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# 1

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## INTRODUCTION: KUREISHI IN CONTEXT

When Hanif Kureishi was born in 1954, Britain was still recovering from the devastating economic and social consequences of the Second World War. His childhood and adolescence saw British culture regain confidence and influence in the 1960s, with the emergence of an individualistic counterculture and the worldwide popularity of musicians such as The Beatles. The 1970s, however, were marred – in Britain and elsewhere – by economic stagnation, labour strife and instability, with the result that most of the political promise of the 1960s’ ethic of self-fulfilment was discredited. This situation produced three successive Conservative administrations in Britain, run by two Prime Ministers: Margaret Thatcher (who served two terms) and John Major. Thatcher especially fought the unions, privatized the state-owned industries she saw as inefficient, and allowed the British pound to lose value at a rate that alarmed many. Kureishi was one of many Britons who found themselves feeling both threatened and stimulated by the Thatcher-dominated 1980s and early 1990s, and his fiction deals primarily with these periods. The late 1990s and 2000s, when Tony Blair’s centrist Labour Party (elected in 1997) has been overwhelmingly dominant, have been less inspiring as fodder for political commentary.

Kureishi’s lifetime has seen a number of intense cultural and demographic changes in British society, perhaps the most notable being the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from South Asia and the Caribbean, and the increasing visibility and self-confidence of their communities. Being the son of such an immigrant,

Kureishi has to some degree been forced into the role of commentator on the phenomenon of immigration and its long-term effects, and readily admits that his initial willingness to play this role meant that he profited from being a member of a visible minority in Britain. In an interview with Colin MacCabe, Kureishi describes his dealings with the media: '[T]hey were liberal. And they needed an Asian, and I was the Asian' (MacCabe 40). Nevertheless, Kureishi's own experience as the child of a middle-class, white-collar family has been very different from that of many minorities in England (most of whom arrived without his father Rafiushan Kureishi's education and have remained working-class). This singularity means that his work differs substantially from that of postcolonial authors such as Salman Rushdie, Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, and Zadie Smith, with which it is frequently compared. Whereas these writers often critique Western culture (implicitly or explicitly) from a non-Western perspective, Kureishi has largely accepted its traditions (though he frequently satirizes the excesses they can lead to). In Susie Thomas's words, 'Unlike Salman Rushdie ... or V.S. Naipaul ... [Kureishi] is not a displaced postcolonial writing *back* to the centre; he writes *from* the centre' (Thomas 1). Thus Kureishi adopts some classically Western theories as narratives that have informed his own life, among them the Freudian idea of the Oedipus complex (often mocked as a specifically Western obsession), which will be discussed in depth in later chapters.

Because of the increasingly obvious uniqueness of Kureishi's cultural and political position as a fully Westernized child of an immigrant father, recent critics have turned away from viewing Kureishi in terms of postcolonialism. For instance, Bruce King argues persuasively that 'it is difficult to understand why postcolonialism should be applied to ... someone writing about ... life in England and the difficulties of accepting life's limitations' ('Abdulrazak Gurnah and Hanif Kureishi: Failed Revolutions' 93). In relation to his previously assumed allegiance to Rushdie's globalizing viewpoint, as Peter Hitchcock writes in his article 'Decolonizing (the) English', 'The work of Hanif Kureishi, while indebted to Rushdie's in important ways, complicates the tokenist assumptions of cosmopolitanism by foregrounding hybridity yet questioning its role as the nirvana of subjectivity' (755). In a similar vein Hitchcock remarks on the potential for isolation in Kureishi's

stance, noting that while Kureishi displays no nostalgia for life in his family's ancestral homeland, his life in England is plagued by an 'apparent rootlessness' which implies that 'he is effectively rejected by both sides' (756). Such rhetoric can seem hyperbolic, but it has a certain truth. Similarly, although King's assertion that 'Kureishi was not concerned with matters of decolonization, migration, exile and cultural conflict' ('Abdulrazak Gurnah' 89) is contestable (and in some instances demonstrably untrue), King makes the valid point that on the whole Kureishi's work is more concerned with other, less typically postcolonial problems.

Thus the central features of Kureishi's depiction of English life are arguably not based on stable racial or ethnic identities but instead on the blurring of class boundaries, the rise of feminism, the emergence of gay and lesbian movements, and the institutionalization and commercialization of youth culture and popular music, as well as an increased postmodern awareness of the arbitrariness and contingency of identity (be it racial, religious, or cultural). Thus Kureishi sees identity both as 'performative' and as subject to 'active negotiation' (Hitchcock 757), and his work chronicles not a straightforward clash of fixed identities but a complex interplay of many cultural movements. Such a project precludes simple political allegiances or old-fashioned displays of commitment or sincerity, as for Kureishi 'earnestness is a pathetically unimaginative mode of responding to ideological opposition' ('Abdulrazak Gurnah' 85). Irony is Kureishi's most reliable trope, and he evinces scepticism about the capacity of any group or ideology to effect lasting or meaningful change. Bruce King notes that 'there is a tension in Kureishi's work between the enterprising individual's desires and the comforts and security of family and the communal' ('Abdulrazak Gurnah' 91). In his early work, Kureishi's sympathy seems to lie with the individual in such situations, though this orientation can be seen to change as his fiction develops, and as he loses his initial faith in the power of youth to gratify all desires.

Indeed, the mature Kureishi becomes ambivalent about the emergence of self-consciously marginal identities that seem to threaten any universalizing, humanistic worldview. As the narrator of *The Black Album* observes, 'These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew ... as if without a tag they wouldn't be human' (*Album* 102). Such pronouncements have prompted Bruce King to exclaim that *The*

*Black Album* is a plea for real literature . . . and, yes, even England, in contrast to those who regard them with scorn as the products of elitism, liberal decadence, and racist imperialism' ('Abdulrazak Gurnah' 92). To some extent, King's argument is sound: Kureishi's fiction does suggest that because of the unnecessarily isolationist, antagonistic stances of identity theorists, humanity has become fragmented into artificially oppositional categories. For Kureishi, our differences – be they due to gender, psychological makeup, geography, religion or age – are less significant than they might seem. (Hence his acceptance, in the interview chapter of this book, of the unfashionable label 'humanist'.) In Kureishi's fiction, this stance increasingly takes the form of a critique of the leftist, supposedly progressive movements of the late twentieth century, and a nostalgia for a more stable, unified culture. While it is true that, as Bruce King notes, 'Kureishi's plays and screenplays of the 1980s were part of an angry response to Thatcher's government and its dismantling of the Welfare State', King's observation that 'Kureishi felt the excesses of the Left . . . were partly responsible for England's problems' ('Abdulrazak Gurnah' 89) is perhaps more germane to his fiction.

It is therefore possible to portray Kureishi as both a victim of and a participant in the postwar backlash against immigrant and civil rights movements. In 'The Rainbow Sign', Kureishi reveals: 'In the mid-1960s, Pakistanis were a risible subject in England . . . I tried to deny my Pakistani self . . . I read with understanding a story in a newspaper about a black boy who, when he noticed that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water' (*Laundrette* 73). In a similar passage from *The Black Album*, the protagonist Shahid confesses that he too has internalized the racism he had encountered in his youth: 'My mind was invaded by killing-nigger fantasies . . . going around abusing Pakis, niggers, Chinks, Irish, any foreign scum . . . The thought of sleeping with Asian girls made me sick' (*Album* 18–19). Such racism is not confined to the characters, however; the novel's impersonal narrator jokes that Shahid's college, whose racial makeup is 'sixty percent black and Asian', has a reputation for 'gang rivalries, drugs, thieving, and political violence' and holds its reunions in Wandsworth Prison (32).

Although Kureishi suggests that his own encounters with racism (being beaten by white classmates and called 'Pakistani Pete' by a teacher, for example) were responsible for most of the

internalized racism that occasionally comes out in his work, he seems less interested in exploring this aspect of his own character or in placing blame on English people in general than in exploring the class issues raised by racial divisions. Few critics have taken the cue and tackled the connections between race and class in Kureishi's work, but those who have done so seem to agree that the issues are intertwined. Nahem Yousaf argues that Kureishi's 'hybridised citizens' and their 'cultural identities' are 'inextricably linked with class politics' ('Hanif Kureishi and "The Brown Man's Burden"' 17). Others, such as Bart Moore-Gilbert, note Kureishi's 'perception that ... the most immediate and violent expressions of racism have tended to emerge from working-class formations' (*Hanif Kureishi* 10). Most critics, however, have steered clear of such questions, in part because of the complex issues they raise.

Perhaps the most obviously disconcerting feature of Kureishi's class-consciousness is his view that racial solidarity between immigrants is made problematic by persistent class antagonisms; for instance, Kureishi attempts to contextualize some of his South Asian characters' contempt for their fellow immigrants when he notes: 'The Pakistani middle class shared the disdain of the British for the émigré working class and peasantry of Pakistan' (*Laundrette* 92). Yet Kureishi implicitly concedes that his own upbringing in a lower-middle-class household, under the eyes of an educated father with a white-collar job, may have produced some of the dismissive attitudes his characters evince. Kureishi speaks for the lower middle classes when, in 'Some Time with Stephen', he asserts: 'There is great lower-middle-class snobbery, contempt for the working class and envy of the middle class' (*Dreaming* 170). Kureishi himself is not, however, totally unsympathetic to those who share his class origins, as we see when he depicts the unfairly narrow social and intellectual expectations placed upon lower-middle-class children. In his view: 'This is partly what it means to be lower middle-class ... the notion of who you can be, is severely limited. It is the Other who are qualified to receive the good things. Being articulate wasn't a virtue; it was regarded with suspicion' (*My Ear* 130). Yet Kureishi's right to speak for (or about) any given class has been controversial; Bart Moore-Gilbert notes that Kureishi has been denounced as a 'middle-class exploiter' of working-class struggles (*Hanif Kureishi* 16).

Notwithstanding such critiques, Rita Felski has made a persuasive case that in Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the Amir family belongs squarely to the lower middle class, and her depictions of the unappealing characteristics of this class are readily applicable to many of Kureishi's families: 'Lower-middle-classness is ... a "cage of umbrellas and steely regularity" [26], marked by respectability, rigidity and gray routine ... guilt about money, anxiety about status, and fear of the neighbors' disapproval' ('Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class' 37). Felski also notes that 'the social life of the lower middle class is almost nonexistent, since the ubiquitous English pub is considered vulgar, working class' (37). Felski has argued that in the mid and late twentieth century, the lower middle class, as portrayed by authors such as George Orwell, 'inhabits a world that is almost completely lacking in spontaneity, sensuality or pleasure' (36) and is often associated with racism (42). The lower middle class is also a largely feminized social group, according to Felski, in that its 'peculiar joylessness' is 'most vividly embodied' in 'female characters' (36) and because 'many of the values and attitudes traditionally associated with the lower middle-class are also identified with women: domesticity, prudery, aspirations towards refinement' (42). Thus we may well understand the wanderlust of Kureishi's protagonists as a response to the fact that, as Felski remarks, 'the lower middle class is ... associated with the triumph of suburban values and the symbolic castration of men' (43). No doubt defending his decision to escape this castrating class straightjacket, Kureishi himself has asserted that 'there should be a fluid, non-hierarchical society with free movement between classes' and predicts that 'these classes will eventually be dissolved' (*Dreaming* 145).

To say the least, the class politics of Kureishi's texts (like those of Kureishi's own life) are complex. For instance, in *The Buddha of Suburbia* Karim's family represents an ambiguous mixture of class identities. His mother Margaret was 'a pretty working-class girl from the suburbs' when Karim's father Haroon met her (*Buddha* 25), but by virtue of her marriage, she becomes a pillar of the lower middle class. For his part, Haroon is a displaced Indian aristocrat who has taken up a marginal position in the British civil service. Karim sketches his father's (and his uncle Anwar's) privileged upbringing with an envious air: 'They went to school in a horse-drawn rickshaw. At weekends they played cricket ... The servants

would be ballboys ... Dad had had an idyllic childhood, and ... I often wondered why he'd condemned his own son to a dreary suburb of London' (*Buddha* 23). Haroon's exalted ancestry not only torments the downtrodden Karim, but also seems to cement the family's isolation and immobility. As Karim recounts, 'If Mum was irritated by Dad's aristocratic uselessness, she was also proud of his family. "They're higher than the Churchills", she said to people ... This would ensure that there would be no confusion between Dad and the swarms of Indian peasants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s' (*Buddha* 24). In this respect, Margaret's own race- and class-consciousness seems to be to blame for Karim's sense of being an outcast. It also arguably reflects a wider social phenomenon that Kureishi himself encountered: snobbish scorn for the mass of non-white immigrants in Britain.

Karim is never made to feel at home in the lower-middle-class milieu either. Part of the problem lies in the social limitations placed on such groups; Kureishi paints a bitter picture of the education Karim is afforded as a lower-middle-class youth: 'all my Dad thought about was me becoming a doctor. What world was he living in? Every day I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury' (63). Yet Karim also denounces lower-middle-class youth culture itself for its complicity in this culture of reduced expectations, and portrays it as a ghettoizing obstacle to his improvement: 'We were proud of never learning anything except the names of footballers, the personnel of rock groups and the lyrics of "I Am the Walrus". What idiots we were!' (*Buddha* 178). In this depressing environment, the winds of political change seem rather bracing, and they come in the shape of Haroon's lover (and eventual second wife) Eva Kay. Eva is Kureishi's embodiment of Thatcherite ideals and capitalist energies, and she provides a stark contrast to the self-pitying inertia of Margaret.

The respective symbolic positions of these two women seem to be Kureishi's clearest commentary on the surprising virtues of Thatcherite ruthlessness. Eva is a 'glorious middle-aged woman, clever and graceful' (*Buddha* 261) who has finally completely transcended her earlier middle-class status: 'There was nothing suburban about her; she'd risen above herself ...' (*Buddha* 261). During one interview, Eva embarks on a curious political speech in which she parrots Thatcherite ideas about individual initiative and self-reliance: 'We have to empower ourselves. Look at those people

who live on sordid housing estates. They expect others – the Government – to do everything for them. They are only half human, because only half active. We have to find a way to enable them to grow' (*Buddha* 263). Furthermore, when Eva and Haroon announce their engagement, the news of 'who was going to be the next Prime Minister' (i.e., Margaret Thatcher) makes everyone at the family party 'ecstatic' (*Buddha* 282). Plainly, both Eva's desires and her political values have triumphed, to Karim's satisfaction; he gloats at his newfound 'money-power' (*Buddha* 283) and rejoices at the fact that (despite their difficulties) Eva and Haroon are to be married.

For her part, Margaret seems to be symbolic of the generally downtrodden tenor of working-class British life in the late seventies and early eighties. After Haroon leaves her, however, she loses weight and embarks on a campaign of intellectual self-improvement. Her transformation reinforces Karim's own ethic of self-centredness; tasks that were once a 'chore' for her when she and Haroon were together (*Buddha* 144) cease to be so now, since she's doing them for herself. One could also see a justification of Thatcherite 'tough love' behind Haroon's abandonment of Margaret; she is portrayed as an inefficient organism who responds favourably to a challenge. The novel thus conveys a major message of the 1980s milieu in which Kureishi was writing; when *The Buddha of Suburbia* was published in 1990, the Conservative Party was still in power, and their ideology of self-improvement and individual responsibility still seemed dominant.

Kureishi also offers us a comic version of British history in Karim's career, which arguably begins with an echo of the long, bitter labour disputes of the 1970s and 1980s. In a brief negotiation with Eva, Karim demands equal wages for himself and Eleanor, and Eva agrees, but only on the condition that both of their wages be 'reduced by twenty-five percent' (*Buddha* 206). This faint echo of a major social crisis is extremely ironic, in that Karim soon becomes a happy worker, soothed by music and fast food, despite the fact that Eva is plainly exploiting him and Eleanor. As if to show that British society rewards such unquestioning industriousness, Karim soon converts his pop-culture savvy into rapid fame as an actor and exults: 'I enjoyed being recognized in the pub afterwards, and made myself conspicuous in case anyone wanted my autograph' (*Buddha* 158). Karim still faces two obstacles to his quest to

overcome his class limitations and social conscience: his friend Terry and his cousin Jamila. Karim confesses his liking for the Marxist Terry, but in terms that reveal his contempt: 'we talked every day. But he did believe the working class – which he referred to as if it were a single-willed person – would do some unlikely things. "The working class will take care of those bastards very easily," he said, referring to racist organizations' (*Buddha* 149). Terry's naïveté where race is concerned annoys Karim, in part because of Jamila's struggles against working-class racism as a woman of colour. Terry's profession as an actor also leads him to betray his basic political values and become a hypocrite: his major professional success comes in the role of a policeman, an authority figure who props up the political structure Terry professes to despise. Jamila is less easily exposed as a fake, but Kureishi does suggest that Jamila's originally class-based anti-racist politics have become socially irrelevant when she retreats from the real world of her working-class neighbourhood into a commune. Against the backdrop of Jamila's principled retreat from society, Karim's own success looks suspiciously like a bargain with the devil. Nevertheless, although both Terry and Jamila display some admirable traits, they are decisively marginalized by the end of the book, suggesting that they are excluded from the main narrative of recent British history, unlike Karim, who witnesses the unlikely engagement of the immigrant guru Haroon to the Thatcherite Eva (a prospective marriage that echoes the pro-business message of Kureishi's film *My Beautiful Laundrette*).

There are some important links between the cultural and social commentaries of *The Buddha of Suburbia* and those in *The Black Album*. Though less admirable than Eva, Shahid's older brother Chili is also a typical product of the excesses of the 1980s. As the narrator notes: 'money had come too easily to Chili in the 1980s. He didn't respect where it came from' (*Album* 63). Moreover, like Thatcherites gaining inspiration from Ronald Reagan's conservatism, Chili looks to America for models of how to succeed as a member of a minority culture. His heroes, however, are the gangsters glorified in *The Godfather* and other movies about the Italian-American mafia. Kureishi's juxtaposition of Shahid with such hyper-masculine figures makes Shahid seem especially effeminate; even Shahid's father sees his son as a 'bloody eunuch fool' (*Album* 61) for failing to live up to their example. Through Chili, the

narrator articulates a philosophy that sounds very much like Eva's (and Thatcher's): 'people were weak and lazy ... people resisted change, even if it would improve their lives; they were afraid, complacent, lacking courage. This gave the advantage to someone of initiative and will' (*Album* 60). Chili's sexual aggression sets him apart from these two feminine figures, however: 'Chili called himself a predator. When a woman offered herself – it was the most satisfying moment. Often, it wasn't even necessary to sleep with her. A look in her eyes, of eagerness, gladness, acquiescence, was sufficient' (*Album* 60). Like a rapist, Chili does not covet sex as much as he covets control and mastery over women. This tendency, however, is checked by his wife Zulma, who, like Chili, is both 'arch-Thatcherite' in her politics and aggressive in her emotional relationships (*Album* 97).

Kureishi comments on the essential futility of the Left in modern Britain through *The Black Album*'s Andrew Brownlow, a stuttering upper-middle-class twit turned academic class warrior. Despite (or perhaps because of) this pedigree, Brownlow cannot even utter a word in his initial appearance, though he is shown being 'collectively willed' to speak and 'working his mouth, and thumping himself on the side of the head as if to repair a connection' (*Album* 39). Flustered by his stammer, Brownlow merely shakes hands with everyone and leaves, as if to underscore the Left's inability to articulate anything of relevance to young Britons. His stutter, we learn, is linked to the fact that leftist ideology has apparently been discredited by history, since, as Shahid's friend 'Hat' remarks: 'He been developing this s-s-s-stutter ... it come on since the Communist states of Eastern Europe began collapsing. As each one goes over he gets another syllable on his impediment' (*Album* 40). Brownlow's upper-middle-class identity seems to disqualify him from cultural relevance, although he is given some redeeming features, such as his anti-racism.

The inheritor of Brownlow's academic and social mantle is his wife, Deedee Osgood, who seduces Shahid and leads him on a whirlwind tour of London's intellectual and sexual demimonde. As a former sex worker and lower-class student, Deedee's working-class credentials are impeccable, and yet she dismisses Brownlow's preoccupation with 'politics' on the grounds that 'It all makes you feel guilty' (*Album* 66), and she turns to drugs such as Ecstasy, which she asks Shahid to share with her. In a telling

moment, Deedee celebrates her discovery of a 'perfect venue for a house party' by quoting Coleridge: 'A savage place! as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon lover' (72). The juxtaposition of Deedee's educated delight and the joy of the 'runty' working-class youth who is seen proclaiming 'E for the people. Up the working class!' (72) makes the point that drugs are a way to bring aesthetic bliss and Dionysian excitement to the masses, who cannot attain Deedee's level of literary sophistication. This democratization of a once-aristocratic privilege is not as harmless as it might seem, however, as we infer from the fact that Shahid sees drugged-out 'kids ... lying on the floor not moving ... as if they'd been massacred' (73).

Perhaps attuned to this destructive undertone, Shahid soon rejects the pretence of academic curiosity that authorizes Deedee's interest in the drug and rave subculture, and turns to a more down-to-earth working-class drug dealer nicknamed Strapper. At first, Strapper's life in the drug subculture affords Shahid a glimpse of the absolute solidarity that class-based political awareness once promised falsely. Yet, paradoxically, Strapper covets the more legitimate, above-board brand names of the consumer culture whose core values he embodies: 'Strapper saw lads his age in Armani, Boss, Woodhouse; he glanced into the road and saw broad BMWs, gold-colored Mercs, and turquoise turbo-charged Saab convertibles ... . None of this would be his – ever. It just wouldn't be. It didn't make sense' (*Album* 209). Indeed, in Kureishi's eyes, as in Strapper's, there is no distinction between the acceptable signs of material wealth under capitalism and illegal drugs.

Given these equivalent and extreme choices, Islamic fundamentalism seems a reasonable alternative, at least as it is initially represented in *The Black Album*, where Kureishi puts a number of strong indictments of Western culture into the mouths of his Muslim characters. For instance, Shahid's friend Chad warns Shahid about becoming involved in this seductive secular culture, claiming that he had once been like Shahid, controlled 'by the music and fashion industries' (*Album* 89). Chad goes on to link music and clothes to drugs, and testifies to his own addictions to cocaine, LSD and heroin. Kureishi portrays the rise of Islamic fundamentalism among young Pakistanis as a youthful movement of rebellion against a decadent, thrill-seeking, and

Westernized older generation: 'While their parents would drink bootleg whiskey and watch videos sent from England, Shahid's young relatives and their friends gathered in the house on Fridays before going to pray' (*Album* 101). Kureishi understands the motives behind this religious rebellion and sympathizes with the Muslim impulse to reject the excesses of the West, but his underlying hostility to Islam's sacred text comes across clearly in his non-fictional writings, as when he observes: 'Open the Koran on almost any page and there is a threat' (*Dreaming* 218). Muslim fanaticism is also corrupted by racial antipathy; as he writes, 'I saw the taking up of Islam as an aberration, a desperate fantasy of world-wide black brotherhood' (*Laundrette* 79).

Kureishi does not, however, ignore the racial prejudices that motivate much Muslim extremism in Britain. For instance, the intransigence of working-class racism is underscored when Shahid confronts an angry woman, a denizen of the miserable 'mildewed flats' (as he unwisely reminds her [*Album* 149]) who hurls racist epithets at him: 'Paki! Paki! Paki! ... You stolen our jobs! Taken our housing! Paki got everything! Give it back and go back home!' (*Album* 149). Thus, in the eyes of some of Kureishi's non-white characters, racial solidarity is called for, even if it must take place under the dubious umbrella of religious fanaticism. Indeed, Kureishi seems to posit that religion can sometimes provide a needed defence for British Asians; as we see in *Buddha*, the only thing that saves Jamila's husband Changez when he is attacked by racists is 'his Muslim warrior's call' (*Buddha* 224). In fact, we see an important shift in Kureishi's picture of racial resistance when Jamila's secular, class-based anti-racist militancy in *Buddha* is reborn in *The Black Album* as Riaz's fundamentalist combativeness: 'We're not blasted Christians ... . We don't turn the other cheek. We will fight for our people' (*Album* 92). Shahid, still smarting from the racism he has endured, identifies with Riaz (at least for a time), and feels 'a physical pride in their cause' (*Album* 93).

Shahid ends up in conflict with his Islamic friends, partly because of the controversy provoked by the reaction of many Muslims to the appearance of an unnamed controversial novel (presumably *The Satanic Verses*, which was published in 1988). Rushdie's depiction of the prophet Muhammad as a fallible and inconsistent leader provoked outrage and book-burning protests

in Britain as well as in many parts of the Muslim world, and in 1990 the Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* calling for Rushdie's death. Kureishi evidently deplores such extreme reactions to a literary text, and Shahid does not participate wholeheartedly in the demonstrations against the embattled author. Shahid also differs from his fellow Muslims depicted in *Album* precisely because he is inclined to view the debate over the disputed novel in a racial context rather than in a purely religious one. Shahid tries to minimize the writer's alleged guilt as a slanderer of Islam, reminding Chad and Farhat that 'this man ... hasn't spat on us or refused us a job. He never called you Paki scum, did he?' (*Album* 229). Thus through Shahid, Kureishi tries to remind his fellow non-white Britons of the need for racial solidarity, which (in his view) ought to overcome religious intolerance.

As the complexity of these texts suggests, Kureishi's overall political orientation is somewhat ambiguous. On one level, he is a card-carrying liberal who professes a moral mistrust of capitalism ('I still think of businessmen as semi-criminals' [*Dreaming* 145]) and deplores what he sees as the Conservative Party's racist and misanthropic agenda; Kureishi recalls hearing Margaret Thatcher say that 'To pursue pleasure for its own sake was wrong' (*My Beautiful Laundrette* 116). Yet Kureishi also complains that 'The Left, in its puritanical way, has frequently dismissed pop as capitalist pap' (*Laundrette* 118), suggesting that his allegiance to popular culture is more important to him than any stable ideological position. Moreover, as we have seen, he has created characters who embody some of what he sees as the positive aspects of Thatcher's influence on an otherwise moribund British culture. Indeed, if we look at the rest of Kureishi's fiction, we can see that Thatcherism is the single most important political ideology in his characters' lives, having outlived Marxism, racial solidarity and feminism.

For instance, the narrator of 'In a Blue Time', the first story of the volume *Love in a Blue Time*, describes the 'mid-eighties' as a time when 'everything had been forced forward with a remorseless velocity' and makes it clear that Roy, the story's protagonist, participated fully in the decade's unapologetic materialism: 'Roy had cancelled his debts to anyone whose affection failed to yield interest' (*Love* 3). Roy's excesses as a consumer in the 1980s seem to rival Chili's:

... at the height of the decade money had gushed through his account ... he drank champagne rather than beer ... he used cocaine and took taxis from one end of Soho to the other five times a day ... The manic entrepreneurialism, prancing individualism, self-indulgence and cynicism appealed to him as nothing had for ten years. (*Love* 15)

This description seems negative enough to sour us on Roy, but it is followed by a more attractive picture of the new and invigorating honesty of eighties culture:

Pretence was discarded. Punk disorder and nihilism ruled. Knowledge, tradition, decency and the lip service paid to equality; socialist holiness, talk of 'principle', student clothes, feminist absurdities, and arguments defending regimes – 'flawed experiments' – that his friends wouldn't have been able to live under for five minutes: such pieties were trampled with a Nietzschean pitilessness. It was galvanizing. (*Love* 15)

In Kureishi's depiction here, all the big ideas that once stood in the way of the Thatcherite vision of unrestrained capitalist exploitation have been cleared away: Marxism has been disproven by history, feminism has apparently been shown to be a collection of 'absurdities', and 'knowledge' has been deemed worthless.

Thatcherite ideals are also triumphant in 'Lately' from *Love in a Blue Time*. The initially detestable Vance stands for Thatcherite moralism and self-reliance, saying, 'These days people don't want to make moral judgements. They blame their parents, or society' (*Love* 156). Vance defends psychological repression and frustration, claiming that 'suppose we all did what we wanted the whole time. Nothing would get done' (*Love* 156). Vance is verbally abusive to his wife Karen and feels that Rocco, the story's protagonist, and Rocco's wife Lisa, are 'Typical of the sentimental unemployed' who 'think people are suffering because I've taken their money ... There's more and more of them about. People don't contribute. What we'll do with them is the problem of our time' (*Love* 165). Vance's credo is that 'Selfishness, wanting something for oneself, is the law of reality', though he tries to moderate his position by couching it in terms of trickle-down economics: 'But if I benefit, others will benefit' (*Love* 181). Plainly, Kureishi distrusts such self-serving rhetoric, but the only character who seems likely to oppose it is the contemptible Rocco, a disaffected bohemian

whose ethos is equally suspect. Rocco rationalizes his selfishness by blaming others for setting up arbitrary and vindictive rules: 'Other people wanted you to live lives as miserable as theirs. This they considered moral behaviour' (*Love* 176).

When the inevitable fight between the two antagonists happens, Rocco quickly collapses and urges Vance to 'Kick my head in' (*Love* 185). Initially, Vance tries to fight according to more gentlemanly rules, helping Rocco back to his feet and punching him squarely in the face. Rocco and Lisa decide to leave for London together, leaving Lisa's would-be lover Moon and Rocco's friend Bodger behind them. Vance takes all the credit for Rocco's change of heart where his marriage is concerned, telling Bodger that 'they've been wanting to get out for weeks. And I'm paying for it ... It's amazing, he's actually doing something' (*Love* 187). Given Vance's crucial intervention, he seems to be the most important and active character in the story, and ultimately the most admirable. We are told that Feather 'liked him in spite of his personality' (*Love* 157) and his reactions to Feather's broken finger, as well as to Rocco's recovery, show him to be capable of compassion. The story suggests that Kureishi, rather than hoping for some champion of the Left who might oppose Thatcherism with an effective alternative, merely hopes that the Right will evince some human compassion despite itself.

At first glance, Kureishi's novella *Intimacy* appears to be a rejection of Thatcherism; the protagonist Jay may be taken as a representative of mainstream British public opinion in the 1990s, which has finally abandoned the Thatcherite values of the 1980s and turned back to a nostalgic leftism that attempts to justify itself with a rhetoric of emancipation and self-fulfilment. Such a reading has a strong basis in the text; after all, Jay professes to despise capitalism as a social and psychological phenomenon: 'I never understood the elevation of greed as a political credo' (*Intimacy* 70). Yet Jay's analysis of his generation's leftist ideology seems more like a condemnation from Kureishi's own mouth: 'We were dismissive and contemptuous of Thatcherism, but so captivated by our own ideological obsessions that we couldn't see its appeal ... Some remained on the left; other retreated into sexual politics; some became Thatcherites. We were the kind of people who held the Labour Party back' (*Intimacy* 70). Indeed, leftist politics are seen as a mere prelude to the true vocation of Jay's age-group: 'we went on

the dole for five years in order to pursue our self-righteous politics, before starting work in the media and making a lot of money' (*Intimacy* 69). This portrait of a generation is really Jay's self-portrait, and we infer that he is the one who is the target of his puritanical wife's indictment:

Susan ... thinks we live in a selfish age. She talks of a Thatcherism of the soul that imagines that people are not dependent on one another. In love, these days, it is a free market; browse and buy, pick and choose, rent and reject, as you like. There's no sexual and social security; everyone has to take care of themselves, or not. Fulfilment, self-expression and 'creativity' are the only values. Susan would say that we require other social forms. What are they? Probably the unpleasant ones: duty, sacrifice, obligation to others, self-discipline. (*Intimacy* 68–9)

By rejecting these dour virtues, Jay allies himself with 'Thatcherism of the soul', quite clearly. He does his best to justify his decision, though, which suggests that Kureishi is still chastising himself for his earlier naïve affection for leftist causes.

*Gabriel's Gift* is perhaps Kureishi's least overtly political novel, yet it too contains some familiar, if oblique, commentaries on politics and culture. For instance, we are informed that Gabriel's mother had tried to 'become entrepreneurial' in the frenetic 1980s to keep up with the rest of the country, but her business, making party clothes for musicians and others, had failed to expand and she had fallen into debt (*Gift* 12). This failure seems at first to vindicate the shiftlessness of Gabriel's father Rex, a part-time musician and idealist whose lack of financial responsibility causes a rift in his marriage. Rex still idealizes the sixties, and pays lip service to the 'revolutionary struggle of making the world a better place, with free food and marijuana all round' (*Gift* 41), and he rationalizes the squalor in which he lives by critiquing the English obsession with property: 'They'd trade their souls for a sofa' (*Gift* 42). However, in an effort to win back his straying wife, Rex changes political and economic credos as the book progresses. Like many other Kureishi characters who once professed leftist radicalism, Rex has joined the Thatcherite movement, despite himself, as Gabriel notes: 'Along with ... other dependants and pseudo-servants, Dad had found a place at the table of the rich ... . If wealth was to "drip down", as people had been told it inevitably did, it would find its

level through Rex' (*Gift* 168). In becoming 'a businessman' (*Gift* 176), Rex has, in essence, grown up, telling Gabriel that 'I have to do my job, now that I have one' (*Gift* 170–1). Rex and his estranged wife Christine are reconciled, just as Eva and Haroon are engaged at the end of *Buddha*, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Thatcherism has proved to be extremely salutary to Kureishi's characters in both the financial realm and the familial one.

Yet even Kureishi's leftist critics would concede that he is capable of pointing out the ironies of all economic and social doctrines. For instance, Kureishi defends the young drug dealers portrayed in his work as 'incredibly enterprising' and wonders why they have been demonized by Tory politicians; after all, they are 'living out the Thatcherite dream' ('Requiem for a Rave' 12). Of course, Kureishi also condemns what he calls 'the old Left' for what he sees as its 'contempt for pop culture' which was based on the assumption that pop was 'capitalism in disguise' ('Requiem for a Rave' 11). In other words, leftists too have been guilty of insufficient love for the hedonistic youth culture they have been portrayed by the right as condoning and even encouraging.

Indeed, when we examine Kureishi's cultural politics carefully, we can see that Kureishi's real allegiances lie with a dynamic youth culture that he believes to be capable of cutting across political and class lines. He frequently depicts this phenomenon as the sole antidote to class imprisonment: 'For a lot of kids, Pop was the only hope for a creative, unpredictable life ... . Otherwise we were locked into the post-war vision of a controlled – married, of course – and secure life, the life my parents wanted to live' (*My Ear* 130). His work is a celebration of the creative energy of young people, and a suggestion of their power to inspire cultural (and, by extension, political and social) change:

These kids called themselves 'freaks', which was how I saw myself. They didn't, though, only want to watch Disney's *Fantasia* on acid ... but were thinking about what they would do in music, fashion, photography. They made me feel competitive, so that before getting into my velvet trousers, I'd do a couple of hours at the typewriter, trying to see what sort of stories I could make out of our lives, stories I hadn't seen in other people's books: teenage sex, overdoses, sadistic teachers, the weird lives of parents when perceived by children ... there is always something shocking and exhilarating about seeing the contemporary world in fiction. (*My Ear* 125)

Kureishi's own literary enterprise seems, in this passage, to be explained in terms of adolescent rivalry and imitative reflexes. Thus, if there is a source of hope for cultural progress in his work, it seems as if it is to be found in the young, whose relatively unsoftened perceptions and openness to new sensations, chemicals and ideas make them infinitely more interesting than older people.

Kureishi's latest novel, *The Body* (2002), in which a middle-aged man trades his body in for the gorgeous corpse of a younger man, is another eloquent testament to his abiding obsession with the power of youth, and another recognition of how central this power is to his conception of contemporary culture. The trouble is that Kureishi is beginning to recognize mortality (as he notes in the interview included in this book) and thus can't fully enjoy the heedlessness of youth. *The Body's* protagonist, initially (and fittingly) named Adam, suspects that 'to participate in the world with curiosity and pleasure, to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and informed' (*Body* 4); however, although Adam (or Leo, as he is known after his transformation) becomes younger in appearance, he never quite manages to become 'informed' enough to enjoy popular culture. As if to rationalize his detachment, he summarizes the fallen state of contemporary life: 'there was culture, now there is shopping' (*Body* 35). Although Adam/Leo is dissatisfied with what he calls 'book knowledge', he feels even more threatened by visual media: 'if I watch TV for too long I begin to feel hollow . . . I am no longer familiar with the pop stars, actors, or serials on TV. I'm never certain who the pornographic boy and girl bodies belong to' (*Body* 4). It is tempting to see Kureishi declaring his own ultimate allegiance to the printed word here, and disavowing his ventures into other media (films and plays especially) as inferior imitations; as Jay's friend Asif says in *Intimacy*, making fiction into films is akin to 'Turning gold into dross' (*Intimacy* 46).

In the end, though, Adam/Leo is content to use popular media such as television and films to justify the timeliness of his own decision to shed his old body in favour of a newer one; as he notes, the surgical procedure enabling 'old . . . men and women' to live vicariously in 'the bodies of the young' is merely a logical extension of the voyeuristic impulses behind popular culture (*Body* 12). Such self-serving hypocrisy where popular culture is concerned is a familiar trait in Kureishi's protagonists; they appropriate and

exploit in practice what they condemn in theory. This attitude is also visible in their political and racial attitudes; it is perhaps part of what Nahem Yousaf terms Kureishi's own 'apparently cynical hardiness' (*Body* 20), though perhaps we might more charitably conclude that it is more often a trait he consciously deploys and exposes in his characters in order to undermine its self-destructive consequences.

Kureishi's cultural politics (as exposed in *The Body* and elsewhere) may make him seem vulnerable to A. Sivanandan's indictment of post-New Left British intellectuals: 'The self that New Timers make so much play about is a small, selfish, inward-looking self that finds pride in lifestyle, exuberance in consumption and commitment in pleasure – and then elevates them all into a politics' (*Communities of Resistance* 5). Many of Kureishi's characters seem to fall into this category, as their creator seems increasingly to realize to his own amusement, annoyance and occasional sadness. Yet for Kureishi, our political lives – which concern our racial, religious, class and gender identities – matter much less than does the fact of being (or having once been) teenagers. Kureishi comes close to making youth into its own cultural ideology, albeit a provisional and self-consciously superficial one. Whether this is a satisfactory position for a writer whose work has been invested with such social and political significance is an open question, as the many critics with differing views cited in Chapter 8 of this book attest.

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