Hanif Kureishi and the tradition of the novel

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1

Hanif Kureishi’s first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, follows on from his several plays and short stories, showing to advantage the stagecraft and spoken language as well as the themes used in earlier works. *Outskirts* (1983), for example, considers the youth culture in a segregated society in language that approximates the broken, partial condition of society fallen on hard times. *Birds of Passage* (1983) discusses the attitudes to residence, belonging, ownership, and displacement in relation to the Pakistani/Asian and the English communities in present-day England. Trade, programmed social communication and repossession—all somehow fail to bring about a society with common points of reference, a shared interest or heritage. Then there is a shift of vantage, what would seem to be the evolution of a device into a system. In *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986), the naturalistic approach leads to a new social harmony through a homosexual and inter-racial relationship between a Pakistani and an English youth; *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1988) celebrates various kinds of sexual relationships to build a new society where all other devices to achieve the same have come to naught. In an essay he published in the mid-1980s in the form of a Shavian preface to the screenplay, Kureishi states his credo concerning a future British society which will be free of racial antagonism. The fictional text of *The Buddha of Suburbia* echoes and examines the subject in a poised and respectable style:

And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and all its self-regard . . . We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all bitterness and resentment, too. How was this possible when bitterness and resentment were generated afresh every day?

(p. 227)

There is the future, perhaps, as well as the crucial question for it; but Kureishi needed the stretch and flexibility of prose-fiction to look into, read, and construct the present moment and probe the artistic self, for which the novel rather than the film was a highly suitable form.

In the novel, adolescent Karim Amir growing into manhood learns about himself and the world around him and discovers the current, operative rules of family, work, institutions, society, and culture. The personal and social similarities between ‘Cor’ (Hanif Kureishi’s familiar name) and Karim, however, result in a critical confusion between the author and the character—similarity being mistaken for identity—the novel being read as an autobiography. Reading it as an autobiography, in turn, leads
to evaluations of Karim Amir–Hanif Kureishi as man in society, and inevitably negative judgements of both the man and his work. At the other end of the scale from the particularist autobiography is the misconception of a universalist representation in which, after My Beautiful Laundrette, all Pakistanis are taken to be homosexual. The work is vetted by reviewers for ‘verisimilitude’ and ‘ultimate values’; the author’s ‘alter-ego hero’ is seen to have a weak grasp of the 1960s–1970s period combined with an excessive emphasis on the contempt felt for ‘Asians’ by the ‘second-generation Asian Britons — especially the brat-packers who have made good as writers in their adopted country’; and Kureishi is categorically accused of the ‘characteristic South Asian overkill’.

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

While a main interest of the novel no doubt lies in its development as Karim Amir’s personal Bildungsroman, its twin-focus plot gives us Karim Amir’s father, Haroon, who is also rediscovering himself in his love for Eva and in the effort on his own and others’ behalf ‘to reach [your] full potential as human beings’ (p. 13). He is the latter-day lecturing (contrary) Buddha, a traditional image recast in the suburbs of South London, who walks out of his marriage for another woman, believing himself and declaring to his son ‘we’re growing up together, we are’ (p. 22). Karim Amir’s own schooling and affairs with Eleanor, Jamila, etc., lead him out to much excitement and learning, away from the gloomy family home and boring suburban living, as he finds himself a place in the theatre world as well as interesting people to base his characters on. The experience also leads to a mature self, the artist with a conscience:

If I defied Changez, if I started work on a character based on him, if I used the bastard, it meant that I was untrustworthy, a liar. But if I didn’t use him it meant I had fuck-all to take to the group after the ‘me-as-Anwar’ fiasco. As I sat there I began to recognise that this was one of the first times in my life I’d been aware of having a moral dilemma. Before, I’d done exactly what I wanted; desire was my guide and I was inhibited by nothing but fear. But now, at the beginning of my twenties, something was growing in me. Just as my body had changed at puberty, now I was developing a sense of guilt, a sense not only of how I appeared to others, but of how I appeared to myself, especially in violating self-imposed restrictions. Perhaps no one would know I’d based my character in the play on Changez; perhaps, later, Changez himself wouldn’t mind, would be flattered. But I would always know what I had done, that I had chosen to be a liar, to deceive a friend, to use someone. What should I do? I had no idea. I ran over it again and again and could find no way out. (pp. 186–7).

As the theatrical itself assumes a dimension of life, playing moves the plot, and searching for a character becomes both a structural and a symbolic device. The first-person narrative develops from the point of view of ‘a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories’ (p. 3), adding to its already colourful, lower-middle-class platform and language, an antidote to the latter-day Raj and Daj fiction of the Minerva Press variety. To gain a correct understanding
of the present, Karim Amir finds himself placed at a distance from his father, and takes a decision to construct time in the only personal and valid terms possible:

I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I’d been colluding with my enemies. . . . [Dad] was always honest about this: he preferred England in every way. Things worked; it wasn’t hot; you didn’t see terrible things on the street that you could do nothing about. He wasn’t proud of his past, but he wasn’t unprideful of it either; it just existed, and there wasn’t any point in fetishising it, as some liberals and Asian radicals liked to do. So if I wanted an additional personality bonus [of an Asian past], I would have to create it. 

(pp. 212–13)

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

I could think about the past and what I’d been through as I’d struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is.

(pp. 283–4)

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

The Buddha of Suburbia has a gripping story, a contemporary socio-cultural reference which at least skims the surface, and a concern with human relationships and happiness that dominates all else. Here Kureishi yet again offers a provocative view of alternative lifestyles and social models, (in)versions of saintly ‘renunciation’, a suburban love-crawl, and the hearty viability of a residual selfhood in a composite
His energetic style is catchy; the quality of humour, particularly the sarcasm, is distinctly Pakistani; and the plebeian manner is worn with a panache that only a literary culture with a working-class tradition—such as Britain’s—can make possible.

Both these aspects of style and design are explained by a particular socio-literary context. With all this, it must be noted that Hanif Kureishi’s reference and debt to H. G. Wells are barely acknowledged by critics, much less examined in any purposeful manner. Within the novel, a kind of twentieth-century underclass tradition is paid a formal and personal obeisance by reference to ‘Bromley High Street, next to the plaque that said “H. G. Wells was born here”’, while admitting a ‘closeness’ to Wells that goes beyond the two authors’ sharing Bromley as their common birthplace.12 Both authors evince an interest in the study of suburban drolls, social mores, and people on the make, with a keen eye to their oddities and peculiarities. The formal references are particularly to Wells’s Kipps (1905), in which a draper’s assistant suddenly finds a fortune by inheritance and has a romantic problem, and to The History of Mr Polly (1910), in which Alfred Polly, 37, divides his life between the real but thwarted present and the imaginative (and less or more than real) but acceptable past. The family legacy is troublesome in this novel, too, as it is for Kureishi’s Karim Amir, and Polly’s chronic indigestion is related to marriage and cooking, of which Kureishi’s Haroon also appears to make a point. Polly leaves home and takes to the road in search of freedom, adventure, and fulfilment. Karim Amir echoes Polly’s predicament concerning the appalling education he has received in society to deal with his specific lower-middle-class or human problems. Another Wells novel that bears some comparison as an antecedent is Tono-Bungay (1909), which Wells described as ‘a social panorama in the vein of Balzac’; it focuses on English society as a severe social incoherence. Kureishi lacks that sort of panoramic view but, like the Wells of the other two novels, is able to draw on his experience of the suburban lower-middle-class life to portray characters types without being autobiographical.

What is further shared not only with H. G. Wells but also with the recent British novel is the social realism enlivened and relieved by a sure comicality. Kureishi’s satiric wit disallows compassion, but it is particularly evident in his portrayal of the character of the mother. He shares these qualities, along with the macabre and farcical elements, with Angus Wilson. In fact a further theme is shared with Wilson’s Anglo-Saxon Attitudes (1956). In this novel, historian Gerald Middleton is separated from his grotesque foreign wife, as Haroon is from his foreign and grotesque wife, and he tries to reconstruct and understand the past, which entails perpetrating a likely archaeological forgery. Karim Amir’s mock-project to obtain ‘an additional personality bonus [of an Asian/Pakistani Past]’ (p. 213) certainly turns out to be a forgery in essential ways as Anwar and Changez, who represent the earlier spirit, are left to die or be defeated. But Karim Amir is not the only character in recent English fiction to contemplate or harbour such projects; he has his other fictional relations in a fairly well-known tradition. The libertine manner may be that of Malcolm Bradbury’s The
History Man (1975), but the story outline is shared with Wilson. Angus Wilson’s As if by Magic (1973) is an adventure story of Alexandra Grant, the god-daughter of Langmuir, maker of magic rice. She is involved in a multiple affair and a search for purpose, while they both travel from place to place, internationally, without arriving at any satisfactory code of personal relations or a workable social harmony; what retains the interest is the adventure itself and the illusions that it fosters. Likewise, in a slick structural division of his narrative, Karim Amir, in the suburbs, dreams of being in the City as a final escape and an achievement, only to realise, later, that he has still further to go in search of that which will suffice without corrupting or satiating.

And the similarities are not only with Angus Wilson. Much postwar English fiction has been concerned with the ennui, antics, and struggles of the underclass seeking to find itself a personal paradise and contributing to the serio-comic mix in a fairly reasonable ‘slow’ society, which is willing to accommodate an odd relation but is decidedly unwilling to change itself. Karim Amir has a comment about this, holding responsible for the present century, in terms of class and social relations, British schools since the Victorian period and their portrayal in the English novel: ‘Fuck you, Charles Dickens, nothing’s changed’ (p. 63). But soon enough the comicality takes over, with a look at the ‘fanatical shoppers in the suburbs’ to whom shopping is ‘what the rumba and singing is to Brazilians’ (p. 65). Numerous postwar novels can be cited to illustrate the point of such a social focus eased by a comic outlook: Jill (1946) and A Girl in Winter (1947) by Philip Larkin; Scenes from Provincial Life (1950), Scenes from Married Life (1961), and Scenes from Metropolitan Life (1982) by William Cooper; Hurry On Down (1953) and Strike the Father Dead (1962) by John Wain; Lucky Jim (1954) by Kingsley Amis: Room at the Top (1957) by John Braine; A Kind of Loving (1960) and Ask Me Tomorrow (1962) by Stan Barstow; and Billy Liar (1959) by Keith Waterhouse, with its sequel Billy Liar on the Moon (1976). The self-absorbed ‘New Men’ (as from Cooper’s Memoirs of a New Man, 1966) had been born but had not quite arrived yet, and the society was not ready for a positive change though it could take the individual quirk involved.

Some of these novels have also been described as provincial novels, with underclass heroes who are ambitious, angry, anarchic, and romantic, seeking to find a change in their own lives. Often enough, the novels are also regional, urban or suburban, and they engage in satiric social commentary. They are generally characterised by a low-key realism, which may be said to be the postwar fictional counterpart of the Movement in British poetry and its project against modernism. While Alan Sillitoe’s work also shares with these the provincial and the regional features, it differs much in style if not mode, and has real working-class characters and outsiders. For example, Arthur Seaton (Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, 1958) knows as a working man that the political systems are devised to cheat him and he needs his beer and women—as there is no other escape for him. Brian (Key to the Door, 1961) is more intellectually disposed and tries life elsewhere, in Malaya, though there, too, is another system to contend with. Like D. H. Lawrence in Nottingham attempting to infuse a vitalist philosophy into the provincial and morally effete body, Sillitoe eventually contem-
plates a ‘revolution’ in the political sense (The Death of William Posters, 1965; A Tree on Fire, 1967; The Flame of Life, 1974), without, of course, changing the composition of this society. Frank Dawley’s long search for the complete life ends when his comrade dies in Algeria and he begins to question even his own commitment. But Karim Amir, rather like Arthur Seaton, would seem to laugh it off as too idealistic a view to be sustained in the face of the levity of fin de siècle suburbia.

Arguably, the only recognisable ‘revolution’ that has taken place is turn-of-the-century multiracial Britain itself, which Karim Amir bestrides both in love and disdain.15 No other change is realised as the protagonist readjusts focus ‘to locate [himself] and learn what the heart is’ (pp. 283–4), instead of embarking on creating social change through the more activist options taken, say, in a working-class novel like Hand on the Sun.16 Nor does the protagonist’s position represent the sort of human struggle, misery and meek resignation, or alternatively the determination of an Adah (In the Ditch, 1972) to find herself and her own life, described in the London novels of Buchi Emecheta.17 The jeering tone would almost undo any intent to alter states which provide for and are complacently couched in irony as self-defence: ‘We lived in rebellious and unconventional times, after all. And Jamila was interested in anarchists and situationists and Weathermen, and cut all that stuff out of the papers and showed it to me’ (p. 82). This does not avoid observing the vast class differences, particularly the underclass where the language exists at levels of much less sophistication and the ironical mediation is not trusted:

What idiots we were! How misinformed! Why didn’t we understand that we were happily condemning ourselves to being nothing better than motor-mechanics? Why couldn’t we see that? For Eleanor’s crowd hard words and sophisticated ideas were in the air they breathed from birth, and this language was the currency that bought you the best of what the world could offer. But for us it could only ever be a second language, consciously acquired.

(p. 178)

So Karim Amir sets about learning some of this language with Eleanor but finds the increasing familiarity with it to be an actual drawback and a divisive, listless experience:

Life had offered these people [Eleanor’s crowd] its lips, but . . . I saw it was the kiss of death; I saw how much was enervated and useless in them . . . that the ruling class weren’t worth hating.

(p. 225)

This degree of detachment must take its political toll and, paradoxically, encourage a kind of complicity. Joining the Asian ‘reply’ march against English racism is a proposition continually considered and scuttled or postponed in favour of the more pressing sexual engagements. Karim Amir is indeed ‘funny’, and has discovered as well as found out the society around him; now he must look inwards, in the liberal tradition, and ‘only connect’.18

A direct axiomatic consequence of such self-discovery and knowledge of character is that the body—rather than any spiritual or political inducement or potion—is seriously indulged as a basis of relationships to form a community: other likely bases have proved more socially exclusive or less amenable to the demands of a cross-racial
structure. But, in the novel’s process, the enterprise of forming a community is invariably undercut by a detached narratorial commentary, as if such communal security would be counteractive to the fragile beauty of personal transience in the frequent one-to-one relationships. To seek any more than this is preposterous and tantamount to entrapment by the same oozy-woozy values of the last century, which are here rejected as a socio-narrative enclosure. Neither Zola nor Dickensian sentimentality, as I suggested in the mid-1980s, can be usefully invoked to describe the hardcore form of the new realism of the novel based on societal conceptions far removed from those of the earlier works; a realism which is more perspectival than ideological. Gissing’s work, too, in novels like *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), describes simple Victorian ideals of (non-pluralist) society and (unilinear) progress; its optimism rests on removing class differences and is then modified by certain inherent flaws of character. Here again, social analysis devolves on the individual personality rather than finding an adequate explanation for the system. Even in a hypothetical turn-of-the-century state, such as that envisioned in Wells’s American predecessor Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), in which the economic, political, social, moral and cultural improvements of the new system have removed class difference, inveterate prejudice, boredom, and unhappiness will still be the questions to ponder or puzzle over. The heart and the soul, indeed the mind and the body, will still be with us; even in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and the post-1984 state, in which the mind is shut out or taken away, the body has its definite existence and Hanif Kureishi only acknowledges this tradition. As in Sillitoe, the world is a jungle, through which we are lucky to be able to take our bodies with us. Thus, what is actually denied in Kureishi is not the body—even when it does not connect with much else—but rather the speculation that any interest or happiness might lie beyond it.

3

Current uses of the body apart, an important aspect of postwar English fiction has been the Asian contribution in terms of the form, theme, and character of the novel. Among the genres, comic fiction has been one of the more successful modes of literary and cultural synthesis. The guru, as a prophet, seer and guide, has been a familiar figure in English fiction for no less than a century, not to mention the Besants, the Webbs, J. Krishnamurti, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Madame Blavatsky, the heyday of Indian lore and the respectful fascination of Theosophy in Britain and Europe. With R. K. Narayan, however, the guru, Raju of *The Guide* (1958), became a comic figure, a cunning if helpless rascal formed into an object of respect and awe by accident and by his own wish to fulfill other people’s expectations of him. His spirituality is a utility in demand, and he can hardly refuse giving it—which leads to hilarious social discrepancy and even seeming compliance on the part of natural or divine forces. Such a per-force-spiritual East is a fictional trope by now, following Sasthi Brata’s *The Sensuous Guru* (1976), Gita Mehta’s *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1980), and Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). In the last-named book, which takes an
allegorical line, following the Mahabharata, religious and political elements are fused together in a parodic union of the pious and the profane, the past and the present, the real and the fictional in an unstoppable, self-conscious narrative which also demolishes the distinctions between prose and verse as the Asian oral mythos takes over from the literary textual precedent. Kureishi's Buddha is contrary, 'a porky little Buddha . . . vibrant, irreverent, and laughing . . . a smooth politician' (p. 84), who can also use slangy rhyme but relies on normal if rather precious ordered prose for his discourse. He has plenty of self-regard, as a further sophistication and enlargement of a wonderful postcolonial character; but, as he 'took off his raincoat, chucking it over the bottom of the banisters' (p. 3) the first day of his transformation from a government official, he came to be as clear as the novel about his Asian line of descent into England.

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


4 'What was lovely was the discovery that in a novel you could do more or less as you pleased and never needed to worry about 'the complications of money' as in the film business you always must.' Hanif Kureishi, as reported in 'Voice of the Almost English' by Frank Kermode, reprinted from a British source in The Frontier Post (Lahore), 27 April 1990, pp. 9, 16.


6 'Voice of the Almost English', op. cit. The article reports certain Muslim demonstrations in New York against such representation even though the participants had not seen the film.

7 Tariq Rahman, op. cit.

8 Ayesha Aslam, op. cit.

9 Akbar Ahmed's comments, quite responsive, themselves reflect the characteristic south Asian overkill he ascribes to Kureishi: Take Kureishi, the current darling of the British literary establishment. His almost perfect mimicry makes him noteworthy. The humour, cynicism, lively language, exaggerated priapism and a pace that never lets up—making depth and insight difficult—reflect popular English taste. It is the characteristic South Asian overkill which ensures the excess of bums and testicles in Kureishi's work. And now that the British media, satiated with sex, appears to have discovered the fart (entire episodes of Ben Elton, Dave Allen and Victoria Wood are woven around it), his next work may well be My Beautiful Fart. (Akbar Ahmed, 'Creating the Perfect Englishman', The Friday Times (Lahore), 17–23 May 1990, p. 5; my italics).


11 As a recent interview reports: 'He relishes change and argues that settled beliefs, resolved questions can be the enemies of thought' ('Sex and Spying in Suburbia', op. cit.).

12 The Buddha of Suburbia, p. 64; 'Voice of the Almost English', op. cit. In the latter, Kermode reports thus: 'Kureishi is sure of one thing: that the Great Immigration is our Great Unexplored Subject. The novel in England remains largely a middle-class, university-educated affair, deeply ignorant of the poor.'

13 In an out-of-hand dismissal of the novel as 'philosophically confused', 'not interesting . . . though realistic', and 'not a work of enduring human significance', a reviewer thinks the novel 'belongs to another postmodernist tradition', admitting that '[his] dislike of most modernist and postmodernist literature may be a predisposing factor in this evaluation' (Tariq Rahman, op. cit.). But this is contradictory, and an erroneous characterisation of the text; Kureishi works through the middle-class, working-class, and expatriate-Asian traditions to create a late-twentieth-century comic synthesis. As Kermode reports, 'Kureishi finds himself unmodern . . . Adventures in novelistic form aren't, he thinks, for him' ('Voice of the Almost English', op. cit.).

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

15 As the novel belongs simultaneously to the English and the expatriate-Asian traditions, the dual, divisive, and
coexistent nature of the life needs to be recognised, and has been noted well in the context of the Asian/Muslim novel by Bruce King: ‘... [this novel] reveals a civilization which has lost its unity; ideals and reality, feelings and experience, mind and heart, lust and love take contrary paths’ (p. 246); the disunity ‘between speech and experience’ no less (p. 253) (Bruce King, ‘From Twilight to Midnight: Muslim Novels of India and Pakistan’, in Alamgir Hashmi (ed.), The Worlds of Muslim Imagination, Islamabad, 1986, pp. 243–59).

16 Tariq Mehmood, Hand on the Sun (Harmondsworth, 1983).
18 The phrase and motto, ‘only connect...’, is an imperative in E. M. Forster’s Howards End (London, 1910), implied in the ‘personal relations’ specifically focused on in A Passage to India (London, 1924).
19 See my review of Tariq Mehmood’s Hand on the Sun (1983), in Alamgir Hashmi, World Literature Today, 58:2 (1984), pp. 327–8. The downtrodden of white England had Dickens greatly concerned, but those of India or America, particularly non-white, had his sympathy constrained to the limit. Enraged by the Indian War of Independence (1857), he vowed to do all ‘to exterminate the race upon whom the stain of the late cruelties rested’ (Peter Ackroyd, Dickens, London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990). Ackroyd then comments about the great novelist contemplating a genocide.
21 The vein would be suggested by the sections titled ‘The Rigged Veda’ and ‘The New Bungle Book—Or, The Reign of Error’.