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Hanif Kureishi

**EDITED BY
SUSAN ALICE FISCHER**

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2015

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4725-1334-2
PB: 978-1-4725-0915-4
ePDF: 978-1-4725-1491-2
ePub: 978-1-4725-1168-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Series: Contemporary Critical Perspectives

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in India

Contents

Foreword *Roger Michell* vii
Series editors' preface x
Acknowledgments xi
Contributors xii
Hanif Kureishi: A chronology xiv

Introduction *Susan Alice Fischer* 1

- 1 The enigma of abandonment: Rethinking Hanif Kureishi's importance for multiculturalism
Michael Perfect 7
- 2 "I believe my eyes": The transformative cinema of Hanif Kureishi
Deanna Kamiel 21
- 3 Culture and anarchy in Thatcher's London: Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*
Peter Hitchcock 35
- 4 "The suburbs that did it": Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and metropolitan multicultural fiction
Ryan Trimm 51
- 5 Hanif Kureishi's "better philosophy": From *The Black Album* and *My Son the Fanatic* to *The Word and the Bomb*
Susan Alice Fischer 69
- 6 The parallax of aging: Hanif Kureishi's *The Body*
Jago Morrison 85
- 7 The other Kureishi: A psychoanalytic reading of *Something to Tell You*
Geoff Boucher 99

4

“The suburbs that did it”: Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* and metropolitan multicultural fiction

Ryan Trimm

Chapter Summary: Multicultural British fiction is associated with central urban areas, especially London. Linking new British ethnicities and cities unintentionally echoes tension between the purportedly organic English countryside and cosmopolitan openness. National identity apparently resides in “natural” and unified roots, while migration and urban alienation render cities places of transit, diversity, and newness. The multicultural suburban novel initiated by Hanif Kureishi upends this contrast: *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) locates complex, mobile ethnicities and sexualities in quotidian, domestic spaces. Gone are immigrant ghettos, bedsits, and tourist topographies of previous multicultural fiction for places all-too-ordinary, suburban locales reorienting the division between English countryside and diverse urban center. This suburban stress remaps Englishness. Distinctions between old and new, between Commonwealth and English ethnicities no longer hold, but rather roil in a mêlée. Consequently, identities and places are fluid, generating a “new breed as it were,” undoing old taxonomies of English and alien, city and country.

Hanif Kureishi's 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* initiates a new line of fiction: postimperial metropolitan novels revolving around suburban characters who navigate a contingent and uneasy path through a Britain of fast-changing politics and demographics. The suburbs here revise the traditional relation of country to city with the pastoral signifying the national, the urban the modern and cosmopolitan. The suburbs in contrast are an in-between space, one caught between "nature and community" (Ball 1996: 20) in an attempt to give large swathes of homeowners a little taste of the country through possession of their own gardens (Williams 1973: 297). As a result, suburbia crosses associations, offering to the masses their own connection to the very soil of the nation, and thus comes to be seen as the country's heart. As Dominic Head suggests, "suburbia is Middle England" (quoted in O'Reilly 2009: 2). Such links position the suburbs as a signifier for bourgeois stability and settlement—ultimately, for national domesticity. Consequently, if "newer" Britons had previously been linked with migration, with their arrival in urban centers and the subsequent struggle to establish roots, then their situation in suburbia suggests a more grounded residence.

Yet *The Buddha of Suburbia* seizes on such associations only to unsettle them. Karim Amir, the novel's biracial protagonist, is firmly situated as "native," as English (though a "funny kind") and suburban (Kureishi 1990: 3). However, for the novel, suburbia is only the point of departure, and habitation morphs into a restive rootlessness. Indeed, the stumbling and evolving trajectory of Karim's progress reworks the idea of being settled itself. Although Karim finds home a problem, his peregrinations begin from a position of already dwelling in Britain (having in fact been born there). His flight out of the suburbs betrays a restlessness, one less about race, migration, or newness—themes driving previous postimperial metropolitan novels—than about a deracination marking fissures in English spaces themselves. Race certainly affects Karim's world. However, though numerous interlocutors assume old associations of racial difference and migrancy with regard to Karim, the novel disrupts those links: his only migration is from settled suburbs to central London. The novel thus rewrites expectations of home, indigeneity, and identity, offering a more provisional and contingent sense of self and settlement. Consequently, even the very language must change: traditional associations of identity and place (such as "native" and "home") suggest a more anchored and established vision of identity than that on offer in the novel. A critical vocabulary of the contingent, such as "settling," "dwelling," and "habitation," more accurately conveys this evolving, fluid sense of identity in the novel. Indeed, the novel uses the suburbs to signal a change, as descendants from the "New Commonwealth" have now more fully settled and have made more "native" spaces their own. However, this transformation also signals an uprooting of

the idea of home itself, for the home is no longer something anchored, but marked by a certain, if limited, mobility. Karim thus moves beyond the exiled alienation of early migrant fiction for a paradoxically settled rootlessness: firmly in Britain, but no longer secured within a single abode.

The novel thus marks a shift from the line of earlier postimperial metropolitan fiction inaugurated by George Lamming (1954) and Sam Selvon (1956), moving from stories of uprooted immigrants arriving in Britain to accounts of an uprooting internalized within the nation, one where the second generations of migrant families prefigure a broader, unsettled identity. By offering differences and feelings of displacement that start at home, the novel reveals not an organic, unified nation remapped by immigrants, but one in which movements of settled citizens manifest a fluid situation of competing elements. Kureishi's novel then disrupts postwar literary associations regarding residence. The suburbs in *The Buddha of Suburbia* mark the settlement of new Britons; however, this residence reveals not an agglomerated nation, but one in which difference becomes the site for staging new and contingent selves. Karim's mobility stems from dissatisfaction with the stolid settledness of the South London suburbs, a frustration propelling him to perform ironic versions of this identity as his path out. However, such movement does not leave the suburbs behind so much as inscribe a fluid metropolis for Karim, one with many shelters but no concrete residence.

Problems of residence and home are a central tension in postwar British fiction. The deprivations of the Second World War, the loss of housing stock from bombing, the influx of refugees and new Britons, all forced the issue of dwelling and the domestic. Thus, both "native Britons" and newer citizens scrambled to secure a domicile. Consequently, a major fault line in postwar British fiction might be framed around contrasting articulations of residence. On the one hand, stand representatives of the country-house novel, including fiction such as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), Nigel Dennis's *Cards of Identity* (1955), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989). In these novels, traces of previous fiction (such as E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910)) help to foreground the country house as the assumed locus of the Condition of England. Consequently, such country-house novels seize on postwar concerns with residence and settling, one frequently oriented around questions of who owns (or runs) the country house. By locating the place of domesticity in a pastoral setting, the frame, if not the final articulation, of the nationalized home is rurally situated. Britain—and more particularly England—is thus associated with the familiar (and often conservative) chain of associations belonging to Little England: traditional, pastoral, bound by certain class relations, and threatened by cities and modernization. Consequently, many of these novels

look to the countryside—and country house—as the citadel of national values and identity in a fast-changing Britain.

In contrast are novels centered around an urban setting, city scenes in which immigration and “new Britons” figure prominently: George Lamming’s *The Emigrants* (1954), Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Colin MacInnes’s *City of Spades* (1957), V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* (1967), Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen* (1974), and, perhaps most iconically, Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The focus on London shifts the traditional architecture of identity and social structure toward more fluid characterizations of subjectivity. Rather than appealing to stability or a once-anchored self now uprooted, these urban selves are inhabited as a never-fixed mobility. The cosmopolitan settings, where migrant communities are provisional and still partially oriented toward points of origin, accentuate this fluidity and provide a stark contrast to the tightly woven tapestry once firmly enclosing characters in British provincial novels (such as George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1874)). Further, these two lines of fiction are also articulated around distinct temporalities: on the one hand, novels appealing to a lingering past of tradition, toward given frames of identity (even if in crisis); on the other, fiction that, in emphasizing the disestablished, foregrounds the new, the evolving, in the form of transitory and migrant selves.

Because this second line of fiction entails displaced characters on the move, the question of residence is often manifested through the theme of hospitality, a welcoming that is itself transient and uncertain, given the lack of settled spaces. As a consequence, staying with others in these novels is a necessity, a hosting emphasizing contingent residence. Characters move from host to host, from place to place. There is not a rooted place of return, for roots seem not yet possible. Post-Windrush fiction, as represented by Lamming, Selvon, MacInnes, and Emecheta, accordingly stresses shuffling between living quarters. In such works, place is always complex for the characters, residence never certain, and being uprooted a continuous experience. These novels all center on migrants, those who have made the journey to Britain to settle. Consequently, they inevitably underscore an ongoing sense of, if not displacement, then an inability to settle fully just yet. Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* differs somewhat in this regard as the novel offers us a settled character (Chamcha) complete with home and wife. Significantly, however, the projections imposed by the British upon his very skin generate upheavals ending with his return to India by novel’s end.

In all such novels, the problem of home is heightened through the magnetism exercised by London on these migrants. London, as imperial and social capital, has very particularly drawn these new citizens and composes a very specific type of topography for them. Selvon’s *Lonely Londoners*

spaces (Piccadilly Circus, Waterloo Station, Green Park) and anonymous and isolating locales (bedsits, buses, trains). With such a geography, it is hardly surprising that roots cannot yet be sunk: no one can claim cold temporary lodging and busy sightseeing spots as home. Indeed, the loose narrative structure of many of these novels—*The Lonely Londoners*, *The Emigrants*, *City of Spades*—reflects this rootlessness: a wide cast of characters drift in and out of narrative focus, plots are episodic and thematic rather than linear. Such narratives cannot yet suggest how migrants could move from being guests dependent on the hospitality of others to being fully settled in their own right. The concern expressed in *The Satanic Verses* with “how newness enters the world,” though, foregrounds an ambivalence in this unsettled state (Rushdie 1988: 8). Migrants and their families at once represent the new, an eruption of a force for transformation. However, if the new is associated with migrants, with “new Britons” in urban spaces, such an advent unfortunately echoes claims of an older, established identity anchored in the countryside, in areas and among those who are seemingly untouched by postwar movements.

Consequently, old and new remain separated, not only temporally but also spatially across country and city with little hope of forging a national identity to bridge such a gulf. Such linking of hospitality and newness might unfortunately suggest—or fail to disprove—that those who are “guests” will forever remain so, that the unclaimable spaces through which such characters maneuver will in fact remain unclaimed. Indeed, this experience is echoed in A. Robert Lee’s observation that multicultural British fiction alters its characterization of the metropolitan center from the first generation of Sam Selvon and George Lamming to that of subsequent black British writers: “living in London was felt as part of a wider experience of travel and adventure [for early generations of black British writers]; for a later generation, England is felt as a place of oppression and restriction” (quoted in Thompson 2005: 122). This second phase clearly signals the tensions of settling in: doing so comes at a cost, affixes an identity and place, adheres selves to a social topography that situates, but also solidifies.

Against such literary historical antecedents, *The Buddha of Suburbia* stands out for its urban geography and by initiating a new mode in metropolitan multiculturalism. In contrast to the migrant fiction preceding it, Kureishi’s novel centers on the suburbs and a flight from these comparative hinterlands, a focus reframing the problem of settlement. This emphasis is most striking in the first half of the novel, “In the Suburbs,” which situates Karim Amir and his evolving cast of family and friends in southeastern ring communities such as Orpington and Bromley. These spaces are all too quotidian and settled (for Karim, this is precisely the problem), bypassing the alienated topography of

Procter argue, this new emphasis on London's suburban spaces signals a growing establishment. Procter notes that this shift in place marks a change in tone: "the geography of suburbia ... foregrounds the privileging of an aesthetics of distance, artifice, self-consciousness and irony" (Procter 2006: 155), a transformation working to "provincialize" London (160) and articulate "the 'hereness'" of black Britons (156). As A. Robert Lee suggests, such vocalization "speaks out of, and to, the absolute centre of 'England,' changing the 'script' of what it means to be English" (quoted in Thomas 2005: 62). The tonal shift depends greatly on having achieved and claimed the very metropolitan spaces that had earlier drawn characters in Selvon and Lemming to the capital. Now that central London has been occupied, now that there is a movement from migrant to urban dweller, the shift to the suburbs is accompanied by a sardonic distance from the magnetism of the metropole that had once been the impetus inward. This centrifugal stage ironizes the preceding centripetal one. Like Selvon's and Lemming's characters, Karim is still drawn to the center; however, he already begins in the greater metropolitan area of that magnetic pole. His grand journey is not across the globe but merely across town: from the satirized suburbs to a center that, though still alluring, is often undercut by the same biting wit.

Center, though, is a relative and relational term, one often homogenizing important differences and distinctions within this realm: "The country (in the sense of 'nation') became metaphorically the city (the new 'metropolis'), while a significant portion of the rest of the world became a new version of 'country'" (Ball 1996: 8). The center then is not stable but can take on new dimensions as the sphere around it alters. Significantly, though the center might remain central, it is not characterized by homogeneity: center here is at once Britain itself, particularly its countryside and its putative possession of a core identity, and the metropolitan center, a cosmopolitan heart gesturing outward toward a larger world. Karim's journey to this heart ironically takes him further from the quintessential national core in the countryside. Ball suggests that London is now marked by great diversity, that its postcolonial makeover renders it a liminal space, one signaling racial and geographical "in-betweenness"; consequently, "Kureishi's 'London' can be called a semi-detached signifier: it is and is not Britain; it is and is not the world" (Ball 1996: 9). However, it is more accurate to suggest that London is altered, not by being decentered, not by being detached from Britain, but by having that center reconstituted, by remapping its centrality—or, perhaps more exactly, by foregrounding differences encompassed by that axial point. As a result, it is more precise to indicate that the diversity of London is concealed by talk of its centrality, a diversity only growing with the circumference of the circle it organizes. This altered centrality is conveyed by Karim's summary of the

There was a sound London had. It was ... people in Hyde Park playing bongos with their hands; there was also the keyboard on the Door's "Light My Fire": There were kids dressed in velvet cloaks who lived free lives; there were thousands of black people everywhere, so I wouldn't feel exposed ... (Kureishi 1990: 121)

London's magnetism here attracts through its encompassing diversity and cultural distinctiveness, elements no longer bound to a restricted catalog of putative Englishness as seemingly the case in the suburbs, at least with regard to race.

However, this center still marks the cultural hinterlands, still puts in relation discrepant points far (Bombay) and near (Bromley). Consequently, both are defined by not being absolute center: Karim notes the youth of Kensington are so far ahead of those in the suburbs with regard to style that "We could have been from Bombay. We'd never catch up" (Kureishi 1990: 128; see also 71). The center produces gaps that collapse space and time, differentials leaving both Bombay and Bromley spatially and temporally separated from the heart of things. However, this metaphoric suggestion is dependent on initial difference—Bombay is not Bromley, but both might be compared in relation to the centrality of London proper. Moreover, this gap of relative provinciality evokes colonization and race in Bromley's temporal lag with regard to Kensington (Fabian 1983: 32). Again, this figuration depends on an initial difference, one never erased: Charlie and Karim are English, not from Bombay.

Such a comparison indirectly highlights not only Karim's racial distinctiveness (his father was from South Asia but he hails from Orpington) but even more his situation within key suburban spaces: Karim is on the Bromley side of the ledger. Karim's suburban situation, the fact of his Englishness (and not just Britishness), is all the more striking as Kureishi himself is convinced that "England is primarily a suburban country and English values are suburban values" (Kureishi 1992: 163). Karim's presence in England is not the portentous advent of a migrant arriving but something quotidian and settled (in a word, suburban). Karim's position within the ideological heartland, in the purported center of England, marks the incorporation of difference within those key places and values: English spaces now encompass skin tones and cultural markers once deemed wholly other.

However, this establishment is not simply a proclamation of settling down; Karim's restlessness, his ongoing reliance on the hospitality of others, betrays unstable roots. Indeed, an additional element is added to the tension of margin and center, one picked up in Karim's loathing of suburbia, one situating provincialism within greater London itself. In short, Karim is drawn toward

future lonely Londoners but rather a frustration with the outer suburbs, an unsettledness within bedroom communities, within (one version of) the center itself. But because Karim has been within the greater conurbation all along, his quest to journey a few miles is ironic: the pilgrimage from the provinces takes only a bus ride, and yet Karim battles the same frustrations, racism, and unhappiness as in Orpington.

London still attracts those like Karim drawn to greater possibilities for work, play, and life itself; however, such journeys simultaneously mark central London as a center while undercutting its magnetism. In fact, the suburbs, positioned as lower middle class, are strangely positioned in terms of class. Referring to his father's lover, Karim notes: "Eva always called our area 'the higher depths.' It was so quiet none of us wanted to hear the sound of our own embarrassing voices" (Kureishi 1990: 74). In such suburbs, it is not poverty or deprivation that is the source of shame but rather the uniform aspirations and desires all-too-limited in their dreams: the "done up" houses, the need to show off to the neighbors (Kureishi 1990: 74–5). The aftereffects of these shared visions persist and cannot be expunged merely by shifting residence. Rita Felski notes: "the novel ... traces the tenacity and continuing power of class distinctions, as Kureishi's hero is constantly confronted with the differences between his background and that of his new friends" (Felski 2000: 38). Karim's own ambitions lead to an acting career, one where he becomes romantically entangled with his upper-class co-star Eleanor. As his interactions with her betray, even his new location and cultural achievements only accentuate the divide between the lower-middle-class suburbs and posher districts: the performance of a different manner of speech, the salting away of cultural capital can only be "a second language, consciously acquired" (Kureishi 1990: 178), an acquisition whose acquired nature lingers and remains deflatingly distinctive.

Rather than being seduced to London from afar, Karim, the "funny kind of Englishman," hails from distant Orpington (Kureishi 1990: 3). The magnetic pull of the metropolitan center stems from dissatisfaction with his suburban lot:

In the suburbs people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness. It was all familiarity and endurance: security and safety were the reward of dullness. ... It would be years before I could get away to the city, to London, where life was bottomless in its temptations. (Kureishi 1990: 8)

He spends the novel's first half eagerly awaiting his "escape" from the place he loathed, the locale he characterizes as a "leaving place" (Kureishi 1990: 8, 71, 101). For Karim, Orpington and the suburbs are a punitive sentence, not

"I often wondered why [my father had] condemned his own son to a dreary suburb of London of which it was said that when people drowned they saw not their lives but their double-glazing flashing before them" (Kureishi 1990: 23). What troubles Karim is not simply the focus on worldly goods—much of "In the Suburbs" is, in fact, composed of Karim's itemizations of his clothes and his record and tea collections—but rather the mundaneness of this materialism, of the wearily pragmatic face put forward. This snug and smug domesticity characterizes the stable and stolid world Karim wishes to flee: suburban sameness means "there was never anywhere to go," a dreariness rendering the "idea of staying behind" intolerable (Kureishi 1990: 71, 72). He finds "it did me good to be reminded of how much I loathed the suburbs, and that I had to continue my journey into London and a new life, ensuring I got away from people and streets like this" (Kureishi 1990: 101). This ordinariness is historical: "no one of note" had lived in the suburbs, save H. G. Wells (Kureishi 1990: 126), a lack spurring Karim's restlessness. Like Eva and his father, he aspires to be in "place[s] going places" (Kureishi 1990: 127), associating the suburbs with immobility and stolidity; Kureishi himself remarked in an interview that "the point of the suburbs is that they don't change" (MacCabe 1999: 45). It is only in the city's heart that contexts can radically shift or alter without a change in locale, that the places are not anchored and can themselves "go places"; in the suburbs, the uniformity of middle-class lives render these spaces veritable sepulchres of complacency. After being sprung from Orpington, Karim can scarcely contemplate a return: "if the secret police ordered you to live in the suburbs for the rest of your life, what would you do? Kill yourself? Read?" (Kureishi 1990: 145). The suburbs are a punishment, a sentence meted out, one against which escape comes only through loss of life or withdrawal into oneself.

Thus, even Eva and Haroon's affair, despite its collateral damage to Karim's family, offers escape from "dull normalcy" (Kureishi 1990: 45). This drab, quotidian existence receives its monotony from various impositions: the workday schedule expectations mean "life for commuters was regulated to the minute" (Kureishi 1990: 46). Indeed, this workweek and its concomitant conformity to domestic dreams and shared experiences produce

a cage of umbrellas and steely regularity. It was all trains and shitting sons, and the bursting of frozen pipes in January, and the lighting of coal fires at seven in the morning: the organization of love into suburban family life in a two-up-two-down semi-detached in South London. (Kureishi 1990: 26)

Love as incarnated in suburbia is overly structured, conforms to a pattern of life, time, and space, a pattern materialized largely due to its echoing with

between Eva and Haroon promises such rich tension for Karim: on the one hand, it threatens (and enacts) the destruction of all he has known, the home and embedded life that has heretofore composed his existence; on the other hand, this very destruction of the pattern sunders the snares that have bound Karim—and thus offers an opening to another life. Consequently, Karim is magnetized by the affair, despite its sometimes absurd character (Kureishi 1990: 16). However curious, Haroon and Eva's relationship indicates an attempt to "strike out for happiness" (Kureishi 1990: 8) against a suburban milieu characterized by a striving for the same markers of attainment and success. The affair is the first crack in suburban homogeneity, a fissure opening the possibility of performing new selves. It augurs a suburbia that breeds its own rebels—not only Eva, Karim, and Charlie (Eva's son and Karim's classmate and idol), but also Haroon (Kureishi 1990: 21).

Karim unveils his own transformed self through migration, one reworking narrative assumptions of previous metropolitan multicultural novels. His move to London proper is a shift that ultimately refuses to stay put, an internal migration that will not be settled. If Selvon, Lemming, Emecheta, and MacInnes charted characters immigrating (with Rushdie ironically doing so as well), characters who stand as first generation Britons, Karim is second generation. However, his refusal to remain in Orpington (or truly to reside with his family or anywhere else) indicates another complication introduced by Karim's situation. Mireille Rosello's work on immigrants is an instructive contrast, most particularly her argument that second generations translate between first-generation parents (those who still might retain a sense of being "guests") and presumably settled "hosts." Rosello argues that second generations serve as "mediators" or "go-betweens"; they thus blur distinctions between "guest" and "host," even while their placement marks a gap and indicates that mediation is needed (Rosello 2001: 90). Consequently, this shuttling second generation occupy a no-man's land, for they are thus neither settled nor presumably visiting.

However, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, though Karim does assist his father in navigating the city (helping him find his way and catch buses), such aid is necessitated by his father's profound lack of worldliness, not his inability to feel at home. And though Karim does move with his father to West Kensington, this move is less about translation or mediation and more about geographical aspiration, an ambition inflected with class and status. Moreover, Karim drifts away from his father, returning at novel's end as much, or more, for Eva than for any filial obligation. In leaving his father, Karim refuses to serve as mediator and disavows any sense of being positioned and settled. Indeed, the novel situates Karim from the beginning as thoroughly British (though "a funny kind of Englishman" (Kureishi 1990: 3)), a creature of quotidian and domestic

to settle in a new land so much as dissatisfaction with the provincialism of the suburbs, a dis-ease stemming from a "funny kind" of settlement: at home enough to wish to move. Karim pronounces from the opening that he is "from the South London suburbs and going somewhere" (Kureishi 1990: 3). Indeed, the fact that he is directed "somewhere" positions those suburbs as nowhere, a cartography picked up by Eva's comment that only in West Kensington had they found a "place going places" (Kureishi 1990: 127).

The opportunities offered by the city proper reflect possible lines of movement. Indeed, the city is disorienting precisely as it is not composed of rigid pathways but rather fluid passages of possibility:

Being in a place so bright, fast and brilliant made you vertiginous with possibility: it didn't necessarily help you grasp those possibilities. ... I felt directionless and lost in the crowd. I couldn't yet see how the city worked, but I began to find out ... London seemed like a house with five thousand rooms, all different; the kick was to work out how they connected, and eventually to walk through all of them. (Kureishi 1990: 126)

One can get lost in the city not just because of its vast and myriad possibilities but because there are no set patterns of movements between the different points of opportunity. The suburbs have well-worn paths in terms of putative dreams and expectations; the city in contrast offers destinations without a set trajectory. Such a topographical distinction is a far remove from Selvon's lonely Londoners and their pilgrimage to fixed places magnetically drawing in future residents the world over. In contrast, though Karim gravitates too toward central London locales, this movement is because the places themselves are unfixed, can be developed, can change their relation on a social map, not because they operate as a fixed pole or universal lodestone. The suburbs cannot shift position, not just because they are seemingly more stable places, but because they also do not appear on the same social map (being comparative "Bombays"). The suburbs then initially signify for Karim only a point of departure, a "leaving place," for it is only as the start of a journey that suburbia might be charted at all. Karim's departure from this placelessness takes him away from Orpington, from suburbia.

Karim speculates this rootlessness might stem from his genealogy: "Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored" (Kureishi 1990: 3). Karim's deracination comes not from exile or from having left home but rather from a fundamental restlessness, an inability to settle—not because he is not welcome but rather because sinking firm roots is not his nature. However, though he certainly experiences no end of racism and prejudice, his

(Kureishi 1990: 284). Indeed, Karim is all too aware that his dissatisfaction stems from his place of origin: "Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it" (Kureishi 1990: 3). Indeed, the first half of the novel is his mad rush to leave his "leaving place" and the second half chronicles a certain failure ever to fully leave it behind.

In fact, the center of Karim's attraction can only be approached as with an asymptote: he can near the magnetic center but never finally reach, "never catch up," as he hails from the cultural equivalent of Bombay. The distance marked here is not that from a province, from a colony, but rather the stylistic, social, and cultural distance of the suburbs from the trendy center. It is this aesthetic gap that also acts as a temporal gulf—the suburbs (and its denizens) forever trail behind, cannot achieve a cultural simultaneity with the toney districts. The distance of a few tube zones marks a significant time lag, a belatedness that cannot be overcome. Ultimately, this sense of separation, this distinction of deficit, provides the final suburban shame: Karim notes that Eva's efforts to transcend her suburban past are doomed to fail: she wants "to scour that suburban stigma right off her body. She didn't realize it was in the blood and not on the skin; she didn't see there could be nothing more suburban than suburbanites repudiating themselves" (Kureishi 1990: 134). If true metropolitan style is marked by ease, insouciance, the suburbanite cannot eradicate the labor needed to cover the distance of those crucial few miles; indeed, attempting to suppress that distance signals it all the more.

Significantly, the suburban malaise has been acquired even by migrants. They too have partaken so deeply of suburban dreams that they have run afoul of its dangers, as seen with the friends of Karim's family: "The idea of enjoyment has passed Jeeta and Anwar by. They behaved as if they had unlimited lives: this life was of no consequence, it was merely the first of many hundreds to come in which they could relish existence" (Kureishi 1990: 51). Consequently, these suburban lives of British Muslims assume some reincarnation, an afterlife part and parcel of suburban existence more broadly. Ironically, it is Ted (Karim's uncle) who migrates from suburban alienation to a newfound Eastern-inspired spiritualism (Kureishi 1990: 48) offering freedom (101) and the opportunity to develop meaning (102) rather than accept an ill-fitting prefabricated sort. If it is true that Haroon and Anwar have begun an "internal return" to India, then this migration is a condition not bound by ethnicity or point of origin—stolid Ted can be altered just as much as Jeeta might find herself rooted in suburban values. Indeed, at novel's end, Karim makes a point of visiting the settled suburban residences of first-generation immigrants: their "unchanged" status provides "relief" by offering a contrast to his own "interesting life" (Kureishi 1990: 271). Karim thus still needs the

This uncertain negotiation of race, one where Karim marks demographic shifts and conceptual reworkings of national identity, is extended in Karim's existence as a "funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were" (Kureishi 1990: 3). Being a quotidian "exotic" is precisely what the theater directors Shadwell and Pyke wish to exploit in him when they cast him in their respective plays:

What a breed of people two hundred years of imperialism has given birth to. If the pioneers from the East India Company could see you. What puzzlement there'd be. Everyone looks at you, I'm sure, and thinks: an Indian boy, how exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we'll hear now from him. And you're from Orpington. ... The immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century. (Kureishi 1990: 141)

And yet Karim is not an immigrant but something Shadwell cannot quite accept: a native suburbanite whose complexion half-promises an intimacy with a language and land not in fact his own, insinuates a foreignness he does not actually possess. Even his "exotic" complexion and accent must be supplemented to signify the dust of India.

As these reversals suggest, the novel refuses any easy situation of authenticity. Though Karim does locate "the real thing" (Kureishi 1990: 113) in the city, it is not a question of one side or another being merely an image. The suburbs depend on maintaining a studied air of respectability: Karim relates, "My mother could never hang out the washing in the garden without combing her hair" (Kureishi 1990: 188). However, the suburbs also specialize in producing those who attempt desperately to stand out from its trackless landscape, performing roles and projecting selves to break free from uniformity: during Eva's first soiree, Karim notes of the guests, "Whoever these people were, there was a terrific amount of showing off going on—more in this room than in the whole of the rest of southern England put together" (Kureishi 1990: 12). Similarly, Karim and Charlie trade on playing identities they do not fully possess: Karim develops a character for Pyke's play based on Changez (who arrives from India for an arranged marriage with Jeeta and Anwar's daughter, Jamila) (Kureishi 1990: 186); Charlie affects a Cockney accent as he becomes a punk rock star (Kureishi 1990: 247).

These attempts to make their own distinctive way permit them to assimilate better into the city scene: John McLeod notes that "the city is above all a *theatrical* space, a locus of performance, display and spectatorship" (McLeod 2004: 135). Both suburban and central urban spaces are then inhabited as if under a proscenium. However, suburban spaces perform variations on "safety and security" while the personas performed in Kensington are far more

between Karim's parents: "Mum's ambition was to be unnoticed, to be like everyone else, whereas Dad liked to stand out like a juggler at a funeral" (Kureishi 1990: 42). Both play roles, but Karim's mother Margaret performs a thoroughgoing unobtrusiveness, a performance firmly situated in the suburbs where she remains. Haroon in contrast affects the garish, an exceptionality corresponding to the city center where Eva takes him as well as his own performance of Indianness (Ball 2004: 233). Karim's own nervy displays trade on elements of stolidity to inhabit more fully an outlandish mobility: he creates characters on stage solidly positioned by Cockney accents and migrant mannerisms to accomplish his own social climb.

Karim is certainly affected by racism, but he turns such reactions to his own partial advantage, inhabiting characters (Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*, an Indian immigrant in Pyke's play, "the rebellious student son of an Indian shopkeeper" (Kureishi 1990: 259) in a TV soap opera) that play with the very racialized expectations with which he has done battle. His restlessness is thus not wholly generated from a sense of exile or nonacceptance as were the very different peregrinations of Selvon's and MacInnes's characters. Rather, his is a psychic and cultural wandering, a desire to partake of the music, drugs, sex, fun, and culture symbolized by the capital (Kureishi 1990: 121), the sense that there are pleasures to be had that are unavailable in the suburbs. Indeed, in many ways, following his time in New York, his final return to London is instructive. Karim returns to the place he hails as "my favourite city, my playground, my home" (Kureishi 1990: 196). However, his time in London reprises his previous time there: he does not stay in any one place but again shuttles between a host of different people who have some claim on him, and continues to make a circuit of the suburban and central sites where he crashes. He seems to take a complex and mixed pleasure in his peregrinations, just as he had before:

I liked it all, because I was lonely for the first time ... and an itinerant. ... I was not too unhappy, criss-crossing South London and the suburbs by bus, no one knowing where I was. Whenever someone ... tried to locate me, I was always somewhere else ... (Kureishi 1990: 94)

This always being somewhere else accurately conveys his rootlessness: he is by no means an alien, yet he seems not to belong squarely in any geographical, racial, class, or sexual camp. Karim maintains connections but refuses to be rooted, refuses to be situated and confined by them. Indeed, he seems dissatisfied with each: longing to keep up the connection but desirous of distance. At novel's end, he lacks a true residence but cycles through sleeping at the residences of his family and friends and the flat he

As Susan Brook notes, the BBC adaptation of *The Buddha of Suburbia* ends on the eve of the 1979 election with Karim assuring everyone regarding Margaret Thatcher: "'Nobody is going to vote for that cow', to which Eva responds 'Don't we live in a suburban country?'" (quoted in Brook 2005: 221). Brook writes that in the novel itself, "suburbia, rather than race, unites the imagined national community ... form[ing] a point of return as well as departure ... disrupting a simple linear structure" (Brook 2005: 221). However, in both novel and adaptation, it might be more accurate to suggest that suburbia generates its own dissidents from what Brook labels its "hedgemony," from its own apparent triumph. As the link to Thatcher helps mark, even the decade governed by her premiership brought not unification under the privet hedge but rather divisions within cities and suburbs alike.

Kureishi's next published novel, *The Black Album* (1995), illustrates this well. Indeed, *The Black Album* constitutes something of an intertext with *The Buddha of Suburbia* as it portrays glimpses of the successful careers of both Karim and Charlie: Karim Amir is now a "fashionable actor" appearing with Zulma (the trendy sister-in-law of the novel's protagonist, Shahid Hasan) in *Hello!* magazine (Kureishi 1995: 86); Charlie Hero has become a star mentioned in the same breath with the Dead and the Sex Pistols, musicians all spurring bootleg trade in the streets around Islington (Kureishi 1995: 112). For Shahid, both Karim and Charlie now represent the city center, themselves now exerting a magnetism on him as he attempts to replicate their journey into London proper from his own starting point in the Kent suburb of Sevenoaks. Though Shahid had some trepidation about the poverty and picturesque danger of the city (Kureishi 1995: 3), he, like Karim before, is thankful to be freed from his suburban situation as a "freak" because of his racial difference: "'Everywhere I went I was the only dark-skinned person. How did this make people see me?'" (Kureishi 1995: 10). As with his suburban avatars before him, Shahid's choice for the city goes beyond a desire to feel no longer racially exposed; it is more to flee the tightly circumscribed world of the suburbs: among his schoolmates, "some he had come to despise for their lack of hope. Almost all were unemployed. And their parents, usually patriotic people and proud of their Union Jack, knew nothing of their own culture. Few of them even had books in their houses—not purchased, opened books, but only gardening guides, atlases, Reader's Digests" (Kureishi 1995: 26–7).

Like Karim, Shahid gravitates toward London for it encompasses experiences not found in the suburbs: cultural, social, sexual, and pharmaceutical encounters. Shahid's discovery of the city is conducted under the tutelage of Deedee Osgood, his teacher and lover: "She knew London and would enjoy showing it to him. Wasn't she an educator?" (Kureishi 1995: 77). For this suburbanite, London is a site of seduction and pedagogy, an erotic and

the city, one leading him to have "never felt more invisible" in this "unreal" and "limitless" metropolis (Kureishi 1995: 5, 67). This sense of limitlessness, of not being tied to a "reality" seen and assigned by those who know him, generates for Shahid the liberty he fears will be stripped from him if he must return to the suburbs: Zulma's summons to return to Sevenoaks means "The freedom he had come to London for was being snatched from him," an end to his "escape" (Kureishi 1995: 190, 87). This liberty is generated in main through London's failure to be unified and harmonious—in short, homogeneous. Instead, it is multiple and varied, so much so that its internal divisions permit it to consort with itself: "London mingled with itself ceaselessly" (Kureishi 1995: 198). This interior multiteity seems of a piece with the performances of Karim, Charlie, and Haroon, guises projected upon them or that they half inhabit, masks they identify with through performance but also diverge from. As they perform these roles, these characters are not fully them—but rather a splitting of the self, rendering them multiple. Just so, as with Karim and Charlie before, the influence of the city leads Shahid to settle on permanent instability: "There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity" (Kureishi 1995: 274).

This limitlessness is defined by self-division, a variety marked by internal and external diversity, a habitation of self, characterized not by a fixity produced through conformity with a façade held in common with others but rather through a provisional, contingent self. Such subjectivity does not so much settle into a home as maintain a host of residences where it might dwell. Suburbia then helps *The Buddha of Suburbia* (and *The Black Album*) offer a quiet follow-up to previous postimperial metropolitan fiction: domestic spaces indicate London is truly the home of Karim's generation, but being domiciled does not mean they have necessarily settled. The suburbs signal a conflicted message. Karim (and Shahid after him) is marked as English and thus domesticated through his suburban origin. In such inclusions the suburbs thus mark a transformation of those who are counted as being at home in Britain. However, this "at homeness" also marks a change in the notion of home itself, for it is no longer an anchorage but more a base of operation, a site from which to move away.

Frustration and restlessness with the suburbs then sparks a rootlessness and mobility very different from that of previous lonely Londoners. Karim is truly at home in England but his version of home means no fixed address; indeed, central to his being at home is the only partially successful desire to leave such security and middle-class domesticity behind. This signals an internal journey from Lamming and Selvon: characters who are born English (if

a change reflected in a fresh restlessness. In short, this new version of home might be viewed through Karim's own peregrinations: he has no fixed abode but rather moves confidently through the city he claims as home, finding a multitude of places to dwell. Indeed, as he himself demonstrates, perhaps being most at home is manifested through a sense that all of London provides a place of refuge: it offers shelter, but is not an anchorage.