attribuisce un'agentività politica positiva a queste *spectacular youth cultures* che, attraverso i loro stili diversi e innaturali, interrompono i processi di normalizzazione appropriandosi di alcuni segni del quotidiano (si pensi ad esempio alle spille di sicurezza, ai vestiti strappati, alla vaselina) e caricandoli di significati segreti espressi in codice. Ricollegandosi alle teorie di Butler e Bhabha, il presente capitolo evidenzia il valore performativo delle stilizzazioni estetiche assunte da alcuni personaggi kureishiani e dagli artisti a cui essi si ispirano, e che sono atte a sovvertire concezioni essenzialiste di genere e sessualità. Viene inoltre messo in luce come l'ascolto di un particolare brano possa contribuire fattivamente alla creazione di una certa atmosfera; come attraverso i gusti musicali dei personaggi sia possibile rilevare particolari aspetti della loro personalità e come, nel corso degli ultimi decenni, la musica abbia subito grandi ed importanti evoluzioni.

Il Buddha delle periferie, ad esempio, testimonia il fatto che già negli anni sessanta i Beatles erano riusciti ad inventare soluzioni sonore e stilistiche tanto originali ed alternative da consacrare anche in ambito ufficiale il potenziale rivoluzionario del pop. Tuttavia, essendo il romanzo ambientato alla fine degli anni settanta, il movimento musicale più significativo risulta essere il punk. Il punk è una sottocultura originatasi nella *working class*, altamente stilizzata e portatrice di un messaggio politico di protesta contro il sistema.

The Black Album e *Il dono di Gabriel*, ambientati l'uno nel 1989, l'altro presumibilmente negli anni novanta, affrontano la rappresentazione artistica della complessa questione del genere attraverso icone come Prince e la star del glam-rock David Bowie. I due cantanti proposero una re-invenzione della mascolinità attraverso il *gender bending*. Furono in grado, attraverso artifici visivi quali trucco e abiti eccentrici, di costruire un'identità di genere del tutto ibrida, che si poneva in netto contrasto con la mascolinità aggressiva dei *rockers* degli anni cinquanta e sessanta. L'obiettivo era di difendere con la propria arte l'idea stessa di differenza, cercando di far interpretare il genere non più come fatto biologico ma essenzialmente culturale, promuovendo così una maggior tolleranza del diverso. In *The Black Album* importante è anche il riferimento alla

dance elettronica che, grazie alle nuove tecnologie, trasforma semplici fruitori in produttori della propria musica, avviando un processo epocale di liberazione dagli interessi economici delle case discografiche.

Intimacy e *The Body*, ambientati tra gli anni novanta e i duemila, dimostrano che la musica pop non è di sola pertinenza dei giovanissimi ma presenta un linguaggio accessibile a tutti e che favorisce la fuoriuscita dell'individuo dalle limitazioni del proprio ruolo sociale.

Ho qualcosa da dirti, ambientato nel 2005, esplora il Bhangra modernizzato, un nuovo e creativo stile musicale creato negli anni novanta dagli immigrati indiani di seconda generazione nel depresso quartiere di Southall, a Londra, e diventato successivamente genere di tendenza a livello internazionale. Il Bhangra è uno stile di musica e danza originario del Punjab che, nella sua versione modernizzata, si arricchisce di contaminazioni hip-hop, house e reggae e, facendo della diversità, dell'eterogeneità e della commistione le sue caratteristiche principali, rappresenta una dichiarazione di identità delle nuove etnie metropolitane dell'era globale.

La prospettiva critica di riferimento per questo capitolo si basa principalmente sui *Cultural Studies*.

Da quando Kureishi ha iniziato la sua carriera artistica negli anni ottanta, molto è cambiato in termini di rappresentazione scritta dalle minoranze e sulle minoranze. Le sue opere controverse e provocatorie hanno aperto la strada ad un'intera nuova generazione di scrittori e artisti nati in Inghilterra da genitori immigrati. Molti sono questi giovani autori che, avendo conquistato popolarità internazionale, riconoscono di aver tratto ispirazione dal coraggio e dal talento di Kureishi. Tra di essi vale la pena nominare Zadie Smith, Deran Adebayo, Ayub Khan Din, Meera Syal e Monica Ali. Il precoce successo di Kureishi e il susseguente interesse dei *media* per il suo lavoro hanno favorito l'emergere, sin dagli anni novanta, di un sempre crescente contributo anglo-asiatico in tutte le aree della produzione culturale; basti pensare al brillante *visual artist* Anish Kapoor o a musicisti di spicco come gli Asian Dub Foundation, Nitin Sawhney o i Cornershop che, nel loro primo *single*, hanno incluso una canzone intitolata 'Hanif Kureishi Scene'.

Vent'anni dopo che un capolavoro come *Il Buddha delle periferie* ha contribuito a cambiare il panorama artistico, culturale e sociale britannico, Kureishi dimostra di essere

un autore audace, disposto a sperimentare stili e progetti artistici differenti. Mentre lui continua a creare, la sua arte continua ad evolversi e il suo messaggio continua a stimolare un produttivo clima di idee che punta nella direzione del cambiamento sociale. L'autore ha meritatamente conquistato un posto di rilievo nella storia della letteratura e ci auguriamo che continuerà ad arricchirla per molti anni a venire con il suo ironico e simpatetico sguardo sulle fragilità umane.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Ida, Orlando, Rita and Giuseppe.



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