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The Buddha of Suburbia (I)

...A little context

‘Orientalism’ (Edward Said)

- Said (1935-2003) was a Palestinian-American Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University and a founding figure of the academic field of **postcolonial studies**, a term which was first used in 1990 to refer to the study of the political, linguistic and cultural experience(s) of former European colonies under colonization. **Since then**, it has **also** come to refer also to their cultural impact on European societies, e.g. through immigration.
- His groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978) was based principally on nineteenth-century representations of North Africa and the Middle East from English and French sources. He aimed to show that these representations/portrayals, strongly shaped by Imperialism, divided the world up into ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’.
- A so-called ‘**geographical essentialism**’ had produced ‘the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically “different” inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture or racial essence proper to that geographical space’ (Said, 1978: 322). **The West (primarily the Imperial European powers)** stands for (signifies) rationality, reasonableness, progress, science, democracy, masculinity; by contrast, **the East – the Orient, be it the Arab world, India or China** – stands (positively) for exoticism, romance, and a lost spirituality; but also (negatively) for cruelty; barbarity; despotism and irrationality; **and in a complex relation to these attributes**, it signifies cultural decadence, decline, and ‘the feminine’.

The late 1960s: social and cultural change

- The 1960s were a period of great social and cultural change throughout Europe and the US: the **'Summer of love' in San Francisco in 1967**, was followed by the protest movements of **1968**, which were targeted at conservative political and cultural elites throughout the world: the legacy of the protests is still much debated.
- However: after the drab austerity of the 1950s, the 1960s and 1970s saw significant changes in the social and class make-up of British society: the class system had been *somewhat* flattened during WWII, and there was an increasing desire, on the part of the working and lower-middle classes to question their places in the social hierarchy. **What are the respective class positions of Karim and Haroon; Charlie and Eva; Anwar and Jeeta; Eleanor; Matthew Pyke?**
- The Immigrant Act (1962) reduced Immigration from the Commonwealth; the Race Relations Act (1965) aimed to protect the rights of those already settled in Britain. **Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of blood' speech in 1968 inflamed inter-community tensions.**

The 1970s: the hangover after the party?

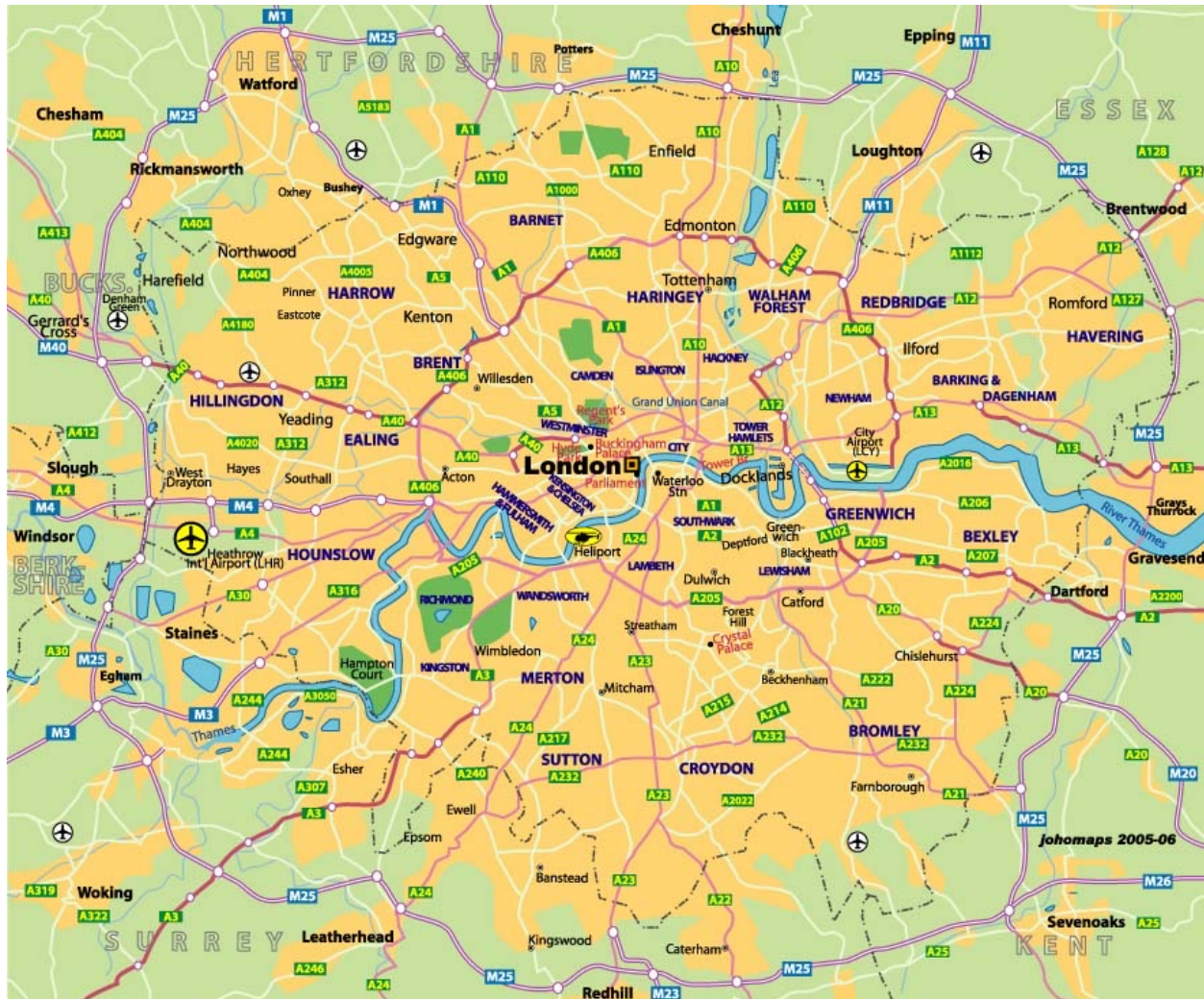
- The ‘Manson murders’ in August 1969 marked a symbolic ‘cultural’ end to the ‘60s. The Oil Crisis of 1973, followed by an economic downturn throughout the world, profoundly shaping the politics, economics, and even the culture of the decade: the “three-day week” in early 1974 in the UK became totemic of Britain’s political and social problems during the 1970s.
- **Nonetheless**, British pop culture (and its pop and rock music scene) flourished: bands like The Beatles and The Rolling Stones revolutionized rock music; and the British ‘influence’ continued to be heard in the hard rock of Led Zeppelin, the progressive rock of King Crimson, Pink Floyd and ELP, and the glam rock of David Bowie. **An Orientalist fascination with Eastern spirituality and religion had a major impact on popular culture in this period.**
- Different ‘sub-cultures’ emerged (cf. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*): e.g., mods, rockers and skinheads (in the 1960s), and punks (from the mid-70s). The Sex Pistols had their most famous hit with ‘God Save the Queen’, during Elizabeth II’s Silver Jubilee, in 1977. Charlie Hero’s band The Condemned (formerly the prog rock ‘Mustn’t Crumble’ is ‘one of the hottest New Wave of punk bands around’ – cf. *BS*, p. 153).

1960s and 70s: shifting (hybrid?) identities



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqrAPOZxgzU>

London and its suburbia



http://www.johomaps.com/eu/ire_uk/uk/london/london1.html

The Buddha: genre trouble

- **Bildungsroman:** an form of the novel that deals with the maturation process, with how and why the protagonist develops as he does, both morally and psychologically.
- **Picaresque novel,** as early form of the novel, usually involves a first-person narrative, related the adventures of a rogue or lowborn adventurer (Spanish *pícaro*) as he drifts from place to place and from one social milieu to another in his effort to survive. In its episodic structure the picaresque novel resembles the long, rambling romances of medieval chivalry to which it provided the first realistic counterpart. Unlike the idealistic knight-errant hero, however, the picaro is a cynical and amoral rascal who, if given half a chance, would rather live by his wits than by honourable work.

Source: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

<https://www.britannica.com/art/bildungsroman> ; and

<https://www.britannica.com/art/picaresque-novel>.

Discussion questions:

1. How would you best characterize Karim and his relationships with the novel's other characters? Is he a sympathetic or likeable character? See if you can find 2-3 examples.
2. Does the novel downplay the awful reality of racism in late-1960s and 1970s London?
3. What do you make of the novel's highly irreverent (and some might say *disrespectful*) exploitation of humour and stereotype? does this strategy succeed in critiquing and undermining -- or reinforcing -- stereotypes? Try to find 2-3 examples.

References

Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com>

John McCormick, *Contemporary Britain*, 2nd edn
(Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

John Oakland, *British Civilization: An Introduction*, 7th edn
(London: Routledge, 2011).