

## “WHERE HAS OUR COUNTRY GONE?” READING *THE LAST WORD* AFTER BREXIT

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### *Abstract*

*The Last Word* (2014) is the first novel written by Hanif Kureishi not being set in London but in the English countryside. While the main focus of the novel is the antagonistic relationship between the famous Indian writer Mamoon and his biographer Harry, the context of deprivation within which Mamoon’s mansion is located speaks of what Kureishi himself called a “big break in Britain, between London and the rest of the country” (2014). This paper will precisely focus on the novel’s description of this “break” within the country and relate it to the outcome of the recent “Brexit” referendum. In particular, through references to earlier novels by the same author and an interview I conducted with him in 2014, the analysis will focus on Kureishi’s take on multiculturalism and the contemporary social and political situation of Britain. What dynamics of power regulate social relationships? Who is included and who is excluded? In addressing these questions, the paper will also address the emergence of “post-multiculturalism” discourses and the backlash against multiculturalism in Europe (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010).

**Keywords:** racism, multiculturalism, immigrants, Brexit, inequality, immigration.

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### *1. Introduction*

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On the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 2016, Europe woke up to the news that Britain has decided to leave the European Union. As comments and demographics of Leave voters began to flood European newspapers, magazines and TV screens, the resonance with the context of Hanif Kureishi’s novel, *The Last Word* (2014) appeared striking. Indeed, if the Leave campaign had been dominated by anti-immigration and anti-establishment feelings and a nostalgia for an “uncontaminated” past identity (Hobolt, 2016, Coffman 2016, Smith 2016) it is almost impossible to miss the resonance of these themes with the context within which Kureishi’s novel is set. While the novel focuses mainly on the antagonistic relationship between the famous Indian writer Mamoon Azam and his biographer Harry Johnson, which plays out in Mamoon’s house in the countryside, the portrayal of the surroundings speaks of a high social and economic disjuncture within the country, and of a resurgent – or never quite defunct – xenophobic attitude towards immigrants.

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The opening scene of *The Last Word* sees Harry contemplating the countryside while on the train to Somerset, where he will have his first official meeting with Mamoon. Looking out of the window, Harry thinks to himself:

*Peaceful England, untouched by war, revolution, famine, ethnic or religious disturbances. Yet if the newspapers were correct, Britain was an overcrowded little island, teeming with busy immigrants, many clinging to the edges of the country, as on a small boat about to capsiz. [...] Meanwhile apparently, since the financial crash, everyone on board the country was so close together and claustrophobic they were beginning to turn on one another like trapped animals. [...] Yet, to Harry now, it seemed like the government was deliberately injecting a strong shot of anxiety into the body politic because all he could see was a green and pleasant England [...] It didn't even look as though you could get a curry for miles.* (Kureishi, 2014: 1-2)

Harry's ponderings introduce some of the key social, economic and cultural issues faced by contemporary Britain, namely the nostalgia for an "uncontaminated" past, the perceived menace of immigration, the "town-and-country divide" (Coffman, 2016), as well as the role played by politicians and the press alike in setting the national agenda on such issues, as highlighted by recent reports on the Brexit campaign (Hobolt, 2016: 1262, Coffman, 2016). This article will precisely focus on Kureishi's engagement with these issues through his references to the social and cultural environment of the countryside and it will discuss the author's perspective on multiculturalism and the backlash it seems to be facing in contemporary Britain (Coffman 2016).

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## ***2. Situating The Last Word***

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As already mentioned, the novel opens with Harry's arrival from London to Mamoon's country estate in Somerset, where he will spend six months collecting material to write Mamoon's biography. Harry is an upper-class English writer in his early thirties who had admired the Indian-born novelist, essayist and playwright Mamoon Azam "since he was a teenage book fiend" (Kureishi, 2014: 2). Mamoon lives in his country house with Liana, his Italian wife, and they manage their estate with the help of housekeeper Ruth, her daughter Julia and, occasionally, her son Scott. Harry comes from an academic family and, having already published a biography of Nehru, he sees the opportunity of writing Mamoon's biography as the way to "make his name, launching him into the public world and a rosy future" (Kureishi, 2014: 3). His relationship with the writer, however, proves to be much more challenging than he expected. Despite having hired Harry to write his biography, Mamoon is not very cooperative, and the relationship between the two is marked by an intense rivalry, as they compete at tennis, literature and women. Mamoon enjoys provoking Harry, while Harry grows increasingly frustrated at Mamoon and fears he won't be able to complete his work. Mamoon, a world-wide

acclaimed writer – “there wasn’t a decent bookshop in the world that didn’t carry this man’s work, nor a serious reader who had not heard his name” (Kureishi, 2014: 285) – is also known for his difficult character, not to mention his controversial political positions:

*For most of his adult life, Mamoon had been his own kind of radical, going to some trouble to mock and invert political correctness, rebelling against the fashionable contrarians of his day, hippies, feminists, anti-racist, revolutionaries, anyone decent, kind or on the side of equality or diversity. This was, for a short time, an unusual and even witty idea. Now Mamoon was as bored by this posed as he was by everything else.* (Kureishi, 2014: 34)

As controversial as his positions are, however, Kureishi’s emphasis on this being a pose highlights the fact that, as it will turn out throughout the novel, his perspective on society and politics is much more insightful than it might at first appear. Indeed, Kureishi mentions Mamoon (perhaps referencing the author himself) being the first to “track, in the dark cities of northern Britain, the change in the Muslim community from socialist anti-racism to a radicalism built around a new worldwide form, a reactionary idea of Islam” (Kureishi, 2014: 50). He also highlights Mamoon’s criticism of Marxism as another form of fundamentalism, which, far from benefiting the working class, turned out to be “hardly a system which sponsored the freedoms” it was supposed to uphold (Kureishi, 2014: 160). Harry’s political views, on the other hand, are not so clearly defined in the novel – apart from the fact that he defines himself as a liberal democrat (Kureishi, 2014: 160) – but his attitude towards Julia and her family somehow reflects the division along lines of class, education and geography within the country mentioned by Hobolt in her analysis of the Brexit referendum (2016: 1273), not to mention the inability of higher-educated middle-class liberals in understanding the working classes that Zadie Smith detects in her article published in *The New York Review of Books* (2016).

In the background of Mamoon and Harry’s daily quarrels on women, sex and literature, stand Ruth, Julia and Scott, “white workers”, as Julia says, “no one cares about” (Kureishi, 2014: 62). Harry, away from his fiancé Alice, begins an affair with Julia and is led into her world, getting a first hand experience of council houses, unemployment, and of the general misery of a life at the margins of society. Kureishi’s description of Julia’s family, through the eyes of Harry, provides a critical commentary on questions of class, race and identity, while raising important questions on the state of British identity. It is the portrayal of the deprived context within which they live that offers a precious overview of the context within which the Leave campaign has managed to secure the positive result of the referendum.

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### 3. *The question of identity*

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Kureishi's engagement with questions of race, class and identity is certainly of no surprise, as in fact these are central themes in his work (Ball, 1996: 16; Malik, 2011, Thomas, 2005: 3). His very decision to become a writer was driven by the need he felt to counter dominant representations of Asian people of the time, which, very much influenced by Thatcherism and Powellism, were grounded in their exclusion from the nation and overtly racist (Kureishi, 1996: 76; Malik 2011; Needham, 2000: 115). As he stated in *The Rainbow Sign*: "in the mid-1960s, Pakistanis were a risible subject in England, derided on television and exploited by politicians, [...] they were despised and out of place" (Kureishi, 1996: 73). Living in a context within which the word "Pakistani" had turned into an insult, Kureishi recalled how he had been racially abused at least once a day since he was five years old (1996: 76). If, as Stuart Hall argued, "regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event role" (1996b: 165), it became clear to Kureishi that the only way to counter racism and narrow, exclusionary conceptions of national identity was through the creation of alternative representations. As he admitted in an interview I took with him in 2014:

*Some of the racism that I became aware of and the right-winged ideology that was circulating in Britain in the Sixties had to be resisted I guess, and the only way you could resist them was through argument, through language, and creating a new identity, a new identity for us but also a new identity for Britain: that it wasn't only that we had to change, but Britain had to change, and it had to become what you call now 'postcolonial', or 'multicultural', it had to find an identity which could make space for us. (Cleli, 2014)*

Kureishi's exploration of a new identity, a "new way of being British" (Kureishi, 1996: 102) brought about a cultural revolution "in millions of living rooms across England" when *My Beautiful Laundrette* was first shown on Channel 4 (Thomas, 2010: 4; see also Sandhu, 2000). Through this film, and subsequently with *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Kureishi introduced a new visual narrative that considerably challenged the idea of "British" and "Asian" as monolithic and mutually exclusive signifiers, breaking out "of the prison of identity" within which British Asian people found themselves "as a consequence both of racism and of anti-racist notions of ethnic belonging" (Malik, 2011). His works, to borrow Stuart Hall's words, point towards "a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities" (Hall, 1996b: 169). Moreover, as Ranasingha remarks, "Kureishi not only explores a range of 'black' identities, his intersections of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and class examine identity in terms of these multiple, overlapping, and colliding categories" (Ranasingha, 2007: 238). This is probably the reason why his works, as Susie Thomas observed, are appealing to

both British Asians and white readers/viewers, thus effectively contributing to the creation of a "genuine multiculturalism in which everyone is changed" (Thomas, 2010:8).

And yet, despite the multicultural turn and the "great cultural experiment" undertaken by Britain, thanks to the contribution of Kureishi himself, "racism and immigration are still contemporary issues" (Kureishi, 2014). Indeed, in his subsequent works Kureishi has continued to investigate the question of racism (as well as the fascination for fundamentalism<sup>2</sup>) and the renewed strength of anti-immigration discourses which followed the Rushdie Affair, September 11 and the London bombing of 2005, this time addressed specifically at Muslims. In *Something to Tell You* (2008), he provides a description of the way in which racism had changed since the Sixties and Seventies: "'Muslim' - or 'Mussie' - was a new insult, along with 'ham-head' and 'AllahAllah- bomb'. In our youth it has been Paki, wog, curry-face, but religion had not been part of it" (482). This description complies with Kureishi's considerations in *The Word and The Bomb*, where he states that, "the real differences in Britain today are a not political, or even based on class, but are arranged around race and religion" (2005:6). In a distant echo of Powell's call for repatriation (Kureishi, 1996: 75) Kureishi thus observes a resurgent nostalgia for a lost past: "I have heard calls among the British for the re-installation of Englishness, as though there has been too much multiculturalism, rather than not enough" (2005: 9).

This nostalgia for the past has been nourished by politicians and extremists of many kinds for years, to the point that anti-immigration and anti-fundamentalism as well as anti-European sentiments have been mixed together in the Brexit campaign, strongly centred on the idea of "taking back control" (Cain, 2016: 1). That almost thirty years after *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and exactly twenty years after *The Rainbow Sign*, Britain had to see a "Breaking Point" poster with Nigel Farage in front of an endless crowd of immigrants and refugees, suggesting their readiness to cross the British borders, with a caption that read "we must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders", clearly speaks of the resurgence of a very narrow perspective on Britishness, one that is grounded in exclusion and nourishes "fantasies of a lost Empire to reclaim" (id.). It is to this fantasy of control that "Scott the Skin", in *The Last Word*, responds to, when he asks his sister "where has our country gone? Who took it away?" The *who*, of course, is the key word here, for it implies that there is someone to blame, and this someone is the "Poles and Muslims" who live in the village, followed and beaten up by Scott and his friends (Cain, 2016: 62).

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<sup>2</sup> On Kureishi's engagement with the question of fundamentalism and the relationship between racism and religious fundamentalism, see Fischer 2015; Kaleta 1997; Upstone 2008, 2010: 37-61; Ranasinha 2007.

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#### 4. *From the metropolis to the countryside*

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*The Last Word* is Kureishi's first novel which is not set in the urban space of London, described by the author as a city of oppression but also a place of possibilities (Kureishi and MacCabe, 2003:45). A key element of the city is its multicultural character, which is remarkably rendered in *Something to Tell You*, where London is alternatively described as a city of "exiles, refugees and immigrants" (59), a "Muslim city" (272) and "a great middle-eastern city" (13). As John Clement Ball put it: "where once London reached out expansively into 'the world,' now the world began to shrink in upon London" (1996: 8). It is this mixture that makes London so exciting, along with a sense of possibility and the perception that the city offers the "potential for self-reinvention" (Ranasinha, 2007: 223), which is what both Eva and Karim look for when they move to the city in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. But London is not Britain, its cosmopolitan character distinguishing it from the rest of the country (Ball, 1996: 9) and *The Last Word* clearly depicts the disjuncture between the city and the countryside.

When I asked Kureishi about the reason why he set the story in the countryside, rather than London, his response confirmed his interest in the investigation of the social and cultural conditions of British society:

*It is quite a deprived England the countryside which I describe. I mean, Mamoon lives in a big house, he's got some money and all that, but then Julia and her family, and the others, they don't have much. There aren't many jobs, there are no possibilities of further education, of leaving the place and so on. There is a big break in Britain, really, between London and the rest of the country actually. As soon as you leave London the landscape is much more deprived and much rougher than London actually. (Cleli, 2014).*

In the novel, the reader discovers context of deprivation of the countryside alongside Harry. It takes some time for reality to sink in in Harry's mind, for, as previously mentioned, he first sees the Somerset countryside as an idyllic place, a "green and pleasant England" uncontaminated by migration or by financial troubles. To borrow Raymond Williams's words, in Harry's mind, "the image of the country is an image of the past" (1973: 296), an idealised image that tends to overlook the reality of life in the country. Indeed, the simple fact that Harry is visiting the country estate of a famous Indian writer already counters his idea of a place with no immigrants. And yet Liana reminds him of Mamoon's difficult journey toward international fame, of the numerous rejections he had to face in his youth as people were not interested "in bloody Indians" (Kureishi, 2014: 56), not to mention the fact that "people didn't even believe the Blacks could spell Tchaikovsky!" (Kureishi, 2014: 57). And yet, Mamoon is not simply an immigrant, he is a successful one, admired by critics (even by right-winged ones) and with a

social status that significantly differs from that of other "Poles and Muslims" referred to in the novel.

If upon his arrival Harry displayed a romanticised idea of the countryside, soon it is his feeling of superiority towards its people which emerges strongly. This is a feeling that, it appears, he has inherited from his father who, when Harry was a child, preferred to spend weekends visiting art galleries and theatres, rather than in the country as his friends did, for he "believed there was no one to talk to in the countryside, and that the people living there were as bovine as the animals they reared" (Kureishi, 2014: 40). On his first night visit to the local pub, Harry himself says that he irritated the locals by "appearing superior" when he suggested them that, if they wanted to learn more about Mamoon, they could read his work (Kureishi, 2014: 51). On this very same night he meets Julia and they begin their affair. His feeling of superiority emerges clearly also in the way he relates to Julia and her family. As Harry starts to see Julia more and more often, and to spend the night at her place, he gradually enters her world but maintains the detachment of a tourist who "wants to immerse [himself] in a strange and bizarre element [...] on condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever [he] wishes" (Bauman, 1996: 29). He does not seem to be affected in the slightest by the sight of Julia's mother drunkenly dancing, half naked, with three other men when he first enters their house (Kureishi, 2014: 51). Their yells, the dirtiness of the house, the sight of Julia's mother with a swollen, blue eye, seem not to touch him. Perhaps cynically, just like a tourist, he knows that he will go back to the safety of his well-off life. As Bauman again remarks:

*In the tourist's world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety. This makes the world seem infinitely gentle, obedient to the tourist's wishes and whims, ready to oblige; but also a do-it-yourself world, pleasingly pliable, kneaded by the tourist's desire, made and remade with one purpose in mind: to excite, please and amuse. [...] Unlike in the life of the vagabond, tough and harsh realities resistant to aesthetic sculpting do not interfere here. (Bauman, 1996: 29-39)*

While Julia is not a vagabond, Bauman's words fittingly describe Harry's attitude towards her, her family and the countryside. He is there but is not really there, taking what he enjoys (sex) and glossing over the rest. But it is not only his tourist-like attitude that characterises his safe travels to Julia's world, it also his feeling of superiority.

When Julia tells him that her brother Scott is with the National Party and that they are "British stock", he dismisses her racist remarks (she is quoting her brother) and does not take her seriously. As Julia tells him about Scott's hatred towards Muslims and how he bemoans the loss of their own country, Harry replies by telling her that, in reality, "the country's much nicer now. Everyone is broke, but

it's stable, unlike everywhere else in Europe. And there's less hate around than there used to be" (Kureishi, 2014: 61). And, to reinforce his point, he adds that he had recently undertaken a research on the new skinheads in South London and that they are "all huff and puff. A bunch of Widow Twankeys pissing in the wind" (Kureishi, 2014: 62). His dismissal of Julia's considerations is grounded in his domestication, to borrow Bauman's words, of the reality he is faced with, and so, to counter her argument, he talks about London, that to him is the representation of real life. While talking about stability, he completely overlooks the fact that her reality is not stable at all. His firm sense of righteousness recalls Zadie Smith's considerations of the fracture between London and the rest of the country, a form of "Londoncentric solipsism" (2016) common among intellectuals in the city – herself included – that she fully acknowledged only in the wake of the Brexit referendum. "One useful consequence of the Brexit", Smith argues, is the fact that it openly reveals "a big fracture in British society", the existence of profound "gaps between north and south, between the social classes, between Londoners and everyone else, between rich Londoners and poor Londoners, and between white and brown and black" (2016).

It is not until he agrees to accompany Ruth to her sister's place that Harry seems finally hit by the reality of these gaps, and by the fallacy of his own previous considerations about the pleasantness of the country:

*Far from living, as Harry had imagined, in flower-strewn Aga-heated cottages in the verdant enchanted English countryside, the part of the town Julia's mother directed him to was composed of run-down ugly council houses – many of them boarded up, seemingly abandoned – and shabby graffitied streets. The people looked pasty-faced, slow-moving, ill-kempt, both dozy and violent. [...] Harry seemed to have discovered an island run by teenagers: a semi-violent English poverty and hopelessness unrelieved by years of government investment. You wouldn't leave your car here, let alone your family. (Kureishi, 2014: 69)*

The harshness of the reality he is faced with is finally acknowledged by Harry, although he still has the comfort of the tourist, knowing that he doesn't have to stay, to leave his family or his car there. Through the depiction of Harry's adventures in the countryside, Kureishi not only shows his "Londoncentric solipsism" (Smith, 2016) but he also sheds some light on the social, economic and cultural divide that fractures the country, basically exposing what Hobolt defines the "divide between the winners and the losers of globalization" (2016: 1265). Where the winners are "the young, well-educated, professionals in urban centres", like Harry, the losers, those "left behind" are "the working class, less educated, and the older"<sup>3</sup> (2016: 1265), the people who, in the novel, live in the "semi-violent English poverty" mentioned before. It is to the "losers" of globalization that the Leave campaign has been more appealing, and they appear to be located mostly "in

<sup>3</sup> See also the British Election Studies report on voters' demographics.



the English countryside and in the post-industrial north-eastern towns with larger working class populations" (2016: 1273). According to the data collected by Hobolt, Leave voters have been strongly led by "anti-immigration" and "anti-establishment feelings" (2016: 1260), spiced up with nostalgic view of Britain's past and a desire to turn back the clock (British Election Study 2016).

The characterization of Julia's family, of Ruth and Scott in particular, thus complies with this description of Leave voters. Scott's racist attacks appear as a response to a feeling of marginalization and to the perceived "invasion of immigrants" who have progressively "taken away" his country (Kureishi, 2014: 61). As Julia tells Harry:

*The local town, where I bet you've never been, is full of Poles and Muslims. White workers like us no one cares about. There's a mosque in a house they watch, the lads. The boys set fires to scare the towel-heads and black crows. They follow them and hit them. That'll teach 'em to try and blow us up.* (Kureishi, 2014: 62)

In these sentences what we see is the conflation of race and class issues: Muslims are speciously attacked because they "try to blow us up", and no one cares about white workers. The link between the two statements is easily found in the fact that, as Kureishi wrote in *The Rainbow Sign*, "racism goes hand-in-hand with class inequality" (1996: 93). Another element that makes it plausible to identify Julia's family with Leave voters is their contempt for the elite. In her analysis of the Leave campaign, Hobolt explains that the campaign has framed the referendum as "a battle between ordinary people and the political establishment, in line with the populist idea of a fundamental division between 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite'" (2016: 1266). This is a strategy appealing especially to those sections of the population who feel left behind, the "losers" of globalization. In *The Last Word* Ruth and Scott in particular seem to be receptive to the idea of a division between ordinary people and the elite, represented here by Harry. Ruth thinks in fact that Harry is "snobby, middle-class and patronising [...] everything she hates about this country" (Kureishi, 2014: 97). Scott, meeting Harry out of the pub one night, tells him: "I'd love to kill a nigger tonight. I'm in the mood for a dune coon. Failing that – there's you". He then adds: "you think you can come from London and take our stuff?" (Kureishi, 2014: 222). Their contempt for Harry expresses no doubt their resentment against his own aura of superiority, his patronising attitude, but it is not only him they dislike, it is what he stands for: elite, middle-class Londoners who think they can do what they want –as if the others did not matter.

Interestingly though, as much as they hate the elite and immigrants, they work for Mamoon, who happens to be part of both categories. Both Ruth and Julia, and possibly Scott, steal food, wine and clothes at Mamoon's, but they never express the same resentment against him that they express against other immigrants, or Harry. They have even lived with Mamoon for some time, after the death of his

first wife Peggy. Writing about that short time, Mamoon describes how he enjoyed his time with “his new family” (Kureishi, 2014: 185) and how he enjoyed the company of the kids, Julia and Scott. Things then changed again as he married Liana: Ruth, Scott and Julia returned to their house and became “staff” again (Kureishi, 2014: 188). The prospect of going back to their previous life devastated Scott in particular, and it was then that he became a racist, chasing and beating “the father of a Somali immigrant family with a cosh” (Kureishi, 2014: 189). And yet, Mamoon and Scott still maintain a privileged relationship, as Mamoon “continued to see Scott and listen to him [...] giving him guidance, but no money” (Kureishi, 2014: 189). Unlike Harry, Mamoon listens, he cares about them, which is perhaps the reason why they do not racialise him – together with the fact that, as Julia observes, he always criticises Muslims (Kureishi, 2014: 61). The irony of this situation lies in the fact that, in a context of social and economic insecurity and deprivation, a working class, racist white man works for, and depends on, an Indian man. If Scott seems lost, Mamoon, to paraphrase Stuart Hall’s words, is finally centred – after years of struggle he is “coming home with a vengeance” (1996 a: 114). Mamoon’s stability, unlike Harry’s, has been reached after years of struggle, and this is perhaps the reason why, despite being a conservative, he is more emphatic than Harry towards them. Unlike Harry, he is much more aware of the significance of the class divide in his country. The speech he gives at his birthday dinner best summarizes his perspective on current politics:

*We are staying, to adapt Gyorgy Lukacs, in the Grand Abyss Hotel, which has every service and facility: it is beautiful, well lit, comfortable, with keen staff. There is an incredible view, because it is perched on the edge of a cliff. And with its inhabitants burrowing beneath it, looking for oil, it could collapse at any moment. We are surviving, in this pleasant liberal enclave where people read and speak freely, on borrowed time. But for those not inside – the dispossessed of the world, the poor, the refugees and those forced into exile – existence is a wasteland. This increasing separation is deadly. We in the hotel are the lucky ones, and we must not forget that.* (Kureishi, 2014: 106)

Despite the fact that he introduces his speech referring explicitly to Britain, it is impossible to miss here the reference with the dispossessed, the refugees and the poor workers, who inhabit the country. Mamoon thus warns his fellow diners never to forget the fact that they are in a position of privilege. The question to be asked now refers to the consequences of the gap between the privileged and the dispossessed of the country for national identity.

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## **5. Conclusions – on identity and multiculturalism**

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In *The Last Word* questions of racism, identity and class are once again at the centre of Kureishi’s writing, and once again he has proved to be ahead of his time with this timely description of the fracture within British society, which operates

along axes of class, race, education and geography (Hobolt, 2016: 1273). As he explained, talking about *The Last Word*:

*Amongst the most deprived in Britain now we find the white working class. They don't even have proper political representation but now they seek representation through Nigel Farage, and through his UKIP party. But they only have two issues: 1) to get rid of immigrants, 2) to leave the EU. And to make Britain into a small, kind of white, supremacist fake place. It's ridiculous. So it's usually the people who are left out and excluded that become fascistic, and they are the white working classes. They are the most frustrated and the more oppressed of all.* (Kureishi: 2014)

His direct references to the UKIP's anti-immigrants politics and to its nostalgia for a lost past – the EU referendum was likened by Farage to the Battle of Britain (British Election Study, 2016) – seem to bring Britain back to the 1960s. The uncanny resonance of Farage's arguments with those of Enoch Powell, observed by Smith (2016), has certainly not gone unnoticed by Kureishi himself. Moreover, just like in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, in this novel it is the members of the most deprived working class, with no representation, who are susceptible to racist fantasies of control and superiority. And in both cases, this racism is grounded in the nostalgia for a “lost Empire” (Cain 2016: 1).

The nostalgia for the past and its racist connotation is, as Thomas observes, not new in itself, but it is rather “based on a residual racism that has now returned with force” (Thomas, 2010: 12). This residual racism has been growing in parallel with a backlash against multiculturalism, which has begun to publicly emerge at the turn of the millennium (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010:4), and which Kureishi himself has discussed in essays and fictional works dealing with the Rushdie Affair, September 11 and the 7/7 London bombings. In *The Last Word* this resurgent racism is coupled with working-class anger and a reflection on the divide between the city and the countryside, between the middle and upper-middle-classes and the disenfranchised. The novel shows, to borrow Zadie Smith's words, how “extreme inequalities fracture communities” and that, if everybody is losing in the process, no one does “quite as much as the white working classes who really have nothing” (2016). If the outcome of the EU referendum in Britain has been an act of closure, a “rejection of British multiculturalism” (Coffman, 2016), Kureishi's novel offers a glimpse of the social, economic, cultural conditions within which this closure has been elaborated. Discourses on the failure of multiculturalism, as previously mentioned, have abounded since the beginning of the new millennium and they mostly drawn on arguments such as the clash of cultures, the threat to social cohesion, and a too permissive immigration policy (Malik, 2015, Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010: 12) that are referenced in the novel.

In *The Last Word* Kureishi registers the popularity of this kind of propaganda and its appeal especially on the disenfranchised, but that does not mean that he believes in the failure of multiculturalism. On the contrary, as already mentioned, in *The Word and the Bomb* he clearly stated that the problem is not that we have had “too much” multiculturalism, but rather that we have not had enough of it (2006: 9). Multiculturalism, for him, is pluralism, “the possibility to speak from different points of view and to be heard” (2014). That multiculturalism is about voice, is about plurality, is an important point that he defended also in *The Carnival of Culture*, where he argued that “multiculturalism is not a superficial exchange of festivals and food, but a robust and committed exchange of ideas – a conflict that is worth enduring, rather than a war” (2005: 100). *The Last Word*’s closing paragraph reiterates the author’s faith in multiculturalism as pluralism, as in fact it ends with Harry’s thinking that his book “was to inform people that Mamoon had counted for something as an artist, that he’d been a writer, a maker of worlds, a teller of important truths, and that this was a way of changing things, of living well, and of creating freedom” (Kureishi, 2014: 286).

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