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Abstract

Bart Moore-Gilbert is currently writing a monograph on Hanif Kureishi for the Manchester University Press 'Contemporary World Writers' series. As part of the research for this, he has been meeting with Kureishi on a regular basis. The following is an edited extract from an interview which took place at Kureishi's flat in Baron's Court, which focuses on the treatment of London in the author's first three films.

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BMG: The first thing that struck me about the films in terms of their representation of London is the way they allude to films which celebrate other capital cities. In 'Some Time With Stephen', you refer to Yasujiro Ozu's Tokyo Story as an influence on Sammy and Rosie¹ and in the script of London Kills Me, there's an explicit reference to Fellini's La Dolce Vita,² which is playing at the Electric cinema in Notting Hill. That's his homage to Rome, yes?

HK: Yes, it's all set in Rome, or the outskirts of Rome.

BMG: And Sammy's speech in Sammy and Rosie about the pleasures of London, that's a reworking of Woody Allen?

HK: Yes, there's a lot of *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* in *Sammy and Rosie*. *Annie Hall*, especially.

BMG: In The Black Album, Shahid seems to feel that there aren't any films about London, so before he gets there, his mental image of life in the city is formed by extrapolation from films about New York, like Taxi Driver and Mean Streets. Were your films in part a conscious attempt to make London a subject for contemporary British cinema in a comparable way?

HK: I suppose so. Well there were some London films, a bit earlier, like *The Long Good Friday*. But the London I was interested in was the kind which never got on film, which was Asian London. *Laundrette*, then, was about the fact that London was a mixed city, a cosmopolitan city, a city of immigrants, as well.

BMG: If you take a film like Tokyo Story, in a sense Tokyo is the major character, insofar as it's always there and it seems to determine the behaviour of so many of the characters, at least the younger ones. Aside from the focus on Asian London, was it part of your purpose to have

London as the central character in this sense?

HK: Yes. And I wanted to shoot films out in the city. So *London Kills Me* is very specifically located, in Notting Hill. There were thoughts of doing a lot of it in the studio, or here and there, but I wanted to photograph the place as it was, or as I thought it was. And all my writing, as you know, is concerned with London, in all sorts of ways.

BMG: *What's very noticeable about the films is that, aside from the excursion to the country in London Kills Me, none of them have settings outside London or its outer suburbs. In fact the rest of England, or Britain, hardly features in any of your work.*

HK: In *My Son the Fanatic* it does, but aside from that, no.

BMG: *One of the things that interests me is the way that London figures in terms of the transition between your plays, which I suppose represent the first phase of your career, and the films, which represent the second. In the last play, Birds of Passage (1983), the setting is very specifically the suburbs and the suburbs are somewhere that the young people want to leave in order to get to London. However, the older character David provides quite a long speech which acts as a kind of eulogy of the suburbs as representing the best of British life. What struck me is that David makes a connection between the suburbs and a notion of Englishness which is in the past, or under threat, or even on the point of disappearing. There are a number of factors behind this, but perhaps the most important, though it's not spelled out as such, are the demographic and cultural changes bound up with 'New Commonwealth' immigration. I wondered whether the shift of location to London 'proper' in the first three films is connected to your sense that, whatever the virtues of suburban life – and David's attitudes to them are by no means represented completely unsympathetically – they represent a sense of Englishness, which because it was, at any rate traditionally, defined more or less implicitly in ethnic as well as cultural terms, is no longer appropriate, or adequate, to the realities of modern Britain and the new conceptions of national identity and belonging which are now becoming necessary. And London, then, becomes a kind of laboratory for working out some of these new possibilities in terms of cultural identity.*

HK: Well in my own case, there was a desire to get away from the stability of the suburbs, which is clearly what the suburbs were there for, the sense of permanence. Nothing changed very much and obviously for me as a young man, that was pretty dreary and I wanted the flux and cosmopolitanism and glamour of London.

BMG: *But particularly in that speech of David's in Birds Of Passage and also in some of the essays, especially 'Some Time with Stephen', which was written in 1987, there's this idea that the suburbs are somehow quintessentially English and that therefore the move to London is tied up*

with a desire to be something different, to imagine how one might become what Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia* calls 'a new breed of Englishman'.

HK: Yes. Well, when I was there, the suburbs were mostly white. White lower-middle class and working-class. And me and my father and my sister were the only Asian people there, really. It wasn't cosmopolitan at all. It may be more so, now. So it was to get away from that kind of Englishness that I wanted to get to the city, because I couldn't bear being the only non-white where I came from. I need to live in a more cosmopolitan environment, as well as a more exciting environment.

BMG: *At the same time, in some of your essays at least, there seems a note of nostalgia for the suburbs, so that although they are narrow and monocultural, they're also still associated with those Orwellian ideas of tolerance and gentleness and so forth – which perhaps you don't get in the city.*

HK: Well, they do sort of work. It's not that one just hates the suburbs and wants to get away. They do serve their function, and they do preserve a certain kind of Orwellian gentility, I suppose. And privacy, which is so stultifying, because people don't engage with one another. You never really went into other peoples' houses. Certainly the parents didn't, though the children did to a certain extent. You wouldn't look at one another. In the opening of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and in the TV film as well, Margaret pulls the curtains, she doesn't want people looking in. There's that sense of nothing being displayed, of living only in the most glancing and superficial ways, that's the idea of the suburbs. And that was terrifying to me, being a kind of sixties or seventies kid, with a romantic idea of what people could do with one another.

BMG: *One of the ways I've been approaching your films is by looking at them in context of all those 1980s 'Raj Revival' and 'English Heritage' works and I've been thinking about your use of London in terms of the latter genre, especially, films like Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and the Merchant-Ivory adaptation of Forster's *A Room with a View* (1984). You mention each of these films at various points in your non-fiction and I wondered whether the emphasis on London in your films is partly tied up with the fact that the social order that is mediated in 'Heritage' films is pre-modern; they evoke an old England which is centred on the country and the country house. And consequently London and other big British cities don't really feature at all in them, because that way England can more easily be presented as ethnically and culturally pure, even though at the time these films are being made all that has long gone. And, of course, the cities in the period that these films address were already culturally mixed, or 'contaminated', even, by foreign influences, though not of course as much as they are now. So 'Heritage' films want to exclude them, as part of that eighties project of defining national identity in very circumscribed terms.*

HK: Yes, that's right.

BMG: So there was a deliberate engagement with those 'Heritage' films in the way you used London in your own films, so that your London was aggressively different, more modern or progressive, more democratic, more cosmopolitan, than the kinds of England for which the 'Heritage' films were nostalgic?

HK: Yes, absolutely.

*BMG: It's interesting that insofar as rural England features in your films, it's a backward, oppressive or threatening place. One of the characters in *Laundrette*, I think it's Johnny, talks about the snakes you find there. It's an alien and weird idea for him.*

HK: Yes. Actually, my [new] play, *Sleep With Me* is set in the country. Somewhere in the country, it doesn't say, but it's set in a country house and all these people from London go for a weekend and while they're there all kind of mad things happen. You couldn't set *Sleep With Me* in London.

BMG: The country house has a very long history as a symbol of England.

HK: Yes. So these modern English kids running around in that kind of place indicates some sort of change, perhaps.

BMG: So in your films, the country, which is so English, traditionally, is actually a foreign land to these people who come to it from London?

HK: Yes, yes. I mean you imagine Johnny and Omar walking around the country, it would be a very strange sight. This skinhead with long hair [sic] and this Asian kid.

*BMG: Which is actually what happens in *London Kills Me*, when the posse have their day trip out of London. Those country kids they meet are throwbacks, culturally, or deprived. They can't cope with these apparitions from London. But they're also dazzled by them, the freedom they represent.*

HK: Yes, they're amazed.

*BMG: There's a very interesting essay by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown in a recent issue of *Marxism Today*. She talks about the relation between Britain's ethnic minorities and the rise of nationalisms in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. One of the things she's worried about is the resurgence of English nationalism in response to devolution, if Britain breaks up. In this context, she seems to see the city, especially London, as a place where minorities can claim a sense of belonging which goes beyond those narrow ideas of Englishness. [reads]: 'If we blacks are going to be locked out emotionally from Wales, Scotland and England, I wish to claim London for us and those who think like us. Here we will preserve that historical fudge – a Britishness which is a civic device to bind people together without recourse to*

ethnicity.⁷³ It seems to me that in a way your films anticipate that kind of argument. So that London is a place of some kind of national or communal belonging still, but one to which anyone can belong, regardless of ethnicity or inherited cultural traditions. So, for example, in *Sammy and Rosie*, *Sammy* says, 'We're not Britishers, we're Londoners.' And you make similar kinds of comments about yourself in your essays.

HK: Yes, that's very interesting. I suppose there aren't really any ideas of Englishness as such in London. Even when you see churches. A church in London is more likely to be a tourist attraction than anything else. In the country it's different. I went to a wedding recently in the country and you could see that that family had been going there for generations and they obviously all knew each other. Clearly churches don't have those meanings in London.

BMG: And in London you can transcend that?

HK: Yes. I find going to the country terrifying because you always feel excluded. One gets very bad paranoia. I think it's very interesting what she says about whether there'll be a resurgence of English nationalism. I doubt it to be honest, I can't see where it's going to come from. I can't see it coming from young people.

BMG: She doesn't actually spell that out, but there's clearly anxiety about reactions to developments like the resurgence of Scottish nationalism.

HK: Everybody wants their own nationalism, I suppose. You want to join in. But you can't find a gap to go through. And then suddenly you see London and you think that can belong to us, it doesn't belong to the English, it's international. So suddenly you can see there's a gap, you can force a way through there. I remember coming from the suburbs and not belonging and getting to London and thinking, where am I? who am I? And you suddenly see that you can claim London as your own.

*BMG: But there's also a quite different sense of London which comes across in the films, which are represented in *Danny's ideas* in *Sammy and Rosie* about London as the site of 'domestic colonialism'. This is striking in the context of the 'Raj Revival' films of the 1980s, even *Gandhi*, perhaps, where colonialism is something that happened a long time ago, a long way away. So that 'London' is actually quite an ambivalent space in the films overall. It's the place of new identities, of opportunity and progress, but it's also the place in which the old colonial order somehow continues, the injustice and oppression and discrimination.*

HK: Certainly if you're a young, black male, I think you'll probably find that a lot of people have bad ideas about you and, you know, you may have certain ideas about yourself. About feeling excluded in certain ways.

BMG: The take that Sammy and Rosie has on those sort of issues, did you feel that in the emphasis on the riots, and the almost documentary aspects – like the references to the shooting of Cherry Groce and so on – did you feel that was a reflection of everyday reality, or was that exaggeration for dramatic effect? At one point you talk about the film's mixture of realism and surrealism. Was all the conflict there to support the former emphasis or the latter? Or did you feel that's the way it really was, and want to get that across?

HK: Well, that stuff had happened. Though obviously, you stick that in the middle of the film and it can seem surreal or an exaggeration. Clearly it wasn't happening every day and clearly we weren't living in South Africa. But also that film was made right in the middle of Thatcherism. And one really felt then that somehow the English, whoever they included, would, under Thatcher, really leave everybody else behind, the unemployed, certainly the ethnic minorities. And you felt that there were going to be two nations. You can see that Blair has somehow prevented that happening, but at that time that didn't seem to be an entirely paranoid vision. Certainly those riots had taken place, there were riots going on everywhere in the country in the early eighties. And we watched all the television footage of that stuff when we actually shot the riots.

BMG: In Sammy and Rosie, I think there's an interesting recapitulation in terms of the earlier connection between Englishness and the suburbs, because of Alice; she's the old colonial and so colonialism becomes associated here with the suburbs. The violence which comes with 'domestic colonialism' somehow gets mixed up with the ideas of gentleness, as the other side of that Englishness represented by the suburbs as David in Birds of Passage conceives of them. She lives in leafy Cockfosters and it's interesting that Danny says he doesn't want to go there, he sees it as 'dangerous'. She lives there in this great, decaying mansion-type building with a cellar which is full of quasi-Gothic secrets. It seemed there was a big shift in that sense from the way the suburbs come across in the plays, that they're much more directly related to the darker side of the English past which is still having its effects on the present. It was actually shot in Kew wasn't it?

HK: Yes, next to Kew Gardens. I suppose she wasn't suburban in the way that we were. I thought of her as being more like Cheltenham, certainly from somewhere further out, an area that people don't commute into the city from. For Alice, and people like her, the city would be considered dangerous, a strange and aberrant place. So I don't see her as being suburban, I see her as being, I don't know, provincial's not the right word, I suppose quintessentially English in a way that's probably now lost.

BMG: I saw a kind of link, or symmetry, in Sammy and Rosie that in the city itself you have this system of modern domestic colonialism and in places like

Cockfosters or Kew you have the vestiges of the old colonialist order. Which is oddly sympathetic as well, in its own way.

HK: Yes, I see that.

BMG: I've asked you about your relationship to Kipling before and I just wanted to go back to this for a moment in the context of the films. It seems to me that in some ways your vision of London is a kind of inversion of his vision of India in The Jungle Books, especially, so the former colonial centre has become a kind of jungle in which characters like Karim, who is so like Mowgli – and Kim – in many ways, and a lot of the characters like him, have to survive. It's a kind of parodic reversal, so that the old imperial capital has become a place of threat and disorder, especially for the migrant.

HK: Yes, definitely. Someone like Karim comes to a place where very bad things are going to happen to him, unless he takes care. He has to be on his guard and negotiate and in a sense sell himself. When he plays Mowgli, he has to sell a part of himself, all he's got really, the colour of his skin, in order to get by as an actor. And that's not unlike what his father has to do, which is selling Indianness, or selling George-Harrisonness, in order to become an admired guru in the suburbs. So in a sense exoticism becomes a kind of commodity which one can exchange in order to get by in the jungle of the city. It seemed to me there were lots of ironies there.

BMG: Yes, it's a motif throughout your work, the white liberal, even hip, domestic interior, which always has the lacquered box from Thailand or the rugs from Morocco. There seems a connection between that and the old colonial idea of prizing the authenticity or Otherness of the colonized peoples, making their difference a commodity.

HK: Yes, ethnicity is a commodity which is bought and sold, but you could also say in a way that it's cultural interchange. Like Picasso taking African masks and making something else with them. You wouldn't only say that he was exploiting Africa for images. This is how culture works. It takes originals and does other things with them.

BMG: It's interesting you say that. Certain kinds of Marxists would probably disagree. Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, sees globalization as simply the latest phase in the West's exploitation of the rest of the world and its appropriation of their culture.⁴ I'd argue that globalization is actually more of a two-way thing, that although there certainly is exploitation, it's also the case that 'they' answer back, or 'write back', to use Rushdie's phrase, and 'we' are changed as well by the relationship, we're productively contaminated, if you like. And that's especially what happens in places like London.

HK: Well the opposite of that would be purity. There would be no interchange at all. The whites would remain entirely white and the Third World

would remain entirely untouched by capitalism. That would be absurd. One of the greatest benefits that somewhere like India has at the moment is computers and e-mail and the internet, and this can give people access to education and knowledge and so on. It would be absurd, rather old-fashioned, just to see these developments as exploitation. I suppose I'm talking more about culture than economics. Culture is about mutation, you have to pick up bits and pieces from wherever you go, and that all has to change continuously, otherwise culture's not alive. And that's more apparent in a city like this. Economically I can see that things might be quite different under globalization, but I think you have to make that distinction. Otherwise, culture's dead.

BMG: Another of the things that interested me in terms of the films' representation of London was in the context of post-colonial ideas about 'imaginary homelands'. First of all, to go back to the 'English Heritage' films for a moment, it seemed to me that they're obviously examples of imaginary homelands, evocations of an England without any real social tensions, and so forth, an England which obviously never existed. But also many post-colonial writers seem to be trying to create imaginary homelands too. I felt there was quite a different emphasis in your films, partly because of the medium itself. As you've said, your London is a real London and the films are in some sense about a struggle over a real place. For example, in London Kills Me, the directions specify very particular streets and locations.

HK: Yes, I'm not a magic realist in any sense. There certainly isn't much magic in South London. Rushdie could find that, the others could find that, where they came from.

BMG: But is that tied up with the fact that they are using a literary medium? The world they create may be based on a real one, but by virtue of the medium it requires more imagining?

HK: Yes, but they're also using places, Bombay or Peru or Colombia, which are places where there really are mysteries, and superstitions, and the world is invested with a kind of magic which certainly Orpington, say, can't possibly have.

BMG: But is the same true of London? In a couple of your essays, you argue that there are aspects of London which you just don't get to know, life on the 'sink' housing estates for example. That London is a mystery in a way, that it's a place of constant surprises, that it constantly eludes you. The point about London is that it is full of these places and ways of living that you suddenly come upon, which bring you up short.

HK: Yes, and that is one of the pleasures of London, too, that in a sense you can never understand it and find it all, that it renews itself all the time and is always different in a way that the suburbs or the country are not. And that's the problem for people with London, too. It's always changing. And here's

that element of fantasy. I suppose that a lot of these places in London are playgrounds, really, for certain kinds of fantasies. Bloomsbury is a playground, there are thousands and thousands of articles and books continuously written about Bloomsbury, so it's become a sort of soap opera, it's a place that you can fantasize around. It's real *and* you make it up. What I wanted to do with *Laundrette*, I suppose, was a sort of blast of the real. You know, if you want to know about London, it's like that, it's a laundrette in Peckham. It's not England as it is in *A Room with a View*, with Judi Dench in her carriage.

BMG: So London is very much a real place, materially, in your films. It's in your face. There are no shots of tourist London, of imperial London or the great shopping streets. I saw that as a really effective riposte to the impossible sweetness of the villages in the English countryside in films like A Room With a View.

HK: Yes, but you could have imperial London, too. But that's not my area. It's what you choose to put in, or leave out, that's what's interesting.

BMG: I suppose it's a fairly obvious point, but there does seem a strong connection in your films between the idea of London as various and changing and the stress in your work on the malleability of identity. I suppose it's an idea which connects with Kim again, the emphasis on disguise and the way a character like Karim is constantly changing his wardrobe as if he's trying on new roles or identities.

HK: Yes, in London there's a sense that you can make yourself up. At the beginning of the TV series, and in the novel, Karim sees his father doing that. His father's usually a man who's watching telly in the evenings, then one night he goes out and becomes a Buddha and everybody is amazed by him. Karim sees his father turned upside down, literally, and then he's transformed into this other creature. Or in *The Black Album*, where Shahid could become a Muslim fundamentalist. Then he goes to a rave. And so on. That idea of mutability, it excited me very much, it was happening to me already. I was a Pakistani boy when I was with my Pakistani family, then I'd go to school, and I'd be a mod. And then you saw you could make more of it and enjoy it and it was rather liberating to think that you didn't have to be stuck in one identity. I suppose one of the things I liked about *Sammy and Rosie* was all that stuff on the tube, the trains and the travelling, which is also a metaphor for other kinds of fluidity. You could easily have made that film without all that kind of stuff.

BMG: And that freedom is much less possible in the suburbs or in the country?

HK: Yes, but it's partly because of class, too. You know, people don't talk much about class. But when you went to the country, you knew you were part of a different class, you know, that you were disdained.

BMG: This is probably my final point and I guess it goes back to something we discussed earlier. In the essays, there's a very interesting engagement with earlier writers like Orwell and Priestley in terms of their ideas about 'Englishness'. In 'Bradford' you mention Priestley's idea of there being three Englands, 'Heritage' England, the old industrial England, especially in the Midlands and the North, and the new suburban England which was emerging in the early part of the twentieth century. London doesn't really get a mention in this scheme. And you argue that now there's a fourth England, the England of the inner city.⁵

HK: Yes, particularly as those parts had been so bombed. So all sorts of people were able to move in, nobody wanted to live there any more. Certainly up to the seventies it was full of squats and derelict buildings. And there was a kind of cultural renewal, so that there were all those little theatres in basements and so on. There were places to hide and remake yourself and to make new kinds of communities. It was before the Canary Wharfization of London in the eighties under Thatcher. Before, those parts of England were still semi-derelict and therefore you had more spaces to play in. And to move in. And with all those new kinds of people, not just immigrants, though the immigrants were most visible, there was a new England coming into being, especially in London, even though it had always had those elements of difference to some extent, of the foreign, because of its history, because it had been the centre of the empire, of the world, even.

NOTES

1. Hanif Kureishi, 'Some Time With Stephen: A Diary', in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid: The Script and the Diary* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 81.
2. Hanif Kureishi, *London Kills Me* (London: Faber, 1991), p. 32.
3. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, 'Nations Under a Groove', *Marxism Today*, Special Issue, November / December 1998, p. 47.
4. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).
5. Hanif Kureishi, 'Bradford', in *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings* (London: Faber, 1996), p. 129.