

**“A Funny Kind of Englishman”:  
Hanif Kureishi’s Representations  
of South Asians in British Cinema**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Britain's direct power over India and Pakistan might have ceased in 1947, yet their control over the "Jewel in the Crown" in popular media lasted for almost another forty years. While images of the subcontinent and its peoples are still prominent in British cinema today, it was not until the 1980s that South Asians were able to represent their own communities on the screen and thus break Britain's hegemonic control over the presentation of Indians and Pakistanis. Films about Anglo-Asian relations were quite popular in the 1970s and 1980s with films such as *A Passage to India* (1984) and *Gandhi* (1982), yet these movies showed the conflicts between these cultures as being the subject of history. *My Beautiful Laundrette*, however, showed the tension between English and Pakistani residents in modern London. Hanif Kureishi's screenplay brought South Asian issues to the forefront of popular culture with insight, wit, and a desire to shock. His first film noted the tenacity of the Pakistani business community, with the members being strangely akin to Thatcherites as they pursued wealth over community improvement. As one character states "But we're professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis. There's no race question in the new enterprise culture." Kureishi's other films, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993), and *My Son the Fanatic* (1987) document the political, domestic, and religious issues faced by Britain's South Asian community from the 1970s to the 1990s. While Kureishi's screenplays address Pakistani and Indian issues in modern Britain, Kureishi relies on traditional English conventions and beliefs which occasionally undermine the issues he is addressing.

Moreover, Kureishi's half-English background problematizes his suitability as a presenter of South Asian issues as his stories frequently conform to his own liberal English doctrine. Despite Kureishi's suitability as a "community spokesman", his films are important documents of the relations between the dominant English culture and the emergence of a vibrant South Asian culture. As Hanif Kureishi is representing South Asian issues to an English audience with English conventions, he is indeed, like one of his characters, is a "funny kind of Englishman."

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my family. My thanks to you is beyond any words that I can muster, but I know that I would never have come this far without you. To my father, I thank you for all those trips to instil the vibrancy and importance of history and the arts (even when it was hazardous to our health). To my mother, I thank you for showing me how to enjoy and appreciate the small, wonderful, and overlooked parts of life; such an outlook has been invaluable over the years. And to my sister, you have been my intellectual rock throughout all of this and deserve praise and acknowledgment for the astonishing (and heartless) editor that you are. My love and thanks for everything you have done.

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Karen, Sean, Larissa, and Darren, thank you for the fun times (even when you got me in trouble). And special thanks to Lauren for support, friendship, and MSN messenger. I would also like to thank the staff and faculty of the History department. To OddTodd for keeping me sane. Finally I must thank my committee members, Prof. Mota, Prof. MacLean, and Prof. Dyck. Ian, of all the people I must thank, I must thank you the most. You have been a constant source of encouragement and a believer in me through many dark times. I cannot thank you enough for your support over the years. I feel truly privileged to have worked with you. You are a rare man.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Three major shifts took place in British culture during the 1960s. National cinema had struggled since its inception to find its voice in between popular American films and European innovative artistic cinema, but a “British New Wave” of films provided a peculiar blend of social realism and drama which invigorated the medium and established a very “British” feel to the films.<sup>1</sup> These “kitchen sink” dramas, such as *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *Room at the Top* (1959), *This Sporting Life* (1963) and *Billy Liar* (1963), introduced working-class heroes and their personal lives to audiences.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, academics began to turn their attention to movies as an area of research. Finally, the 1960s saw the first large-scale immigration of “colonial” non-whites to Britain. This merging of socially realistic films, the academic study of cinema, and the changing face of British society will provide the foundation of this thesis.

Just as audiences “discovered” the working class in the 1960s, Britain’s immigrant population became a popular and profitable subject matter in the 1980s. While the premiere of Horace Ové’s *Pressure* (1975) marked the first British film by a black director, it was not until Hanif Kureishi’s screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) that South Asian issues were presented to British audiences by a member of that

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Murphy, ed., *The British Cinema Book. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (London: British Film Institute, 2001): xi.

community. Indians and Pakistanis were the largest national immigrant groups in the United Kingdom, yet they were frequently subjected to negative portrayals in the British media.

As with any introduction of a new subject matter, there is the “burden of representation.” As Kobena Mercer declared in 1990, “the black artist is expected to *speak for* the black communities as if she or he were its political ‘representative’.”<sup>3</sup> Although Kureishi is ambivalent about his status as a representative of the South Asian community, the majority of studies on him simply assume that he is representative. Unfortunately, they offer little quantitative proof to validate or to discredit Kureishi’s role as a spokesman. It is among the aims of this thesis to provide Kureishi’s South Asian films with the context they deserve.

Studying films within history is a delicate enterprise, partly because they are still a rare source for historians, but also because of the numerous approaches that can be taken in analyzing them. Movies can be studied as records of the past (such as documentary films), as cultural artefacts (the progression of film styles or aesthetics), or as social documents (reflecting the values and attitudes of their society).<sup>4</sup> To further complicate such studies, the film’s economic, technological, and artistic qualities as well as its audience and the filmmaker’s background and intention must be considered.<sup>5</sup> Historians have traditionally studied movies from a “social” perspective where the films

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Hutchings, “Beyond the New Wave: Realism in British Cinema, 1959-63”, *The British Cinema Book* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (London: British Film Institute, 2001): p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Kobena Mercer. “Black Art and the Burden of Representation” *Third Text*, no. 10 (Spring 1990): 65.

<sup>4</sup> James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*. (London: Reaktion, 2003): 15.

<sup>5</sup> For greater detail see, David Robinson, *World Cinema: A Short History* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973): 1. Robert Clyde Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985): 37-8, and Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994): xl.

are treated as cultural artefacts which are illuminated by studying their modes of production, their audiences, their critical response, and the censorship imposed on them. Film studies, on the other hand, focuses on questions of aesthetics, authorship, and narrative techniques. As James Chapman surmises, “[s]ocial film history then, is a broad category that includes both the textual analysis of films and the investigation of the various contexts in which they may be placed.”<sup>6</sup> This study will treat the films of Hanif Kureishi as social documents which record the values of the society with specific attention to the author’s cultural background.

While there is a lively academic debate on whether films reflect society or recreate it,<sup>7</sup> this thesis will follow a specifically “film historian” response that movies are a site of mediation, rather than reflection, between the medium’s codes and structures and a social reality.<sup>8</sup> Yet in order to understand the mediated territory between the film and its society, film historians must provide the context to the movie’s production and consumption. As it is difficult to determine the class or ethnic heritage of the audience and what they found appealing in the films, the fact that Kureishi has written screenplays for eight films over the past twenty years – half of which focus on South Asians – will be taken as evidence that his ideas resonate within British society. Movies are an extremely expensive venture; as Arthur Marwick notes, “there is a law of the market: the bigger the commercial success, the more a film is likely to tell us about the unvoiced assumptions of the people who watched it.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chapman, p. 25

<sup>7</sup> See Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1999.): 127-131.

<sup>8</sup> Chapman, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Class, Image and Reality in Britain, France and the US since 1930*. (London: Collins, 1980): 22.

As this thesis deals with Kureishi's representation of South Asians in British cinema, it must be noted that Kureishi is not the sole writer or disseminator of South Asian issues. While there are now frequent contributions on and about South Asians, Kureishi is unique as he was the first writer to present contemporary issues to British audiences. His screenplays for *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993), and *My Son the Fanatic* (1997) have presented the economic, political, domestic, and religious struggles faced by Pakistanis and Indians in Britain from the 1970s to the 1990s with a keen eye for contemporary political events. One reviewer noted that Kureishi is an *insider-outsider* who is "able to see social facts about the way we live more accurately than the social statisticians."<sup>10</sup> Yet the question remains: "What is he telling us?"

Each chapter of this thesis will address a specific Kureishi film, taking into consideration the author, the screenplay, the contemporary events portrayed in the film, and how faithfully these issues are represented. This study is based on Kureishi's screenplays, novels, short stories, essays, and newspaper articles. It also utilizes critical reviews of Kureishi, contemporary newspaper articles, and movie reviews, as well as articles and monographs by scholars in fields such as film studies, literature, political science, psychology, economics, and, of course, history.

As his popularity has continued to increase in the past few years, there are numerous books and articles on Kureishi to study. This thesis, however, has relied primarily on the works of Kenneth C. Kaleta, Bart Moore-Gilbert, and Ruvani Ranasinha. Kenneth Kaleta's 1998 book, *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller*, was the first

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<sup>10</sup> Colin Ward, *New Statesman & Society* November 12, 1993.

major study of Kureishi, and is based on numerous insightful interviews with him. This semi-biographical work uses a film theory approach to link Kureishi's works to other films. Bart Moore-Gilbert's 2001 study, *Hanif Kureishi*, is a balanced, thoughtful, and clearly written analysis of Kureishi's work. It effectively links the themes of Kureishi's plays, screenplays, and short stories together. However, as it is a literary analysis, Kureishi's essays and articles on contemporary topics is beyond its scope. Ruvani Ranasinha's 2002 book, also called *Hanif Kureishi*, is the most theoretical work and often struggles to pinpoint Kureishi's ethnic identity. Ranasinha's theoretical underpinnings, however, frequently lead to tenuous conclusions as she attempts to establish Kureishi's ideas and political approaches. While the study's attempt is admirable, Ranasinha's approach rests on the assumption that Kureishi is a spokesman for South Asian, and she frequently questions his representations of this community. However, Kureishi frequently decries attempts to label him as a spokesman for the Pakistani community. Although Kureishi does not perceive himself or desire to be solely a South Asian spokesman, his works provide a captivating glimpse into Britain's South Asian community.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“SQUEEZE THE TITS OF THE SYSTEM”: ECONOMICS AND THE NATIONAL FRONT IN *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE***

In 1984 Salman Rushdie raised his concern over a recent trend in Britain: “[a]nyone who has switched on the television set, been to the cinema or entered a bookshop in the last few months will be aware that the British Raj, after three and a half decades in retirement, has been making a sort of comeback.”<sup>11</sup> Rushdie’s complaints about recent films on Anglo-Indian relations were well founded as there was a popular new genre emerging from Britain’s “heritage films.” These movies, typified by the Merchant and Ivory films about class and crumpets, focused on the nation’s past, and were inspired by literary classics and historical events and persons.<sup>12</sup> These films were not historically accurate, but they were popular because they attempted to define the “British” way of life, and characteristics of “Englishness.” These “inherent” qualities could be used to interpret current events. For example, *Chariots of Fire* (1981) celebrates traditional values such as

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<sup>11</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Outside the Wale”, *Imaginary Homelands; Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. (London: Granta in association with Penguin, 1991): 87.

<sup>12</sup> Sheldon Hall recently grouped “heritage films” into five distinct groups. First, there are adaptations from classical literature such as the works of canonical authors like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, E.M. Forster, and George Orwell. Second, there are the costume dramas which typically dwell on the Late Victorian, Edwardian, and interwar periods about the middle-class with films such as *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and *The Remains of the Day* (1993). Third, there are the ‘Raj revival’ films. Fourth, there are historical dramas which are often biographical representations of historical figures such as *The Madness of King George* (1994), *Mrs Brown* (1997), and *Shadowlands* (1993). Finally, there are the numerous Shakespearean adaptations. From Sheldon Hall, “The Wrong Sort of Cinema: Refashioning the Heritage

sportsmanship, hard work, and personal sacrifice for the good of the nation. These themes were very popular during Britain's involvement in the Falklands War.

Heritage films also addressed Britain's colonial past. Due to the importance of India in the days of the Empire, movies about the colonial experience in the Raj were also popular, as illustrated by feature films such as *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), the Oscar and BAFTA<sup>13</sup> winning *A Passage to India* (1984), and *Gandhi* (1982) as well as television mini-series such as *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984) and *The Far Pavilions* (1984).<sup>14</sup> These films about colonial relations comprise a sub-genre of heritage cinema called the "Raj Revival," which tended to show British colonialism in a flattering, although not necessarily uncritical, light. These films presented troubled and divisive periods of colonial history through the lens of the liberal sensibilities of modern British film-makers and audiences. In *Gandhi*, for example, British subjects in India were portrayed as actively opposing colonialism and supporting characters such as Gandhi.<sup>15</sup> This presentation is interesting as India was long understood as a source of tremendous power for the British Empire; as Lord Curzon noted, "as long as we rule India, we are the greatest power in the world. If we lose it we shall drop straight away to a third rate power."<sup>16</sup> Curzon's prophetic statement was well understood by British policymakers and by the public, yet this belief is chastised in the film and presented as the out-dated ideals of ultra-conservatives. In other words, history was massaged to reflect modern sensibilities.

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Film Debate," *The British Cinema Book, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.*, Ed. Robert Murphy. (London : British Film Institute, 2001): 192 – 3.

<sup>13</sup> British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards

<sup>14</sup> Other notable films include *Heat and the Dust* (1982), *White Mischief* (1987) *The Deceivers* (1988).

<sup>15</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001): 75.



The “Raj Revival” movies were shot in appropriately exotic locations, with local “native” actors in supporting roles; they rarely played lead characters. White actors, however, portrayed both the white and the main “native” characters. In the latter roles, actors wore makeup to make them appear “native” – such as Ben Kingsley in his Oscar and BAFTA-winning performance as Gandhi. Many of these films were moral studies of Britain’s policies throughout its Empire; they were not political movies, even though politics is at the heart of these stories.<sup>17</sup> Yet, with the success of these films, a young British playwright of South Asian origins sought to counter these films which showed race relations as problems which were settled in the colonial past. To young Hanif Kureishi, modern Britain was still in the grip of colonialism and racial conflict, and he sought to explain the modern issues faced by the South Asian community in Britain to the traditional British audience.

In 1985 *My Beautiful Laundrette*,<sup>18</sup> written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Stephen Frears, premiered to great acclaim at the Edinburgh Film Festival. Although originally shot for television on 16mm film with a small budget,<sup>19</sup> the movie was released on the film festival circuit and later in wide theatrical release, where it was well-received by both audiences and critics. The “little film” had a final box-office gross of over \$15

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory; Britain 1900-1990*. (London: Penguin, 1996): 16. George Nathaniel Curzon, Marquess Curzon of Kedleston was Viceroy of India (1898 - 1905) at the zenith of the Britain’s imperial power.

<sup>17</sup> Moore-Gilbert. p. 75-6.

<sup>18</sup> Kureishi purposefully misspelled the title to show the deficiencies of the secondary modern school which he attended. (*The Sunday Times*, November 10, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Depending on the source, the film cost \$400 000 (US), \$ 1 000 000, £ 600 000, or \$850 000, although the last figure is perhaps the most reliable as it is the most recent figure. (Internet Movie Database, “Business Data for *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985)”, <http://us.imdb.com/Business?0091578>. internet; accessed on August 16, 2002.), (Hanif Kureishi, “The Prick Up Artist,” *American Film*, May 12, 1987, p. 48.), (*The Sunday Times* November 10, 1985.), and (Kenneth C. Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller*, (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1998.): p. 40), respectively.

million.<sup>20</sup> It won numerous awards, and was even nominated for a BAFTA and an Academy Award for best screenplay.<sup>21</sup> This film shared many of the characteristics of the “Raj Revival” films. It had a mixed cast of both white and South Asian actors. It tackled the political ideals and motives of its characters, many of whom were under the constant threat of racial violence.

While these characteristics made the film similar to the “Raj Revival” movies, *My Beautiful Laundrette* was radically different. The actors who dominated the screen time were South Asians such as Bollywood star Saeed Jaffrey and British stage star Roshan Seth, who played Nasser and Papa respectively (and had played in many of the “Raj Revival” films<sup>22</sup>). They showed themselves as magnetic and thoughtful actors on par with the traditional white British cast – including future Oscar winner Daniel Day-Lewis who played Johnny.<sup>23</sup> The characters struggled with unemployment and the advantages and disadvantages of capitalism and socialism. Racial violence was a constant menace due to the presence of disaffected “natives” (i.e., the white, unemployed working class). The lovers’ relationship is “forbidden” not only because one is from the white English working class and the other is Pakistani, but also because both characters are men. Arguably, the largest break between this film and the popular “Raj Revival” movies was that this tale was not set in some halcyon past in a lush, exotic country with marvellous

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<sup>20</sup> *Sunday Times Magazine*, February 19, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> The film won National Society of Film Critics Awards, USA’s Best Screenplay award, New York Film Critics Circle Awards for best screenplay, and best supporting actor for Daniel Day Lewis, as well as National Board of Review, USA’s award for best supporting actor. It was nominated for the Independent Spirit Awards, Best Original Screenplay for British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards, and finally an Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen for the 1985 Academy Awards. (IMDB “Awards for *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985)”, <http://us.imdb.com/Tawards?0091578> internet; accessed on August 16, 2002.)

<sup>22</sup> Most notably is Jaffrey playing Billy Fish in *The Man Who Would be King*, and Roshan Seth playing Nehru in *Gandhi*.

sets and costumes, but rather in a cold, dreary-looking London suburb in the 1980s. As Kureishi complained:

I was tired of seeing lavish films set in exotic locations; it seemed to me that anyone could make such films, providing they had an old book, a hot country, new technology and were capable of aiming the camera at an attractive landscape in the hot country in front of which stood a star in a perfectly clean costume delivering lines from the old book.<sup>24</sup>

*My Beautiful Laundrette* was a revision and rejection of the traditional Raj films. The main characters were of South Asian descent, while the white cast largely played supporting roles. As one reporter noted during the film's wide release in Britain, "Kureishi's art is to counter the recent nostalgia for the British in India with the more contemporary relevance of the Indian and Pakistani communities in Britain." The reporter felt that Kureishi's message succeeded because it was delivered with "insight, wit and sympathetic objectivity" rather than with harsh polemics.<sup>25</sup> The young half-English, half-Pakistani screenwriter provided a powerful script which played with the conventions of the Raj cinema and managed to encapsulate the mood of modern Britain.

*The Sunday Times'* film reviewer Ian Johnstone noted:

What Kureishi and his talented director, Stephen Frears, have achieved is to take us behind the closed doors of the Asian community. We see what divides them and what unites them but, much more trenchantly, we see modern Britain through their eyes, and it is not exactly a sight to be proud of.<sup>26</sup>

Similar to all of Kureishi's films, *My Beautiful Laundrette* presents numerous themes to analyse, yet it is the economic situation and the political reaction of the characters which reveals the most about British society in the 1980s. In order to study

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis won the Oscar for Best Actor in a Leading Role for *My Left Foot* (1989), "Awards for *My Left Foot* (1989), <http://us.imdb.com/Towards?0097937> internet; accessed 05 August 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Hanif Kureishi, "Introduction", *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings* (London, Faber and Faber, 1996): 5.

<sup>25</sup> *The Sunday Times*. 25 August 1985.

the politics that are imbedded in the film, a broad, macro study of the trends addressed in it must be undertaken. This is not to suggest that a smaller, micro study of the film's characters would not be useful, but such a study would be perhaps too limited in its scope. As Kureishi claims, "Asians should be depicted just like anyone else. They're not saints, or sinners either, so you can't write anything representative. It would be like saying that Quasimodo was representative of all hunchbacks."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, in order to avoid making oversimplified generalizations such as Omar being representative of all young Anglo-Pakistani men, a study of the economic and political issues and events presented in the film will be related to the socio-economic situations which inform them.

Before studying the economic and political situation, however, it is imperative to provide a brief biography of Kureishi and his family, as well as a plot synopsis of the film. Although *My Beautiful Laundrette* is not an autobiographical work, there are certain aspects of Kureishi's life which help to explain this and his other South Asian films. Hanif Kureishi was born in London in 1954 to the English lower middle-class Audrey Buss and the upper-class South Asian Rafiushan Kureishi. Rafiushan came from a well-placed Muslim family in Bombay. One of his childhood friends was future Pakistani President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Although Muslim, Rafiushan's first language was English, and he attended Catholic school in Bombay – coincidentally, the same school attended by Salman Rushdie. In India, his family was considered to be anglophiles rather than Indian Muslims.<sup>28</sup> Rafiushan worked as a journalist in India, but when his Muslim family moved to the newly created nation of Pakistan in 1947, he

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<sup>26</sup> Iain Johnstone, "Film Review" *The Sunday Times* 17 November 1985.

<sup>27</sup> *The Sunday Times* 10 November 1985.

<sup>28</sup> Ranashinha, p. 6.

moved to England to study law – never to return.<sup>29</sup> Even though he was raised in India, attended a Catholic school, spoke English, was not accepted by other Indian Muslims, and never lived in Pakistan, Rafiushan always identified himself as Pakistani.<sup>30</sup> He loved living in England, where he met and married Kureishi’s mother and worked in, as his son puts it, “a dull, enervating civil service job” at the Pakistani embassy.<sup>31</sup>

Although Hanif is half-English, his dark skin meant that he was always deemed to be Indian by his teachers or a “Paki” by his schoolmates.<sup>32</sup> In some respects, he appears to have had a fairly typical British childhood with a paper route, a love of cricket and football matches, and a passion for rock and roll groups like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Spiritually, however, he grew up neither within the Church of England, nor as a Muslim. Moreover, he did not learn to speak Urdu. Reflecting on his childhood, Kureishi notes that, “[f]rom the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else.”<sup>33</sup> He went to school in Bromley – the same school as David Bowie and Billy Idol – and, with the encouragement of his father, he decided to become a writer during his adolescence.<sup>34</sup> His decision to write was also motivated by the loneliness caused by his status as an Anglo-Pakistani:

When people insult you, when friends of yours become skinheads and go out Paki-bashing and you don’t have anyone to talk to about your feelings and you’re

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<sup>29</sup> Hanif Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign,” *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996): p. 73. and Ruvani Ranashinha, *Hanif Kureishi*, (Tavistock: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 2002): ix.

<sup>30</sup> This split national identity helps to explain Hanif Kureishi’s work as an Anglo-Pakistani, who sometimes uses characters from India who identify themselves as Pakistanis.

<sup>31</sup> Kureishi, “Something Given: Reflections on Writing,” *Dreaming and Scheming; Reflections on Writing and Politics*. (London: Faber, 2002): 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ranashinha, p. 4. Kurisihi “Rainbow Sign”, p. 75.

<sup>33</sup> Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign”, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Kaleta. p. 18-19.

far too nervous to confront your friends directly, you have to express yourself somehow.<sup>35</sup>

As many of Kureishi's friends became enamoured with "Paki-bashing," the adolescent Hanif soon withdrew to a "safer place, within myself."<sup>36</sup>

His teenage years appear to have been very difficult for him not only because of his cultural hybridity and the loss of his friends, but also because of the rising hostility towards immigrants in the 1960s. As Kureishi became more reclusive, he became acutely aware of the changing attitudes around him: "I started to write down the speeches of politicians, the words which helped create the neo-Nazi attitudes I saw around me."<sup>37</sup> The significance of Enoch Powell and other like-minded politicians were not lost on young Hanif and his growing political and social awareness. This is to say that Kureishi's political interests and his aspiration to be a writer developed simultaneously.

Kureishi attended King's College, London where he read philosophy. At the same time, he worked in various jobs at the Royal Court Theatre, eventually becoming its Writer-in-Residence. By the early 1980s, he was an up-and-coming playwright with well-received plays such as *Borderlines* and the award winning *Outskirts*. His plays were notable for their strong, believable characters and for an underlying social conscience which avoided moralizing or didacticism. His theatre work garnered the attention of Karin Banborough of Channel Four's *Film on Four*, and she asked him to write a screenplay. "I was extremely keen," Kureishi states, as "*Film on Four* had taken over from the BBC's *Play for Today* in presenting serious contemporary drama on TV to a wide audience." In his opinion:

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<sup>35</sup> Ginny Dougray. [Interview] *Observer (London)*, Magazine Supplement, 20 March 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Kureishi, "The Rainbow Sign", p. 74-5.

<sup>37</sup> Kureishi, "The Rainbow Sign", p. 75.

The great advantage of TV drama was [that] the people watched it; difficult, challenging things could be said about contemporary life. The theatre, despite the efforts of touring companies and so on, has failed to get its ideas beyond a small enthusiastic audience.<sup>38</sup>

Kureishi also decided to move into television as he was broke at the time and had realized that he would “never make any fucking money working with the theatre. Unless I was Harold Pinter.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the most understandable reason for Kureishi’s switch to television was that the story he wanted to tell:

seemed like a telly subject. ... You can’t go to a big film company and say, “I want to make a film about a gay Pakistani who runs a Launderette.” They’d tell you to get lost.<sup>40</sup>

*My Beautiful Launderette* was Kureishi’s first film, and is about the coming-of-age and coming-out of Omar, a young half-English and half-Pakistani unemployed student. Omar lives with his widowed, unemployed, alcoholic Papa, Hussein, in a small apartment as Omar’s mother recently committed suicide. While Hussein is a disillusioned socialist, his brother Nasser is a successful capitalist who soon seeks to turn Omar “into something damn good.”<sup>41</sup> Young Omar works his way through his uncle’s numerous business ventures, eventually taking over a launderette. Unfortunately, it was impossible to make a profit on the business, and Omar becomes a part-time drug courier for his uncle’s business partner Salim. The resourceful Omar, however, conceives a bold plan: with the help of his old schoolmate Johnny, he will steal some of the drugs from a delivery, quickly sell them, and use the money to renovate the launderette.

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<sup>38</sup> Hanif Kureishi, “Introduction,” *My Beautiful Launderette and Other Writings*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1996): 3-4.

<sup>39</sup> Kaleta, p. 40.

<sup>40</sup> *The Sunday Times*, November 10, 1985.

<sup>41</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Launderette and Other Writings*. p. 17.

During the renovation, Omar and Johnny grow closer, eventually becoming lovers. With Omar's increasing success, however, his uncle intends for him to marry his daughter Tania, and to take over all of Nasser's businesses. Unfortunately, Uncle Nasser is unable to balance his family, his philanthropy, and his philandering after Omar invites Tania to the opening of the launderette and Nasser appears with his mistress. Nasser's life starts to crumble as his wife plans to return to Pakistan, his daughter plots to run away, his mistress leaves him, and he squanders his money on his gambling habit. Salim eventually reveals that he knows that Omar stole drugs from him, but rather than taking the money that Omar owes him, Salim acknowledges the usefulness of investing drug money in legitimate businesses like launderettes and becomes Omar's financier. One night, while driving Omar and Johnny home, Salim attempts to illustrate the extent of his power by trying to run over Johnny's National Front friends with his car, some of whom were badly injured. In retribution, the young thugs proceed to destroy Salim's car and to beat him severely when he appears at Omar's launderette. Johnny intervenes and is also badly beaten. The film ends with Nasser seeking Papa's advice, and then watching his daughter Tania disappear onto a train. Meanwhile, Omar playfully washes Johnny's bloodied face.

This highly unconventional story proved to be very successful. With the critical and commercial success of *My Beautiful Launderette*, Kureishi showed that a film about issues between different racial communities could be marketable. Moreover, the film demonstrated that these issues do not need to be set in the past; contemporary topics could be addressed in a contemporary setting.



But what does Kureishi stress in the film? The movie's characters portray numerous facets of the English and Pakistani communities during the mid-1980s. There are drug and slum lords, opportunistic capitalists, disillusioned socialists, National Front thugs, and homosexuals. As film critic Roger Ebert notes:

The movie is not concerned with plot, but with giving us a feeling for the society its characters inhabit. Modern Britain is a study in contrasts, between rich and poor, between upper and lower classes, between native British and the various immigrant groups – some of which, such as the Pakistanis, have started to prosper. To this mixture, the movie adds the conflict between straight and gay.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the film enables an analysis of Anglo-Pakistani relations as it shows the status of and interplay between these various groups. However, what were the historical factors or agents which inspired this situation? And, how representative is Kureishi's work?

The political and social aspects of *My Beautiful Laundrette* were apparent in the earliest drafts of the screenplay. Originally, Kureishi saw the film as showing the immigrant experience in a similar style to Francis Ford Coppola and Mario Puzo's epic *The Godfather*:

[The intended film would open] in the past with the arrival of an immigrant family in England and showing their progress to the present. There were to be many scenes set in the 1950s; people would eat bread and dripping and get off boats a lot; there would be scenes of Johnny and Omar as children and large-scale set pieces of racist marches with scenes of mass violence.<sup>43</sup>

Not only would the intended film's scenes be influenced by the epic American film, but also would include the same "gangster and thriller elements, since the gangster film is the form that corresponds most closely to the city, with its gangs and violence. And the film was to be an amusement, despite its references to racism, unemployment and

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<sup>42</sup> Roger Ebert, "My Beautiful Laundrette"; available from [http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert\\_reviews/1986/04/52849.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1986/04/52849.html); internet; accessed 20 June 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Kureishi, "Introduction" p. 5.

Thatcherism.”<sup>44</sup> In many respects, this intended epic bears little resemblance to the low-budget, sincere, and unassuming film that was developed. Perhaps the small television budget restricted the grandiose conception for the film, but ultimately this restriction provided the film with the realism that it required. As Kureishi complained that anyone could point a camera at an actor in a “clean costume,” it is perhaps fitting that the production of *My Beautiful Laundrette* would often rely on pulling regular people off the street to be extras, thus adding to the film’s unassuming realism.<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Kaleta astutely notes that television is a populist medium and has an “aura of immediacy and approachability” and therefore seems “less distanced and elitist” than the cinema.<sup>46</sup> It is clear that although the style and manner in which the film was conceived changed greatly from Kureishi’s conception of it as an epic feature film to its production as a TV movie, Kureishi was nevertheless intent on showing the status of “racism, unemployment and Thatcherism” in contemporary England.<sup>47</sup> Unable to create the large set pieces that he envisioned, Kureishi internalized many of the historical events which arise in the movie as subtle clues. Thus, many of the references about the political and economic situation of the Pakistanis must be reconstructed.

There are numerous comments about unemployment in the film, and it appears that, until Omar starts working for Nasser, none of the young people in the film have a steady job. As Papa says, “[h]e’s on [the] dole like everyone else in England.”<sup>48</sup> Although Papa is glad to see his son working, Johnny’s closest friends are not pleased when their old mate starts working for Omar and Nasser:

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<sup>44</sup> Kureishi, “Introduction” p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Kaleta. p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> Kaleta. p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Kureishi, “Introduction” p. 5.

GENGHIS: Why are you working for them? For these people? You were with us once. For England.

JOHNNY: It's work. I want to work. I'm fed up of hanging about.

GENGHIS: I'm angry. I don't like to see one of our men grovelling to Pakis. They came here to work for us. That's why we brought them over. OK?<sup>49</sup>

Genghis' complaint about the Pakistanis alludes to their history and introduction into the United Kingdom. Kureishi's original idea of having immigrants arriving in boats was transformed into a quick, verbal racist attack. Although the audience does not see the immigrants arriving, they are reminded of why they are in England – or at least as one of the local skinheads understand it. As the Pakistanis' affluence and presence are such integral factors for understanding the racial tension emanating towards them, their arrival in Britain must be addressed.

The presence of South Asians in Britain is not a twentieth century phenomenon. Due to Britain's increasing involvement in India in the nineteenth century, many Indians arrived in Britain as workers – but in very restricted roles. Indian seamen, or Lascars, gained British citizenship in 1849, and thus became some of the first non-British “British Citizens.”<sup>50</sup> Many English colonial workers returned from India with native servants or nannies, called ayahs. There were also students who came to learn western methods of law, medicine, and business. Finally, there was a small proportion of visiting Indian royalty. These groups were either restricted by their jobs, such as the Lascars and ayahs, or, like the students and princes, returned to the Indian subcontinent once their business

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<sup>48</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.12.

<sup>49</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.38.

<sup>50</sup> Only British subjects could work on ships leaving British ports, so that when captains employed Lascars from India to Britain, they were forced to pay for these sailors' return voyage. Once the Lascars were made citizens, they were able to work an entire round trip. Thus, they were given citizenship for economic reasons. Paul Gordon. *Policing Immigration*. (Gurnsey: Pluto Press Ltd., 1985): 6.

was complete.<sup>51</sup> It was very rare for any South Asians to establish themselves or their families in the United Kingdom.

The Aliens Act of 1905 was Britain's first piece of legislation on immigration. It was subsequently amended and strengthened both before and after the Great War.<sup>52</sup> The legislators were mainly concerned with keeping Germans out of Britain, but they granted the peoples of the British Empire *de facto* citizenship. The Lascars, however, proved to be the most contentious workers in Interwar Britain, and the government passed laws to bar colonial "British" citizens, from taking work from regular British workers.<sup>53</sup> Although the controversial 1925 Coloured Aliens Seamen Order was haphazardly conceived and enforced, it provided magistrates, employers, and unions the ability to keep "undesirable" colonials within an "acceptable" level during the interwar period by limiting their employment opportunities. After the Second World War, South Asian immigration steadily rose until the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill of 1962 imposed restrictions. The Act stipulated that immigrants needed to have a job voucher which proved that they were skilled workers.<sup>54</sup>

After the Second World War, there was simply not enough labour to aid in the development and expansion of Britain. The nation struggled to rebuild itself and was hampered by high levels of emigration. For example, in the 1950s, 50 000 citizens a year

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<sup>51</sup> Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars, and Princes; Indians in Britain 1700-1947*. (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 9-10.

<sup>52</sup> British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act of 1914, and the 1919 Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act.

<sup>53</sup> Laura Tabili, "The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925." *Journal of British Studies*, Vol 33, Issue 1 Jan., (1994): 63.

<sup>54</sup> Ian R. G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939; The Making of Multi-Racial Britain*. (London, Routledge, 1997): 129. Although there are other pieces of legislation towards immigrants after the 1962 Act, this paper is only addressing the acts which affected the immigrants in *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

emigrated to Australasia, with the figure rising to 100 000 by the late 1960s.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, as new and more socially desirable jobs became available, many people took advantage of the improving economy and moved into more attractive jobs. This socio-economic shift led to a labour shortfall in less desirable jobs such as public transportation, the National Health Service, and manufacturing. The labour shortfall in the manual labour sector created a “pull” factor for many young single men from the Indian sub-continent and from the Caribbean.<sup>56</sup> Roughly 50 000 immigrants per year came from the New Commonwealth. Between 1955 and 1968 Britain’s population of Indians and Pakistanis rose to 200 130 and 145 960, respectively.<sup>57</sup> Studies on these groups of migrants revealed that these men were essentially confined to low-paying manual work – regardless of their social origins or qualifications.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, although South Asians were not unknown in the United Kingdom prior to the post-war period, they had usually been confined to port cities. During the mass migration in the 1950s and 1960s, however, they became visible throughout urban Britain in low-paying, “undesirable” jobs. Therefore, Genghis’ blunt statement “[t]hey came here to work for us” is a crude, yet accurate restatement of history. The working-class Genghis is angry because the Pakistanis that he sees around him are more affluent than himself. Although the economic situation for the early immigrants was difficult, the succeeding generation was quite successful. In comparison to traditional white workers, Pakistani males were increasingly able to leave their manual labour, or working class

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<sup>55</sup> Clarke. p. 321.

<sup>56</sup> Tarquid Modood, “Ethnic Diversity and Racial Disadvantage in Employment,” in *Race Relations in Britain*, ed. Blackstone, Tessa, Bhikhu Parekh and Peter Sanders (Routledge, London): 53. and Paul Iganski and Payne, Geoff, “Declining Racial Disadvantage in the British Labour Market.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol 19, Number 1, January, (1996): 114.

jobs. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, essentially the period when Johnny and Omar were growing up, the percentage of Pakistani men in non-manual, or “respectable,” employment increased from around fourteen percent to over twenty six percent – the largest increase of any group in this thirty year period. From 1983 to 1986, however, the Pakistani community witnessed the only decline of any of the groups in terms of non-manual work. Although it was only a marginal decrease and only lasted for a small period, it must be noted that this is the time when Omar goes from “brush[ing] the dust from one place to another” in the apartment, to manually washing cars in the garage, to running an eventually successful laundrette.<sup>59</sup> During this time, non-manual employment was increasing, although the white population was not benefiting from this shift from blue to white collar work.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the Pakistani community was steadily changing its blue collar jobs for white collar ones as opportunities continued to appear. For white workers such as Genghis, however, there were no new opportunities, and thus he resented the new affluence experienced by the immigrant Pakistanis. Before the representation of this growing affluence is analysed, however, the representation of post-war immigration must be addressed.

Post-war immigration is not directly dealt with in the movie, but it is implied through numerous subtle references. During Papa and Omar’s introduction, there is slow pan-shot around their apartment. A glossy photograph of a well-dressed, attractive woman in her forties sits on Papa’s bedside table. The screenplay identifies the picture as Papa’s wife Mary, but, for the audience, the placement of the photograph provides a

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<sup>57</sup> Clarke, p. 326. Muhammad Anwar, *The Myth of the Return; Pakistanis in Britain* (London: Heinemann, 1979): 5.

<sup>58</sup> Modood. p. 53.

<sup>59</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.12.

subtle clue that this was Hussein's wife and Omar's mother. Later in the movie, it is revealed that Omar's mother committed suicide in the past year. Without seeing Omar's white mother, it may be difficult for audiences to realize that Omar is half-English, but there are some references to Omar's dual-heritage. When Omar visits Nasser's house, Salim's wife Cherry complains about Omar as an "in-between" as he cannot speak Urdu and has never been to Pakistan. Omar looks Pakistani, but he identifies himself as English, to which Cherry replies, "Could anyone in their right mind call this silly little island off Europe their home?"<sup>61</sup> Cherry, who is identified in the screenplay as an Anglo-Indian, is the most westernized of the women at the party, wearing fashionable western clothes in a clear contrast to the other South Asian women who wear saris or salwar kamizs. But in her proper English accent, she hypocritically chastises and belittles Omar for his Englishness. Salim also criticizes Omar's "white blood."<sup>62</sup>

As the movie is a contemporary piece, and was filmed in 1985, it is quite safe to assume that the "twentyish" Omar was born in the mid-1960s. Therefore, Omar's father Hussein, and most likely his brother Nasser, were part of the post-war influx of migrant workers. Hussein met and married an Englishwoman and settled down to raise his son in a culturally mixed environment. It seems that Papa's history and arrival in Britain is based on Kureishi's own father's immigration. Rafiushan arrived in Britain in 1947 and later married Hanif's English mother.<sup>63</sup> Both Rafiushan and Hussein worked as journalists in India. Although Hussein is identified as a Pakistani in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the only reference to Papa in the sub-continent is as a journalist in Bombay,

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<sup>60</sup> Iganski, Payne, 119.

<sup>61</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.19.

<sup>62</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.28.

<sup>63</sup> Ranasinha, ix.

India. This semi-confusing placement of Pakistani Hussein in India, however, is clearer if the character is related to Kureishi's father who grew up in India, yet considers himself Pakistani.

As previously noted, the jobs available to immigrants were low-paying and undesirable ones which ignored the workers' qualifications and abilities. Although it is not clear what kind of jobs Hussein had when Omar was young – and before he succumbed to the ravages of alcoholism – Nasser does mention a clerk job which he had arranged for his brother.<sup>64</sup> This passing comment may not be terribly remarkable except for numerous sly references to Hussein's talent and abilities which have been squandered in England. When Omar is first introduced to Salim in the garage, as well as to Nasser's party guests, everyone knows Omar's father Hussein as a "famous journalist in Bombay."<sup>65</sup> As Salim despondently notes, "So many books written and read. Politicians sought him out. Bhutto was his close friend. But we're nothing in England without money."<sup>66</sup> Thus, Hussein was a famous, prominent, highly regarded writer who could influence a nation's politicians and had been a friend of Pakistan's famous president.

Yet despite his abilities and influential contacts, all of Hussein's talents are useless in Britain where Pakistani immigrants were restricted to poorly-paid, manual work. As his brother Nasser says "[w]hat chance would the Englishman give a leftist communist Pakistani on newspapers." Although the Englishman at Nasser's party claims that "Omar's father didn't make chances for himself," it is quite apparent that many immigrants were simply unable to apply their abilities in the work opportunities that they

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<sup>64</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.15.

<sup>65</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.14, 21.

<sup>66</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p. 48.



found in Britain.<sup>67</sup> Although racism towards the immigrants was officially illegal, there were numerous infractions to this government policy which created a *de jure* racism in the workplace. Sociological studies of the 1960s show that ethnic workers faced prejudice from other workers and as well as discrimination from their employers. Many employers stated that they would only use immigrant workers as a “last resort” if they were unable to find British workers for the position. Employers were able to feign that they were not discriminating by adhering to a standard of hiring by “merit.” The definition of merit, however, was quite loose as it was extended past its traditional understanding of one’s “abilities” or “qualifications.” Employers were then able to deem how well candidates would “fit in” with other workers as well as customers and clients. Essentially, employers were able to maintain their desired status quo without blatantly transgressing any racial hiring policies.<sup>68</sup>

Although Hussein’s immigrant status likely restricted the types of jobs he could attain, his socialist ideology also hampered his ability to succeed. Hussein tried to instill these values in Omar and his son’s friends, but they seem to have had little effect. The meeting between Papa and Johnny in the launderette illustrates the suitability of his ideals in modern Britain:

PAPA: Do you do a pink rinse, Johnny? Or are you still a fascist?

JOHNNY: You used to give me a lot of good advice, sir. When I was little.

PAPA: When you were little. What’s it made of you? Are you a politician? Journalist? A Trade Unionist? No, you are an underpants cleaner. (Self mocking.) Oh dear, the working class are such a great disappointment to me.

JOHNNY: I haven’t made much of myself.

PAPA: You’d better get on and do something.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.21.

<sup>68</sup> Iganski, Payne, p. 114-5

<sup>69</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.52-3.

Kureishi saw Papa's politics as "the sort of hopeful socialism he might have learned at the LSE in London in the 1940s. It is a socialism that would have no hope of finding a base in ... 1980s Britain."<sup>70</sup> Thus, Papa's political ideologies are shown as useless in Britain under Margaret Thatcher. He is a confused alcoholic who shows up at the opening of his son's business twelve hours late, and Johnny, his disciple, helps people wash their underwear. When Papa's prosperity as a socialist is compared to that of his wealthy capitalist brother, the success of political and economic ideologies in Britain is clear: in the 1980s, socialism's ideals of responsibilities to the workers and the working class were ignored in the pursuit of capital gain.

Perhaps one the most ironic and telling example of how this type of capitalism, as represented by Nasser, has drastically altered England in the "new model economy" is when the uncle and nephew first visit the launderette. The only seats available in the grubby place are some old church pews. The use of church pews placed incongruently into a launderette that is "nothing but a toilet and a youth club now,"<sup>71</sup> show that quite literally nothing is sacred. Regardless of the original function of an item or the deference which would have been given to it in its original setting, its *intended* use has no difference in how it is used in the present. The objects are regarded and respected only for their utility.

The power afforded by financial success in Britain, however, transcends how the immigrant capitalists understand and use material items, as they can also impose their power on people. Nasser uses Johnny as his enforcer to help evict delinquent tenants as well as to manage the apartment block. In one of the movie's most insightful moments

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<sup>70</sup> LSE: London School of Economics. Hanif Kureishi, "Sex and Secularity" *Hanif Kureishi, Collected Screenplays 1*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2002): viii.

about the Pakistani experience in Britain, Johnny asks Nasser about his business practices:

JOHNNY: Aren't you giving ammunition to your enemies doing this kind of ... unscrewing? To people who say Pakis just come here to hustle other people's lives and jobs and houses.

NASSER: But we're professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis. There's no race question in the new enterprise culture.<sup>72</sup>

Johnny invokes a common stereotype about Pakistanis as unscrupulous “hustlers”, yet Nasser remains unconcerned, believing that responsibility to one's community has little use in business enterprises. Lacking his brother's ideals of social responsibility that wealth provides, Nasser trusts that the pursuit of capital provides its own justification – as well as its own power: “in my street I am the law! You see, I make wealth, I create money.”<sup>73</sup> At one point he attempts to assert his authority over Omar when he discovers that Johnny is working for him because “nobody works without my permission.”<sup>74</sup> Nasser, however, does not appear as a heartless Machiavellian character; he wants to help the disenfranchised. “I wish I could do something more to help the other deadbeat children like him [Johnny]. They hang about the road like pigeons, making a mess, doing nothing.”<sup>75</sup> Nasser keeps his power limited to creating wealth, but not to the detriment of others. Admittedly, he gambles, yet his vice affects only a small segment of the community, and in many respects he is blending in with his neighbours. In a deleted scene when Omar and Nasser go to the betting club, the screen directions note that there is a “good sense of camaraderie” between Nasser and the local working-class

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<sup>71</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.26.

<sup>72</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.41.

<sup>73</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.36.

<sup>74</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.35.

<sup>75</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p.44.

Englishmen.<sup>76</sup> Thus, although Nasser may not support the ideals of his socialist brother regarding civic responsibility towards one's community, he does attempt to help those whom he can – albeit when such aid is advantageous to him. Nasser's most definitive statement about his conception of England and the possibilities it affords is revealed early in the film:

In this damn country which we hate and love, you can get anything you want. It's all spread out and available. That's why I believe in England. You just have to know how to squeeze the tits of the system.<sup>77</sup>

Behind his crude and graphic description of the English system is a true belief in the pursuit of capital and an understanding not to abuse, or bite, the system.

Whereas Nasser flirts on the edge of remaining respectable in his pursuit of wealth, Salim has no desire to work within the system. Unlike Nasser, Salim's vice and means of "additional" income, is detrimental to the community. When Omar delivers the fake videotapes (which contain drugs<sup>78</sup>) and mistakenly tries to play them, Salim uses his power against his unwitting pawn. He pushes Omar down, presses his foot into Omar's face, and proceeds to belittle him:

Nasser tells me you're ambitious to do something. You've twice failed your exams. You've done nothing with the launderette and now you bugger me up. You've got too much white blood. It's made you weak like those pale-faced adolescents that call us wog. You know what I do to them? I take out this. (*he takes out a pound note. He tears it to pieces.*) I say: your English pound is worthless. It's worthless like you, Omar, are worthless. Your whole great family – rich and powerful over there – is let down by you.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Launderette and Other Writings*. p. 48.

<sup>77</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Launderette and Other Writings*. p. 17.

<sup>78</sup> There are no stage directions about what kind of drugs Salim couriers, but as it is a white substance, the couriers are South Asians and therefore close to the Golden Triangle, and that Omar and Johnny are able to make enough money to refurbish the launderette, heroin seems to be the most plausible drug.

<sup>79</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Launderette and Other Writings*. p.28.

The narcissistic Salim holds Omar, and all others, in contempt, and even money has no value for him. At the end of the film, Omar and Johnny confront Salim about his placement in the community and what he does:

JOHNNY: Salim, we know what you sell man. Know the kids you sell it to. It's shit, man. Shit.

SALIM: Haven't you noticed? People are shit. I give them what they want. I don't criticize. I supply. The laws of business apply.<sup>80</sup>

Salim seems to be echoing Nasser's upright, capitalist attitude, but without the desire to help anyone. Although he uses his wealth to patronize the arts, he neither supports local artists, nor displays them to the community; art is for his own self-aggrandizement.<sup>81</sup> Salim keeps his power to himself, and whereas Nasser uses it to try and help Johnny and his friends, Salim would rather use it to destroy them. When driving home one night, he sees Johnny's hooligan friends and says to him and Omar:

These people. What a waste of life. They're filthy and ignorant. They're just nothing. But they abuse people. (To OMAR) Our people. (To JOHNNY) All over England, Asians, as you call us, are beaten, burnt to death. Always we are intimidated. What these scum need – (and he *slams the car into gear and starts to drive forward fast*) is a taste of their own piss.<sup>82</sup>

Salim's actions however, have detrimental repercussions on himself as well as Omar's launderette. The National Front thugs whom he attempted to run over with his car, wait for him to arrive at Powders and proceed to attack him, his car, and the launderette. Thus, as Salim does not respect the community and the people within it, he is severely punished for his selfish beliefs. Whereas Nasser freely pursues wealth in the "New Model economy," he still respects the other members of society. Salim, on the other

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<sup>80</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Launderette and Other Writings*. p. 60.

<sup>81</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Launderette and Other Writings*. p. 27.

<sup>82</sup> Kureishi, *My Beautiful Launderette and Other Writings*. p. 61.

hand, chooses to flaunt the laws and the delicate balance between different community groups.

Thus, the Pakistani immigrants who came to Britain to work in the 1950s and 1960s had varying levels of success. Although originally restricted to poorly-paid manual work, many were able to eventually improve their socio-economic situation. As Salim notes “we’re nothing in England without money.” It appears that because of the exclusion and *de jure* racism faced by the immigrants, they were forced to find gaps in the economic system which they could exploit to their benefit, such as gambling or drug running – regardless of the legality of these pursuits. Yet *My Beautiful Laundrette* presents different views of wealth: Papa’s socialism which appears worthless and incongruent with modern Britain; Nasser’s manner of being a “professional businessman” who respects the laws of society; and Salim’s selfish and unscrupulous methods. Each political and economic model that the characters represent about the Pakistani experience in Britain shows a gradual withdrawal from civic responsibility. It is the inability to communicate successfully with other community members which instigates the most problematic manifestation of racism for the Pakistanis: the National Front.

The most vocal, and violent opponent to the increasing number of immigrants from the 1970s to the 1980s was the National Front (NF), a neo-fascist organization which was notorious for its violence and racist rhetoric. NF supporters were characterized as young, unemployed men, infamous for wearing Doc Martin boots, bomber jackets, and shaved heads. The “skinheads,” like the members of Johnny’s gang of hooligan friends, were often the most visible representation of the neo-fascist

movement. Similar to the immigrants, however, their political-cultural movement was not solely a late twentieth century phenomenon.

With the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, there were numerous quasi-fascist parties in Britain. The most successful party was the British Union of Fascists (BUF) which was founded and led by former Member of Parliament Sir Oswald Mosley. At first, Mosley's party was a desperate attempt to promote the Keynesian economic reforms which he was unable to promote in the House of Commons.<sup>83</sup> For a time, he was financially and politically backed by Benito Mussolini. When Mosley failed to garner sufficient support, however, *il Duce* abandoned him, leading Mosley to look to Adolf Hitler for inspiration and support. To curry favour with Hitler, Mosley introduced violent, anti-Semitic elements into his fascist party which he had earlier strove to suppress. The new tactics proved to be disastrous for the party after a particularly bloody and well-publicized public BUF rally was followed within a week by the "Night of the Long Knives" where Hitler purged top members of the Nazi party in July 1934. The British public saw how Mosley's tactics could easily turn Britain into a totalitarian state as violent as Nazi Germany, and all vestiges of respectable support for the BUF vanished. It became a violent, political, fringe party which disappeared with the outbreak of World War II.<sup>84</sup> Although this early attempt at fascism failed, many of its supporters later used their abilities when the "British way of life" was "threatened."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Clarke, p. 154-5.

<sup>84</sup> Mosley and many of the key party members were arrested with the outbreak of the war over fears of the party being a "fifth column" in Britain. While Mosley ensured that his party was British first and Nazi second, he had strong ties to the German Nazi party as Hitler was a close friend of his wife, and they were married in Germany with Joseph Goebbels as their best man.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain; From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front*. (London: I.B. Publishers, 1998.), ch. 3.

As the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill of 1962 failed to placate the fears of the radical right, the political, economic, and racial precedent of the BUF found new admirers as anti-immigration attitudes grew. Arguably, the catalyst for these sentiments was radical MP Enoch Powell's "River of Blood" speech in 1968.<sup>86</sup> The apocalyptic speech served to bring racial fears of "wide-eyed, grinning piccaninnies," back into British politics.<sup>87</sup> Powell was a well-established MP, who articulated many of the racial anxieties and prejudices.<sup>88</sup> Although Powell avoided the radical, racial right wing that was inspired by his speech, this group of admirers soon overshadowed the man who invoked them.

The National Front (NF), formed in 1967, was a combination of revisionist neo-fascism and racial populist politics.<sup>89</sup> Whereas the BUF had struggled to convince people of the threat of Jewish financiers, the reformed neo-fascist NF had little difficulty in identifying the "culprits" responsible for the problems in British society: New Commonwealth immigrants. Whereas Jewish immigrants could integrate into British society, the new scapegoat's skin colour prevented any "quiet" assimilation. The NF was able to marshal public support that immigrants were "stealing British jobs." Old members of the BUF, such as Mosley's once trusted advisor, A. K. Chesterton, helped to rally disenchanted Conservatives to the NF cause, which was based on some of the BUF's old ideas of racial and economic reform. The NF sought to establish itself not only with the political establishment, but also with the alienated whites from inner-city areas by limiting the party's emphasis on notorious and contentious fascist politics which

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<sup>86</sup> Powell will be addressed directly in chapter 3.

<sup>87</sup> Enoch Powell, *Immigration and Enoch Powell*. Ed. Tom Stacey (London: Tom Stacey Ltd: 1970): 93.

<sup>88</sup> Clarke, p. 323.

<sup>89</sup> Thurlow, p. 245.



would have failed to attract these groups.<sup>90</sup> Instead, it promoted an attempt to preserve “British Culture” in a racial, populist movement. Conservative political support, which was courted during Edward Heath’s rather relaxed and liberal control of the Conservative party, vanished with the rise of the “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher and her contempt for “Wet Toryism.” Thatcher’s strong will and vision for her party left the NF with only its inner-city supporters.<sup>91</sup> Although the movement “went underground” and became a political fringe party, it did not go quietly into the political wilderness.

By the late 1970s, the NF staged numerous rallies and marches through new immigrant neighbourhoods as it began to focus on “street politics.” They infiltrated the outcasts of British society, and successfully recruited football hooligans and skinhead “bovver boys” in an attempt to “kick [their] way into the headlines.”<sup>92</sup> Just as the BUF would march through London’s Eastside to harangue the local Jewish residents and shopkeepers, the NF would go through the same area to disturb the New Commonwealth immigrants. One of their notorious marches is mentioned in *My Beautiful Laundrette* during Omar’s sorrowful rebuking of his lover:

What were they [Omar’s childhood friends] doing on marches through Lewisham? It was bricks and bottles and Union Jacks. It was immigrants out. It was kill us. People we knew. And it was you. He [Papa] saw you marching. You saw his face, watching you. Don’t deny it. We were there when you went past. (OMAR *is being held by* JOHNNY, *in his arms*.) Papa hated himself and his job. He was afraid on the street for me.<sup>93</sup>

As Lewisham experienced two significant NF marches in 1977 and in 1980 (roughly the time the teenage Johnny would have been enamoured with the NF), it is difficult to determine exactly to which rally Omar refers. However, regardless of which

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<sup>90</sup> Thurlow. p. 248.

<sup>91</sup> Thurlow. p. 256.

<sup>92</sup> Thurlow. p. 255.

demonstration Johnny and the lads attended, both were violent and shocking not only to the residents of the area, but also to the nation.

By the late 1970s, it was apparent that the police not only failed to perceive the severity of the racial tensions and violence towards the New Commonwealth immigrants, but also were unable to contain the rising number of assaults towards them. The effects of unemployment, social and economic deprivation, drug problems, and hooliganism proved taxing to the authorities in Britain's inner-cities, and racial tensions further exacerbated the dangerous situation.<sup>94</sup> The police soon were unable to communicate effectively with community groups and they began to look after their own interests.<sup>95</sup> A clear example of the police's misunderstanding of neighbourhood divisions is evident in its failure to prevent a NF rally through Lewisham on 14 August 1977.

According to Martin Webster, the NF's national activities organizer, the aim of the Lewisham march was:

simply to give heart to the white people, to reassure the many people in Deptford who have voted for us that they have not been forgotten by all the trendies who now run this country and do nothing but pander to the black muggers.<sup>96</sup>

The NF had purposefully held their march through the centre of black Deptford in an attempt to show the crimes committed by the immigrant population.<sup>97</sup> The NF had started to recruit the young and volatile football hooligans and skinheads, which provided a very violent support base.<sup>98</sup> The National Front supporters, who were estimated to be around 1 000 to 1 500, were countered by nearly 4 000 anti-fascists, with around 4 000

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<sup>93</sup> Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. p. 43.

<sup>94</sup> Thurlow. p. 257.

<sup>95</sup> The ramifications of their loss of control will be addressed in chapter 2 with the outbreaks of riots in the early 1980s.

<sup>96</sup> Martin Webster, as quoted in *The Times*, August 17, 1977.

<sup>97</sup> *The Times*, August 14, 1977.

<sup>98</sup> Thurlow. p. 252.

police supervising the event. When the three different groups encountered one another, violence ensued with fist fights, stabbings, the hurling of bricks and bottles, and ammonia being sprayed at the police. The police were forced to use riot shields – for the first time in mainland Britain – in their attempts to limit the violence of the groups whose resources and size they had underestimated.<sup>99</sup> By the end, 202 people were arrested and charged, 56 civilians were hurt, and 55 policemen were injured.<sup>100</sup> In the aftermath of the march, the police were unable to placate the various groups. They were, however, better prepared to handle a similar situation in the future.

In 1980, the NF attempted another march through Lewisham. They sought to exploit an impasse between the local council and the Metropolitan Police. On 16 April 1980, the Lewisham council decided to withhold its funds for the police unless they could receive an assurance of improved and accountable policing in their district. Under the guise of demonstrating against the council's decision to ban a NF public meeting in the area, the National Front attempted to launch another rally protesting the presence of immigrants in the area. Despite the bloody precedent from three years before, the police decided not to ban the march, although the local council tried frantically to cancel the potentially riotous rally.<sup>101</sup> Once again, the event made headline news, yet the results were drastically different. With only 800 marchers, as well as between 500 and 1 000 anti-fascist demonstrators, there were only 59 arrests.<sup>102</sup> Although the second event was less violent, it likely had a chilling effect on the community as it proved that the previous march was not simply a one-time attack on their neighbourhood. Moreover, it

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<sup>99</sup> They had previously been used in Northern Ireland.

<sup>100</sup> *The Times*, August 15, 1977.

<sup>101</sup> *The Times*, April 18, 1980.

<sup>102</sup> *The Times*, April 20, 1980.

demonstrated the precarious relations between the police, the city council, the National Front, and anti-fascist groups. As Omar's speech, and the recurrent marches in Lewisham prove, immigrants inhabited a world where they could receive just as much hatred at home in their neighbourhoods as they would experience at work.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine how pervasive the National Front was by the mid-1980s. In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, many of the white characters are NF hooligans, and thus give the appearance that their presence, at least in economically depressed neighbourhoods, was pervasive. In *Fascism in Britain*, Richard Thurlow argues that it was the disaffected members of the inner cities that were the core supporters. There is, however, a dearth of information on the members' socio-economic background. Thurlow notes that it is difficult to determine accurately the number of supporters during the National Front's tumultuous rise in the 1970s and its fall in the 1980s, and only rough estimates of membership are available. During the group's peak in the early 1970s there were around 17 500 members and by the 1979 election there were 10 000. With Thatcher's ascent after the election, the party's membership entered a rapid decline, and by early 1985 the NF had only around 1 000 members, although by the end of the year it had 2 000 supporters. Unfortunately, however, these numbers may not be representative as the official membership numbers have not been released.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, it is unclear if the volatile skinheads and regular hooligans are represented in these membership figures. It is unlikely that lads such as Genghis or Moose would pay membership dues and thus be counted as verifiable supporters of the NF. Thus, although *My Beautiful Laundrette* may be an accurate depiction of the NF in the 1980s, this representation may

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<sup>103</sup> Thurlow. p. 260.

be based solely on standard stereotypes of NF supporters as xenophobic, unemployed, conservative zealots.

Perhaps the strangest irony in Kureishi's presentations of the various groups in the film is that of Johnny as a gay National Front hooligan. Although such a character would appear to be impossible in a group which is notorious for its arch-conservative, traditional, and ultra-right wing views, there actually were a high proportion of homosexuals amongst NF members.<sup>104</sup> Thus, even when Kureishi appears to be at the height of his powers as an ironic commentator and creating perverse plot twists, he is actually presenting activities which are more common than many would believe.

Therefore, Kureishi's presentation of the National Front notes the division between the ethnic communities in Britain's inner-cities. The marches in Lewisham exacerbated the tensions between the immigrant communities and the authorities. Yet, Kureishi's focus on Johnny's friends makes it seem that the threat of racial violence was lurking on every street, although membership numbers for the National Front does not necessarily support this representation.

Thus, *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a fairly accurate portrayal of the Pakistani experience in the mid-1980s. Kureishi defies the conventions of the "Raj Revival" films by presenting a movie which concentrates on contemporary race relations in Britain. He presents the South Asian community as "tough – not to say unscrupulous – entrepreneurs who understand the rules of Mrs Thatcher's England better than many whites."<sup>105</sup> The character's histories are subtly worked into the film so that Kureishi can avoid falling into a preachy trap of "dourness and didacticism." The Pakistanis' growing affluence in the

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<sup>104</sup> Thurlow, p. 263.

<sup>105</sup> *The Sunday Times* 10 November 1985.

1980s is shown as being as divisive as their very presence had been in the 1960s and 1970s. In either scenario, they are unable to feel at home in their adopted homeland. This inability to “fit in” is best shown by Omar, the half-English, half-Pakistani leading man who struggles to be accepted by either community. Kureishi refuses to provide any simple answers to the problems he presents in his screenplay, and this is perhaps the key to the successful representation of these communities: no ending can be written as it is still an ongoing process. Whereas films within the “Raj Revival” can provide moral solutions to political problems, Kureishi focuses on the political problems and forces his audience to create their own answers. Thus, Kureishi showed that compelling and difficult stories about contemporary issues could be told about the different communities in Britain, without restricting them to a romanticized colonial past.

## CHAPTER 3

### DOMESTIC COLONIALISM: ENGLAND'S INNER-CITIES IN *SAMMY AND ROSIE GET LAID*

When they kick at your front door  
How you gonna come?  
With your hands on your head  
Or on the trigger of your gun.

When the law break in  
How you gonna go?  
Shot down on the pavement  
Or waiting in death row?

You can crush us  
You can bruise us  
But you'll have to answer to  
Ou – the guns of Brixton.  
- The Clash, *Guns of Brixton* (1979)

The Clash's song "Guns of Brixton" from their seminal album "London Calling" asks its audience to consider how to react to authority while conveying the strength of the neighbourhood. Brixton was one of London's roughest inner-city ghettos in the 1970s and 1980s, and its citizens were frequently at the mercy of overly zealous police officers. Within five years after the song's release, Brixton was rocked by two major riots, and Hanif Kureishi was asking the same questions.

While *My Beautiful Laundrette* was successfully screening around the globe, Kureishi finished his second film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). Once again directed by Stephen Frears, the film portrays the intertwining lives of hip Londoners

Sammy and Rosie and their family and friends, with London's rioting streets as a backdrop. Rosie is a social worker, and Sammy is an accountant whose father, Rafi, has unexpectedly announced that he is moving in with them as his life is threatened if he returns home. Although the script is never clear on Rafi's precise homeland, he appears to be a dictator from Pakistan, or as one reviewer deemed him "a General Zia figure."<sup>106</sup> Rafi was educated in London and has returned, not only to see his son, but also to visit his old friend Alice. The movie opens with the police shooting an innocent black woman in her home during a raid. The local immigrant community soon erupts in protest over the shooting, and a riot ensues. The woman's "adopted son"<sup>107</sup> Danny befriends Rafi and helps the former dictator around the riot-plagued neighbourhood. Although Sammy and Rosie are married, they have an open relationship and prefer to sleep with other people. Rosie takes Danny as her lover after meeting him through Rafi, and Sammy's mistress is an American photographer. Other characters include the militant Asian lesbian Rani and her lover Vivia, as well as a ghostly Pakistani cab driver. This cavalcade of characters is bound together by their particular political beliefs or by their sexual desires.

Kureishi envisioned his movie to be similar to *My Beautiful Laundrette* with a "mixture of realism and surrealism, seriousness and comedy, art and gratuitous sex."<sup>108</sup> Perhaps appropriately, Kureishi originally wanted to call the film "*The Fuck*" as he

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<sup>106</sup> Peter Porter "Polemical Pairings" *Times Literary Supplement*. January 22-28, 1988, 87. Similar to Hussein in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi has sprinkled his clues throughout the screenplay. There are references to Rafi's ties with the military and ruling with martial law, which would align him with Pakistan as it was a military dictatorship at the time. General Zia ul-Haq controlled Pakistan after a military coup against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977 until his death in 1988.

<sup>107</sup> In the screenplay, Rafi refers to her as "the woman who brought you up," but "adopted" mother will be used here for clarity and brevity. Hanif Kureishi, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid: the Script and the Diary*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1988): 51.

<sup>108</sup> Hanif Kureishi, "Some Time with Stephen," p. 64.



envisioned the scene with the various couples simultaneously copulating as the heart of the film.<sup>109</sup> Due to the numerous couples and their varying personal beliefs, describing the film's plot is difficult, and even Kureishi himself was uncertain of where the balance of the film lay. In his diary about the making of the film, Kureishi expresses concern that director Stephen Frears was focusing more on the personal issues of the characters, and thus depoliticizing the "public acts or moral positions."<sup>110</sup> Kureishi admits to his weakness as a writer in determining plots, and, as one movie reviewer commented, "Kureishi's script has the restless fury of a harpooned whale."<sup>111</sup> Or, as Iain Johnstone, aptly noted:

[a] proliferation of sex scenes adds to the sense that there is something disturbingly trendy, as opposed to heartfelt, about the whole set-up. Political morality, sexual morality, society's view of homosexuality, the right of black communities to self-determination, and inner-city decay are strong and legitimate subjects for any feature film. But they sit uneasily in the same one.<sup>112</sup>

Ultimately, the film suffers from attempting to address too many issues and it is unable to deal with any of them satisfactorily. Moreover, critical studies of Kureishi have focused primarily on the personal politics of the characters and have left the traditional politics unaddressed.<sup>113</sup> As Kureishi believed the political comments to be equally important, the film's political themes shall be analyzed.

In the 1980s, Britain was under the rule of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, arguably Britain's strongest PM since World War II. Thatcher had a very particular vision of the country's domestic and global direction. Unfortunately, her policies

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<sup>109</sup> Kureishi, "Some Time with Stephen." p. 70.

<sup>110</sup> Kureishi, "Some Time with Stephen." p. 111-2.

<sup>111</sup> The Times, January 21 1988.

<sup>112</sup> Ian Johnstone, *The Sunday Times* January 24, 1988.

<sup>113</sup> See Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities", *Black Film, British Cinema*. Kobena Mercer, ed. (London:Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988), Gutari Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. (London :

exacerbated the division between the “haves” and “have nots.” Kureishi’s film was one of the many contemporary criticisms of Thatcher’s increasingly authoritarian Britain, as it addresses some of the nation’s major problems in the 1980s.<sup>114</sup> Although the film has two South Asian characters in the primary cast, it is not restricted solely to South Asian issues. Rather, it shows the government’s relationship with its inner-city immigrant population. The dominant political themes in the film are riots, inner-city decay, and Thatcher’s response to both. The response that Kureishi’s film elicited from Thatcher’s supporters will be addressed as it illustrates the tension between Kureishi’s gritty, contemporary urban dramas which are in stark contrast to traditional “good” films about Britain such as Merchant and Ivory’s genteel heritage films or “Raj Revival” movies. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is a more ambitious and broader film as it seeks to address issues affecting both the South Asian and Black British communities by taking the close “street-level” view of *My Beautiful Laundrette* on economics and the National Front and “panning out” to the wider, towering structures of power in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain.

While the National Front (NF) was still a contentious group in the inner-cities, their power had clearly waned by the mid 1980s; Thatcher’s effect, however, proved to be much more relevant than the NF as the manifestations of her power, policing and re-development, were harder for citizens to combat. While the NF was a demonstrative force, Thatcher and her policies was a more diffuse enemy as there were no overt manifestations of her government’s schemes for the area. As Danny laments to Rafi:

DANNY: For a long time, right, I’ve been for non-violence. Never gone for burning things down. I can see the attraction but not the achievement. OK. After

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Routledge, 1993), and bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

<sup>114</sup> Some other anti-Thatcher films are *Business as Usual* (1987), *Empire State* (1987), *Eat the Rich* (1987), *The Last of England* (1988), and, of course, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985).

all, you guys ended colonialism non-violently. You'd sit down all over the place, right? We have a kind of domestic colonialism to deal with here, because they don't allow us to run our own communities. But if full-scale civil war breaks out we can only lose. And what's going to happen to all that beauty?

RAFI: If I lived here ... I would be on your side. All over the world the colonized people are fighting back. It's the necessity of the age. It gives me hope.

DANNY: But how should we fight? That's what I want to know.<sup>115</sup>

While the film is unable to produce any answers, it presents the topic so that the audience can consider the "state of England" under Thatcher.

Kureishi was clearly concerned with the Prime Minister's direction for Britain.

As he wrote during the release of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*:

England seems to have become a squalid, ugly and uncomfortable place. For some reason I am starting to feel that it is an intolerant, racist, homophobic, narrow-minded authoritarian rathole run by vicious, suburban-minded, materialistic philistines who think democracy is constituted by the selling of a few council houses and shares.<sup>116</sup>

Kureishi was appalled to see the "state of England" and its decaying cities, and he saw Thatcher's policies as destroying the nation. When looking for shooting locations, Kureishi lamented over many of the districts he visited:

They are filthy, derelict places, falling down, graffiti-sprayed, wind-blown, grim and humming with the smell of shit, implacable in the hatred of humanity they embody. The surrounding shops are barricaded with bars and wire mesh. I was brought up in London. It's my city. I'm no Britisher, but a Londoner. And it's filthier and more run down now than it's ever been.<sup>117</sup>

Although Kureishi often has a love/hate relationship with Britain,<sup>118</sup> he is passionate about his love for London and prefers to identify himself as a Londoner than as an Englishman. As Sammy says, "We love our city and we belong to it. Neither of us are

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<sup>115</sup> Kureishi, "Sammy and Rosie Get Laid," p. 21.

<sup>116</sup> Hanif Kureishi. "England, bloody England". *The Guardian*, 15 January 1988.

<sup>117</sup> Kureishi, "Some Time with Stephen," p. 75.

<sup>118</sup> His essay "The Rainbow Sign" clarifies his likes and dislikes in Britain, although he ultimately sees himself as British after he became impatient with the anti-liberalism he experienced in Pakistan.

English, we're Londoners you see.”<sup>119</sup> Sammy, Rosie, and Kureishi reject the national identity as it is inevitably tied to Margaret Thatcher, and embrace a local and multi-cultural identity. In the 1980s, however, London was experiencing major difficulties with its immigrant communities and Thatcher's growing influence on the affairs of the nation's capital. The movie opens with a portion of Thatcher's 1986 victory speech, “We have a great deal of work to do, so no one must slack. We've got a big job to do in some of those inner-cities.” Danny, however, is more straightforward about the situation: “[n]obody knows the shit black people have to go through in this country.”<sup>120</sup> *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* illustrates the contemporary difficulties in London with the struggles between riots and re-development.

*Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* opens with a fairly pleasant scene of Paulette, a black woman, frying chips in her sunny kitchen while listening to her son play his trumpet. They are soon interrupted by a surprise police raid, and Paulette throws the chip oil at her intruder. The event happens so suddenly, that her action appears to be sheer instinct against an intruder, rather than malice towards the officer. The police respond by fatally shooting her. Paulette's death ignites the neighbourhood, and by the evening there is a riot in the streets. While the series of events – an innocent woman shot dead by the police in her own home and the neighbourhood's spontaneous reaction and condemnation of the act – is startling within the film, the event was even more shocking when it actually happened. Kureishi based the opening on the tragic shooting of Cherry Groce and the ensuing Brixton riot. As Kureishi notes in his diary, “I do like the shooting, not for

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<sup>119</sup> Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 33.

<sup>120</sup> Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 43.

aesthetic reason, but for didactic ones: it says, this is what happens to some black people in Britain – they got shot up by the police.”<sup>121</sup>

On Saturday morning, 28 September 1985, 37 year old mother of four, Cherry Groce, was awoken by what she thought was her sick daughter Juliet. Upon entering her Brixton flat’s hallway, rather than finding her daughter, she was confronted by eight policemen, with three police dogs, who immediately began yelling at her. Stunned by the sight, and unable to comprehend what the police were saying, she turned to flee into her bedroom, but was shot as she turned around. As her three children screamed hysterically and she lay on the floor repeating “I’m dying, I’m dying,” the police stood over her, with a gun still pointed at her, saying “Don’t be silly, where’s Michael?”<sup>122</sup>

The police had staged an early morning raid in an attempt to arrest Mrs. Groce’s son Michael on a weapon’s offence. The operation ended without Michael in custody and with an innocent bystander seriously wounded. The bullet entered Mrs. Groce’s left shoulder whereupon it shattered a bone and sent splinters throughout her back, grazing her spine and leading to permanent paralysis.<sup>123</sup> As Rosie dryly quips in the film’s fictionalized account of the event, “The police shot a woman by mistake. They were looking for her son. It’s easy enough to mistake a fifty-year-old office cleaner for a twenty-year-old jazz trumpeter.”<sup>124</sup>

As news of the shooting spread throughout the neighbourhood (the rumour was that the police had killed Groce),<sup>125</sup> a crowd gathered at the local police headquarters

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<sup>121</sup> Kureishi, “Some Time with Stephen,” p. 119.

<sup>122</sup> *The Times*, Monday September 30, 1985.

<sup>123</sup> *The Times*, Monday September 30, 1985.

<sup>124</sup> Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 6.

<sup>125</sup> John Benyon and John Solomos, “British Urban Unrest in the 1980s” in *The Roots of Urban Unrest* ed. John Benyon and John Solomos. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987): 17.

demanding answers. Community leaders complained that the police did not inform them of the shooting, preventing them from helping the police to contain the community protest.<sup>126</sup> The Police Superintendent's attempts to placate the crowd failed, and soon bricks, bottles, and petrol bombs were hurled at the police station. The police responded to the crowd in their riot gear, and the five hour Brixton riot ensued. By the next morning, police recorded 724 major crimes, 43 civilians and 10 officers were injured, over 50 counts of vehicular and property damage, two rapes, nearly one hundred burglaries, and numerous assaults.<sup>127</sup> Thus, the riot depicted in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* was based upon a major and shocking uprising.

Unfortunately, not only was the riot Brixton's second uprising in four years, it was also not a limited occurrence. Although riots were historically common in English cities, the large scale disturbances were practically unknown to the new generation of city-dwellers.<sup>128</sup> Post-World War II England was relatively calm, but the 1980s proved to shatter the long silence of urban unrest. In 1981 there were riots in London, Bristol, Brixton, Southall, Merseyside, Moss Side, as well as disturbances in Handsworth, Birmingham, Sheffield, Nottingham, Hull, Slough, Leeds, Bradford, Leicester, Derby, High Wycombe and Cirencester. The incidents were in inner-cities and were usually race related conflicts which pitted local Asians and Blacks against either skinheads or the police.<sup>129</sup> Not only was the number of events shocking, but their intensity was nearly

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<sup>126</sup> *The Times*, Monday September 30, 1985.

<sup>127</sup> Benyon, p. 6, 18.

<sup>128</sup> Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists enabled many conflicts during the Depression, but once the group was disbanded during the war, there had been few disturbances. In the 1950s the teddy boys and in the 1960s the mods and rockers created 'moral panics.' The 1970s had the rise of football 'hooligans' as well as the resurfacing of organized racism with the National Front (NF). As noted in the previous chapter, the NF staged marches which led to urban unrest, but it was not until the 1980s that large scale riots resurfaced in England.

<sup>129</sup> Benyon, p. 3-5.

unprecedented in twentieth century Britain. Lord Scarman, who investigated the riots for the House of Lords, reported to his peers that the Brixton riots nearly overwhelmed the police, and there would be “no other way of dealing with it [the riots] except the awful requirement of calling in the army.”<sup>130</sup> Apart from the troubles in Northern Ireland, Britain very rarely uses the army to quell civil disturbances. If the riots were as serious as Lord Scarman claims, then England narrowly avoided a major blow to its identity as a tolerant and peaceful nation.

Both the Tories and the public were shocked by the events, yet there were conflicting perceptions about the riots. Many saw them as the result of hopelessness and despair that government policy had created in the afflicted districts where unemployment was drastically high. Others saw the rioters as lawless working-class hooligans, a view supported and promoted by many Conservatives.<sup>131</sup> Prime Minister Thatcher saw the rioters as lazy, with no pride in their neighbourhoods:

Young people ... had plenty of constructive things to do if they wanted. Indeed, I asked myself how people could live in such surroundings without trying to clear up the mess and improve their surroundings. What was clearly lacking was a sense of pride and personal responsibility.<sup>132</sup>

Despite her acknowledgement of the problems faced by these people, Thatcher did little to aid them to improve their surroundings or to instil a sense of pride. She did, however, continue to add more police officers to the affected areas.

After eighteen “disturbances” in 1981, unrest continued in subsequent years and led London’s Metropolitan Police Commissioner to state that “there were many mini-riots which had the potential to escalate to Brixton 1981 proportions.” He concluded in

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<sup>130</sup> House of Lords Official Report, Parliamentary Debates (*Hansard*), Session 1981-82, Fifth Series, Vol. 428, 24 March 1982, cols 1005-1006.

<sup>131</sup> Eric J. Evans. *Thatcher and Thatcherism*. (London: Routledge, 1997): 21.

1984 that “London is nowadays a very volatile city.”<sup>133</sup> After the 1981 riots, Lord Scarman investigated the events and recommended that affirmative action, an improved education system, and the recruitment of black police officers would help stem the sense of injustice that Black Britons felt.<sup>134</sup> Unfortunately, little was done to implement Scarman’s recommendations. In the next year, when *My Beautiful Laundrette* brought South Asian issues into the mainstream, England erupted once again.

The first riot in 1985 happened in Birmingham after two incidents towards New Commonwealth immigrants occurred on the same day. An Asian shop keeper was stabbed, which was soon followed by an argument between police and bystanders after the officers were accused of racial abuse when they pulled a black man from his car and assaulted a woman. The altercation between police, the suspect, and pedestrians soon escalated into a fight in which eleven officers were injured and then into a full-scale riot. In the morning, the bodies of two Asian men were found asphyxiated in their postal office. 122 people were reported injured and the area sustained £7.5 million in property damage.<sup>135</sup> The riot was similar to the ones seen in 1981, and even though people had died as a result of the riot, the government still did not take any action to prevent further outbreaks.

Later that same month, Cherry Groce was shot and the Brixton riot ensued. Again, little was done to address the issues facing these communities. Little more than a week after the Brixton riot, on 6 October, riots at Broadwater Farm Estate erupted. The day before the riots, police arrested Floyd Jarrett under suspicion of auto theft, and after

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<sup>132</sup> Margaret Thatcher. *The Downing Street Years*. (London : HarperCollins, 1993): 144-5.

<sup>133</sup> *The Guardian*, 17 October 1984.

<sup>134</sup> Sir Lesley George Scarman. *The Scarman Report: the Brixton Disorders 10-12 April 1981: Report of an Inquiry by the Rt. Hon. The Lord Scarman*, OBE, (London: HMSO, 1981, Cmnd. 8427)



detaining him, they proceeded to search his home under questionable procedures.<sup>136</sup> During the search, Jarrett's mother, Cynthia collapsed and died under suspicious circumstances. The next day, the police met with community leaders and Floyd Jarrett to address the community's rumours about police involvement in the death. The police refused not only to acknowledge any inappropriate use of force, but also to suspend the four officers involved in the events. A riot ensued that evening, and while there was a comparable number of buildings and automobiles damaged as in Brixton, the revolt was mainly targeted towards the police. While apparently only twenty civilians reported injury, 223 police officers were injured, and one officer was stabbed to death after tripping during a police retreat from the dissenters.<sup>137</sup>

Despite the alarming nature of these events, the government had little reaction except to affirm their allegiance to the police and to call for more officers to solve the problems. The government refused any requests for external reviews into the riots, and even though disturbances continued in England's inner-cities, the general populace showed little concern. As John Benyon and John Solomos noted, by 1986:

a great deal of the brief media coverage there was a barely hidden undercurrent of boredom and resignation at yet more urban unrest. The shock and bewilderment evident in 1981 seemed to be absent by 1986 – instead there was a general expectation of further disturbances.”<sup>138</sup>

Any firm conclusions about the riots are well outside the scope of this thesis as it would require much more analysis than could possibly be offered here. It is clear, however, that these riots were caused by and often directed towards the police, and rather than leading

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<sup>135</sup> Benyon, p. 5-6, 16.

<sup>136</sup> Jarrett was a well-known resident and worked at the Broadwater Farm Youth Association who just returned from a youth exchange trip to Jamaica. The tax disc on his BMW had expired and the police suspected that he had stolen the vehicle. They proceeded to wrongfully charge him with assaulting an officer, arrest him, and detain him for four hours before allowing him to make a phone call. Benyon, p. 19.

to changes to the system that inspired the riots, most British citizens resigned themselves to a complacent tolerance of these “uncontrollable” events. Kureishi wanted to bring a sympathetic presentation of London’s decaying inner-cities residents to his audience, but realized that it would be a challenging endeavour.

Reflecting on the Brixton and Broadwater riots in his diary of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Kureishi felt that while the film helped justify the riots:

The difficulty arises from the fact that black people are so rarely represented on TV; if when they are shown, they’re only throwing rocks at the police, you’re in danger of reinforcing considerable prejudice. I suppose this depends partly on how you see the riot, or revolt. I know I supported it, but as Orwell says about Auden, it’s easy to say that if you’re elsewhere when the violence takes place.<sup>139</sup>

Kureishi’s comments raise the question of how the riots were perceived. He realizes that he is presenting the view of “middle-class people (albeit dissenting middle-class people) who own and control and have access to the media and to money, using minority and working-class material to entertain other middle-class people”.<sup>140</sup> Similar to his film, he has no answer to the questions he poses. He does, however, present the government’s response to inner-city problems.

While Thatcher had steadily increased policing during her previous terms in office, which enabled the police to develop a tighter control over the inner-city areas,<sup>141</sup> with her third successful election in 1987, she saw the redevelopment of inner cities as one of her top priorities. Thatcher had little respect for socialism and saw the nation’s predominantly left-leaning local councils as an inhibiting factor to improving the

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<sup>137</sup> Benyon, p. 7-8, 19-20.

<sup>138</sup> Benyon, p. 10.

<sup>139</sup> Kureishi, p. 79.

<sup>140</sup> Kureishi, p. 121.

<sup>141</sup> While Thatcher strove to reduce public spending in numerous areas, she nearly doubled the police budget from £2 billion in 1979 and 1980 to £3.9 billion in 1984 and 1985. Evans, p. 75.

country's troubled districts and that the councils were responsible for driving away the neighbourhood's "natural leaders."<sup>142</sup> During her drive to reform the inner cities in Manchester she archaically declared "[i]n days of yore in Manchester, this great enormous city, your business leaders would live within the bounds of the city."<sup>143</sup> The Prime Minister believed that the inner-cities needed to be re-invigorated in order to attract the society's "natural leaders" to return to their neighbourhoods and thus provide the cool, Conservative guidance that the areas "needed." Thatcher proposed an ambitious redevelopment of these areas with large scale building schemes such as London Docklands and Merseyside developments.<sup>144</sup> She planned to bypass local council's authority and provide the funds directly to private companies. The Thatcher government had already dealt the authority of local councils a grievous blow when she dissolved the Greater London Council and six other Metropolitan Authorities with the Local Government Act in 1986 which negated the control of local councils over their own cities.<sup>145</sup> Her new redevelopment proposal sought to circumvent further local governance by focusing urban renewal on old factory sites of more than twenty acres, which were outside of the local council's jurisdiction. These developments would be implemented by private companies, thus reducing the expense to the government as the corporations would be responsible for the development's economic future. Thatcher felt that

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<sup>142</sup> Although an in-depth analysis will not be addressed in this paper, the councils were so notoriously difficult for Thatcher that they were frequently referred to as the "loony left," albeit Thatcher disliked the phrase as it "distracted attention from the fact that all left-wing councils were hostile" to her initiatives. . In 1986, two-thirds of local authorities were Labour. *The Times*, 17 April, 1987, and Evans, p. 60.

<sup>143</sup> *The Times*, 17 April 1987

<sup>144</sup> *The Times*, 21 July 1986

<sup>145</sup> Evans, p. 60-61.

extending the free market economy would help solve the inner city problems, yet few private developers showed any interest in such large and expensive projects.<sup>146</sup>

Thatcher argued that such projects would “restore power and decision-taking to local people, to make them responsible for their own revival of prosperity and pride.”<sup>147</sup> Unfortunately, there was no real consideration of the local communities as the corporations took precedence over the local rights. The execution of these new projects was “farmed out” to external organizations whose directors were in line with Thatcher’s views.<sup>148</sup> This scheme, however, ignored Lord Scarman’s findings that many of the “residential, industrial, and commercial buildings had been erected without any idea as to what was wanted by the people who would use them.”<sup>149</sup> Scarman argued that a “grassroots” approach which relied upon local input was the way to proceed in helping the inner cities. Clearly, each side had opposing views with Thatcher favouring a “top-down” method over Scarman’s “bottom-up” approach. Scarman wanted to build for the present residents, whereas Thatcher used nearly every tactic she could to circumvent and negate local councils which represented the neighbourhoods to build massive projects which were intended to provide council homes for the executives – the incoming “natural leaders.”<sup>150</sup>

*Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* has a brief, yet poignant depiction of the government’s attempts to lure local business. When Rafi and Danny first meet they overhear the local MP imploring a property developer to rebuild the neighbourhood:

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<sup>146</sup> *The Times*, 14 September 1987.

<sup>147</sup> *The Times* 8 July 1987.

<sup>148</sup> Evans, p. 62.

<sup>149</sup> *The Times* 9 July 1987.

<sup>150</sup> *The Times* 19 July 1987

TORY MP: You're a wealthy, intelligent businessman. ... You've got to invest in this area – for your sake and ours. You can do whatever you like.  
PROPERTY DEVELOPER: I want that open space under the motorway – then we can talk.<sup>151</sup>

There is clearly no regard for the local residents in their plans; the development is intended to benefit the MP and the developer, not the local people. At the end of the film, the developer's contempt for Danny's caravan is clearly palatable: "Here we go, here we go, here we go! Fuck off, you lesbian communists!"<sup>152</sup> While Kureishi presents the government's desire to dislocate and to ignore the needs of these riotous neighbourhoods, he also shows how troublesome the new residents were.

Sammy and Rosie are perfect examples of the affluent citizens that Thatcher wanted to attract to England's blighted neighbourhoods, yet the hip young Londoners also show the difficult shift these inner-cities encountered. Clearly, government policy in the 1980s encouraged displacement in the inner cities, as reform efforts in these areas fell under the aegis of policing and redevelopment; policing to control people and redevelopment to encourage urban renewal.<sup>153</sup> Lord Scarman warned against the dangers of such policies as they encouraged displacement. Urban renewal, or gentrification, typically attracts younger and more affluent neighbours who have little attachment to the community. Specifically, Scarman warned against couples like Sammy and Rosie.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Kureishi, "Sammy and Rosie Get Laid", p. 18.

<sup>152</sup> Kureishi, "Sammy and Rosie Get Laid", p.55.

<sup>153</sup> Urban Renewal: The rehabilitation and/or rebuilding of decaying urban areas through large-scale planning schemes, usually with government and/or municipal finance. It tends to reduce inexpensive and often well-liked housing and other buildings (shops and workshops) by upgrading them, a process resulting in the displacement of the urban poor and later called 'gentrification'. Criticized for this reason,... urban renewal has become suspect though defended as an inevitable result of modern urban transport and other facilities. From John Fleming, Hugh Honour and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture* (Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 1999): 596.

<sup>154</sup> *The Times*, 7 October 1986.

Although they live in “a part of England ... twinned with Beirut,”<sup>155</sup> they do so not because they are from the area, but rather because it is trendy and chic, or as Sammy aptly told Rafi, “It’s cosmopolitan, Pop. And cheap.”<sup>156</sup> Scarman was worried that the improvements in the inner cities would not go to the local residents, but rather to “yuppies.”<sup>157</sup>

Sammy and Rosie are merely surface people in the neighbourhood; apart from grocery shopping and hunting for Indian sweets, they are barely involved in community events. During the riots Sammy retreats into excess consumerism; he “tunes out” the riots by listening to classical music on headphones, while eating a fast-food hamburger, “reading” a pornographic magazine, and snorting cocaine.<sup>158</sup> Sammy initially espouses Rosie’s “radical” perspectives on the riots, “Rosie says these revolts are an affirmation of the human spirit. A kind of justice is being done.”<sup>159</sup> He seems, however, to be more conservative about the revolts after seeing his “fucking car” overturned and wrecked by the rioters.<sup>160</sup> The scene clarifies Sammy’s self-centred attitudes: he may speak about the right of people to rebel, but he reacts differently when he is “on the receiving end” of their freedom of expression. Rosie is equally selfish. During the riot, she dresses up in a provocative bustier and nonchalantly wanders out into the rioting streets to meet her lover. Moreover, when Danny’s caravan is forcefully relocated by the police and the MP so that the land can be redeveloped, she does nothing to fight for him or his friends.

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<sup>155</sup> Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 15.

<sup>156</sup> Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 13.

<sup>157</sup> *The Times*, 7 October 1986.

<sup>158</sup> John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 211.

<sup>159</sup> Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 14.

<sup>160</sup> Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 15.

Both Sammy and Rosie have little attachment to their neighbourhood. As Rafi noted at the party, “[y]ou young international people mystify me. For you the world and culture is a kind of department store. You go in and take something you like from each floor. But you’re still attached to nothing. Your lives are incoherent, shallow.”<sup>161</sup> Moreover, when Sammy delivers his soliloquy on London, the cultural landmarks he describes as enjoyable, are all outside of London’s inner-cities.<sup>162</sup> Sammy and Rosie live in their neighbourhood to take advantage of cheap rent in order to live in greater affluence. Lord Scarman was wary of such residents as they provided little improvement to their neighbourhood. In the mildly pejorative British vernacular, Sammy and Rosie are “gentrifying yuppie buppie dinks.”<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, as Sammy is clearly attracted to his father’s request to buy a new home, it seems quite likely that he would be tempted to buy one of the new houses that are being built under the bridge. Thus, Thatcher would have the successful capitalist which she would see as a natural leader in the neighbourhood, yet ironically, the homeowner would be Pakistani, the very group she sought to restrict with her proposed Poll Tax which led to her political demise in late 1990.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 36.

<sup>162</sup> They cross over Hammersmith bridge and proceed to visit Any Amount of Books on Charing Cross Road, Albert Hall, Hyde Park, Royal Court Theatre, theatres in Earl’s Court, and the ICA. All of these districts are in London’s trendier neighbourhoods on the north side of the river. Kureishi, “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid”, p. 32.

<sup>163</sup> Yuppie: Young upwardly-mobile professional. Buppie: Black yuppie. Dink: Double Income, No Kids.

<sup>164</sup> Thatcher implemented the unpopular “poll tax” in Scotland (1989) and Wales (1990), and there was great recalcitrance in England to do likewise. The “poll tax” would shift the local community charges where the land owner paid for the cost of local services (a standard community tax), to taxing the number of adults in a residence. Behind the government rhetoric of democratically distributing the cost of local projects and make local governments more accountable to its constituents, the move would shift costs from the wealthy land owners to the middle and working class to whom it would be a significant financial burden. Although originally estimated to be around £200 per person, by 1990 it was up to £350 which meant that an average family with two children of eighteen and twenty would pay nearly £1,500 per year. Moreover, it would adversely affect the immigrant communities in the inner cities who often lived with several adults in one dwelling. The racist undercurrent and the mere cost of Thatcher’s scheme proved to

While *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is unquestionably anti-Thatcher, it is also anti-left. The film astutely captures the mid-1980s with the “chattering classes” aimless drifting. The unemployed and working class have little recourse to the policies that are being enacted upon them, and the middle class is experiencing enough affluence to squelch any ambitions of denouncing Thatcher’s conservative economic practices. Although Sammy and Rosie regret the direction of Thatcher’s government, they are still affluent enough to remain inactive and ineffective in acting on their beliefs. Even the unemployed working-class Danny chooses to follow a foreign dictator to the suburbs and to have an affair with Rosie than to stay and fix relations between his neighbourhood and the police after the shooting of his adopted mother or to forestall the removal of his caravan.

The Conservative response to Kureishi’s depiction of contemporary England was often vehement, and is aptly summarized in right-wing Oxford historian Norman Stone’s caustic attack on Kureishi and other contemporary films. When *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* was released, Stone instantly attacked it and similar “farrago of films” as “[w]orthless and insulting,” and simply finds them “very depressing.”<sup>165</sup> Stone disparages “kitchen sink” dramas from the 1960s:

[b]ut alongside the quality in some of these films came a new element: sleazy, sick hedonism replaced 1930s-style social criticism, such as the vacuous Beatles films such as *A Hard Days Night* and *Help!*. Sensationalism and the urge to shock replaced responsible social comment.

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be damning to her credibility and was a major factor in her losing control of the Conservative party in November 1990. Evans, p. 63.

<sup>165</sup> Norman Stone, “Through a Lens Darkly,” *The Sunday Times*, 10 January 1988.



Similar to Thatcher's "days of yore" ideals, Stone's remarks, while containing some validity, appear hopelessly outdated. He does, however, acknowledge that these new films represent contemporary Britain:

Yes, there are nasty patches in modern Britain, and parts of our great cities are a disgrace. And yes, it is right for film makers to be concerned with these bad patches if they can be converted into meaningful film in the long and worthy tradition of social-realist films. But the vision of England they provide has nothing to offer an overwhelming majority of the potential audience. They represent at best a tiny part of modern England, and, more likely, a nasty part of their producer's brains.<sup>166</sup>

Contrary to Stone's complaint, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* shows the audience the difficulties faced by the immigrant population – a group which had few films about them. Stone further complains that by concentrating on such depressing subjects that the filmmakers were depleting government resources for good films such as the heritage films *Passage to India*, *A Room with a View*, and *Hope and Glory*.<sup>167</sup> Interestingly, all the films Stone cites as "good" are set in a nostalgic past where even Adolf Hitler can be treated with applause.<sup>168</sup> Just as Kureishi had written against the "Raj Revival" films with *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi and his band of contemporary film makers were struggling to make, in a sense, documentaries about modern Britain and the complex issues its populace faced. He had no interest in making films of which Stone approved as they are "the sort of meaningless soft-core saccharine confection that Tory ladies and gentlemen think is Art."<sup>169</sup> It is simple enough to develop a thoughtful ending for historical stories when the audience knows that the Axis will be defeated, and when India

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> In fact, the majority of the films Stone attacks were financed with American investment as Thatcher's government provided little funding for the film industry. Kureishi details Steven Frears and the producers attempts to finance the movie through a variety of American investors in "Some Time with Stephen."

<sup>168</sup> The ending of *Hope and Glory* has the young protagonist running through the streets thanking Hitler after his school was bombed during the blitz. Granted, the humour in the scene is clear and anyone who truly remembers childhood can empathize with the glee a destroyed elementary school would bring.

can be an escape from English problems as it is still under their control, but to find “Hollywood” answers to Britain’s complex contemporary social problems is difficult and outside the ability of these filmmakers, and ultimately, even Thatcher’s government. Similar to The Clash’s song “Guns of Brixton,” Kureishi wanted a film which forced its audience to think about modern problems, and how to react to them.

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<sup>169</sup> Hanif Kuerishi, “England, Bloody England,” *The Guardian*, 15 January 1988.

## CHAPTER 4

### “GROUND CONTROL TO UNCLE TOM”: *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA*

As a result of the mixed reception to *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and the critical panning of his directorial debut *London Kills Me* (1991), a discouraged Kureishi temporarily gave up writing screenplays. Prior to the public drubbing of *London Kills Me*, however, Kureishi was inspired to start writing fiction after Salman Rushdie inspired him with a calculated “backhanded” compliment. As he later recalled, Rushdie told him “‘We all take you seriously as a writer, Hanif ... but you only write screenplays.’ And I remember being really hurt by this, and provoked by it. And I thought, well, I’ll write a novel then, and then I’ll be a proper writer.”<sup>170</sup> Ironically, his first published novel spawned his next film, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993). Rather than a feature film, however, the story was adapted into a highly successful four part BBC mini-series.<sup>171</sup>

Both the mini-series and the novel were quite successful, and offer an in-depth look at South Asian families in Britain. Unlike his previous films, which addressed issues in the 1980s, *The Buddha of Suburbia* focused on young Karim Amir’s coming of age in the 1970s. The story’s narrator, Karim, is half-English like Kureishi, and he is not

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<sup>170</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *Interview with Hanif Kureishi*, *Critical Quarterly*, vol 41 , no. 3., p.42.

<sup>171</sup> As there is no screenplay for the television series, the novel will be used as the authoritative text. Although this usage is problematic, as not all events in the novel were used in the show, Kureishi and Roger Mitchell’s adaptation remains faithful to the original book, and few of the scenarios were drastically changed for the television program. Furthermore, the novel often provides insight into characters attitudes, as well as the setting of numerous scenes.

restricted to either the English or South Asian communities. For the purpose of this thesis, however, the Indian community will be the main focus of this chapter. In order to understand Kureishi's portrayal of the community, numerous questions must be asked. What was Kureishi's adolescence like, and how did it influence his burgeoning writing career? As the series was originally a novel, how did its adaptation into a screenplay affect it, and how was the show received by audiences and critics? How are topics such as racism, politics, and immigration addressed? How effective is Kureishi's use of pop culture and pop music in relaying the struggles of South Asians in Britain? Finally, how does Kureishi see himself and his characters as representative of the South Asian community? *The Buddha of Suburbia* was one of the first novels to show the settled South Asian community to the wider British mainstream, but was Kureishi's success due to his Indian characters' struggles in Britain, or was it due to Kureishi's portrayal of this group as essentially assimilated into Western traditions?

Analyzing the autobiographical parallels between Kureishi's life and the *Buddha of Suburbia* are necessary to understand how Kureishi's own life influenced his stance on politics, pop culture, and representation.<sup>172</sup> As a teenager, Kureishi had been inspired by his father's dutiful dedication to writing; Rafiushan would write every morning before going to work, producing six novels during his lifetime, none of which were ever published. Despite his failure to secure a publisher for his own work, Rafiushan encouraged his son's ambition to write. Hanif finished several novels during his adolescence, but, like his father's works, they were never published.<sup>173</sup> Rafiushan

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<sup>172</sup> Kenneth C. Kaleta cites numerous parallels between Karim and Kureishi in chapter three of his work.

<sup>173</sup> Kaleta, p.

encouraged Hanif to learn his craft from canonical writers,<sup>174</sup> but Kureishi's influences were not solely British, as there were many continental writers, mostly French and Russian, that inspired him.<sup>175</sup> From these writers, and with his father's help, Hanif endeavoured to create understandable, vibrant, and engaging characters.

Growing up as a half-English, half-Pakistani teenager in the 1960s and 1970s was quite lonely for Kureishi and he withdrew from his schoolmates. He focused on his writing and discovered the themes which would later resurface in his writing: politics and pop culture:

In this isolation, in my bedroom where I listened to Pink Floyd, the Beatles and the John Peel Show, I started to write down the speeches of politicians, the words which helped create the neo-Nazi attitudes I saw around me. This I called "keeping the accounts."<sup>176</sup>

Kureishi's knowledge of politics and pop, along with his understanding of characterization, were invaluable when he entered the London theatre scene in the late 1970s as a playwright after finishing secondary school. His plays ranged from a couple obsessed with Elvis ("The King and Me"), to schoolmates whose lives are changed after a racist attack ("Outskirts"), to the lives of South Asian families in Britain ("Borderline"). His South Asian stories garnered the most attention and helped Kureishi to become a Writer-in-Residence in London's Royal Court Theatre in 1981. Although immigrants had been prominent in England since the 1960s, there were still few stories about them. Theatres and audiences "required stories about the new British communities, by cultural translators as it were, to interpret one side to the other," and Kureishi had both the

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<sup>174</sup> Kureishi has cited Saki, Maugham, O' Hendry, Fitzgerald, Hemmingway (Plays ix)

<sup>175</sup> Hanif Kureishi, "Introduction," *Hanif Kureishi Plays One*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2002): ix  
I have been unable to determine if Kureishi was influenced by Indian or Pakistani writers. As he is not fluent in any South Asian languages, however, it seems unlikely.

<sup>176</sup> Kuerishi, "The Rainbow Sign". p. 75.

background and the writing skills to do so.<sup>177</sup> He realized, however, that “a good writer draws deeply on himself or herself, but that one can’t go writing and rewriting one’s autobiography for ever.”<sup>178</sup> Thus, he developed stories about the Pakistani and Indian community, which, while they drew upon his own experiences, were not entirely restricted to his own life experiences.<sup>179</sup>

After finding success on the stage and later on the screen with his writing, Kureishi frequently contributed to publications such as *The New Statesman* and *Granta*. He often re-uses characters and ideas from previous works.<sup>180</sup> For example, he simply expanded the characters from his original short-story “Buddha of Suburbia” into his first novel.<sup>181</sup> In the late 1980s, immigration novels were very popular in Britain, and Kureishi followed this trend.<sup>182</sup> As one character quips in the novel, “[t]he immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century.”<sup>183</sup> With the publishing of *The Buddha of Suburbia* in 1990, Kureishi came full circle with his literary career, and once again focused on writing novels.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* was a stylistic departure for Kureishi as it was not a contemporary tale. The character was still of the same generation of Omar, Sammy, and Hanif, but this work presented more “background” for the generation of young Asians who were born in the 1950s and 60s, came of age in the 1970s, and struggled for their share of England in the 1980s. Although Omar and Sammy’s backgrounds are obliquely

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<sup>177</sup> Kureishi, “Introduction,” p. xvi.

<sup>178</sup> Kureishi, “Introduction,” p. xviii-xix.

<sup>179</sup> Kureishi notes that the plays introduced him to researching in order to present his topics properly. “Introduction” p. xviii.

<sup>180</sup> For example, the friends in his “break-out” play “Outskirts” are similar to Omar and Johnny from *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

<sup>181</sup> Kaleta, p. 62.

<sup>182</sup> Moore-Gilbert, p. 108.

<sup>183</sup> Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, p. 141.

mentioned, movies are too small of a medium to develop their personal histories. Novels, however, provided Kureishi with a much broader canvas: “In my novel I could really fill the characters out much more. I had unlimited time and space.”<sup>184</sup> His first novel enabled a broader description of the Pakistani and Indian communities than he could achieve in his screenplays.

Both the novel and the screenplay for *The Buddha of Suburbia* build upon the “new Englishman” ideal of Omar and Sammy with the story’s young protagonist, Karim. They are all comfortable in both traditional English and immigrant communities, and it is in this vein of identifying oneself within the dominant structure, from which they are normally restricted, that Kureishi’s mini-series should be viewed. For example, the novel opens with the narrator Karim clearly – and ironically – situating himself:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don’t care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it) ... .<sup>185</sup>

Just as Omar and Sammy never fully identified themselves with their South Asian heritage, Karim clearly places himself as English, regardless of how others see him.<sup>186</sup> He is half-Indian and is often torn between the two cultures. Yet it is usually other characters who are concerned about where he “belongs.” Similar to his bisexual tendencies, Karim is willing to sample what each culture has to offer when it suits him or which ever is more readily available. He is often criticized by his Indian friends for being separate from them, while many English people see him as not an Englishman, but

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<sup>184</sup> Kaleta, p. 114.

<sup>185</sup> Kureishi, p. 3.

<sup>186</sup> While Omar and Sammy are of Pakistani descent, Karim is an Indian Muslim. Thus, similar to Omar’s father Hussein, as well as Kureishi’s own father Rafiushan, Karim’s father Haroon is also from a prominent

rather solely as an Indian. To further complicate his identity, his own mother views him as English and believes that he would react the same as any Englishman would if he visited India: absolutely lost. Karim's father also encourages his son to mingle with the English, especially with English women.

Karim lives with his Indian father Haroon, his English mother Margaret, and his brother Allie in a London suburb. Karim is in school when the novel begins, but he soon fails out of college. He is too interested in the hedonistic lifestyle of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" as personified by Charlie Kay, an ambitious and marginally talented musician, with whom Karim is infatuated. In his efforts to "find himself," Karim starts to act, eventually landing the lead role of Mowgli in a stage production of *The Jungle Book* even though he despises the role as it perpetuates Indian stereotypes. By the end of the story, he is cast in a contemporary television soap opera as "the rebellious son of an Indian shopkeeper."<sup>187</sup>

Similar to Kureishi's own father and Hussein in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Karim's father Haroon is an affluent Indian Muslim from Bombay who came to Britain to study law in the 1950s – never to return.<sup>188</sup> Haroon neglected his studies, married the working class Margaret, and became a British civil servant. Haroon and Margaret are unhappily married and the story starts with his burgeoning affair with Eva Kay. Although Haroon is essentially a secular Muslim, he soon finds acceptance and notoriety in the suburbs by masquerading as a catch-all South Asian spiritualist to Eva's menagerie of suburban socialites. As Haroon's popularity increases, so does his love for Eva. Once Margaret

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Muslim family from Bombay. Further adding to the similarities is that both Hussein and Haroon are played by the same actor Roshan Seth.

<sup>187</sup> Kureishi, *Buddha of Suburbia*, p. 259.

<sup>188</sup> See chapter 2, p. 19-20.



realizes how serious Haroon's affair is, she and Allie leave him to stay with her equally unhappily married relatives, Jean and Ted. Haroon and Karim move in with Eva and her son Charlie. Although Haroon is sometimes regretful about his infidelity and subsequent marital breakdown, the story ends with the announcement of Haroon and Eva's marriage.

While these groups represent a degree of conformity within the English social structure, they are countered by Haroon's Indian friend Anwar, his wife Jeeta, and their daughter Jamila. Although Anwar is from India's high society, and his wife is a princess, they struggle in England and run an unglamorous corner grocery store. Anwar insists on maintaining his cultural Muslim traditions and coerces his daughter into an arranged marriage by resorting to Mahatma Ghandi's starvation tactics.<sup>189</sup> Jamila is a headstrong militant feminist who only concedes to an arranged marriage when she fears that her father will die from his refusal to eat. Her husband, Changez, is from India. He is an ugly, deformed simpleton who refuses to work. Despite these deficiencies, he proves himself to be an unyielding romantic and is one of the story's strongest characters. At the end of the film, Changez and Jamila move to a commune where she has a child with another man and finally comes out as a lesbian.

Kureishi's first novel was quite successful and won the prestigious Whitbread Award for best first novel. Yet the story was not met with unrestrained praise as its satire is quite dry, many scenarios are very sexual, and the language is often shocking. Yet, as even the undaring *Sunday Times* notes:

[Karim's] swearing doesn't – or shouldn't – offend because it is apropos. The result is literature, although the book never becomes self-consciously literary in

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<sup>189</sup> Hence, he hypocritically uses another Indian culture's tradition to force his daughter to conform to his culture's tradition even though she wants to follow the English tradition and marry whomever she wants.

the currently fashionable manner. Karim, via Kureishi, is constantly catching life on the hop.<sup>190</sup>

The BBC convinced Kureishi to adapt the popular novel into a mini-series with director Roger Mitchell.<sup>191</sup> While he worked closely with Mitchell, the adaptation was difficult, and Kureishi was “bad tempered, and more impatient than usual.”<sup>192</sup> He was still recovering from the critical panning of *London Kills Me*, as well as suffering from severe back pain. But more importantly, Rafiushan had died a few months beforehand. Roger Mitchell commented that Kureishi seemed to be writing the adaptation with his deceased father in mind.<sup>193</sup> To further complicate his life, the hedonistic lifestyle that Kureishi frequently portrays in his stories, of which he was an avid follower, was beginning to “catch up” with him, and he was becoming addicted to cocaine.<sup>194</sup>

Despite all of these impediments, the show was successfully completed and very popular. *The Times* reported that “[n]ever has a novel waltzed so effortlessly on to the screen”, and that the “huge appeal of the new four-part adaptation ... has a lot to do with this sense of peering into someone’s suburban living-room and seeing a half-dressed Indian civil servant standing on his head. Everything is gratifyingly familiar yet, at the same time, astonishing and particular.”<sup>195</sup> The show was typically in BBC2’s top five spots for ratings, and reached over five million people every week.<sup>196</sup> Yet its success was

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<sup>190</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 15 April 1990.

<sup>191</sup> Mitchell has also directed Kureishi’s latest film *The Mother* as well the Hollywood hits *Notting Hill* and *Changing Lanes*.

<sup>192</sup> Hanif Kureishi, “Boy in the Bedroom”, *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002): 209.

<sup>193</sup> Kaleta, p.106.

<sup>194</sup> Kumar, Amitava and Hanif Kureishi. *A Bang and a Whimper, a Conversation with Hanif Kureishi*. (<http://80-muse.jhu.edu/hermes.lib.sfu.ca/journals/transition/v010/10.4kumar.htm>. Accessed on August 20, 2002.)

<sup>195</sup> *The Times*, 4 November 1993.

<sup>196</sup> For example, on 21 November 1993, which would have aired the third episode of four, the series had climbed to number two. *The Times* 5 December 1993.

controversial. Kureishi was quite happy that it was going to be one of the naughtiest things ever shown on the BBC<sup>197</sup> with its high level of swearing, drinking, drugs, nudity, and numerous straight and gay sex scenes.<sup>198</sup> Its risqué depiction of the 1970s caused a bit of an uproar. Yet one critic defended Kureishi's subject matter:

Attitudes to many subjects – Asians, contemporary music, mysticism – have been represented and variously parodied ridiculed or attacked, and it would be odd, given the time and attention that so many people devote to it, if sex were to be left out.<sup>199</sup>

Its reflection of the seventies, however, was not simple nostalgia as it dealt with South Asian immigrants who were struggling to establish themselves in the 1970s and how they dealt with British culture with its sub-currents of anti-immigration, racism, and the pressure to conform.

Thus far, many of Kureishi's critics have failed to investigate the historical periods that Kureishi addresses in his work. Some of the strongest themes in *The Buddha of Suburbia* are its depiction of immigration and Britain's culture in the 1970s. Kureishi's use of these subjects, however, are not as "heavy handed" or obvious as they were in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. Rather, *The Buddha of Suburbia* has a more subtle way of conveying the shifts in the seventies. One of Kureishi's great strengths as an author is that he balances humour and politics so well that his stories never become too heavy or lapse into, as he so aptly described, "dourness and didacticism."<sup>200</sup> Yet often, his jokes can overshadow the seriousness of what he is addressing. For example, when

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<sup>197</sup> Kaleta, p. 46.

<sup>198</sup> It was these risqué elements which prevented the show from receiving wide distribution in North America, although Showcase in Canada has aired it.

<sup>199</sup> Kaleta, p. 118.

<sup>200</sup> Chapter 2, p.45.

Karim tries to visit his new girlfriend Helen, her father “Hairy Back,”<sup>201</sup> is appalled to find that a “wog” is trying to date his daughter. While the father insults Karim with numerous racial slurs, he punctuates his stance towards Karim and to all immigrants in general by yelling, “However many niggers there are, we don’t like it. We’re with Enoch. If you put one of your black ‘ands near my daughter I’ll smash it with a ‘ammer!”<sup>202</sup> After this insult and threat of violence, Hairy Back slams the door and Karim attempts to retaliate by urinating through the window of the family’s Range Rover. His plans are quickly foiled when a Great Dane becomes enamoured with the trespassing Karim, and Karim flees Helen’s house. While Bart Moore-Gilbert dismisses this episode as being within the tradition of English farce, he has oversimplified the scene.<sup>203</sup> The event conveys Kureishi’s love for randy and shocking humour, but there is also his keen eye for politics and how the ideas which are happening in society as a whole are played out on a smaller and more personal scale. Similar to Genghis’ comment in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, “they came here to work for us,” Kureishi has once again subtly worked historical content into his story via quick, insulting racist attack.<sup>204</sup> Although half-English, as someone who looks like an Indian in Britain in the 1970s, Karim faced not only the racial slurs of the average person, but also from politicians such as the notorious MP Enoch Powell.

“As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood.’”<sup>205</sup> So concluded Enoch Powell on 20 April

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<sup>201</sup> The name is a moniker created by Karim in the novel, and as there is no actual name given to the character, his nickname will have to suffice.

<sup>202</sup> Kureishi, p. 40.

<sup>203</sup> Moore-Gilbert, p.118.

<sup>204</sup> Chapter 2, p. 27.

<sup>205</sup> Powell, p. 93.

1968<sup>206</sup> in his infamous speech where he “prophesied” about Britain’s future with immigrants. Powell catalyzed the debate around immigrants as he became an instant spokesman for the unspoken attitudes of many people towards immigrants, or as he dubbed them in his speech “wide-grinning piccaninnies.”<sup>207</sup> Powell correctly warned that the growth of immigrant communities would develop into inner-city ghettos racked by race riots such as those in the United States and suggested a preventative repatriation scheme. While his speech made him an instantaneous tribune for the people, he was forced from his position in the Conservative government’s Shadow Cabinet.<sup>208</sup> Despite Powell’s contentious claims and schemes, he did little to capitalize on his popularity.<sup>209</sup> His effect on British politics and society, however, were significant.<sup>210</sup> Kureishi notes:

Powell allowed himself to become a figurehead for the racists. He helped create racism in Britain and was directly responsible not only for the atmosphere of fear and hatred, but through his influence, for individual acts of violence against Pakistanis.<sup>211</sup>

Paul Rich echoes Kureishi’s thoughts in the conclusion of *Race and Empire in British Politics*: “The long-term legacy of Powellism was the heightening of racial consciousness in British society.”<sup>212</sup> Furthermore, as discussed in chapter 1, Powell’s eloquent enunciation of Britain’s racial problems facilitated the growth of the fascist National Front. The effect of Powell should not merely be seen in the “big picture” of politics, but also in the small scale of Hairy Back’s threats to “smash wogs with a ‘ammer.”

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<sup>206</sup> An auspicious day for the rebirth in the popular racism in Britain as it would have marked Adolf Hitler’s sixty-ninth birthday.

<sup>207</sup> Powell, p. 91.

<sup>208</sup> For more on Powell check Patrick Cosgrave, *The Lives of Enoch Powell*. (London: Bodley Head, 1989).

<sup>209</sup> Clarke, p. 324.

<sup>210</sup> As noted in chapter one, Powell was a catalyst for the National Front, which took his fears of immigrants and manifested them in the violence of the skinheads.

<sup>211</sup> Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign” p.28.

<sup>212</sup> Paul Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 212.

It seems that Powell and his supporters concerns stem from the rapid introduction of immigrants in the post-World War II period.<sup>213</sup> As Kureishi once wrote, “In 1945, England ruled over six hundred million people. And there were few black faces on its streets.”<sup>214</sup> After the war, immigration increased rapidly, and although the majority of immigrants were white, the South Asians were unable to remain as inconspicuous as Irish immigrants.<sup>215</sup> From the 1950s to the 1970s an average of 30, 000 South Asian immigrants were arriving per year, so that by the 1970s there were 1.2 million Asian and black immigrants.<sup>216</sup> In 1968, Enoch Powell was concerned that:

[a]s time goes on, the proportion of this total who are immigrant descendants, those born in England, who arrived here by exactly the same route as the rest of us, will rapidly increase. Already by 1985 the native-born would constitute the majority. It is this fact above all which creates the extreme urgency of action now...<sup>217</sup>

While average Britons such as Hairy Back supported Powell’s rationale at the time, this projection was never actualized. By 1991, the year after *The Buddha of Suburbia* was published, the British census recorded people’s ethnicity for the first time. There were 840, 000 Indian and 477, 000 Pakistanis in Britain. What is intriguing about these figures is that nearly half of these citizens (42% and 51% of the Indians and Pakistanis, respectively) were born in the United Kingdom. While nearly half of the ethnic population was born in Britain, thus significantly adding to their ethnic group’s population, this is hardly the “native-born majority” which Powell feared. In fact, even

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<sup>213</sup> As noted in chapter 2, pp. 26-9, immigrants from the Indian sub-continent came to Britain to help rebuild the country after the war and to help offset the number of British emigrants.

<sup>214</sup> Hanif Kureishi, “Bradford” *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002): 58.

<sup>215</sup> Holmes, Colin, *A Tolerant Country? :Immigrants, Refugees and Minorities in Britain*, p. 3

<sup>216</sup> Although these numbers are fairly stable, immigration spiked in 1972 to over 60 000 that year due to the exodus of Ugandan Asians. Asifa Hussain, *British Immigration Policy Under the Conservative Government*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001): 133.

<sup>217</sup> Powell, p. 85.

by 1991, all ethnic minorities only accounted for 5.5% of the population in the UK, with Indians and Pakistanis comprising 1.5% and 0.9% of Britain's total population.<sup>218</sup> Similar to Kureishi, Karim, Allie, and Jamila were all born in Britain. Yet despite their official status as British citizens, they are commonly treated as immigrants and referred to as "second-generation" immigrants – a term which Kureishi dislikes as it maintains their status quo as "outsiders."<sup>219</sup> Hence, it seems that the hostile attention that this minority received was due not to their numbers, but rather to the visibility which their skin colour afforded.

The majority of the original non-white immigrants were young, working age men who did not intend to stay in the UK. Rather, they planned to work in the UK until they had earned enough money to return home and buy land. Few, however, were able to leave Britain, and the sojourners became settlers which led to the "Myth of the Return" which remained popular from the 1960s up to the 1980s.<sup>220</sup> As Haroon laments, "[w]e old Indians come to like this England less and less and we return to an imagined India."<sup>221</sup>

While Kureishi's novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* was one of the first truly popular presentations of South Asians who had grown up in Britain, his characters failed to conform to the majority of Indian or Pakistani immigrants. While Karim, Allie, Jamila, and Kureishi himself were all born in Britain, their parents were not typical immigrants. Like Kureishi's father, Haroon and Anwar came to Britain to study prior to the "beat the ban" rush of immigrants who arrived just before the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants

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<sup>218</sup> Annie Lau, *South Asian Children and Adolescents in Britain : Ethno-Cultural Issues*. (Philadelphia : Whurr Publishers, 2000): 15.

<sup>219</sup> Kureishi, "The Rainbow Sign", p.

<sup>220</sup> *British Immigration Policy Under the Conservative Government*, p. 132-3.

Act, rather than to work.<sup>222</sup> As Karim quips, “Like Gandhi and Jinnah before him, Dad would return to India a qualified and polished English gentleman lawyer and an accomplished ballroom dancer.”<sup>223</sup> Like many of the students who arrived prior to the massive immigrant influx, Haroon and Anwar came from aristocratic backgrounds. Karim’s mother was always proud that Haroon’s family is “higher than the Churchills,” as she wanted to ensure that her husband was not confused with “the swarms of Indian peasants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and of whom it was said they were not familiar with cutlery and certainly not with toilets, since they squatted on the seats and shat from on high.”<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, while never mentioned in the novel, in the mini-series Karim refers to his father as a prince in India,<sup>225</sup> and Jeeta was also originally a Princess.<sup>226</sup> Thus, these aristocratic immigrants are quite different from the majority of “sojourners.”

Kureishi also fails to depict the standard experience of the majority of South Asians in coming to the United Kingdom. As Kenneth Kaleta frequently notes, many of Kureishi’s characters have a biographical source, and it is easy to see versions of Kureishi’s father or his father’s family in them. It would be erroneous, however, to simply dismiss Kureishi’s depiction of immigrants as unrepresentative as they are too personal and do not conform to the majority’s experiences. In his 1986 essay “Bradford,” Kureishi noted that when people thought of Pakistani immigrants, they often thought of

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<sup>221</sup> Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, p. 74.

<sup>222</sup> The Act was designed to restrict the numbers of immigrants who arrived, and prior to its implementation there was a swell in the number of immigrants coming to Britain. Ultimately, however, their numbers remained consistent to the pre-legislated period.

<sup>223</sup> Kureishi, p. 24.

<sup>224</sup> Kureishi, p. 24.

<sup>225</sup> He states his father’s status when being interrogated by Aunty Jean in the first episode of the series.

<sup>226</sup> Kureishi, p. 26.



those from the lower class in Pakistan.<sup>227</sup> The uneducated majority created an image of all immigrants as being “backwards and simple.” Even Omar’s Aunt Bilquis, from *My Beautiful Laundrette*, can be seen as representing a common Pakistani immigrant with her unassimilated traditional dress, food, manners, and her use of magic against Rachel. Thus, Kureishi’s use of well-educated immigrants should be seen as a counter point to the common perception that all South Asians are simple “peasants.” Such notions enable misunderstanding and derision. Before Kureishi’s breakthrough with *My Beautiful Laundrette*, antipathetic Pakistani jokes were very popular in 1970s television shows such as *The Comedians*.<sup>228</sup> Thus Kureishi is making a political statement. His characters are not representative and frequently try to conform to English traditions. Despite his attempts to restrict his role as a spokesperson for the community, his novel and film have strong tones of conformity which cannot be ignored. Hence, Kureishi’s use of non-representative South Asian characters should not be seen merely as a biographical “coincidence,” but rather as a calculated strategic act to counter the decades of misrepresentation of Pakistanis and Indians in British society. In addition to Enoch Powell, Kureishi also uses the familiar topics of the NF, and Margaret Thatcher in the story. Yet these political themes are not as prominently placed in the story as culture is.

Kureishi, however, deals with South Asian culture at “an arms length” as it is rarely displayed. For example, Jamila and Changez’s wedding is presented as a rather cold, secular affair.<sup>229</sup> Yet, while immigrant culture is marginally portrayed, English pop culture is quite prominent. While Kureishi’s use of pop culture is quite nostalgic and

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<sup>227</sup> Kureishi, “Bradford” p.

<sup>228</sup> Colin Holmes, *A Tolerant Country?: Immigrants, Refugees and Minorities in Britain* p. 51.

<sup>229</sup> Kureishi’s depiction of South Asian culture will be addressed in greater detail on p 90.

playful,<sup>230</sup> his approach of revisiting the seventies by emphasising immigrants and pop culture can be seen as inappropriate as the former subject is often treated with either derision or a consciously positive political stance while the latter is often dismissed as “low culture.” Indeed, as noted in chapter 2, Oxford historian Norman Stone saw Kureishi’s work as a sign of “disgust and decay.”<sup>231</sup> Regardless of its status as low or disgusting, to Kureishi, pop culture:

was the first sort of common culture I was ever aware of. You would go to school and you would talk about what the Beatles were doing, or the Rolling Stones had said, and what The Who were doing, and so on. It was the first time I’d ever been aware that culture was something that you could exchange between people.<sup>232</sup>

Thus, Kureishi’s use of English pop music in a story about immigrants must be analyzed. How does he interpret pop music? What are the limitations of pop? Are Kureishi’s views on the merits of popular culture as democratic as he claims? What opportunities arose from pop music’s fragmentation in the 1970s, and what promise did David Bowie and punk music convey to their fans? Finally, how does the emphasis on pop music affect the presentation of South Asian culture? Kureishi has responded to criticisms about his choice in subjects by declaring, “I think its part of a writer’s armour to shock. Artists should be terrorists not masseurs.”<sup>233</sup> But does Kureishi’s use of pop culture in a story about Anglo-Indians really help him as an “artistic terrorist,” or does it render him an “artistic masseuse?”

Pop music is important in both the film and the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* as the music, and the trends it inspires, are often the only way to note the passage of time in

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<sup>230</sup> For example, the cover art for the novel was created by Peter Blake, and while his name may not be familiar to many, he is responsible for creating (arguably) the most famous and recognizable pop album cover: The Beatles “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band.”

<sup>231</sup> See chapter 3, p. 64-6.

the story. As Kureishi later commented, “The whole of that era was soaked in music, and although I’ve tried to write a novel which is quite serious in some ways, I also wanted it to be fixed in its time.”<sup>234</sup> Charlie’s various musical mutations serve to establish the timeline. The story starts him as a post-mod bohemian with posters of the Velvet Underground on his wall and Pink Floyd on his turntable. He moves to a silver jump suited-impersonation of Ziggy Stardust in the outlandishness of the glam period. Then, he adopts the manufactured rage of a punk rocker, and, finally, he sinks in the post-punk era. Each of these musical mutations encapsulated the seventies in a clever chronological manner from 1970 to 1972, 1972 to 1975, 1975 to 1978, and 1979 to 1980.<sup>235</sup>

While pop music is unquestionably an enjoyable way to ground the story, why use pop culture instead of government policies to establish the period? Although Kureishi was very aware of politics, and it would seem quite apropos to use political events and issues to set the stage, Kureishi realised that official politics does not necessarily create entertaining stories. As Karim divines during his performance in Pyke’s play, “[t]he other actors had the loaded lines, the many-syllabled political analysis, the flame-throwing attacks on pusillanimous Labour governments, but it was me the audience warmed to. They laughed at my jokes.”<sup>236</sup> In *Subcultures to Clubcultures: An Introduction to Popular Cultural Studies*, Steve Redhead illustrates the difficulty of using a governmental approach to study popular culture. In 1982, the British government began to try to control youth culture by introducing a Bill aimed at restricting the

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<sup>232</sup> Hanif Kureishi, “Interview: Hanif Kureishi on London” *Critical Quarterly*. Iss. 43 vol 3. Autumn 1999 p. 46.

<sup>233</sup> *The Times*, April 3, 1990.

<sup>234</sup> *The Times*, April 3, 1990.

<sup>235</sup> NB these are rough estimates of the time period for the peak of the popularity of these respective forms of music.

<sup>236</sup> Kureishi, p. 220.

contemporary “acid house” form of music and parties. By the time the Bill became law in 1990, “raves” would have been the more apt term, but even their popularity was waning. Although the law still served to limit and to police such gatherings, the actual cultural event for which they were designed was passé.<sup>237</sup> Thus, while focusing on governmental policy is edifying, it is rarely entertaining and not necessarily in step with the times, and Kureishi seems to have felt that such a focus would simplify the period. Political and sociological studies can reduce people’s lives and the experiences of a community to cold statistics. Kureishi would certainly agree with The Police’s lyrics “I don’t ever want to play the part, of a statistic on a government chart.”<sup>238</sup>

In the introduction to his anthology *The Faber Book of Pop*, Kureishi argues that pop culture is a valuable source for understanding the latter half of the twentieth century:

... the alternative history of our time [can be] told from the standpoint of popular music, which is as good a position as any to look from, since pop, intersecting with issues of class, race and particularly gender, has been at the centre of post-war culture.<sup>239</sup>

Kureishi has quite simply stated that “I find the distinction between rock music and high art false and snobbish.”<sup>240</sup> While Kureishi is correct that pop music can be used as a source for history, such approaches are rarely used. In part there is the reluctance to do so as there is often intellectual apprehension in using popular over classical sources. As Raymond Williams notes:

Popular culture was not identified by the people but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as opposed to democratic journalism, or popular

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<sup>237</sup> Redhead, Steve. *Subcultures to Clubcultures; An Introduction to Popular Cultural Studies* (Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, 1997):xi.

<sup>238</sup> The Police, “Spirits in the Material World.”

<sup>239</sup> Kureishi, Hanif and John Savage. *The Faber Book of Pop*. ( London: Faber and Faber, 1995): Xix.

<sup>240</sup> *The Times*, April 3, 1990.

entertainment); as well as the more modern sense of being liked by many people.<sup>241</sup>

While Williams made this distinction in 1976, his insight is still quite true to this day.

Yet there are some problems with relying on pop music, as noted by Kureishi, it is “made for the moment, to embody exhilaration; and it sprang from a momentary but powerful impulse: teenage sexual longing.”<sup>242</sup> Arguably, the biggest consumers of pop culture are teenagers, and the market is geared towards them. Pop music is always youthful. While this association always ensures a sense of vibrancy and constant change, it often relies on simple black and white binaries. Politics can be present in the music, but they usually only represent one side of the issue, often the Left. Pop requires no understanding of the ramifications of the hedonistic subjects it presents, and the audience is often oblivious to the content of the songs. For example, The Police’s “Every Breath you Take,” considered by many as a love song, is actually about a stalker.<sup>243</sup> Pop is Peter Pan: it cannot grow up. Although the scene was never put into the mini-series, in the novel Karim starts to take an interest in jazz as he is bored with pop music by the end of the novel.<sup>244</sup> In a sense, Karim’s change is interesting as the difference between pop and jazz often conforms to the low/high cultural debate, with rock and roll being “low culture” and jazz being “high culture.” Thus, pop is as restrictive as it is culturally juvenile.

Kureishi’s own stance between the distinctions and merit of “high” and “low,” “good” and “bad” must also be fully considered. Whereas he is a passionate advocate of

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<sup>241</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 199.

<sup>242</sup> Kureishi, *Faber Book of Pop*. p.xix.

pop music and of those who write about it,<sup>245</sup> his enthusiasm for pop writing is limited to those who write about pop music. While Changez may love the classics of pop literature,<sup>246</sup> Kureishi himself frequently refers to canonical authors and apparently scorns popular literature:

Literature is concerned with the self-conscious exploration of the lives of men, women and children in society. Even when it is comic, it sees life as something worth talking about. This is why airport fiction, or “blockbusters”, books which are all plot, can never be considered literature, and why, in the end, they are of little value. It is not only that the language in which they are written lacks bounce and poignancy, but that they don’t return the reader to the multifariousness and complication of existence.<sup>247</sup>

While his argument is compelling, it is difficult to accept it fully as he has noted in the past that he is never very good at writing plots<sup>248</sup> and is more interested in characters. Thus, his definition of “good” Literature, and “bad” popular, blockbuster literature not only smacks of self-interest, but quite simply seems “false and snobbish.” He is simply reiterating the high/low cultural debate within literature. To hold one portion of an art form in high esteem, while denigrating another aspect of it, is somewhat surprising from a writer who so unquestioningly admires pop music.

Regardless of the limitations of pop culture and Kureishi’s ideas about it, pop music is an important source for understanding not only the post-war period, but more specifically, the post-1960s. Kureishi’s co-editor noted that “[f]rom 1972 on, we enter an

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<sup>243</sup> “Every breath you take,\ Every move you make,\ Every bond you break\ every step you take \ I’ll be watching you \ ... O can’t you see \ You belong to me” The Police. “Every Breath You Take”, *Synchronicity*.

<sup>244</sup> Kureishi, *Buddha of Suburbia*, p. 218.

<sup>245</sup> NB see his massive 862 page *Faber Book of Pop*.

<sup>246</sup> When Changez and Karim first meet, Changez asks if he likes “the classics.” “P.G. Wodehouse and Conan Doyle for me! Can you take me to Sherlock Holmes’s house in Baker street? I also like the Saint and Mickey Spillane. And Westerns!” from, Kureishi, *Buddha of Suburbia*, p.83. Of course, there is also Changez’s love of Tom Robbin’s “saucy” novels.

<sup>247</sup> Kureishi, “Something Given: Reflections on Writing.” *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2002): 8.

age where today's pop climate –fragmented, self-conscious, reference laden – becomes visible.”<sup>249</sup> This is not to suggest that pop was homogenous before 1972, but rather that it then enabled a greater sense of opportunity with its greater variety of music. With the broader choice in music, there was also a sense of many opportunities for teenagers. Pop is presented as an avenue for the working and middle classes to express themselves. The staggering success of working and middle-class artists such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and David Bowie showed that there was a way to transcend Britain's rigid class structure. Kureishi was from the lower-middle class and attended the same school as David Bowie (who attended a decade before Kureishi – both were taught music by Peter Frampton's father<sup>250</sup>) and Billy Idol. Kureishi also partied with members of Siouxsie and the Banshees and Generation X.<sup>251</sup> All of these artists enjoyed varying levels of success, yet all of them came from the borderline between working and middle class. Pop music provided them with a different lifestyle than would have been possible a generation before. As Kureishi summarizes in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, “[b]oys were often found on their knees before this icon [a poster of Bowie], praying to be made into pop stars and for release from a lifetime as a motor-mechanic, or a clerk in an insurance firm, or a junior architect.”<sup>252</sup>

David Bowie is key to understanding Kureishi's argument about the promise that pop music provided in the 1970s. Apart from being one of rock and roll's greatest – and longest lasting – musicians, Bowie encapsulated so much of the change of the 1970s. He was the first performer to discuss his sexuality, and to bring gender politics into the

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<sup>248</sup> Kureishi “Some time with Stephen: A Diary.” From *Dreaming and Scheming* p. 191.

<sup>249</sup> Savage, *Faber Book of Pop* p.xxix.

<sup>250</sup> Kureishi, “Interview with David Bowie”, *Interview Magazine*. Vol. 23, May 1993 p. 92-5.

<sup>251</sup> Kureishi, “Boy in the Bedroom”, p.211.

mainstream either through performing in dresses, by flaunting his bisexuality, or by remaining curiously androgynous.<sup>253</sup> In Michael Bracewell's survey of English pop culture, which spans from Oscar Wilde to Goldie, the author concludes that "David Bowie ...was the single most important figure in English pop".<sup>254</sup>

Above all – above his influence on fashion and music – David Bowie was a unifier of pop youth: he brought together a massive faction of lost romantics and disbelievers in the rock school orthodoxy; he built a bridge between the sexes that inspired mutual identification and adoration from boys and girls, in a way that neither the Beatles nor the Rolling Stones had ever achieved."<sup>255</sup>

Quite simply, Bowie represented the changing styles of the seventies, not only in the world of pop music, but also within the wider area of English culture.

The potential to change, and the adaptability of appearance which is central to pop music is also key to *The Buddha of Suburbia*. If the numerous images portrayed by Bowie are taken as a template for English pop culture for the time, and if these images are a product of the majority culture (and not merely its pop offshoot) then the 1970s was a period of mutability. Suburban boys could be punk rockers from working-class estates, renegade Muslim immigrants could be oriental spiritualists, and half-Indian, half-English children could be English. Whether or not they were completely accepted by the majority was irrelevant to them as they believed in their image. Karim, like Bowie, is an outsider. He is half-English, half-Indian and bisexual. Bowie's characters (Major Tom, Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, and The Thin White Duke) were ambiguous outsiders, or even aliens, who were accepted by the majority.

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<sup>252</sup> Kueishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*. p.68.

<sup>253</sup> By the 1980s Bowie recanted his bisexuality

<sup>254</sup> Bracewell, Michael. *England is Mine; Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie*. (Harper Collins , London, 1997): 191.

<sup>255</sup> Bracewell, p.192.



The artifice of pop culture, however, finds its zenith, or nadir, in punk music. While punk music served as a great music leveller (as long as you could hold an instrument, and play three chords, you could be a star), it was an untenable style. As Jon Savage notes, they were “[p]rogrammed for failure, punk groups fell apart when they became successful.”<sup>256</sup> By merely reaching the mainstream, the punks committed “Rock and Roll suicide”: “When the kids had killed the man, I had to break up the band.”<sup>257</sup> Karim sees Charlie’s success as a punk rocker as magnificent on the one hand with “his venom, his manufactured rage, his anger, [and] his defiance”<sup>258</sup> that punk music inspired, and yet on the other hand Karim realizes that for a middle-class kid like Charlie it was too artificial. Punk music was a working-class form, whereas Bowie’s pop music was middle class. While Charlie argues that suburban middle class teenagers understand “where it’s at” and can appropriate any form of music, Karim counters that “[w]e’re not like them. We don’t hate the way they do. We’ve got no reason to. We’re not from the estates. We haven’t been through what they have.”<sup>259</sup> Charlie, however, has no qualms in taking the vestiges of punk in his attempt to shock. Indeed, the nearly unflappable Eva is shocked when Charlie wears the swastika to one of his concerts.<sup>260</sup>

Nor was this desire to shock simply restricted to certain shady music clubs. The mini-series shows Charlie on a television interview show where he swears and insults the host. This behaviour represents not only Charlie’s conscious breaking of conventions, but also Kureishi’s efforts to recreate the Sex Pistol’s infamous interview on the “Today”

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<sup>256</sup> Savage, *Faber Book of Pop*, p. xxix.

<sup>257</sup> David Bowie, “Ziggy Stardust” (1972)

<sup>258</sup> Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, p. 154.

<sup>259</sup> Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, p. 132.

<sup>260</sup> Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, p. 152.

show with Bill Grundy.<sup>261</sup> The anger of the punks was broadcast and expressed to the entire nation to the shock of many. Yet, for all of its contrived imagery, punk music was a distinct expression of England in the mid and late seventies. Karim summarizes the movement and its music when Charlie moves to New York and attempts to transport his music into the new world:

But the menace was gone. The ferocity was already a travesty, and the music, of little distinction in itself, had lost its drama and attack when transported from England with its unemployment, strikes and class antagonism. What impressed me was that Charlie knew this. ‘The music’s feeble, OK? I’m no Bowie, don’t think I don’t know that.

Ultimately, punk music is another variation of English pop music, which regardless of its flagrant and calculated transgression of normative cultural values still enjoyed greater success in the mainstream media than South Asian immigrants.

Kureishi shows his South Asian characters as embracing the dominant English culture. Aside from kebabs and a passing reference to Bollywood film star Sashi Kapoor (Rafi from *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*), there is very little South Asian culture in the story. Although the spiritual side of the continent is evident, Haroon has “boiled it down” to a spiritual potpourri. Hence, there is no presentation of authentic South Asian traditions. Such a Non-Asian story about Asians would be understandable in the 1970s when it was “beyond the pale” of traditional culture, it hardly seems understandable for a book written in the late 1980s and a TV series produced in the early 1990s to completely avoid South Asian culture. As South Asian authors such as Kureishi and Salman Rushdie were establishing themselves in the late 1980s, South Asian culture was coming into the

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<sup>261</sup> While on the program on December 1, 1976, they respond to Grundy’s taunting questions by swearing and verbally abusing the host. The infamous incident led the group being on the front cover of every newspaper in Britain the next day, and established the group’s reputation across the country. From

British mainstream. By the early 1990s, Bhangra music was recognizable in mainstream British pop music, and in 1994 (a year after the broadcasting of *The Buddha of Suburbia*) BBC Radio One's new Birmingham-born Sikh DJ Apache Indian helped to solidify British Asian youth culture within the British mainstream.<sup>262</sup> While Kureishi arguably helped raise the stature of Indians and Pakistanis as being separate groups from others within the umbrella of "Black Brits," there is very little in the way of South Asian culture in the story.

If *The Buddha of Suburbia* is compared to similar films about Anglo-Indians or Anglo-Pakistanis, the lack of South Asian culture is glaring. For example, the extremely popular film *East is East* (1999), written by Ayub Khan-Din<sup>263</sup> from his mid-1990s stage play, has a closer focus on the Asian experience. While it is also set in the 1970s with a mixed English and Pakistani family, the experiences of the family and the young men growing-up are quite different from Karim and Haroon. While *The Buddha of Suburbia* has passing references and images of South Asian life, *East is East* shows an elaborate arranged marriage, scenes from a Bollywood theatre, a trip to the ethnically changing city of Bradford, and has characters dancing to Bhangra music. The film also shows the cultural hybridity of the children with them sneaking into English dance clubs, furtively eating pork, and having the youngest boy undergo a circumcision in order to make him more Muslim and less English. While Khan-Din's story follows Kureishi's by only a few years, the emphasis which the two authors, and their directors, put on the South Asian

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*Guinness Book of Rock Stars*, ed. Rees, Darydd, Luke Crampton, and Barry Lazell. (Guinness Publishing Ltd, Enfield, 1989.): 448.

<sup>262</sup> Gillespie, Marie. *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (Routledge, London, 1995): 4.

<sup>263</sup> Khan-Din played Sammy in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*.

community is quite striking. Khan-Din shows South Asians negotiating their place between cultures, while Kureishi shows them striving to gain acceptance in England.

Granted, the opening lines of the novel clearly establish Karim as an Englishman, so it should not be too surprising that his links to his Indian heritage are quite limited. Yet, even when the story and the film have Jamila's arranged marriage, the event is never shown, except for the rather stark and secular reception in Anwar and Jeeta's home. In essence, *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a palatable story for the traditional British audience as it is about Asians within the English tradition. While Kureishi has brought the lives of a young Asian man and his family into the English mainstream, his presentation of South Asians within English culture has him more as a masseur than a terrorist. Hence, does Kureishi's under-representation of South Asian life in England make him an "Uncle Tom"?<sup>264</sup>

With his heavy emphasis on pop, and fleeting references to Indian culture, Kureishi has certainly allied himself with the dominant English culture. In a sense, Kureishi is as far from Indian culture as Major Tom is from the earth in "Space Oddity": Ground control to Uncle Tom.<sup>265</sup> Kureishi's failure to present South Asian culture raises one of the most troubling questions about studying Kureishi: how representative is the story?

In a sense, it is difficult to condemn fully Kureishi for his under representation of South Asian culture as it was just coming into the British mainstream in the early 1990s. In the 1970s, South Asian culture was not popular, and it certainly was not fashionable in pop music. For example, Freddie Mercury, the flamboyant lead singer of Queen, was not

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<sup>264</sup> Pejorative American slang for black slaves who would emulate white traditions so that they may be accepted into white culture.

English but rather a Zoroastrian from Zanzibar.<sup>266</sup> Mercury, however, aligned himself with the dominant English culture and found incredible success in his decision.<sup>267</sup> Yet where does Kureishi position himself and his characters? Ruvani Ranasingha argues in her book on Kureishi that he and Karim have positioned themselves against the dominant culture. While her evidence is strong, her conclusion is questionable.<sup>268</sup> She is correct that Karim/Kureishi question all levels of culture. There is England's crude racism with Helen's father's support of Enoch Powell, and the Skinhead's assault on Changez. The liberal embracement of Orientalism, which smacks of pretentious middle-class airs and neo-colonialism control of the crumbled empire. Finally, there is the lampooning of London's radical theatre community which sees race as just another facet of entertainment. As Pyke quips, when he has decided on the play's set-up, "[w]e have class, race, fucking and farce. What more do you want in an evenings entertainment?"<sup>269</sup> While Kureishi certainly questions the various slights towards minority issues in Britain, ultimately he is rooted in the English tradition of writers like Charles Dickens, as they both question traditions.

As so many studies on Kureishi are fixated on how he represents South Asian communities, few actually define the group. Thus, before concluding this chapter a quick definition of Anglo-Indian culture, is imperative to provide a brief analysis of the group's

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<sup>265</sup> From Bowie's breakthrough song "Space Oddity" with the chorus "Ground Control to Major Tom."

<sup>266</sup> Mercury, born Frederick Bulsara, moved to England when he was thirteen and struggled to become "English" in order to understand and enjoy his new home, unlike his parents who strictly maintained their Zoroastrian heritage. Mercury, like Kureishi was enamoured with rock and roll and idolized Jimi Hendrix's ability to gain respect from black and white audiences due to his unquestionable talent. From, Rider, Stephen. *Queen; These are the Days of our Lives*. (Surrey: Kingsfleet Publications, 1993) ch. 1 and ch. 4.

<sup>267</sup> Mercury rarely discussed his heritage or religion, and within the Queen catalogue there are only two songs which provide any insinuation of Mercury's background: "White Man," about the hypocrisy of Britain's colonial attitudes, and "Mustapha" a rather jazzy rendition of a traditional eastern prayer.

<sup>268</sup> Ranishania p. 64.

general characteristics. Annie Lau's recent work on South Asian children in Britain provides useful descriptions of Indo-Asian society which is in stark contrast to Kureishi's "Asian" characters. While western society is fairly open and permissive, South Asian society is more restrictive and has a strict hierarchy. Elders must be respected, and gender roles are clearly defined. Whereas western culture is egocentric with its pursuit of personal autonomy and individuality, Indo-Asian culture is sociocentric as conformity and collectivity are expected. Marriage is not simply a contractual obligation, but rather an alliance between family friends. Finally, there is a heavy emphasis on higher education.<sup>270</sup> In every example, Kureishi's work is contrary to Lau's examples. His Asian characters are extremely permissive with shifting gender roles and believe in personal satisfaction over social or family obligations.

As Kureishi's characters go against traditional values they must negotiate between South Asian and British cultures. There are four differing styles of self-identification which ethnic minorities use in Britain.

1. *Assimilative style*: those who adapt themselves exclusively to the majority group and not to the ethnic minority group.
2. *Dissociative style*: those who adapt themselves exclusively to the ethnic minority group and not to the majority group.
3. *Acculturative style*: those who identify with both the ethnic minority group culture and the majority group culture.
4. *Marginal style*: those who identify with neither group.<sup>271</sup>

According to Lau, thirty percent of all South Asians<sup>272</sup> use the dissociative style, two thirds use an acculturative strategy, and only a minority use the assimilative and marginal

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<sup>269</sup> Kureishi, *the Buddha of Suburbia*, p.189.

<sup>270</sup> Lau, p. 30.

<sup>271</sup> Nimmi Hutnik *Ethnic Minority Identity: a Social Psychological Perspective*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.): 124.

<sup>272</sup> Lau includes Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or African Asians in her definition.

style.<sup>273</sup> Karim is arguably part of the acculturative style, however, many of his actions place him within the assimilative style as he heavily favours English culture with its music and plays. Yet, it is difficult to restrict Kureishi's characters within the cold trappings of social psychology. Kureishi uses pop culture rather than polemics against the government to establish the period in an invigorating and compelling manner. To merely label Kureishi and Karim as assimilative is as misleading as Ranasinha's conclusion that Kureishi is against the dominant culture. Although Kureishi's depiction of British South Asians in the 1970s fails to conform to the majority's experience, the representation still succeeds because it encapsulates the essence and vibrancy of the period.

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<sup>273</sup> Lau, p. 29.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ISLAM MY ISLAM; MY SON THE FANATIC**

One thing that has always interested me is the relationship between who people really are and what they believe, their ideologies ... . All ideologies, cultural or religious, are props in the identity game. All ideologies require a measure of conformity - if you play by the rules, you get the part. Fundamentalism, with its insistence on one worldview, a single history, is at the extreme of ideology.

- Hanif Kureishi<sup>274</sup>

After the airing of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi published the short story “My Son the Fanatic” (1994) on Anglo-Islamic relations in the early 1990s. By 1997, the story was adapted into a modestly successful film and marked Kureishi’s sole attempt to address religious matters in a screenplay. While the concentration on religion may seem incongruous when compared to Kureishi’s previous urban topics, the departure is understandable as all of Kureishi’s South Asian characters were based on his own family of Indian Muslims who considered themselves Pakistani due to their faith rather than their nationality.<sup>275</sup> Kureishi strives to equally represent arguments about Islam in Britain between his characters’ various viewpoints, but he is ultimately unsuccessful. Ruvani Ranasinha’s chapter “Muslimphobia” is particularly damning towards Kureishi’s representation of Muslims as she summarizes various arguments about Kureishi’s

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<sup>274</sup> The Guardian Weekend, 6 May 1998: p. 110

<sup>275</sup> See the description of Kureishi’s father Rafiushan in chapter 2 p. 19-20.



depiction of Islam and notes his religious errors.<sup>276</sup> Her argument is compromised as she assumes that Kureishi is addressing religion from a basis of faith. Kureishi, however, frequently presents Islam from a political perspective. For example, when discussing his growing interest in Islamic issues with the *fatwa* against Rushdie, Kureishi stated in his unpretentious candour, “[t]here were all these blokes who wanted to kill this friend of mine, and I wanted to know why, so I went and found them ... Islam is rather like Thatcherism. It's an intoxicating force to test yourself against.”<sup>277</sup>

This thesis has focused upon linking specific and general cultural or political events to Kureishi's work, the events in *My Son the Fanatic* will not be addressed in great detail. On the one hand, the film offers little in the way of notable events to study. While the passing reference to Salman Rushdie offers a tantalizing rich subject, the event is tangential to the actual story, as well as too broad and too complex a topic to be addressed within the confines of this thesis chapter.<sup>278</sup> Arguably the attack on the prostitution house is shocking, but the event is too limited in scope to make any insightful comments on the larger subject of Anglo-Islamic relations. On the other hand, Kureishi has proven to be an astute and fairly accurate commentator of current events and incorporates them into his stories quite deftly, and further analysis would fail to garner any additional insight.

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<sup>276</sup> Ranasinha brings the work of Homi Bhabha, Tariq Modood, Pnina Werbner, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to bear on Kureishi's work

<sup>277</sup> Fernanda Eberstadt, "Rebel, Rebel," *The New Yorker* (Aug 21 & 28, 1995): 119.

<sup>278</sup> Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Versus* (1988) was a contemporary account of the prophet Mohammad and seen by many Muslim leaders as a denunciation of the Prophet's life and therefore blasphemous. The novel was banned in many countries, but not in Britain. There was both domestic and international reaction to the novel with public burnings in Bradford and Iran's political and spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini calling for Rushdie and the book's publishers to be executed. While Britain was home to over one million Muslims, the majority of whom are Sunni, few derived from Khomeini's Shia branch of Islam, and thus the threat, while still significant, was not as dire as some believed.

Hence this chapter will address how Kureishi presents Muslims within English culture. Kureishi has been chastised for presenting Muslims in a binary manner as either “fundamentalists,” like Farid, or as fallen, like Parvez. This analysis is flawed as it steers Parvez into a narrow definition as a “bad Muslim.” While this argument has some validity,<sup>279</sup> Kureishi’s depiction of Britain’s Muslim community, and his conception of Islam must be analyzed and considered in order to understand his reaction to critics and how Islam is portrayed in the film.

The original short story “My Son the Fanatic” is quite similar to the screenplay, although the latter added characters, events, and setting to draw out the issues between the characters and their ideals.<sup>280</sup> Parvez is a middle-aged cab driver in a small northern, industrial town whose life is disrupted after his son Farid breaks off his engagement to the local police Chief Inspector’s daughter. As Parvez and his wife Minoo are distant from one another, he discusses his son’s sudden interest in religion with Bettina, one of the prostitutes he regularly drives around town. Their relationship is based on their ability to see past each other’s cultural and societal trappings and to understand one another on a personal basis, and they soon fall in love. Parvez becomes a small time “pimp” as he facilitates meetings between Bettina and other local prostitutes with a visiting German businessman Herr Schitz. While Parvez dabbles in questionable activities with Bettina and Schitz, his son Farid invites a *maulvi* from Pakistan to help organize the fervent young believers. Parvez and Farid’s diverging lifestyles collide at the end of the film when Bettina is threatened during a demonstration organized by the *maulvi* against the prostitutes and Parvez is forced to defend his lover from Farid’s attack

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<sup>279</sup> Parvez drinks alcohol, eats pork, and fails to remove his shoes in the mosque.

on her. After the incident, Farid and Parvez argue and Farid leaves the house to join his fundamentalist friends. With Farid gone and Parvez's adultery revealed, Minoo departs for Pakistan. Although Parvez is without his family and his friends at the end of the film, he has realized his love for Bettina and reflectively summarizes his strange and contradictory position: "I have managed to destroy everything. I have never felt worse ... or better."<sup>281</sup>

*My Son the Fanatic* is arguably Kureishi's best film. While it lacks the groundbreaking insight of *My Beautiful Laundrette* into an unrecognized group in England, it has the tightest and clearest story of any of the films discussed, it strives to create a meaningful dialogue between the conflicting characters' ideals, and it certainly has the strongest leading cast. Om Puri and Rachel Griffiths provide astonishing interpretations of characters that could easily have been clichéd depictions of a frustrated cab driver and a hooker with a heart of gold. It is also different from the other films as Parvez is a simple working-class man who came to England to feed his family, and not a thinly disguised version of Kureishi's own affluent relatives. Furthermore, although there is still the father-son dynamic of all the previous movies, the focus is on the father rather than on the son. Kureishi attempted to write from the son's point of view, "[b]ut I couldn't make it work; I got bored with the son."<sup>282</sup> His inability to "make the son work," however, should not be seen as a weakness. "As a man, I have my own views, but as a

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<sup>280</sup> For a comparison between the short story and the screenplay see Bart Moore Gilbert's excellent analysis. Moore-Gilbert, p. 164-171.

<sup>281</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic*. From *Collected Screenplays I*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2002): 383.

<sup>282</sup> *The Guardian*, 2 May 1998.

writer, I would never make a case for anybody – or anything ... I have done that in the past, I think. Now, I try and make the argument or the debate as dramatic as possible.”<sup>283</sup>

The dramatic tension in the film is sparked by Parvez and Farid’s clashing ideals. Parvez is part of the Pakistani working class who arrived in England during the immigration boom of the 1960s.<sup>284</sup> Although the film notes his dawning comprehension of how badly he is treated in England, he still enjoys the country. Parvez is not a religious man, but still tries to be good and to see it in others. He is a secular humanist. He tolerates his son’s request for the *maulvi* to stay at their home, despite his dislike for the man’s religious ideals. He sees the *maulvi* as a hypocrite and tells Farid: “Your great long-beard friend wants to stay in this immoral county. Knowing of my Fingerhut connections he asked me to help him with the immigration.”<sup>285</sup> Although the *maulvi* and his followers send Parvez’s household bills beyond his ability to pay them, he does not eject the *maulvi* until he witnesses the demonstration against Bettina and the other local prostitutes. While religion is central to the film, it must be noted that Parvez does not dismiss the *maulvi* due to a religious disagreement, nor even due to a financial one, but rather because of his and his followers’ intolerance of others. “I won’t stand for the extremity of anti-democratic and anti-Jewish rubbish!”<sup>286</sup> This is not to suggest that Parvez is a perfect character, as he is a domineering, adulterous, and violent man.

Compared to Parvez’s complex characterization, Farid is quite palely drawn. While Kureishi heavily favoured the father and his views in the screenplay, the original

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<sup>283</sup> Kaleta, p. 194.

<sup>284</sup> Similar to *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Parvez’s background is never clearly stated. Yet he mentions Pakistan frequently and he notes that he and Fizzy worked in the textile factory when they first arrived. Thus it seems safe to speculate that he was Pakistani migrants who came in the 1960s to work in British factories.

<sup>285</sup> Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic*, p. 374.

<sup>286</sup> Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic*, p. 379.

text has significant sections on Farid, which were cut from the film's theatrical release. Well over half of Parvez and Farid's conversation at Fizzy's restaurant was excised, as well as Farid's scenes about his former life as a drug addict. Both scenes serve to explain Farid's decision to embrace Islam so thoroughly, as well as to provide the character with more buoyancy and understanding as the father and son enjoy a few genuine laughs over dinner. Just as Farid's character is stripped of his understandable qualities, Parvez's questionable actions, such as the attempted rape of Minoo, were cut in order to keep Parvez somewhat "likeable." While Kureishi never expected the marital rape scene to be in the film,<sup>287</sup> both he and director Udayan Prasad<sup>288</sup> were surprised by many of the other cuts made by the film's producers.<sup>289</sup> While these edits focused the film on the romance between Parvez and Bettina, and away from the controversial Islamic plot line, the cuts gave the film a stronger "anti-Islamic" tone as Farid is a bland zealot, rather than an understandable young man trying to escape from a life on the street. Despite the attempts to make the film less disagreeable, it still angered people – especially Kureishi.

After the film's premier at the Cannes Film Festival in 1997, Kureishi asked reporters during the press conference to focus on the love story, rather than on the social and religious aspects of the film. After a reporter from *The Observer* continued to question Kureishi on the subject, Kureishi not only assaulted the man, but also threatened to kill him.<sup>290</sup> Both Kureishi and Prasad were uncomfortable with the media's emphasis on the film's religious aspects as well as their determination to name the film's nameless

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<sup>287</sup> Kaleta, p.162.

<sup>288</sup> While Prasad's career has yet to "take off", his film previous to *My Son the Fanatic* was *Brothers in Trouble* (1996) which based on London based, award winning Urdu novelist Abdullah Hussein's short story "The Return Journey."

<sup>289</sup> *The Guardian*, 11 May 1997.

<sup>290</sup> *The Guardian*, 10 May 1997.

city as Bradford. It seems that the reporter Kureishi attacked was phoning Bradford mosques in an attempt to create a controversy around the film prior to its UK release. Kureishi claimed that the reporter “kept saying, ‘The mullahs won't like this film,’ when actually they didn't know anything about it.”<sup>291</sup> Regardless of this rationale, Kureishi's reaction is confusing as he wanted the press and the audience to focus on the relationship between Parvez and Bettina rather than on the movie's religious themes. Yet he was upset with the studio when sections of the film which explain or emphasise Farid's fanaticism were cut. If Kureishi was worried about the film's reception by the religious community, it would seem that he would welcome the deletion of scenes which would incense or provoke them. Instead, Kureishi left the premiere upset with both the film's producers over how it was presented, as well as with the film's critics over their reception of it.

Both Prasad and Kureishi were concerned about upsetting not only Britain's Muslim community, but more specifically, the vocal and active members of Bradford. Bradford is a unique northern English city; while it was once a vibrant industrial town, Britain's economic shift away from heavy industry and manufacturing led to high levels of unemployment, especially among the city's factory-working South Asian population. Bradford is known as Britain's city of Islam or ‘Islamabad within the Islamic world. Yet, to most people, the city is infamous for its public burning of *The Satanic Versus* in 1989.<sup>292</sup> Hence, the city has a potentially volatile mix of unemployment, strong religious belief, and the ability and willingness to express itself.

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<sup>291</sup> *The Observer*, 4 May 2003.

<sup>292</sup> Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain; Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims*. (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, London, 2002): 1.

Originally, the movie was to be filmed in Bradford, yet even in the mid-1990s, years after the original uproar against Rushdie, the town was still subject to protests. The location was changed after Kureishi met with some of Bradford's Islamic groups to discuss the film, and they voiced their concerns over the movie's depiction of drinking, adultery, and prostitution.<sup>293</sup> Kureishi was aware of the Muslim community's ability to act on politically sensitive causes after he visited the town in 1986.<sup>294</sup> With the Rushdie affair, he knew the extent to which the community would act on its beliefs. While he realized that the visible reaction did not represent the majority of Muslims, he was nevertheless cautious. As one fundamentalist told Kureishi, "killing Rushdie had become irrelevant. The point was that this was 'the first time the community has worked together. It won't be the last. We know our strength now.'"<sup>295</sup> Kureishi realized how the Muslim community could act both locally and nationally when dealing with a sensitive issue and he clearly wished to avoid being a flashpoint for any similar demonstration. In the film, the town remains nameless, but to many Britons it seemed clear that the unidentified city is Bradford, and numerous film reviews noted likewise. The film is unique in Kureishi's canon as it is not set in London.<sup>296</sup> Kureishi felt that Parvez and Bettina's affair would resonate in a smaller city where there is a tight community in which everyone's actions are known.<sup>297</sup> Yet the film's "fictional" small community proved troublesome in real life, and Kureishi was forced to leave the city nameless, even though it would be understood by its audience as Bradford simply due to the northern setting, ethnic

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<sup>293</sup> Kaleta, p. 161

<sup>294</sup> See Kureishi's essay "Bradford" (1986).

<sup>295</sup> Kureishi, "Sex and Secularity," p. ix.

<sup>296</sup> London figures prominently not only in Kureishi's films, but also in his novels and short stories. There are very few stories which do not use London as their setting. Even the original short story was based in London.

<sup>297</sup> Interview with Kureishi, 44

diversity, and religious tensions. Moreover, Kureishi even contradicts himself in interviews as the production was moved after the community raised concerns about the film, and yet he later defended his “murderous” argument with the Observer’s reporter by declaring the mullahs “didn’t know anything about it.”

Kureishi’s representation of Islam is complex, and can be roughly categorized by three periods: his adolescence in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s, and the Rushdie affair. Kureishi was raised in a secular household<sup>298</sup> and was very politically aware as a teenager of neo-Nazi attitudes, as well as various counter-strategies to popular racism.<sup>299</sup> He was fascinated by the Nation of Islam as it showed an isolated half-Pakistani teenager how to oppose oppressive white actions while instilling pride and affecting social change. Pictures of Elijah Muhammad, Muhammad Ali, and Malcolm X replaced the pop culture “The Rolling Stones” and “Cream” posters on his teenage bedroom walls. While these American activists were inspirational, Kureishi was unsettled by some of the extreme and separatist attitudes taken by Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad:

I saw racism as unreason and prejudice, ignorance and a failure of sense... . That the men I wanted to admire had liberated themselves only to take to unreason, to the abdication of intelligence, was shocking to me. And the separatism, the total loathing of the white man as innately corrupt, the ‘All whites are devils’ view, was equally unacceptable. I had to live in England, in the suburbs of London, with whites. My mother was white. I wasn’t ready for separate development. I’d had too much of that already.<sup>300</sup>

Kureishi could not reconcile himself with the militant, separatist attitudes of the Nation of Islam which he saw as ignoring modern realities of integration.

These conflicting ideals are present in the *My Son the Fanatic* when Parvez confronts Farid about breaking off the engagement with Madelaine:

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<sup>298</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 20.

<sup>299</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 68.



FARID: Can you put Keema with strawberries? ... In the end our cultures ... they cannot be mixed.

PARVEZ: Everything is mingling already together, this thing and the other

FARID: Some of us are wanting something more besides muddle.

PARVEZ: What?

FARID: Belief, purity, belonging to the past. ... I won't bring up my children in this country.<sup>301</sup>

While Farid believes in separate development between Islamic and English culture, similar to the Nation of Islam, Parvez clearly shows Kureishi's belief in integration. Kureishi was sceptical of ideas of creating a purified society through division and separation when he was young, yet it was not until his visit to Pakistan when he realized the difficulties of religion influencing society so thoroughly.

Kureishi's trip to Pakistan in 1984 marks the second phase in his understanding of Islam. He had considered living in Pakistan, but quickly realized during this visit that his ideals were too contrary to the militaristic and theocratic rule of General Zia al-Haq. Kureishi conceded that religious ideals were succeeding where ideologies such as Marxism or capitalism had failed, and were providing an identity and direction for Pakistan. He notes that while many see "fundamentalism" as an archaic form of Islam it is actually as "recent as postmodernism."<sup>302</sup> It seems that one of his uncles in Pakistan provided the clearest explanations of the situation the nation faced. His uncle was a former Marxist<sup>303</sup> who argued that economic freedom was the salvation for Pakistan:

There was a mass of people for whom alternative political ideologies either had no meaning or were tainted with colonialism, particularly when Islamic grassroots organization was made so simple through the mosques. For my uncle the only possible contrast to revolutionary puritanism had to be acquisition; liberalism smuggled in via materialism. So if Islam represented a new puritanism, progress would be corruption, through the encouragement of desire. But it was probably

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<sup>300</sup> Kureishi, "The Rainbow Sign," p. 78.

<sup>301</sup> Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic*, p. 313.

<sup>302</sup> Kureishi, "Sex and Secularity", p. viii.

<sup>303</sup> He was actually the inspiration for Rafi in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*.

too late for this already; US materialism, and the dependence and quasi-imperialism that accompanied it, was resented and despised.<sup>304</sup>

Kureishi was suspicious, however, of what was happening under the guise of religion in Pakistan: “Islamization built no hospitals, no schools, no houses; it cleaned no water and installed no electricity.”<sup>305</sup> He saw no tangible improvement in the quality of life under General Zia. Kureishi’s visit in Pakistan, however, was not a typical one as he stayed with his prominently placed family. He was excited at the parties he attended as he consorted with landowners, businessmen, and politicians – “people I wouldn’t have been able to get to in England” – but he realized that the laws, even in an apparently religiously devout nation, only applied to certain groups.<sup>306</sup> “They were drinking heavily. Every liberal in England knew that you can be lashed for drinking in Pakistan. But as far as I can tell, none of this English-speaking international bourgeoisie would be lashed for anything.”<sup>307</sup> He was further confused as the television news was in Arabic “a language few people in Pakistan understood.”<sup>308</sup> Nor was his confusion over the news limited to television. One night near his house in Karachi, a riot broke out, and even though there were fires, there was “no mention of this in any paper. The headline, I think, was: Steel Prices Up Again. I began to see how important public reflection is.”<sup>309</sup>

To Kureishi, religion being used within the workings of the state impeded the flow of information, and therefore progress. He began to see politics as the counter to religion, yet he constantly defines Islam with negative political terms. In his strongest

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<sup>304</sup> Kureishi, “Sex and Secularity”, p. viii-ix.

<sup>305</sup> Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign”, p. 83.

<sup>306</sup> Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign”, p. 80.

<sup>307</sup> Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign” p. 80.

<sup>308</sup> Kureishi’s uncles explained that General Zia was attempting to appease his Arabic neighbours even though Urdu is the common language in Pakistan. Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign” p. 80.

<sup>309</sup> Kureishi, “Satan and the Politicians.”

analysis, he describes fundamentalism as resembling “neo-fascism or even Nazism: an equality of oppression for the masses with a necessary enemy – in this case “the west.”<sup>310</sup> In the film, Farid focuses on the west’s attitudes towards “pornography and filth”<sup>311</sup> as represented by the prostitutes. While Parvez’s liberal sentiments enables friendship with the women, Farid’s fanaticism encourages hostility and antagonism towards them. With one of Kureishi’s strongest lines, Parvez condemns his son’s actions as “there is nothing of God in spitting on a woman’s face!”<sup>312</sup> Therefore, while Kureishi’s trip to Pakistan solidified his understanding of Islamic fundamentalism as simultaneously a religious and a political force, he remains aware that acts done in the name of religion often have no basis in either religious or political ideologies.

The final phase in Kureishi’s understanding of Islam emerges in the late 1980s with the *fatwa* against his friend and fellow writer Salman Rushdie. Although Kureishi was quite critical of British attitudes and institutions towards Muslims in “The Rainbow Sign,” he was concerned with the growing schism between the Muslim community and Britain. In 1986, Kureishi attended the opening of the first Muslim school in the United Kingdom, and noted his concerns over the school’s sexual segregation as well as its choice of curriculum.<sup>313</sup> He felt that “Islamic schools like the one in Batley appeared to violate the principles of a liberal education, and the very ideas to which the school owed its existence.”<sup>314</sup> Kureishi was concerned at the time over the separate development that the school represented, yet he remained respectful of their ideals. Three years later, when vocal members of the Muslim community called for the banning of *The Satanic Versus*,

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<sup>310</sup> Kureishi, “Sex and Secularity”, p. vii

<sup>311</sup> Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic*, p. 333.

<sup>312</sup> Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic*, p. 379.

<sup>313</sup> Kureishi, “Bradford,” p. 132.

Kureishi was highly critical of them and their supporters. He lambasted British MP Keith Vaz<sup>315</sup> after the politician argued on behalf of his constituency to ban the book. “Vaz should know that freedom of speech is far more important than the offence that Rushdie’s book causes.”<sup>316</sup> It was within the government’s power to ban books, and Kureishi was afraid that this would be a continuation of the Islamization in Britain which he witnessed in Pakistan and in Bradford.<sup>317</sup> Hence, the events in Bradford and the endeavours to ban *The Satanic Versus* were seen by Kureishi as dishonest attempts to trample the British ideals of diversity and toleration which he felt were the key to British and Muslim relations.

While Kureishi’s understanding of Islam changed during his adolescence, his trip to Pakistan, and the *fatwa* against Rushdie, it appears that his feelings towards religion are closest to his early realization about the Nation of Islam:

I saw the taking up of Islam as an aberration, a desperate fantasy of world-wide black brotherhood; it was a symptom of extreme alienation. It was also an inability to seek a wider political view or cooperation with the other oppressed groups – or with the working class as a whole – since alliance with white groups was necessarily out of the question.<sup>318</sup>

While the context of his argument is specific to Elijah Muhammad’s organization, the spirit of the quote best encapsulates Kureishi’s conception of fundamentalist Islam. Kureishi appears not to be adverse towards Islam as a religion, but rather to certain

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<sup>314</sup> Kureishi, “Bradford,” p. 133.

<sup>315</sup> Keith Vaz is a Catholic Indian who was born in South Yemen and educated at Cambridge. He has been the Labour MP for Leister East since 1987. He has grown in prominence over the years to become Minister for Europe (1999 - 2001), Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (May - October 1999), and Opposition Spokesperson on planning and regulation (1992 - 1997). From <http://www.labour.org.uk/maps/locinfo.phtml?ctid=2443>. accessed on 16 March 2004.

<sup>316</sup> Kureishi, “Satan and the Politicians”

<sup>317</sup> While Muslims argued for the novel to be banned as blasphemous, British laws only cover works blasphemous towards Christianity. The government certainly had the power to ban the novel, yet was perhaps unwilling to enact such unpopular measures after the recent uproar over Thatcher’s questionable grounds for banning former MI5 agent Peter Wright’s autobiography *Spycatcher* in 1987.

<sup>318</sup> Kureishi “The Rainbow Sign, p. 79

Muslims' attempts to limit discussion on matters such as freedom of speech, education, and inter-faith relations. He was concerned about a trend which he saw as leading to separate development between the two cultures. Kureishi's liberal beliefs advocated for hybridity over singularity as he was certain that such limiting attitudes were suicidal for both groups. As James Baldwin realized about the Nation of Islam, "the debasement of one race and the glorification of another in this way inevitably leads to murder."<sup>319</sup> With the *fatwa* against Rushdie, Kureishi's fear from his adolescence about what *he* understood as intolerance in the name of religion was realized.

Yet how is Kureishi's view of Islam conveyed in *My Son the Fanatic*? Kureishi originally attempted to use Farid as the film's central character, but as previously noted,<sup>320</sup> he "couldn't make it work."<sup>321</sup> Hence the film addresses Islam in a contrary manner as it focuses on Parvez's ideals. Parvez's distrust of religion stems from his childhood where he was disciplined by the *Maulvi* for falling asleep in class as well as for asking questions about religion which his teachers refused to address:

Naturally I annoyed him by asking why my best friend, a Hindu, would go to Kaffir hell when he was such a good chap. ... So he would clip my arms and legs with a cane. ... After such treatment I said goodbye permanently to the next life and said hello to –to work.<sup>322</sup>

For many immigrants like Parvez who arrived in the 1960s, religion was less important to them as they were focusing on "survival" and simply worked to support their families.<sup>323</sup>

In one of the film's revealing scenes about the generational division between British Muslims, a man the same age as Parvez notes that Farid and his friends "are always

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<sup>319</sup> Kureishi, "Rainbow Sign", p. 78.

<sup>320</sup> See p. 100.

<sup>321</sup> *The Guardian Weekend Page*; p. 111.

<sup>322</sup> Kuerishi, *My Son the Fanatic*, p 324-5.

<sup>323</sup> Lewis, p. 56.

fighting for radical actions on many subjects. It is irritating us all here, yaar. But they have something these young people – they're not afraid of the truth. They stand up for things. We never did that."<sup>324</sup>

Although Parvez shares qualities of other immigrants his age, there are similarities between the film's patriarch and Kureishi's own father. Parvez's resentment towards religion is close to Rafiushan who "was educated by both mullahs and nuns, and developed an aversion to both."<sup>325</sup> While this sentiment may seem understandable, it may not be as universal as Kureishi implies. It is clear that Rafiushan's position from Bombay's elite Muslim community has fostered some of Kureishi's peculiar representations of South Asians, as they are certainly not typical immigrants. As Salman Rushdie, who was educated at the same school as Rafiushan, noted, "most Indian Muslims affirm the value of secular principle, seeing it as their best safeguard as a minority group in a predominantly non-Muslim country."<sup>326</sup> Hence, Kureishi's depiction of the older generation of South Asians as non-religious is close to the actual experiences of South Asians, yet the use of his own father's characteristics significantly alters the character so that Parvez's views on religion cannot be taken as a completely representative.

Much like the father in the film, Kureishi was confused and concerned over the rise of this new puritanical strain of religion amongst younger South Asians in the late 1980s.

It seemed to me that these younger kids would be interested in what I was interested in: *bhangra* music, pop culture, all that stuff. But they had completely rejected all of that, and I was really shocked, because those kids were as English

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<sup>324</sup> Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic*, p. 328.

<sup>325</sup> Kureishi "Sex and Secularity" p. x.

<sup>326</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Why I Have Embraced Islam" from *Imaginary Homelands; Essays and Criticisms 1981-1991*. (London : Granta in association with Penguin, 1991): 430.

as me. They were born and raised in England, yet they rejected the West. They hated it. Boys from Birmingham were burning books by Muslim writers who were making fun of Islam. This wasn't some ancient tradition. I mean, there are all kinds of liberal ideas in the Muslim tradition, anyway. Pretending that this fundamentalism was the only Islam was definitely a modern thing. A kind of repossession of Islam.<sup>327</sup>

While Kureishi was already interested in Islam in Britain prior to the Rushdie affair, his focus on the issue intensified after it erupted. Kureishi actively sought out and even befriended some of the young Muslim “fundamentalists.” Their strong ideological beliefs reminded him of his old Trotskyite friends (which were characterized by Terry in *The Buddha of Suburbia*).<sup>328</sup> Moreover, he was drawn to them as many were either ex-drug users or had many friends who were, and at the time Kureishi admits that he was struggling with a growing cocaine addiction.<sup>329</sup> Hence, their embracement of a chaste lifestyle was quite understandable to him. Mostly, he was engaged by the strength of their dual cultural background. “[T]he young are less likely to take any shit. And they’re tougher. They organize. They go on the street, being British and Asians at the same time.”<sup>330</sup> Kureishi was clearly trying to understand the youths, but his approach was empirical and secular.

I wondered why normal blokes got to the point where they wanted to see an author killed. I tried to be fair. I really liked the kids - I still see them. I felt sympathetic; they seemed lost, and fundamentalism gave them a sense of place, of belonging. So many were unemployed, and had friends involved in drugs; religion kept them out of trouble.

I'm not interested in the spiritual, but in religion as ideology, as a system of authority, a kind of business.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Kureishi, “Bang and a Whimper” p. 127-8.

<sup>328</sup> Kureishi, “Bang and a Whimper”, p. 128.

<sup>329</sup> Kureishi, “Bang and a Whimper”, p. 126.

<sup>330</sup> Kaleta, p. 203.

<sup>331</sup> *The Guardian*, 1 March 1995.

Once again, Kureishi strives to separate religion from the individuals by defining it with non-religious terms such as “ideology”, “authority”, and “business.” While this approach may be questioned by academics like Ranasinha, he is attempting to understand the young men in terms which others will comprehend.

This personal connection may be the key to Kureishi’s action at Cannes and his reluctance to link the film to Bradford. Antagonists in Kureishi’s earlier films had a feeling of characterization in their portrayals. The National Front in *My Beautiful Laundrette* is used as antagonists in fairly broad terms as represented by the local hooligans, and Thatcher’s policies in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* are a lingering Machiavellian force always hidden in the machinery of the state. Neither film showed empathy towards their adversaries,<sup>332</sup> but there is a strong sense of understanding the fundamentalists in *My Son the Fanatic*. It seems that Kureishi’s personal connections enabled his understanding of the group, but it also may explain his reluctance to antagonise the Muslim community. While the National Front was a dangerous group, its ability to act against a specific individual was almost laughable by the mid-1980s. Likewise, aside from “sicking” conservative watchdogs like Norman Stone on Kureishi, Thatcher’s government could do little to constrict him. Kureishi’s knowledge of the Muslim community, however, seems to have engendered a previously unknown trait into his writing: restraint.

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<sup>332</sup> In the previous films, Kureishi relied on a political theatre form called agitprop which was popular in the fringe theatre tradition where he started. Agitprop is a political style of drama which is derived from an abbreviation of agitation and propaganda. This polemical style of theatre developed in Bolshevik Russia to aid in the cultural and political redevelopment of the country. It was an influential form on Bertolt Brecht, of whom Kureishi was a great admirer and even adapted Brecht’s “Mother Courage and her Children.” *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* Ed. Chris Baldick. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 4.



Kureishi's writing on Islam shows a gradual shift in both style and content as he slowly retreats from making any strong condemnation of Britain's Muslims. "The Rainbow Sign" is his earliest piece and it focuses on Kureishi's relationships with England and Pakistan. It was later condensed and published as "England my England."<sup>333</sup> The piece takes its title from a 1941 George Orwell essay, and documents Kureishi's conflict with his own identification as English, yet has a decidedly judgmental tone towards British ideals such as "tolerance." Yet in the essay "Satan and the Politicians," written in defence of Salman Rushdie against MP Keith Vaz's call to ban *The Satanic Versus*, Kureishi is definitely supporting the British ideal of tolerance which he previously dismissed. Hence, similar to his support of British culture, Kureishi chose to maintain British rather than South Asian ideals when topics became contentious.

Kureishi also explored the South Asian diaspora in England in the essays "Bradford" and "Wild Women, Wild Men." To a certain degree, "Bradford" was a travelogue, as Kureishi visited the city to see how Britain's largest diasporic city dealt with racism from the white community, the growing politicization of the Asian population with Britain's first Asian Lord Mayor, as well as its burgeoning and powerful Muslim community. "Wild Women, Wild Men" documented a cultural twist when two lesbian, Pakistani strippers inverted their private show so that rather than arousing their South Asian clientele, they attacked and humiliated them. In many respects, the later essay seemed eerily close to one of Kureishi's short stories in subject matter and execution. With these essays on the South Asian community, there is a clear shift in Kureishi's writing as he switches from an overt political essayist to a literary writer who focuses on characters. "Wild Women, Wild Men" was one of his last essays in 1992.

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<sup>333</sup> Hanif Kureishi, "England my England" *The New Statesman and Society*. 24 March 1989.

While his essays disappeared, short stories appeared with increasing frequency.<sup>334</sup> When interviewed in 1988, Kureishi was asked about his politics and his writing, to which he responded: “[I am a] political person rather than a political writer.”<sup>335</sup> Thus, Kureishi was separating his political ideas from his writing as his short stories supplanted his essay writing.

Kureishi’s progression away from directly addressing Muslim issues culminates in his second book *The Black Album* (1995). The novel depicts the fall of one system of beliefs, communism, with the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, and the sudden rise of Islamic fundamentalism in 1989. One of the novel’s main plots was based on the *fatwa* against Rushdie over *The Satanic Verses*, and while Kureishi often revels in the controversy he creates<sup>336</sup> he never directly refers to Rushdie in *The Black Album*. Instead, he leaves the conversation curiously oblique as the Muslim and liberal characters discuss “that book.”<sup>337</sup> Regardless of Kureishi’s authorial decision to almost completely avoid mentioning Rushdie, the novel culminates with the burning of “the book,” which was an obvious parallel to the burning of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford. In addition to censoring Rushdie from his text, during press interviews for the book, Kureishi frequently clarified the distinction between his novel and Rushdie’s “blasphemous” one:

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<sup>334</sup> In 1997 and 1999 Kureishi published two short story collections, *Love in a Blue Time* and *Midnight All Day*, respectively. Both collections are predominately about relationships, and have few South Asian characters.

<sup>335</sup> Elyse Singer, “Hanif Kureishi; A Londoner, But Not a Brit”, from *In the Vernacular; Interviews at Yale with Sculptors of Culture*. Ed Melissa E. Biggs (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland, 1991):104.

<sup>336</sup> For example, after receiving criticism from one of his Aunts over the homosexuality in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, he somewhat spitefully recorded his frustration with her in his diary of Sammy and Rosie Get Laid and decided to name one of the new film’s lesbian characters after her. From “Some Time with Stephen” p. 65.

<sup>337</sup> The novel utilizes a omniscient narrator, yet the clearest the narrator comes to describing Rushdie is when some of the Islamic characters are discussing the *fatwa* and the narrator notes that the protagonist “had liked *Midnight’s Children*; he admired its author.” While it can be expected that characters may censor themselves, it seems odd that the narrator would never directly address the author or book in question. From Hanif Kuerishi *The Black Album* (Faber and Faber; London, 1995): 169.

“[h]e wrote a book about religion; mine's about what people might do in its name.”<sup>338</sup> To ensure that his novel would not be considered blasphemous, Kureishi had it read by religious advisers.<sup>339</sup> Moreover, the theft of all forty original manuscripts from the publishing house’s office prior to the book’s publication would have arguably heightened concerns over the novel.<sup>340</sup>

Finally, some of Kureishi’s restraint may have a domestic rationale. Kureishi’s girlfriend from 1989 to 1995, Tracey Scoffield, was his editor at Faber and Faber, and in 1993 they had twin sons Sachin and Carlo. As the novel is dedicated to his sons, his family was clearly important to him and he would quite likely try to prevent any harm from coming to them. If a similar *fatwa* as Rushdie’s, which targeted not only the author, but also his publishers, was issued towards Kureishi, both he and Scoffield would arguably be in direct danger. It seems clear that Kureishi had no intention in drawing the ire of the Muslim community as Rushdie had and took these preventative steps to (for once) avoid controversy.

While writing *The Black Album*, he published the short story “My Son the Fanatic” (1994). As Kureishi had seemingly abandoned essays, short stories were an effective medium for conveying contemporary issues.

If I started writing a film script today, when would it be on the screen? It would take me six months to write it. Maybe six months for them to raise the money.

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<sup>338</sup> *The Guardian Features*, 1 March 1995, p T6.

<sup>339</sup> *The Guardian Features*, 1 March 1995, p T6.

<sup>340</sup> The robbery received a cursory account in the news as the theft happened on Christmas Eve and was reported in a succinct footnote on December 27. The article contributed the purloining of every manuscript in Faber and Faber’s London office to Kureishi’s “cult” status as a popular author and that the copies would be discreetly “laundered” by certain bookshops. Considering that the novel’s subject matter, although not its content, were known to be on a still highly sensitive subject, attributing the theft to black marketers is questionable. Unfortunately, there is only a solitary reporting of the robbery in the media, it is not mentioned in any interviews with Kureishi, nor in any of the literature about his work. It is therefore unclear whether or not if the religious advisers read the book before or after the theft. *The Times* December 27, 1994.

Then we fuck around for six months before we start shooting. Then we shoot. Then we edit it. Then we put it out. It wouldn't be out for two years, at least two years. Maybe three years. And with a novel, two, three years, the same thing. As you know, *The Black Album* was at least three years. But short stories are like writing fucking postcards.<sup>341</sup>

Kureishi was motivated to write the story after reading about the troubles between Muslim fundamentalists in Brighton and their working-class neighbours.<sup>342</sup> Although inspired by an actual event, "My Son the Fanatic" continues Kureishi's *Black Album* style by never directly addressing specific political issues. Furthermore, by this point in Kureishi's career as a writer, his interest clearly changed to characters rather than events. While working on novels such as *The Black Album*, *Intimacy* (1998), *Gabriel's Gift* (2001), and *The Body* (2002), Kureishi published numerous short stories which have been collected in *Love in a Blue Time* (1997) and *Midnight All Day* (1999) and the overwhelming majority of these stories address personal relations between white characters with very little reference to politics. Perhaps it is not surprising that Kureishi's dissipating interest in politics corresponds to the fall of Margaret Thatcher.<sup>343</sup> Thatcher was the source of many of Kureishi's political diatribes in both his films and essays, especially "Finishing the Job" (1988). As he surmised during an interview in 1988;

...Thatcher has politicized a lot of people. For example, people like me who would be sort of decent liberal people who would want to stay at home and watch what you want on television, smoke dope and so on. What she has done is so extreme that you have to sort of come out and say: "We're going to have demonstrations. We're going to talk about this."<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Kaletta, p. 155.

<sup>342</sup> *The Los Angeles Times*, 25 June 1999.

<sup>343</sup> Margaret Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister on November 28, 1990.

<sup>344</sup> Kureishi, "A Londoner, But Not a Brit" p. 104-5.

Thus, the immediate medium of the short story enabled Kureishi to capture a specific moment in Britain, yet it lacked the political thrust of his earlier work as his artistic interests had shifted.

Clearly, Kureishi's conception of Islam is complex and still evolving. Rani Ranasinha, however, treats Kureishi's conception of Islam as homogenous and chastises it as being "circumscribed within narrow polarities."<sup>345</sup> Yet her argument reveals that she wants Kureishi to present "positive" images of Islam and fails to see the political arguments that Kureishi is making. Such a desire is woefully misplaced as Kureishi has always resisted being a "hired liar" for groups.<sup>346</sup> Ranasinha is correct to argue that Kureishi, with his reliance on urban and domestic issues, is unqualified to write about religion, but his concerns are still well-founded; Kureishi's secular approach should not be considered less valid than a religious one when dealing with a culturally sensitive topic.<sup>347</sup> Ranasinha also criticizes Kureishi for presenting "stereotypical portraits of British Asian Muslims" and for being circumscribed within narrow polarities.<sup>348</sup> It seems however, that Kureishi presents not polarities but rather binaries, as he has reduced the issues to either "Islamic" or "British" ones. Although there have been numerous criticisms of Kureishi's attempts to address Islam, no one has noted that Kureishi fails to make any specific distinction between the various branches of Islam. While Kureishi notes that there are differing *ideals* in Britain's Muslim community, he fails to address the regional distinctions. In fact, it has been suggested that the growing popularity of young South Asians define themselves as Muslim as it is a clear, definable term which

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<sup>345</sup> Ranasinha, p. 82.

<sup>346</sup> Kureishi's response to such views will be discussed in the conclusion.

<sup>347</sup> "Given his vaunted position on the radical fringes of London's urban culture, Kureishi is singularly ill equipped to give insight into a group which decries the lifestyle he cherishes." From Ranasinha, p. 88.

allows them to distance themselves from their parent's regional variation of Islam, and thus enable them to connect easily with other Muslims as they will all have a clearly defined identity.<sup>349</sup> While the *Black Album* comments on some of the variations in the Muslim community, within Kureishi's non-fiction he merely presents ideological differences in the broadest of terms.

Throughout Kureishi's various essays and interviews about Muslim issues he constantly refers to himself as Muslim. Yet the overwhelming criticism of how he addresses Islamic issues, as well as his predilection for describing them in western political terms certainly raise concerns about his self-presentation as Muslim. Kureishi is playing the "identity game" with religion, and in his last essay on Anglo-Islamic relations, he finally addresses the issue clearly.

I have often been asked how it's possible for someone like me to carry two quite different world-views within, of Islam and the west; not, of course, that I do. Once my uncle said to me with some suspicion: "You're not a Christian, are you?" "No," I said. "I'm an atheist." "So am I," he replied. "But I am still Muslim." "A Muslim atheist?" I said. "It sounds odd." He said: "Not as odd as being nothing, an unbeliever."<sup>350</sup>

Although his identification as an atheist may be recent decision, it often seemed clear in his writing that Kureishi held no firm religious beliefs. It is not, however, until he reflects on the September 2001 attacks that he openly declares himself as an atheist with no hint of any affinity to his father's religion. While many critics have seen his veiled atheism as a liability for discussing religious topics, and that he tends to address religious characters solely as zealous fundamentalists, Kureishi has a fairly simple response:

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<sup>348</sup> Ranasinha, p. 82.

<sup>349</sup> Jessica Jacobson. "Religion and Ethnicity: Dual and Alternative Sources of Identity Among Young British Pakistanis." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 20, Number 2, April 1997.

<sup>350</sup> Kureishi, "Sex and Secularity", p. ix-x.

Well I like to think that I do [show religion as having more than one aspect], and also in the film *My Son the Fanatic*, I like to feel that, in so far as I can, the characters are sympathetically portrayed. And that this is an argument worth having and there are points on both sides.

But I suppose that in the end I would betray the fact that I don't like fundamentalists, and fundamentalists don't like writers. So you know, there is going to be a kind of animosity between us from the start. But it's an argument worth having and it's worth engaging with the fundamentalists. And I would want them to engage with me too. But it's difficult.

But I try.<sup>351</sup>

After writing *The Black Album* Kureishi figured that he had written all he could on Britain's racial issues and in the last decade he has hardly addressed the issue which brought him fame. Although there have been a few short stories with Asian characters, they have dwindled into the background, and all of his recent films have a predominantly white cast. Upon reflection, it seems that of all the films, *My Son the Fanatic* is perhaps the most important as it informs the audience about the future interaction between Britain and its immigrant population. The topics addressed in the earlier films were either self-contained as they are expressions about neo-fascism or post-colonial arrogance. In *My Son the Fanatic*, however, Kureishi presents a topic that the West attempted to ignore: fundamentalism. In the introduction to his *Collected Screenplays*, Kureishi reflects on how initially *My Son the Fanatic* was not considered to have any interest to the public due to its subject matter. Yet by the time Kureishi's reflective opening, "Sex and Secularity" was written in November 2001, both Britain and the rest of the Western world was suddenly acutely aware to the danger of ignoring and misunderstanding the new "fundamentalist" strain of Islam.

Just as Orwell wrote about what he saw as the qualities of "Englishness" in "England my England," Kureishi presents his views on Islam in Britain in *My Son the*

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<sup>351</sup> Interview with Kureishi, p. 54.

*Fanatic*. Yet they are a very biased view, and the film could almost be dubbed “Islam my Islam” as Kureishi shows a generalized depiction of Muslims from his own very “English” viewpoint. Kureishi may not address all of the nuances behind fundamentalism, and is arguably biased towards the liberal perspective in his analysis, but the film is a serious attempt to convey the ideals of a group which has increasingly turned away from Western ideals – ideals which Kureishi, regardless of his numerous grumblings about Britain’s hypocrisy towards them, holds quite deeply.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

While visiting in Karachi in 1984, Kureishi was told at a local party that “we are Pakistanis, but you, you will always be a Paki – emphasizing the slang derogatory name the English used against Pakistanis, and therefore the fact that I couldn’t rightfully lay claim to either place.”<sup>352</sup> Even though his films document how Anglo-Pakistanis have troubles “fitting in” in Britain, it seems that Hanif and others would not be accepted in their “homeland” either.

Kureishi’s films *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *My Son the Fanatic* have shown the complex struggle of Britain’s South Asians to be accepted in their new homeland. Issues surrounding immigration, economic prosperity, the National Front, inner-city riots, gentrification, Enoch Powell, pop culture, and Islamic fundamentalism have been used to show the important issues facing Pakistanis and Indians in Britain. Even though these issues are *represented* they are not necessarily *representative* as Kureishi’s depictions frequently fail to conform to a common experience. His films are a mediation between historical events and cultural trends in the medium of film. To see Omar or Karim as representative of all young South Asian or “half-caste” men would imply that “all” South

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<sup>352</sup> Kureishi, “The Rainbow Sign”, p. 81.

Asian men are bi-sexual. Furthermore, characters such as the brothers Hussein and Nasser can be seen as common stock characters within the English literary canon as they represent contesting political ideals – one is a capitalist, while the other is a socialist. Nor should it be assumed that they are simply Pakistani, or that they are the final representation for this group. The difficulty in analysing them is that it was not until the 1980s, that Asian issues began to filter into the British mainstream media.

After *My Beautiful Laundrette* received a hostile reception from the Pakistani community, Kureishi complained to Jewish novelist Philip Roth about the difficulties in presenting minorities. Kureishi notes Roth's reaction to his own difficulties with the Jewish community which he fictionalized in *The Ghost Writer*. When the protagonist Nathan writes a story about a family feud, his father reacts against the portrayal of Jewish people.

When Nathan protests that they are in Newark, not Germany, father seeks a second opinion, that of Judge Leopold Wapter. Wapter immediately applies the literary acid test which he believes every Jewish book must endure: will the story warm the heart of Joseph Gobbels? The result is ... positive. So, why, why, screams Wapter, in a story with a Jewish background, must there be adultery, incessant fighting within a family over money and warped human behaviour in general?

What Wapter's Complaint demands is 'positive images'. It requires useful lies and cheering fictions: the writer as public relations officer, as hired liar.<sup>353</sup>

To which Kureishi responds:

My answer to such ideas, is that I cannot do PR for special groups of people. No artist who has any integrity can ever do that. You can't create ideal types, you have to ask questions. I suppose I'm a chronicler of British society of the Seventies and Eighties or of the world that I know, and my job as a writer is to tell the truth as I see it, not to tell lies in order to appease special interest groups. Of course it may be polemical to write about anything at all – just describing things may be illuminating to other people in society.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Kureishi, "Some Time with Stephen: A Diary", *Dreaming and Scheming* . p. 132.

<sup>354</sup> *The Times*, April 3, 1990.

As Bart Moore-Gilbert notes, Kureishi is addressing the state of England just as Charles Dickens, TS Eliot, and George Orwell did before him. He is showing that what it is to be English is changing. Kureishi does not identify himself as an Anglo-Pakistani, just as Karim never shows himself as an Anglo-Indian, but rather as an Englishman. Being English no longer relies on one's skin colour or "where you're from," but rather is presented as a title which anyone who wants it can freely take up and struggle with the term however they see fit. As this thesis has shown, his films are not precise reflections of South Asian life in Britain. Although they are not accurate, this is not to suggest that the films are unsuitable documents for historical analysis. What they lack in details, they make up for in, that vague but incredibly important term, *essence*. It would be similar to criticizing *Catcher in the Rye* as not being representational because few people attended private schools. But, like *Catcher in the Rye*, Kureishi's films capture the essence of the period, how it affects people, and how these characters move through not only the time in which they live, but also, how these different families struggle with a changing ideal of what it means to be English. Nor should Kureishi's work be taken as a hermetically sealed document about South Asian life. Rather he should be seen as part of the vanguard of writers dealing, not simply with the South Asian Diaspora, but of their children and how they negotiate their place in England. As Kureishi said, "I like to think of myself as one of a number of writers who are describing the immigrant experience, and the contemporary results of it. I hope that there'll be a flowering of new black and Asian writers to bring new life to British writing."<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> *The Times*, April 3, 1990.

Perhaps the final scene of *My Son the Fanatic* provides the perfect summary of Kureishi's South Asian films. While the pop music plays "Please Send Me Someone to Love," Parvez wanders from room to room in his house turning on every light, until finally settling at the top of the stairs where he unceremoniously sits down, pours a glass of scotch and sits reflecting on what has happened. Like Parvez, Kureishi has turned the light onto the rooms in English households that were dark for so long, with probing insight, a sober yet perverse perspective, and a unique sense of charm.

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