



Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Corso di Laurea magistrale

in

Lingue e letterature europee, americane e post-coloniali

Tesi di Laurea

The Concept of Englishness in Hanif Kureishi's Main Works.

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**Anno Accademico 2011/2012**

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## *General Introduction*

The main aim of this work is to highlight Hanif Kureishi's concept of Englishness in his works. From an excursus of his life and his characteristics as second-generation immigrant, it will emerge why he considers himself an Englishman. Thanks also to the works of criticism of scholars like Bart Moore-Gilbert, Esterino Adami and Susie Thomas, Kureishi's first works and essays will be analysed to show how the obsolete conception of Englishness should be changed in order to be extended to the rest of the multicultural English society.

This work is divided in three chapters. In the first, the concepts of Englishness and 'in-betweenness' will be described through some Kureishi's essays. In the second chapter his two best novels *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* will be discussed. In those works, while analysing English society he connects it with the concept of Englishness and with the Asian community. Finally, the third chapter will deal with some screenplays adapted into film by Stephen Frears. Even in those works, through the voice of characters of different cultural background, class and race, Kureishi makes a criticism about the place where he lives.

On the whole, this work tends to disagree with that part of the criticism which considers Kureishi as an "exotic writer". From the beginning of his literary career, he has always declared to be an Englishman. This work will provide information to sustain his position.

## Chapter I

In this first chapter will be given some general information on Kureishi's work. My aim is to show Kureishi's strong sense of belonging, indeed his 'Englishness'. This section starts with some notes about the writer's early life and formation, his birth in a suburban area of London and his first contrasts with the racist school system he found himself in when he was a child. An highlight on the ethnic situation of his family will be useful in order to understand the reasons of his research of new meanings for concepts such as Englishness and nationhood. Born to a Pakistani father and an English mother brought him to reshape the obsolete conviction that to be an Englishman and to belong to Britain one has to be white. In fact, as he claims, he is an "Englishman born and bred".<sup>1</sup>

Kureishi's father was a first-generation immigrant, and it is thanks to him and his passion for literature, if his son today is a writer. A little historical information about the Indian diaspora will be given and then there will be discussed the definitions of concepts as 'in-betweenness' and 'hybridity', which should lead to the reformulation of the meaning of the word Englishness. The period during which Kureishi has been a participant of the movement of the fringe theatre will be highlighted in order to talk about some of his most famous plays in which some elements of his research of a new meaning of Englishness could be found. These plays indeed deal with issues like race, ethnicity, culture, religion and politics. Finally this chapter will focus on two of the most significant essays written by Kureishi: *The Rainbow Sign* and *Bradford*.

In the first essay Kureishi tells about his first journey in Pakistan, his father's homeland, where he made a cultural study about those people. He highlights the good and the bad aspects of the Pakistani society and then compares them with English society. The fact that he loved some elements of Pakistani culture but could not imagine his life far from Britain suggests his high level of in-betweenness: Kureishi feels himself like the synthesis of different elements of both cultures. At the end of *The Rainbow Sign* there is an exhortation to change the obsolete idea of Englishness in

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<sup>1</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London: Faber and Faber, 1990, 3.

favour of a new one including also black people. In the second essay, Kureishi goes to Bradford, a borough of West Yorkshire, in Northern England, with the largest Asian community in England; indeed it is a microcosm of the entire Britain. Kureishi analyses some events and the particular dynamics they caused: the 'Honeyford Affair' for example, the story of the headmaster of a school where the 95 per cent of the children were Asians who wrote two racist articles in which he railed against the multicultural innovations that he considered as an insult to the concept of Englishness; then there is also the story about Mohammed Ajeeb who has been the first Asian mayor in Britain.

Hanif Kureishi was born on 5 December 1954 in Bromley, which is a borough set in the south east suburb of London. His career as a student has never been easy – and it will be confirmed by the writer himself who in several essays would remember his childhood – especially because of some racist episodes, which occurred to him during that period which will make him hate the school system and dream of run away from the suburbs. Racism did not come only by his mates but even by his teachers, who gave him racist nicknames increasing in him a sense of intolerance toward his Pakistanis half roots. He started to study Philosophy at the University of Lancaster, but he did not get the degree because he dropped out. In the meantime, when he was fourteen he decided to be a writer, and during his adolescence he supported himself financially by writing pornographic stories under the pseudonym Antonia French.<sup>2</sup>

Kureishi is the son of Rafiushan Kureishi, who went in England in 1947 to study law, and Audrey Buss, who is an English white woman. Rafiushan left the Asian continent because of the political instability of that period which came to an end with the partition of India and Pakistan. He never went back to his homeland. Once in England he left his studies, began to work as a civil servant in the embassy of Pakistan and married Audrey.<sup>3</sup> Kureishi said he inherited the love for literature by his father, who had tried to be a writer but without success.

When my father bought a book, new or second-hand, he would take a plastic carrier-bag from under the kitchen sink and, using scissor and sticky tape, fashion a plastic cover for the book, to preserve it. This was a function of his

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2 Bradley Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 31.

3 *Ibidem*, 31.

love for literature: you cared for books, they weren't disposable. (He'd hate it if anyone asked to borrow one.) [...] My father's book-love supported a view of the world. He respected people who could speak or write 'good English'. (I noticed this form of respect was common among Indians of a certain age and class.) 'He writes beautiful English', he'd say of someone, as if this facility were yoked to humane values, and the mellifluous manipulation of sentences would produce people who were good, magnanimous and polite. Early on, I may have unconsciously absorbed this assumption, which might account for my being disconcerted by the behaviour and language of highly educated theatre people when they revealed such spite and biliousness towards each other over something as edifying as a play.<sup>4</sup>

The paternal figure has been so important in Kureishi's life that in 2004 he wrote a book of memories about his father called *My Ear at His Heart*. In these memories the son talks about the classical themes of a father-son relation, like filial hostility and inadequacy. The book is also a way to ask for forgiveness for the pain caused in leaving the paternal home and never coming back. But most importantly is the criticism Kureishi makes to some of his father's contrasting attitudes: "he did consider white girls to be slutty, though he'd married a white girl himself [...] Father disliked Muslim conservatism, but didn't like my sister looking 'tarty'".<sup>5</sup> Kureishi deals with those attitudes highlighting his father's condition as first-generation immigrant. The ideas of these people are those of a generation who tries to embrace the culture of a liberal society without setting itself free from the conservative views in which it grew up. Thus one can explain how the refusal of Islamic restrictions to women's way of dressing coexists with the condemnation of Western liberty.

At the beginning of his career Kureishi attended the University of London, where he got his degree in Philosophy. After having finished his studies he was given a job as ice-creams and programmes seller at the Royal Court Theatre in Loan Square, London. Actually he had sent to the Royal Court a short play he had written, which gave him the possibility to have a job in the theatre in order to start making his way through his career as a writer

Soon I received a reply inviting me to go and see them. Weeks later my father discovered this letter in my bedroom – I'd been too intimidated to

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4 Hanif Kureishi, *Plays I*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992, IX.

5 Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi*, 32.

reply to it – and persuaded me to go and meet the literary manager, Donald Howarth.

After he'd made some remarks about my play, I expected to be dismissed by Howarth and returned to my dismal life. I dreaded this, but at least something I'd written had been taken seriously. However, Howarth led me into the auditorium and invited me to sit at the back and watch the proceedings. That afternoon Samuel Beckett was standing on stage rehearsing *Footfalls* with Billie Whitelaw. Howarth left me there. I returned several times, and sometimes sat with Beckett in the pub next to the Court. Once he gave me £50 when I needed money for a course I wanted to do.<sup>6</sup>

Kureishi soon made good contacts which helped him through his career. He became a remarkable exponent of 'fringe' theatre, in which the main themes of the plays concerned Left and anarchist politics, sex roles, rebellion and oppression. These plays were performed in basements, above pubs, in tents, in the street and even in theatres, and their main characteristics were nudity, insults, music, audience participation and comedy. For Kureishi this was an excellent training as a playwright. But it gave him also a strong political conscience: in those years, as he says, “the whole cultural area was being seen as political, as presenting values, assumptions, practices”.<sup>7</sup> Through fringe theatre he begun to deal with all those issues he will explore in his early writings, like politics, ethnicity and cultural differences between people living in the same country with different backgrounds. In fact, this kind of theatre promoted radical changes of ideologies and was accessible to all the people, and even if its plays did not have the possibility to change the politics or to mitigate problems like racism and homophobia, it introduced the consciousness of the changes Britain was going into.<sup>8</sup>

During his career as a writer Kureishi, has often been criticized, even by his relatives, for using some events of his life to write his stories. Between his work and his life can be found a lot of connections that could enable a scholar to reconstruct Kureishi's life just by reading them. For example, in 1998 he wrote a novel called *Intimacy* in which is told the story of Jay, a man who in one night wanders if he has to leave his family or not. Jay has two children and a lover, and he thinks he does not love his wife any more. The story is set in one night, at the end of which Jay leaves

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6 Kureishi, *Plays*, VII.

7 *Ibidem*, XIV.

8 Susie Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 8.

home, while the rest of his family is sleeping.<sup>9</sup> This story recalls an event that really happened to Kureishi some time before: in 1993 he was married to Tracey Scoffield who in 1995 gave him two twin sons. After some years of marriage Kureishi decided to leave his family and he was also having an affair with another woman who gave him his third son. The connections between Kureishi's failed marriage and the plot of *Intimacy* are clear. Scoffield's reaction to *Intimacy* was particularly hostile, and she declared that the novel cannot be considered 'just pure fiction'.<sup>10</sup>

Another example of Kureishi's use of personal events is *The Buddha of Suburbia*, in which the main character Karim is a second-generation British-Asian son of an Indian father and an English mother. He attends the same school in Bromley which was attended by Kureishi and by pop icons like David Bowie and Billy Idol. The protagonist of the novel is an actor of 'fringe' theatre, a passage that reflects Kureishi's involvement in the same kind of theatre. The use of biographical material involving his maternal family has been strongly criticized and contested by his family: in 1998 his sister Yasmin sent a letter to *The Guardian* accusing Kureishi of giving a false impression of their family life, that their grandfather was not a "cloth cap working person" – as the writer described him - but "owned three shops, and [their] parents were rich enough to send her to the ballet school".<sup>11</sup> Kureishi's mother in an interview on *The Observer* confirmed her daughter's words, stating that probably "it's trendy for an author to pretend they had a working-class background, but Hanif had everything he wanted as a child".<sup>12</sup> The reactions of the author to these criticisms were contrasting: at the beginning he answered the complaining of his family by affirming the memories and interpretation of the events could be different among the members of the same family, then he showed some regret for the use of personal sources which aroused the disappointment of his mother and his sister.<sup>13</sup>

Kureishi, even through the use of personal events of his life and that of his relatives, managed to generalize the concept of 'in-betweenness' that millions of immigrants with their descendants faced and are still facing today. Being the son of a

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9 Hanif Kureishi, *Intimacy*, London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

10 Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, 15.

11 *Ibidem*, 15.

12 *Ibidem*.

13 *Ibidem*, 16.



Pakistani father and an English mother he represents a new kind of Englishman – the result of the issue called the Indian diaspora. This phenomenon, which consist of a wide mass migration towards the UK, reached its highest spreading during the post-war era:

An iconographic representation of the beginning of such pregnant process lies in the image of the steamship “Windrush” approaching the British coast: the boat crammed with West Indian immigrants dramatically anticipated the consequences of the cultural and social displacement implied in the condition of exile. Nowadays we may even consider the “Windrush” as a forewarning sign, if we look at the derelict fleet of ships that illegally carry migrants to the coasts of Mediterranean countries, miserable victims of a cruel criminal exploitation.<sup>14</sup>

Adami's use of the image of the Windrush highlights the situation Britain was going to face in future decades: the landing of a lot of people coming from the ex-colonies. After the Second World War there has been a sort of invasion of Britain by Indian immigrants who were escaping from their country in order to get a better life in the place that until few years before was considered the oppressor's homeland. The reception of the immigrants has often been anything but peaceful, but the political and social situation of India was still worst. The break-up of the country that will lead to the emancipation of Pakistan brought also a lot of social and religious problems as the restriction of personal rights because of the massive reinforce of the Islamic religion. These were some of the main reasons why Indians and Pakistanis were trying to get a better life by emigrating in England.

The results of the diaspora were the cultural changes that Britain would have found itself into: if the racism that the first-generation of Indian immigrants suffers during the 40s and 50s could be understood as a feeling of the 'host' society towards the immigrants due to the invasion of their country, with the second-generation – that is to say those who were born in Britain by immigrant parents – racism could not be justified any more. So in this period Britain had to face the fall of some ideologies and concepts which could not fit the British situation any more: for example, among the concepts which were reformulated, there were those of nation and nationhood. Until

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14 Esterino Adami, *Rushdie, Kureishi, Syal: Essays in Diaspora*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2006, 11.

that moment these concepts were linked to questions of belonging to a certain place and even to a certain race. The new arrived were not white and did not talk the English language according to the Received Pronunciation, but they started to be a part of the community and of the society, and with their work they improve the economy of the nation. Even if there have been countless episodes of racism – and still today there is a lot of racism – English people had to find a place for the Indian immigrants, or better for their children, in English society. The question was how to consider those children with Indian parents – or mixed race parents like Kureishi – who were born in Britain. The concept of Englishness as well as the concept of nationhood had to be reformulated. It could not be based on race or ethnicity any longer.<sup>15</sup> Indeed the children of the Indians who were born in Britain after the first wave of immigration have the right to consider themselves English – growing up in a country makes anyone assimilate the customs of that society, especially if there is no direct contact with the parents' homeland. Otherwise there would be a society with a lot of members with no sense of belonging.

Nowadays the problem of a new conception of Englishness is far from to be sorted out, but thanks to writers like Kureishi it has been at least highlighted – their interest in making public this issue can be understood through their condition as second-generation immigrants who born and have always lived in Britain. Critics of post-colonial literature try to analyse this concept also through the writings of those artists such as Rushdie and Kureishi, and to relate it to the cultural changes that Britain has faced and is still facing today.

There have been two kind of Englishnesses theorised by Mishra and Chambers - “the first is strictly Anglocentric and imbued with the praise of an imperial past, a dream of power that sustained the racist feeling of white superiority and the belonging to the British nation; the second type, conversely is linked to the potentiality of hybridity and the interconnection of various cultures and ethnic communities”.<sup>16</sup> Writers as Kureishi, children of at least one non-English parent, sustain the second kind of Englishness because it reflects their condition of 'in-betweenness':

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15 Adami, *Essays in Diaspora*, 15.

16 *Ibidem*, 16.

Thus, a new type of society seems to give raise to the contemporary quest for identity and present the revisited notions of 'Englishness', detached from stereotypical images of post-imperial grandeur. The author's perception and provoking affirmations of 'being English,' epitomised by the groundbreaking incipit of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), works as the key to comprehending the intercultural forces and historical agencies that have reshaped and moulded British society over the last decades. Whilst the process of decolonisation and the struggle for independence of the overseas colonies date back to the end of the Second World War, what Kureishi speaks of is the hybrid legacy and postmodern vision of the historical results of such salient events. The fruition of the oeuvre of Kureishi is redeemed from easy labels, absorbing migrant and local elements, depicting a multicultural London, inhabited by immigrants and dropouts, in the partial shadow of the Indian heritage. A double position, then, given the peculiar nature of in-betweenness which forges this new sense of belonging.<sup>17</sup>

This in-betweenness is the result of the blending of the elements of different cultures which converge in one subject. Kureishi can be considered as an exponent of this phenomenon because of his mixed origins which give him a different point of view about the cultural and political situation in Britain. Adami says that Kureishi's different view is shown in the writer's works where the multicultural aspect of the city of London and of Britain in general is highlighted, and where the Indian character is central. This condition of in-betweenness can be considered an amplification of the writer's perception of his world, which enables him to be more conscious about the similar situation of other second-generation immigrants and instils in him a new sense of belonging. This new sense of belonging brings with it a deeper awareness about the roots and the identity of the subject.

So, the first kind of Englishness defined by Mishra and Chambers is permeated with a sense of belonging to a nation based on the superiority of native white people, the want of personal and national power and with the importance of the greatness of what the English empire has been. For this kind of Englishness there was no place for all the Indian immigrants who, wishing a better life, left their country to go in England. But they arrived en masse, and during the years of the second half of the twentieth century they tried to carve out a niche in English society. This process was not easy, indeed it was full of episodes of racism. Kureishi had described several times these

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<sup>17</sup> Adami, *Essays in Diaspora*, 90.

episodes of political clashes between the Asian Youth Front and the National Front: in the 60s, 70s and 80s Southall – a large suburban district of west London – was theatre of different episodes during which the Asians tried to contrast the marches of the National Front directed at those territories in which the Asians lived.

Thanks to these political struggles, during the years the concept of Englishness begun to change little by little. Of course there are still racists who vote for the Far Right and are convinced of the superiority of white race. After the so called Indian diaspora, English people begun to understand that it was impossible not to consider English all those children born in England by foreign parents or by a foreign parent and a native one, as in Kureishi's case. The old concept of Englishness based on the belonging to a particular race begun to change in favour of the second kind theorised by Mishra and Chambers, that is the one based on the possibility to belong to the people of a nation even being of mixed race.

This new kind of Englishness introduced the concept of 'hybridity'. For some literary critics it is a natural consequence of the new meaning the concept of Englishness has acquired. According to Moore-Gilbert, this is a particular subject because of the impossibility of its explanation in an unambiguous way. He quotes Salman Rushdie who says hybridity could be seen as the blending of different cultures which give birth to a completely new identity. “The 'hybrid'”, says Rushdie, “will not completely surrender to the customs of the host society nor will hold onto the traditions of his parents' homeland”. In this way this kind of hybridity “overturns the binary structure of opposition between different cultures and cultural traditions, thus potentially diminishing possible hostilities between them”.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of hybridity does not fit Kureishi who has always stated to be a real Englishman. But this is not the only motivation for the writer's rejection of hybridity: Bradley Buchanan quotes Judith Misrahi-Barak who claims that this concept can fit those artists like Rushdie who have a real Indian background, being he born in Bombay, but it cannot fit Kureishi who “is not quite part of the post-colonial crowd: he was not born in a former British colony, he did not exile himself like many first-generation writers, he does not speak the mother tongue of his family”.<sup>19</sup>

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18 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, London: Penguin, 1992 then quoted in Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 195.

19 Judith Misrahi-Barak, *The Scope of Fiction in Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia: from Margin to Margin*

Comparing Rushdie's definition of hybridity and Misrahi-Barak's analysis about Kureishi's background it is clear that the two arguments are not compatible: the writer does not need to fight against an irresistible instinct to save the traditions and the culture of his parents. He is born in England and he declares himself to be an Englishman. When questioned about the relation between his works and the concept of hybridity, Kureishi gives a quite annoyed answer:

Q - A lot of people have used that word [hybridity] to analyse your work, and it's very much part of the post-colonial vocabulary to be seen as creating something new that may push the boundaries of the human by crossing ethnic or racial lines.

A - Yeah, but it's a vague idea, because there's hybridity everywhere, there always has been. Look at a child with a mother and a father, and is composed, therefore, as Freud wrote, of at least two genders, and the pulling together of these genders into a sexuality and so on. And in fact these parents have come from different places psychologically, so there's a lot of hybridity going on all the time, if you think of hybridity as meaning the putting together of disparate things. People, when they talk about hybridity, are really talking about someone with an Indian mother and an English father, aren't they?

Q - So it's everywhere we look?

A - It's so vague, isn't it? Somebody from West Germany and somebody from East Germany; at certain times, that would have been very different to negotiate for a child, for instance. But it's usually used in terms of black and white.

Q - You seem to be saying that there's a limit to the utility of that term where your work is concerned, that your work is not necessarily privileged in its access to hybridity.

A - I don't mind if people use that term, but it's not something that I think much about myself, because it goes on all the time, in so many other places and ways. But I have no objections to what people says about my work.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, even if criticism tends to give a great importance to the issue of hybridity, Kureishi seems to minimize it stating that it is easy to find everywhere, in all the people, not only in those who born to parents coming from different countries. His first aim is to give a new meaning to the concept of Englishness. Anyway, the social analysis he makes in his works does not involve only Pakistani community, but all society.

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*and Back to the Centre*, Études Britanniques Contemporaines: Revue de la Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines, 13 (January 1998, 31-9 then quoted in Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi*, 119.

All Kureishi's works written before 1997 deal with the issue of Englishness. For this reason he has been considered by some critics as the minority artist who speaks for the entire community. But his writing on behalf of Indian people gave him some problems: he was limited as artist and this role was based on the racist assumption that "every minority subject is essentially the same".<sup>21</sup>

Susie Thomas argues that for this reason "Kureishi was judged according to the need to formulate positive images which restored the community the artist belongs and according to the explicit request for a representation of issue of race in a heterogeneous and sophisticated way".<sup>22</sup> So he had to give voice to the British-Asian community showing it as a concrete and important part of English society, and at the same time he should not fossilize his analysis only on the Asian issue, he had to give a depiction of the whole British society. This is, says Thomas quoting Kobena Mercer, the problem called 'the burden of representation'.<sup>23</sup>

In his works the issue of immigrants becomes a symbol of his preoccupation to introduce a new concept of national identity. As Adami points out, Kureishi is deeply concerned with the dynamics of transformation that have affected British society and he tries to go over obsolete definitions. He seems to suggest that the concept of Englishness cannot deal any more with that of Nationalism, which now belongs to the past because a huge 'global village' is substituting social settings: large cities represent the main sites of such dramatic innovations. The ethnic component in Kureishi is crucial insofar as it emphasises both the centre and the margins, England and the subcontinent, and poses questions to the self. He recognises the Indian background, which is an important narrative source in many of his works, and yet he breaks every conventional literary label. Indeed in many Kureishi's works there is an investigation of human personality which enlarges the scope of his writing.<sup>24</sup>

His early plays were produced not only by the Royal Court Theatre, but also by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the London's Theatre Upstairs. In this period he wrote some of his most famous plays such as *The King and Me* (1980), *Outskirts* (1981), *Borderline* (1981) and *Birds of Passage* (1983). These plays contained those

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21 Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi*, 3.

22 *Ibidem*, 4.

23 *Ibidem*, 3.

24 Adami, *Essays in Diaspora*, 128.

themes at the core of Kureishi's development of the issue of Englishness: England, ethnicity and racism. The condition of England deals with the perception of the nation by the different characters who populate the story. *Outskirts* is set in the years between 1969 and 1981, “a time of particular turbulence and difficulty in contemporary British history which from a Left-liberal perspective began with quasi-revolutionary optimism and ended in deep reaction”.<sup>25</sup> By reading Kureishi's words it is clear that in those years England was suffering for an apparent failure of the Welfare State and a not complete recovery from the ravages of World War Two.

In *Borderline* Kureishi employed the perspective of the Pakistani Ravi, who is just arrived in England, “to comment on the depressed state of the nation of that period. Ravi's expectations of the former imperial power are repeatedly frustrated from the moment he gets the airport bus to London”.<sup>26</sup> Following the main features of the fringe theatre, other issues highlighted and discussed in Kureishi's plays are ethnicity and racism. He makes a study of the societies living in England, in this case the British society and the British-Asian, trying to explore and understand why there is hostility between them. *Outskirts* and *Birds of Passage* are Kureishi's first attempts to analyse the psychology of racism, and they are characterised by complexity and nuance in the depiction of white supremacy. As Moore-Gilbert states, in “*Birds of Passage* Ted may switch off his TV whenever a black face appears, yet this is also a man tortured by a sense of responsibility towards the workers he has had to lay off”.<sup>27</sup>

In *Outskirts* the protagonist Bob is responsible for his difficult situation, due to his refusal to get an education. It is clear, says Moore-Gilbert, that he is deluded in defending neo-Nazism stating that is the country to be ill, not him. Kureishi shows that Bob's political views are linked to “a sense of frustration he feels as a member of a white 'under-class' which was emerging at the end of the recessions of the 1970s”.<sup>28</sup> Bob is depicted as the victim of social and history changes which affected the quality of his life, and he considers the invasion of immigrants as a failure of the politics. So his joining the far Right movement can be considered an attempt to make immigrants into scapegoats for his uneasiness and that of the working class. But his hostility

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25 Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 37.

26 *Ibidem*, 38.

27 *Ibidem*, 43.

28 *Ibidem*, 44.

towards immigrants is due also to his ignorance about other cultures. Moore-Gilbert says that at one level Kureishi's early plays attempt to restore the stereotypical misconceptions about British-Asian culture: he resists to create positive stereotypes and presents British-Asian immigrants as ordinary people, confronting this way the racist idea that the members of other races are less than human.<sup>29</sup>

While analysing the issues of ethnicity and racism, Kureishi dwells on the Asian Youth Movement, the association founded by Asians in order to protect their rights and even literally their life during the clashes against the members of the National Front. By one side this Movement is seen as something good for the Asian community because of its policy of helping British-Asian women for their admission to education, work and politics. For this reason it does not meet the favour of the male part of old Asian generation. By the other side, Kureishi criticizes its aspects of violence and separatism. The writer's objections to those aspects of the Movement are expressed by Haroon, one of the characters of *Borderline*, who says that the violence and the siege mentality the group cultivates can only encourage the ghettoisation. He suggests the others British-Asians to learn reading and writing in order to be considered by British society, instead of responding with violence to racist violence, feeding this way the hate between his community and the host society. Haroon's aim is to take advantage “of the structures of the dominant society to empower subordinate constituencies like his own and to change the nature of that dominant order from within”.<sup>30</sup> To reach his objectives he puts himself on the way between the apolitical position of the old Asian generation and the destructive militancy and separatism of the Asian Youth Movement. He can be seen, says Moore-Gilbert, as a “politically subversive model of cultural hybridity”<sup>31</sup> who could represent the solution to the problems of the immigrant communities which want to highlight the ethnic and cultural changes the host society has to face.

Other important works by Kureishi analyse the issues of ethnicity, race, nationhood, politics and religion, while giving a new meaning to the notion of Englishness.

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29 Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 46.

30 *Ibidem*, 53.

31 *Ibidem*, 54.



In 1985 he gained international success with the film *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which won some prizes and received a nomination for BAFTA's Award and an Oscar nomination for Best Screenplay. In 1990 he wrote his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which won the Whirlbread Prize for Best First Novel and it has been translated in more than 20 languages. In 1987 he wrote his second screenplay called *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* which became a film directed by Stephen Frears – the same director of *My Beautiful Laundrette* - and in 1995 his second novel, *The Black Album* came out.<sup>32</sup> All these works will be analysed in the following chapters.

Anyway, Kureishi is today considered the one who brought the Asian issue into the spotlight. As Susie Thomas claims, Kureishi's works were the first written by a British-born writer of Asian descent, even if a long tradition of literature by and about Asians already existed in Britain. One of the particularities of this writer is that he does not write back to the centre, but from the centre, that is to say Kureishi is not an Indian immigrant who came in Britain and wrote about Indian situation in that country, but he do it having been born in Britain. His analysis of the British-Asian society is carried out from the perspective of a person who has always lived in England. So his work cannot be considered as something coming back to the 'empire', because his work is written already in the 'empire'. For these reasons Kureishi becomes the inspirer for a lot of artists who were born in Britain from at least one foreign parent like Meera Syal, Ayub Khan Din, Zadie Smith, Shyama Perera, Atima Srivastava and Monica Ali.<sup>33</sup>

Kureishi has always considered himself an Englishman, at least until he first went in Pakistan to visit his father's homeland and the rest of his family. After that journey he has started to consider again his position in English society. Indeed, though born in England, he suffered from episodes of racism as a child and as a young boy. However, these events did not make him hate England to embrace Pakistani culture, but gave him a different awareness about his situation which will make mature in himself a critical mind towards the two cultures. This can be seen in one of his most famous essays called *The Rainbow Sign*, in which Kureishi presents a keen analysis of some differences between the two countries from a cultural point of view.

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32 Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 17.

33 Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi*, 1.

## *The Rainbow Sign*

In *The Rainbow Sign* Kureishi makes his contribution in changing mono-cultural definitions of British national identity through the telling of his childhood, of the political situation of England and through the analysis of the phenomenon of racism of that time.<sup>34</sup> The essay is divided in three parts, and each part takes the name of the place Kureishi wants to talk about. In the first part called *England* the writer tells how during his childhood he has been victim of racist episodes, even at school by his teachers:

Frequently during my childhood, I met my Pakistani uncles when they came to London on business. They were important, confident people who took me in hotels, restaurants and Test matches, often in taxis. But I had no idea of what the subcontinent was like or how my numerous uncles, aunts and cousins lived there. When I was nine or ten a teacher purposefully placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts in front of me and said to the class: Hanif comes from India. I wondered: did my uncles ride on camels? Surely not in their suits? Did my cousins, so like me in other ways, squat down in the sand like little Mowglis, half-naked and eating with their fingers?<sup>35</sup>

This and other events marked his life to the point that he started hating his Indian half. At the same time, when he was still a boy, Kureishi began to study the English political situation of his time, finding out it was not one of the best. In that period Enoch Powell was gaining political power, even thanks to his racist ideals. Powell was that kind of politician who used to say statements like “we should not lose sight of the desirability of achieving a steady flow of voluntary repatriation for the elements which are proving unsuccessful or unassimilable”, or “as I look ahead I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, 'I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood'”.<sup>36</sup> Those people who had a natural predisposition to racism towards other races felt empowered by Powell's words. Kureishi tells that in those years there were daily

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34 Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi*, 2.

35 Hanif Kureishi, *Collected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 2011, 3.

36 *Ibidem*, 6.

racists episodes like the beating of Pakistanis or the graffiti which invite them to come back in their country.<sup>37</sup>

In this contest of racism, Kureishi found a sort of relief in studying the movement of the Black Panthers and begun to admire those people because they “were proud and they were fighting [...] no one in England was fighting”.<sup>38</sup> Among the black activists there was even Muhammad Ali, a boxer who changed his name from Cassius Clay because of his embracing of the Muslim religion. So Kureishi discovered the Nation of Islam movement, to which Ali belonged, led by Elijah Muhammad who “called himself the Messenger of Islam and [...] preached separatism, separate development for black and white”.<sup>39</sup>

The issue of separatism, the hatred of the white man and the completely submission to a god and to a religion which use threats and ignorance as methods to rule the masses and to keep them quite, made Kureishi understand that the Islamic religion was not suitable for his situation.

That this glorious resistance to the white man, the dismissal of Christian meekness, was followed by submission to Allah and worse, to Elijah Muhammad, was difficult to take. I saw racism as unreason and prejudice, ignorance and failure of sense. [...] That the men I wanted to admire had liberated themselves only to take to unreason, to the abdication of intelligence, was shocking to me. And the separatism, the total loathing of the white man as innately corrupt, the 'All whites are devils' view, was equally unacceptable. I had to live in England, in the suburbs of London, with whites. My mother was white. I wasn't ready for separate development. I'd too much of that already. [...] I saw the taking up of Islam as an aberration, a desperate fantasy of worldwide black brotherhood; it was a symptom of extreme alienation.<sup>40</sup>

The issue of separatism is important for Kureishi and it often recurs in his works as in his play *Borderline*, where one of the main characters, Haroon, criticizes the separatist component of the Asian Youth Movement programme. Kureishi believes that separatism only helps to improve the isolation of Asian cultures in English society. The

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37 Kureishi, *Essays*, 6.

38 *Ibidem*, 7.

39 *Ibidem*, 8.

40 *Ibidem*, 9.

writer understands that to live in England without problems it is better to become integrated in society. Perhaps for him it has been easier to develop this belief, being born already in England, but surely integration is the best way to be accepted.

In the second part of the essay, *Pakistan*, Kureishi describes his first impressions of the subcontinent, his father's homeland. There he deals with rich people who use to pass over the restrictive laws imposed by Islam: “they were drinking heavily [...] the 'leggers delivered video tapes [...] hot copies of *The Jewel in the Crown*, *The Far Pavilions*”.<sup>41</sup> His feelings of in-betweenness, which raises in him contrasting feelings – the great welcome given to him by his relatives, the unity of Pakistani people – stimulate his Pakistani half, while the mocking of his job as a playwright reminds him of the differences between him and the Pakistani. Even those people have contrasting visions about Kureishi's nationality and identity: when he tells them he is an Englishman they laugh asking themselves how could “anyone with a brown face, Muslim name and large well-known family in Pakistan want to lay claim to that cold little decrepit island off Europe where you always had to spell your name”.<sup>42</sup> But at the same time he is addressed as Paki, a disparaging term with which the English use to express their racism towards the Pakistani people, because he uses to wear jeans, a symbol of Western fashion.

Adami states that Kureishi's travelling to Pakistan can be seen as a highly symbolic journey across the contradictions of a double sense of nationhood. In fact, “in spite of his sense of detachment from the rural local reality, where an almost feudal social, political and religious hierarchy disintegrates freedom and the creative spirit, Kureishi tries to track down the fine culture of the Asian country”.<sup>43</sup> Thus, even if Kureishi tends to condemn the narrow-minded Pakistanis who criticize his Englishness, he succeeds in find out different fascinating aspects of that culture. Such aspects, such as the need of aggregation, make Kureishi feel at home in a way. He starts to feel a sense of belonging towards that place. These considerations brought him to analyse British and Asian cultures and to discover how much he was affected by both of them.

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41 Kureishi, *Essays*, 11.

42 *Ibidem*, 12.

43 Adami, *Essays in diaspora*, 129.

Kureishi's study of Pakistani culture is stimulated also by Rahman, a friend of his intellectual uncle who explains him the history of the new Islamisation and how this event brought in that country a lot of unbelievable and unfair laws which could take only towards a dynamic regression. For a person like Rahman, who has been educated in England and came into contact with the Western thinking, the result of the Islamisation was that "this country is being sodomised by religion"<sup>44</sup>. The reintroduction of Islam is for Kureishi one of those aspects he dislikes in Pakistani culture.

The restrictions it brought to the people and the ideological basis on which it stands are unacceptable for the writer: in the essay *The Word and the Bomb* he says that "one of the most significant reasons for the rise of Islamic extremism in the Third World is the presence of financial and political corruption, along with the lack of free speech, and the failure to make a space for even the mildest political dissent"<sup>45</sup>. But what is worst is the fact that this religion was used, and still it is, by some British-Asians as a way to find an identity in a country that had deprived them of it.

In another essay called *The Carnival of Culture* Kureishi analyses this aspect after having visited some London mosques; he noted that it was the second-generation of immigrants who tended to embrace the new Islamic wave: "The British-born children of immigrants were not only more religious and politically radical than their parents, whose priority had been to establish themselves in the new country, but they despised their parents' moderation and desire to 'compromise' with Britain. To them this seemed weak"<sup>46</sup>.

During his intrusions in the mosques, Kureishi was astonished at the complete absence of dialogue between the orator who rattled off the teachings of the Koran and the audience composed by silent listeners. The impossibility to intervene and create a discussion was for Kureishi something strange and useless that went against the concept of multiculturalism, which the writer considers as a "committed exchange of ideas"<sup>47</sup>. Kureishi highlights the dullness and the presumptuousness of these characters telling about meetings between him and some members of the Islamic community of

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44 Kureishi, *Essays*, 13.

45 *Ibidem*, 99.

46 *Ibidem*, 130.

47 *Ibidem*, 133.

London:

Sometimes I would be invited to the homes of these young 'fundamentalists'. One of them had a similar background to my own: his mother was English, his father a Muslim, and he'd be brought up in a quite suburb. Now he was married to a woman from the Yemen who spoke no English. Bringing us tea, she came into the room backwards, and bent over too, out of respect for the men. The men would talk to me of 'going to train' in various places, but they seemed so weedy and polite I couldn't believe they'd want to kill anyone. What did disturb me was this. These men believed they had access to the Truth, as stated in the Koran. There could be no doubt – or even much dispute about moral, social and political problems – because God had the answers. Therefore, for them, to argue with the Truth was like trying to disagree with the facts of geometry. For them the source of all virtue and vice was the pleasure and displeasure of Allah. To be a responsible human being was to submit to this. [...] I found these sessions so intellectually stultifying and claustrophobic that at the end I'd rush into the nearest pub and drink rapidly, wanting to reassure myself I was still in England.<sup>48</sup>

Kureishi's refusal of Islamic dogma could be considered a clear mark of his Englishness. The laws of the Koran and their irrefutable nature tend to erase the basic principle of multiculturalism, the exchange of ideas. But all those concepts which deal with the coexistence of several cultures, races and way of thinking stand at the basis of the new meaning Kureishi tries to give to the concept of Englishness. The final lines of the last quotation make clear Kureishi's position about the spreading of Islamic religion in England and his wanting not to be a member of it.

However, Kureishi says that along with the Islamisation in Pakistan, a little of the 1960s spirit seems to be still alive, especially for what concerns the music, the clothes and the drugs. This last issue is highlighted in *The Rainbow Sign*. He says in Pakistan there are places where everyone produces and sells heroin, and a lot of it is exported in the West bringing with it a sort of ideology of revenge:

The Americans, who had much money invested in Pakistan, in this compliant right-wing buffer-zone between Afghanistan and India, were furious that their children were being destroyed by a flourishing illegal industry in a country they financed. But the Americans sent to Pakistan could do little about it. Involvement in the heroin trade went right through Pakistan society:

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48 Kureishi, *Essays*, 132.

the police, the judiciary, the army, the landlords, the custom officials were all involved. After all, there was nothing in the Koran about heroin, nothing specific. I was even told that its export made ideological sense. Heroin was anti-Western; addiction in Western children was a deserved symptom of the moral vertigo of godless societies. It was a kind of colonial revenge. Reverse imperialism, the Karachi wits called it, inviting nemesis.<sup>49</sup>

Since Islamisation is also the result of political and financial corruption, not surprising the interpretation of the Koran shows the non-existence of a law fit to forbid the use and the sell of heroin. Moreover, the ideological meaning which the fundamentalists give to the great use of drug by the Western countries tend to increase feelings of hate towards Western societies.

One of the cultural differences noted by Kureishi between Pakistan and England is the relationships among the people. In Pakistan his uncle's house is always full of people who could be friend or relatives staying even for a month. The senses of unity and belonging are strong and Pakistani people use to help themselves, they share their knowledge and people are always inclined to learn about anything. In England friends lasts hardly more than eight years, and it's impossible that someone ever meet his friends' parents. Friendship is a superficial feeling so that the talking among friends turns out to be an unnecessary activity.<sup>50</sup>

But there are also some similarities between the two cultures, for example, the Pakistanis, like the English, “drank whisky and read *The Times*, they praised others by calling them 'gentlemen'; and their eyes filled with tears at old Vera Lynn records”.<sup>51</sup> This is because Pakistan sense of dependence towards England is still alive, giving birth to contrasting dynamics: although in Pakistan there are libraries full of English books and newspapers, the buildings and the monument remind English style, and the Pakistanis still want to escape to England, “the old men in their clubs and the young eating their hamburgers [who] took great pleasure in England's decline and decay. The great master was fallen. Now it was seen as strikebound, drug-ridden, riot-torn, inefficient, disunited, a society which had moved too suddenly from puritanism to

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49 Kureishi, *Essays*, 19.

50 *Ibidem*, 17.

51 *Ibidem*, 19.

hedonism and now loathed itself".<sup>52</sup>

But there are still people who, like Rahman, consider England the cradle of human progress and civilisation and do not want Islamisation. This kind of people astonished Kureishi for the particular answer they used to give when were asked why some of the English hate so much the Pakistanis:

It was that the English misunderstood the Pakistanis because they saw only the poor people, those from the villages, the illiterates, the peasants, the Pakistanis who didn't know how to use toilets, how to eat with knives and forks because they were poor. If the British could only see *them*, the rich, the educated, the sophisticated, they wouldn't be so hostile. They'd know what civilised people the Pakistanis really were. And then they'd like them. The implication was that the poor who'd emigrated to the West to escape the strangulation of the rich in Pakistan deserved the racism they received in Britain because they really were contemptible. The Pakistani middle class shared the disdain of the British for the émigré working class and peasantry of Pakistan.<sup>53</sup>

What is interesting, says Kureishi, is that the English middle class uses the same vocabulary of contempt against the English working class – accusing the workers of ignorance, laziness, uncleanliness – the Pakistani middle class uses for the Pakistani poor. Thus Kureishi finds out another similarity between the two cultures, which leads to the conclusion that racism is also a result of class inequality, a desire to show one's own superiority through money and culture. It can be seen in the treatment given to the English working class by the middle class, which is the same the Pakistani poor receive by their middle class.

In the last part of his essay, *London*, Kureishi reflects upon the situation he left in England, but with a new store of knowledge, the one he has accumulated in Pakistan. The racist attacks against the Pakistanis still continue, but now they are trying to fight back thanks to “defence committees, vigilante groups and becoming united”.<sup>54</sup> The irony is that even among the Pakistani immigrants there are class differences. So there are the Pakistanis who, having managed to get well off and to establish their businesses, now they vote the Conservative Party; then there is the

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52 Kureishi, *Essays* 23.

53 *Ibidem*, 24.

54 *Ibidem*, 25.



Pakistani working class which is politically unprotected by the Labour Party. What is worst, is that the Labour Party – which should make the interest of the working class – does not number black people among its lines because it fears to lose the white racist's vote.<sup>55</sup>

Kureishi says that to come back in England was not so easy. In Pakistan he found a part of his roots and overall he understood that he naturally shares some aspects of the Pakistani culture. At the same time he admits that he missed England a lot, despite all the inconsistencies of this place, even if his identification with this nation is not complete. He says that he “would rather walk naked down the street than stand up for the National Anthem”, but quoting Orwell he is conscious that “the suet puddings and the red pillar boxes have entered into [his] soul”.<sup>56</sup> He warns the Indians and Pakistanis who, being born and brought up in England, used to live their life waiting to come back to a place where they will be welcome. When they will manage to realize their dream, says Kureishi, they would understand how deep is their attachment to England. This statement is supported by Adami who says that this desire to come back to 'imagined Indias' is used by immigrants as a shelter from the racist assaults, and at the same time the fictitious country could represent a temporary escapism.<sup>57</sup>

At the end of the essay, Kureishi suggests that the only way to change this situation of racism and identity in England is to give a new meaning to the concept of Englishness.

It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time. Much thought, discussion and self-examination must go into seeing the necessity for this, what this 'new way of being British' involves and how difficult it might be to attain. The failure to grasp this opportunity for a revitalized and broader self-definition in the face of a real failure to be human, will be more insularity, schism, bitterness and catastrophe. The two countries, Britain and Pakistan, have been part of each other for years, usually to the advantage of Britain. They cannot now be wrenched apart, even if that were desirable. Their futures will be intermixed. What that intermix means, its moral quality, whether it is

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55 Kureishi, *Essays*, 28.

56 *Ibidem*, 31.

57 Adami, *Essays in Diaspora*, 133.

violently resisted by ignorant whites and characterised by inequality and injustice, or understood, accepted and humanised, is for all of us to decide. This decision is not one about a small group of irrelevant people who can be contemptuously described as 'minorities'. It is about the direction of British society. About its values and how humane it can be when experiencing real difficulty and possible breakdown. It is about the respect it accords individuals, the power it gives to groups, and what it really means when it describe itself as 'democratic'. The future is in our hands.<sup>58</sup>

Susie Thomas gives the best interpretation of this passage. She claims that what Kureishi means is that the minorities do not have to assimilate and to become exactly like the British, because the British would reject them anyway. What has to be renewed is the “humanity, equality and justice of British society as a whole”.<sup>59</sup> Kureishi maintains that the British have to understand that the concept of Englishness, as they intended it is now over, it has to be refreshed. This refreshing does not mean that the Pakistani community must conform to the British one, but that the latter has to rethink what it means to be British now, considering for example the great phenomenon of multiculturalism which in Britain has always been massive. Otherwise, says the writer, the failure to find a new way to state what does nowadays mean to be British could bring such problems as cultural isolation. This could be dangerous in a country where several different races have to coexist, and it is also a failure of the human principle of mutual acceptance.

In the last lines of *The Rainbow Sign* Kureishi talks in favour of Pakistani society, but as an exponent of British society. He criticizes the colonial dominion of Britain in Pakistan which accounts for the fact that the future of the two countries is now indissoluble. Moreover, to apply the principles of social acceptance should be compulsory for a country which declares itself as democratic.

Back from this journey Kureishi's sense of belonging is a little confused. From that moment on he began to write about the new immigrant communities now mainly associated with urban and suburban locations. This interest derives from his condition of immigrant of second generation, and it is amplified by his little identity crisis described in *The Rainbow Sign*. He explores issues of identity and Englishness by

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58 Kureishi, *Essays*, 34.

59 Thomas, *Hanif Kureishi*, 3.

creating characters which reiterate the revised concept of being English and his own meditation on the British context. The theme of immigration is used by Kureishi as a basis for the birth of a new national consciousness and the reformulation of old paradigms of belonging.<sup>60</sup>

### *Bradford*

In an essay called *Bradford*, Kureishi goes again into the issues of nationhood, racism, separatism and Englishness. Kureishi visits this place which he considers as “a microcosm of a larger British society that was struggling to find a sense of itself, even as it was undergoing radical change”.<sup>61</sup> In fact Bradford is a city where the largest community of British-Asian people of all Britain resides in, so its dynamics could be looked at as general directions of all the country – the ethnic, religious and political conditions of Bradford are the same of the entire nation, but on a small scale.

Although racism towards the Pakistanis is still strong, Bradford is a city in which something was made in shape of an alleged benefit for the Islamic community. Even if the Asiatic families were living in dilapidated houses without electricity or gas, an aspect of their religion would be fulfilled: separatism. Kureishi went to the inauguration of an Islamic girls school where, during the opening speech the MP Michael Shaw talks about this school as something made for give all the possible liberties to the spreading of Islamic culture in the community. However it was the Islamic culture separatism which prevailed over the integration of the Indian people in English society. Probably, says Kureishi, all that was happening because of some repressed Islamic believers who felt threatened by England and frightened for their daughters' sexuality.<sup>62</sup>

Paradoxically, it seems that separatism was due more to the concessions given by the English government than to the requests of the Islamic community. Indeed

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60 Adami, *Essays in Diaspora*, 130.

61 Kureishi, *Essays*, 36.

62 *Ibidem*, 46.

Chowdhury Khan, the President of the Council of Mosques in Bradford, told Kureishi that the aim of his community is to found single-sex not Islamic schools, in order to educate their children according to Islamic teaching and to give anyone the possibility to learn Islamic culture. Khan complains about the fact that Islamic schools are synonymous of segregated schools which could only lead to apartheid. Kureishi talks about this issue with a young man called Tariq, who has always been active in politics and when he was sixteen he had been chairman of the Asian Youth Movement. Tariq is not in favour of Islamic schools, because children studying there would always have problem to get qualifications. For them it would have been better to study in mixed-race and mixed-sex schools in Britain. Tariq is obviously against separatism, and he would prefer that all the immigrants were integrated in English society. But he is convinced that the problem of integration is linked to that of poverty. He says that

[...] people [cannot] feel themselves to be active participants in the life of a society when they were suffering all the wretchedness of bad housing, poor insulation and the indignity of having their gas and electricity disconnected; or when they were turning to loan sharks to pay their bills; or when they felt themselves being dissipated by unemployment; and when they weren't being properly educated, because the resources for a proper education didn't exist.<sup>63</sup>

Even in *The Rainbow Sign* Kureishi talks about separatism. He says that it was one of the main reasons for his refusal to join Islamic religion. In *Bradford* instead, separatism is something due to some political concessions the British government gave to Asian people, such as that of the Islamic school. Indeed it is considered something good by those Muslims who do not want to be integrated, and counterproductive by those Asians who want to be an integral part of British society. Tariq says that attending an Islamic school means to have problems in finding a job. It would be better to attend a mixed-race school, or the single-sex schools hypothesized by Khan. But the latter alternative seems impossible to carry out. In fact, the number of white British children attending a school where the teachings are based on Islamic precepts would be infinitesimal.

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63 Kureishi, *Essays*, 49.

Thus, separatism is due not only to the narrow-minded fundamentalists who want their children to learn according to the laws of the Koran, but also to some political decisions which tend to ghettoise Asian people. Moreover, states Tariq during his conversation with Kureishi, there is the problem of the bad conditions of Asians – bad housing, poverty, unemployment – that put other obstacles to the process of integration of his people.

Later in his essay, Kureishi talks about his fortune: he feels that for him and for the so called second-generation immigrants there has been more luck in being born in England respect to their parents who had not. He states he belongs to Britain despite the racists telling him the contrary. He says that his life can be seen as the synthesis of elements such as “the pub, the mosque, two or three languages, rock 'n' roll, Indian films”.<sup>64</sup> With these few words Kureishi summarizes the concept of his in-betweenness: he highlights those aspects which constitute his cultural background and made him “almost an Englishman”, paraphrasing the famous opening words of *The Buddha of Suburbia*. In fact a part from the mosque, all the others features are typical of Western people, although his background is not fully European, it is mixed with Eastern elements.

Kureishi's peculiar identity could be considered a new kind of Englishness: he is completely British from a cultural point of view and at the same time he does not reject his Pakistani origins. Thus the difference between a first-generation and a second-generation immigrant is that the former has difficulty in finding his identity in the new country, while the latter assimilates the cultural background of that place plus some elements of the culture of his parents' homeland. According to Adami this happens because while “the older generation migrants finds himself trapped in a cultural grid, imprisoned between the memory of a self-constructed India and a half-absorbed England, [...] second generation immigrants cannot rely on the mind-constructed India and therefore opt for exploring new ways of being through pop culture, drugs, fashion”.<sup>65</sup>

In the final part of the essay Kureishi analyses how some political fringes deal with the concepts of Englishness and nationhood. He tells the story of an event

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64 Kureishi, *Essays*, 48.

65 Adami, *Essays in Diaspora*, 132.

happened in Bradford some years earlier, which aroused great interest for its dynamics: a man called Ray Honeyford, who was headmaster in a school where the 95 per cent of the student were Asian, had published two articles in which he wrote about the education system in relation with the issue of race. Honeyford stated that Englishness and the English way of life were damaging by multi-racial policies, and he railed even at those teachers who endorsed those plans of action. His polemic was addressed also towards the Pakistanis, who were considered responsible for young British drug problems because of Pakistan producing and selling heroin. But it was Honeyford's second article which provoked the protests of Pakistani people, the withdrawal of the children from the school and the consequent Honeyford's exemption from his job.<sup>66</sup>

Kureishi's analysis highlights the fact that Honeyford's conception of what means to be British is shared also by the New Right Party. This strand of Conservatism says that the political consciousness can be reached at its highest form only through the consciousness of nationhood, which requires a unity of national sentiment. The view the New Right holds of people who are British but not white could explain this principle: "Asians are acceptable as long as they behave like whites; if not they should leave".<sup>67</sup>

So the New Right feels threatened by anti-racism and multi-racial policies in education because of the erosion they caused to the meaning of nationhood. This conception of nationhood is based on an obsolete sense of unity that does not consider all those elements which have entered the British culture, as "the Indian restaurants, the music of Bob Marley, the novels of Salman Rushdie and the Hare Krishna Temple"<sup>68</sup>:

Among all the talk of unity on the New Right, there is no sense of the vast differences in attitude, life-style and belief, or in class, race and sexual preference, that *already* exist in British society: the differences between those in work and those out of it; between those who have families and those who don't; and, importantly, between those who live in the North and those in the South. [...] And of course from the New Right's talk of unity, we get

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66 Kureishi, *Essays*, 54.

67 *Ibidem*, 55.

68 *Ibidem*, 56.

no sense of the racism all black people face in Britain: the violence, abuse and discrimination in jobs, housing, policing and political life.<sup>69</sup>

Kureishi argues that the way those neo-fascist Parties conceive the ideas of Englishness and nationhood is so obsolete that it does not fit even the changes of the white British society. It implies that there is no place for the Asian community in the ideal society described by the New Right. Their conception of being British is the same of that theorised by Mishra and Chambers mentioned before, precisely the first one which is based on those ideas such as the praise of the imperial past, the racist feeling of white superiority and the belonging to the British nation. These ideas and their application not only hinder the natural development of the society, but hold also racist features that make the evolution of new ways of Englishness impossible.

At the end of the essay Kureishi talks about his meeting with Mohammed Ajeeb, who for a year has been mayor of Bradford. Actually he was the first Asian or black mayor. The writer describes this meeting as the event which most filled him with enthusiasm during his visit in the city. Of course Ajeeb, at the time he was mayor, had a lot of problems, especially of racism, such as when he had to deliver a cheque to the families of the victims who lost their lives in a fire at the stadium, and the people addressed him with racist slogans; or when he tried to become a Parliamentary candidate and the Labour Party denied its support fearing to lose the votes of the racists white working-class. But despite these episodes he knew that no culture could remain static, neither British nor Pakistani. And when the situation seemed to become unbearable, he consoled himself in the “knowledge that the British electorate had always rejected the far right”.<sup>70</sup>

The neo-fascist groups like the National Front and the British National Party had never had much votes, and that meant the racists were in minority. Ajeeb's firm belief could be considered as a good sign for all those issues here discussed, such as the integration of Asian people in British society and the reshaping of concepts such as those of Englishness and nationhood.

In conclusion, in this first chapter the concept of Englishness has been

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<sup>69</sup> Kureishi, *Essays* 57.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 51.

highlighted. It has been stated how this word should change meaning, in order to fit the contemporary British society. In fact two kinds of Englishness exist: the old one, which is based on racist issues like white man's superiority and the belonging to the British nation; the new one, which is linked to multiculturalism and states that one could be of mixed race and be considered British at the same time. This new concept of Englishness leads to another important issue, that of in-betweenness. It concerns those children born to parents of different nationality or those who were born in Britain to non-English parents.

Kureishi was one of the first writers to raise the argument about the identity of people like him. His family situation – the father was the descendant of a rich Indian family, the mother is a white British who belongs to the working-class – makes him a prominent exponent of the in-betweenness: the same Kureishi will describe his identity as the blending of different elements of both cultures, the Pakistani and the English one. Some critics were led to theorise another concept, that of hybridity, which could be described as the mixing of more cultures that give as result a completely new identity. Kureishi tends to refuse that label, because he thinks that everything could be considered hybrid, even a child who is the result of the coupling of different entities like a man and a woman.

Kureishi says he has always considered himself an Englishman, fulfilling in this way the new conception of Englishness. In his first works he often talks about issues of race, ethnicity, religion and politics, highlighting the situation that Asian people have to live in Britain, as the short analysis of the plays *Outskirts* and *Borderline* has shown. In the first play the Asian argument is just mentioned, what is highlighted is the situation in Britain, especially the political one that is represented by neo-fascist parties welcoming the loafers of the society. The analysis of British situation has helped Kureishi in tracing those lines of research which he studied in depth to give a new meaning to the word Englishness. In *Borderline* his study is more specific: here are represented several strata of British-Asian community, from the rich businessman who does not employ Pakistanis because of their laziness, to the illegal immigrant who goes in Britain without a real intention to work and with a particular idea about European girls.



Kureishi's analysis is pitiless, he does not try to give a forced good image of British-Asian people. In fact, he criticizes some aspects of the Asian Youth Movement, the political association which tries to resist the racist attacks of neo-fascist parties such as the National Front and the New Right: he makes Haroon says that the violence used to retaliate against the neo-fascists is something horrible, like the problem of separatism which these kind of association bring. The only important word for Haroon-Kureishi is 'integration'.

In the essay *The Rainbow Sign* Kureishi again makes an analysis of the British society, but this time he compares it with the Pakistani society he had studied during his first journey in his father's homeland. He lists vices and virtues of the two societies and realizes that some good aspects of the Pakistani culture are inextricably deeply-rooted in him, such as the sharing of the knowledge that Pakistanis use to do in order also to stay together. Things of this kind makes Kureishi feel almost at home in Pakistan, but just for a short time, because he acknowledges he already misses Britain. He was born there, so for him Britain is where he come back home. At the end of the essay Kureishi takes the opportunity to talk clearly about Englishness, inviting his British compatriots to open their minds to the acceptance and the integration of those people like him who are not white but feel British anyway.

In the essay *Bradford* Kureishi analyses the situation of this city where the biggest British-Asian community resides. There he manages to talk with the first Asian mayor Mohammed Ajeeb, who was in charge for one year and was often victim of racist episodes. They talk about the 'Honeyford Affair' – the headmaster of a school where the 95 per cent of the student were Asians, who published two racist articles against the Pakistanis – and about the British political situation in which there still were active neo-fascist parties, even if they always collect few votes. Another important issue discussed in this essay is that of separatism created by the Islamic schools and the British government who grant them to the Asians. Kureishi makes a study on the city of Bradford because its features make it seem a microcosm standing for the entire Britain.

Thus, in this first chapter the issues of Englishness, in-betweenness, race, ethnicity, politics and religion have been discussed in relation with some early

Kureishi's play and with two of his best essays on this arguments. In the next chapter the same issues will be highlighted in two of his best novel: *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*. The former focuses most on questions about Englishness and race, while the latter deals with issues of in-betweenness and religion.



Hanif Kureishi photographed for *The Sunday Times*, 2011.



June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1948. The *Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury carrying 493 passengers from Jamaica.

## Chapter II

This chapter talks about two Kureishi's mayor works: *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*. *The Buddha*, published in 1990, is the story of Karim from his adolescence to his adulthood. It is considered a quasi-biographical novel for the strong similarities of the story with the author's life. Analysing some characters of *The Buddha*, the issue of Englishness will be highlighted from different points of view. Through Kureishi's words, the cultural identities of the protagonists of the novel will be discussed. The focus is on how much they feel to belong to Britain. So their Englishness will be compared with their Indianness – as in the case of Anwar, Haroon and Karim – in order to study the different sense of belonging between a first-generation and a second-generation immigrant. It will be discussed also how white English deal with the issue of Englishness, especially for what concerns the immigrants and their sons born in England.

*The Black Album*, which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter, was published in 1995. It is the story of Shahid, the son of Pakistani parents who suffers a sort of identity crisis: he does not know if he has to give prominence to his Indian roots or to his English background. Englishness and Indianness are represented respectively by Deedee Osgood, Shahid's teacher and lover, and Chad, a member of a group of Muslims led by Riaz. The novel brings out the inner struggle that takes place in Shahid's mind. He should choose between the fulfilment of his dream to belong to something thanks to his Pakistani friends, although it means to be subject to cultural obscurantism, or to accept his English background, even if he often feels uncomfortable with being the only dark-skinned Englishman. The protagonist's identity will be discussed also in the light of the analysis of the identities of other characters, such as the members of his family.

## *The Buddha of Suburbia*

The writing of *The Buddha* marks a change of direction in Kureishi's career: until then he had considered his job as playwright and screenwriter as a good way to express himself, but in those years he started to realize he had a lot of restrictions. In fact he began to understand that in media like cinema, television and theatre the director was the only one to lead the decision-making process. Thus Kureishi backs his teenage passion for the novel: according to Moore-Gilbert, during the sixties the novel was considered to be close to death as artistic form. But at the end of the eighties “*Granta*” magazine – a reliable literary forum – stated that in Britain there was a new vitality, and this new power “resides along the peripheries; it is spoken through a minority discourse, with a dominant tongue re-appropriated, re-commanded, and importantly re-invigorated. It is at last the end of the English novel and the beginning of the British one”.<sup>71</sup>

Kureishi's personal characteristics makes him fit for this new kind of novel. His half Pakistani origins and his living on the outskirts of London makes him a potential innovator of the novel, transforming it from English to British. *The Buddha of Suburbia* belongs to the so called “condition of England” genre: this subject is discussed in several part of the novel, for example in the commune where Jamila lives and it is also a feature of Pyke's drama. According to Moore-Gilbert *The Buddha* belongs to a particular “sub-set of British social realism”: it deals with the change of class identity in a society which was rebuilding itself after the World War Two. In fact the protagonists of the novel come from different part of the society and their story concerns the improvement of their social conditions.<sup>72</sup>

Kureishi's novel deals with issues of race and ethnicity and through them he tries to establish new models of British identity<sup>73</sup> as it transpires in the *incipit* of the novel:

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71 Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, 108.

72 *Ibidem*, 111.

73 *Ibidem*, 112.

My name is Kamir Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from to old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. 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. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it.<sup>74</sup>

Karim is aware he is an Englishman despite the fact he has mixed origins. Moreover, his character stands for a new kind of Englishness. Through the novel Kureishi talks about this issue very often, analysing it from different points of view, according to the character concerned. Karim is the character most involved in the matter of Englishness: he considers himself an Englishman, and at the same time he regards Britain – and especially the city of London – as something to which he belongs to. In fact, talking about London, Karim will describe it as “my favourite city, my playground, my home”.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, the main character of the novel is also considered an Englishman by other characters. For example, Changez in a moment of rage due to Karim's poor consideration about loyalty in love, addresses him as “a little English, with a yellowish face like the devil”, underlining the fact that “the number of morals [he has] equals none”.<sup>76</sup> Karim's Englishness is also highlighted by his step-brother Charlie, who is English in the sense a member of the National Front could intend it – white, born in Britain by white English parents. Charlie complains about Karim's attitude in facing situations that are not familiar with him: the protagonist does not want to take part in a sadomasochistic session of sex, and Charlie asks Karim why “can't [he] stop standing there and looking so English, [...] so shocked, so self-righteous and moral, so loveless and incapable of dancing”.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, at the end of a play in which Karim plays the role of an Indian, his mother reminds him that he is not an Indian, he has never been in India and probably he would “get diarrhoea the minute [he] stepped off that plane”. When Karim questions her about his half Indian roots she will answer, “Who gave birth to you?”

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74 Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London: Faber and Faber, 1990, 3.

75 *Ibidem*, 196.

76 *Ibidem*, 184.

77 *Ibidem*, 254.

You're an Englishman”<sup>78</sup>.

Karim's Englishness gives him the possibility to look into some particular aspects of English society, in the same way as English people need to show-off, through the possession of property, their economic power:

All of the houses had been 'done up'. One had a new porch, another double-glazing, 'Georgian' windows or a new door with brass fittings. Kitchens had been extended, lofts converted, walls removed, garages inserted. This was the English passion, not for self-improvement or culture or wit, but for DIY, Do It Yourself, for bigger and better houses with more mod cons, the painstaking accumulation of comfort and, with it, status – the concrete display of earned cash. Display was the game. How many times on a visit to families in the neighbourhood, before being offered a cup of tea, had we been taken around a house – 'The grand tour again,' sighed Dad – to admire knocked-through rooms, cunning cupboards and bunk-beds, showers, coal bunkers and greenhouses.<sup>79</sup>

Karim criticizes also the educational system of the suburbs because of its inefficiency in catching students' interest. It manages to make kids grow ignorant, giving them the possibility to have jobs only as “car-mechanics, or managers [...] in department stores”<sup>80</sup>.

at my school they taught you a bit of French, but anyone who attempted to pronounce a word correctly was laughed down. On a trip to Calais we attacked a Frog behind a restaurant. By this ignorance we knew ourselves to be superior to the public-school kids, with their puky uniforms and leather briefcases, and Mummy and Daddy waiting outside in the car to pick them up. We were rougher; we disrupted all lessons; we were fighters; we never carried no effeminate briefcases since we never did no homework. 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! How misinformed! Why didn't we understand that we were happily condemning ourselves to being nothing better than motor-mechanics?<sup>81</sup>

In order to give prominence to the concept of Englishness Kureishi distributes

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78 Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 233.

79 *Ibidem*, 75.

80 *Ibidem*, 177.

81 *Ibidem*, 178.

different degrees of 'Indianness' among some of his characters – the higher is the degree of Indianness, the lower is Englishness. In other words, Englishness and Indianness are in inverse proportions. It can be seen in those characters as Anwar, Haroon and Karim.

Anwar and Haroon are first generation immigrants. They spent the first part of their lives in India, so that they assimilate an Indian background. Anwar's degree of Indianness is quite high, but it has increased in the course of his life. Initially, when he went to Britain with Haroon, Anwar did not attach much importance to his Indian roots. He used to go with prostitutes who would call him 'Baby Face' because of his plump cheeks.<sup>82</sup> Yet, during his life, he does not manage to integrate with English society. Anwar experiences the racism of a society which rejects him. So he starts to behave as he were still in India. When his daughter Jamila refuses to marry the man chosen by him, he goes on hunger strike. His behaviour is inappropriate as the words he says to justify it: “If Gandhi could shove out the English from India by not eating, I can get my family to obey me by exactly the same”.<sup>83</sup> Obviously the analogy does not work, or at least it is out of place for a Westerner.

After the umpteenth racist episode – the head of a pig was thrown through the window of his shop – Anwar's rejection of English society develops into a strange form of madness which scares his wife. He starts to patrol the streets waving his walking stick, screaming against the white boys, and challenging them to beat him. At the same time, he begins to go to the mosque, where he complains to the Moulvi that Allah has abandoned him. But the summit of his Indianness can be seen in his words about the fact he wants to go back to Bombay: “I want to go home now [...] I've had enough of this damn place”.<sup>84</sup> All the years spent in Britain mean nothing to Anwar who has never stopped to consider India as his home. At the end of his life, his feeling of rejection of English society is so strong that he directs his indignation towards his friend Haroon, who is considered guilty because of his affair with Eva, a “immoral woman”, and because he “had been seduced by the West, becoming as decadent and lacking in values as the rest of society”.<sup>85</sup>

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82 Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 25.

83 *Ibidem*, 60.

84 *Ibidem*, 172.

85 *Ibidem*, 211.

Haroon seems to adapt to English society better than Anwar, although they are both first generation immigrants. At the beginning of his adventure in Britain, he lets himself be enchanted by some marks of the Western way of living, leaving aside for that moment his Indian roots. He neglects his law studies, preferring to spend his time buying fine clothes and drinking alcohol. Memorable is Anwar's joke to describe his friend's situation, in which he says that Haroon "is called to the Bar every day – at twelve o'clock and five-thirty".<sup>86</sup>

Haroon is described as someone who struggles to be accepted by English society. Karim tells that "he always carried a tiny blue dictionary with him, the size of a matchbox, making sure to learn a new word every day. At the weekends I'd test him on the meaning of analeptic, frutescent, polycephalus and orgulous. He'd look at me and say, 'You never know when you might need a heavyweight word to impress an Englishman'."<sup>87</sup>

Unfortunately his naïvety – due also to the fact that he was born in a rich Indian family where there were servants and chauffeurs – is one of the causes that make him seem a fresh immigrant who has just landed on the British shores:

Dad had been in Britain since 1950 – over twenty years – and for fifteen of those years he'd lived in the South London suburbs. Yet still he stumbled around the place like an Indian just off the boat, and asked questions like, 'Is Dover in Kent?' I'd have thought, as an employee of the British Government, as a Civil Service clerk, even as badly paid and insignificant a one as him, he'd just have to know these things. I sweated with embarrassment when he halted strangers in the street to ask directions to places that were a hundred yards away in an area where he'd lived for almost two decades.<sup>88</sup>

Finally Haroon finds a way in order to carve out a space for himself in society. Thanks to his passion for the oriental philosophies and also to his love affair with Eva, he manages in a certain way to play a role among the people belonging to the middle class: he starts to give some sort of seminars about how to live and behave according to his latest studies. In doing so, he attracts a little circle of followers and gains a bit of

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86 Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 25.

87 *Ibidem*, 28.

88 *Ibidem*, 7.



popularity. Actually, he gives also an interview to a journalist – a friend of his lover – which would be published in *Bromley and Kentish Times*.<sup>89</sup> But this expedient will turn against Haroon who, to fulfil his role of guru, makes some remarkable changes in his character. As Karim says:

The other thing that happened, the thing that made me realize that 'God', as I now called Dad, was seriously scheming, was the queer sound I heard coming from his room as I was going up to bed. [...] He was hissing his s's and exaggerating his Indian accent. He'd spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, and now he was putting back in spadeloads.<sup>90</sup>

In addition, Haroon starts to dress in a really exotic way during the seminars. Karim remembers that his father “was certainly exotic, probably the only man in southern England at the moment (a part, possibly, from George Harrison) wearing a red and gold waistcoat and Indian pyjamas.”<sup>91</sup> So the removing of social and class barriers implies for Haroon the loss of his natural Indianness and the regaining of a fake Indian identity. These changes will lead him to be again the victim of racist attacks. In other words, he is discriminated by the people who constitute the society he was trying to join.

An example is the exchange of jokes between two Eva's English friends who find themselves in her house during one of the seminars: “Why has our Eva brought this brown Indian here? Aren't we going to get pissed?' 'He's going to give us a demonstration of the mystic arts!' 'And has got his camel parked outside?' 'No, he came on a magic carpet.' 'Cyril Lord or Debenhams?'.<sup>92</sup> Haroon's attempt to become part of English society is mocked also by his colleagues who find the article with his interview on the local newspaper. They draw a bubble “protruding from his mouth saying, 'Dark mystery of life solved by dark charlatan – at taxpayers' expense.’”<sup>93</sup>

So, although he manages to become somehow a member of at least a small part

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89 Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 115.

90 *Ibidem*, 21.

91 *Ibidem*, 31.

92 *Ibidem*, 12.

93 *Ibidem*, 115.

of the English society, Haroon finds himself involved in the same problems every new immigrant had to face. This is why his regained degree of Indianness becomes stronger day by day, even though at the beginning it was just a strategy to be accepted. Haroon's character turns more silent and thoughtful as the story goes on. Even if he used to condemn Anwar's exaggerated resumption of Indianness, he starts to rediscover and to accept his roots. It will give him a clear perspective of English society and of how he does really feel about his life in Britain. During an interview, he is questioned about his feelings towards Eva's philosophy of life – which now was based on social climbing and the improvement of economic status – and he says:

I have lived in the West for most of my life, and I will die here, yet I remain to all intents and purposes an Indian man. I will never be anything but an Indian. When I was young we saw the Englishman as a superior being [...] and we laughed at his face for it. But we could see that his was a great achievement. And this society you have created in the West is the richest there has been in the history of the world. There is money, yes, there are washing-up bowls. There is domination of nature and the Third World. There is domination all round. And the science is most advanced. You have the bombs you need to make yourself feel safe. Yet there is something missing [...] there has been no deepening in culture, no accumulation of wisdom, no increase in the way of the spirit. There is a body and mind, [...] but there is a soul, too.<sup>94</sup>

Kureishi explains the condition of Anwar and Haroon through Karim's words. It turns to be a common state especially among the first generation immigrants, as they are. But the assertion about their roots is something internal to these characters, and it will not bring them anywhere. In other words, they will not be able to leave Britain and go back in India:

Maybe there were similarities between what was happening to Dad, with the discovery of Eastern philosophy, and Anwar's last stand. Perhaps it was the immigrant condition living itself out through them. For years they were both happy to live like Englishmen. Anwar even scoffed pork pies as long as Jeeta wasn't looking. [...] Now, as they aged and seemed settled here, Anwar and Dad appeared to be returning internally to India, or at least to be resisting the

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94 Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 264.

English here. It was puzzling: neither of them expressed any desire actually to see their origins again. 'India's a rotten place,' Anwar grumbled. 'Why would I want to go there again? It's filthy and hot and it's a big pain-in-the-arse to get anything done.'<sup>95</sup>

Karim, unlike Haroon and Anwar, is a second generation immigrant. He was born in Britain and feels that Englishness is a natural element of his character. So his degree of Indianness tends to zero. He has never been in India even on vacation and knows very little about his father's homeland. But, as Haroon before him, Karim needs to exploit his Indian roots in order to gain something, and the only way for him to do so is to pretend his Indianness. For example, he lies about his spiritual habits to impress his beloved friend Charlie, who admires Haroon and thinks he is wise. Charlie asks Karim if he uses to do "that meditation stuff every morning" like his father, and he gets an affirmative response.<sup>96</sup>

The first character who notes a complete absence of Indianness in Karim is Shadwell, a third-rate director who hires the boy to play the role of Mowgli in a theatrical adaptation of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Shadwell tests Karim telling him some words in a language the boy recognizes to be Urdu or Punjabi. He admits to not understand those words, telling he has never been in India. This situation provokes Shadwell's hilarity and his mocking at Karim:

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. [...] What a strange world. The immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century.<sup>97</sup>

Shadwell's statement tends to confirm that Karim can be considered almost completely an Englishman. His lacking of Indianness can be seen not only in his complete

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95 Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 64.

96 *Ibidem*, 14.

97 *Ibidem*, 141.

ignorance about his roots and Indian culture, but also in the colour of his skin. In fact, his mother is English and white, so he is not dark-skinned. That is why Shadwell makes him cover his body with a brown cream to play Mowgli.<sup>98</sup>

Finally, the director points out that the main character of the play is not from Orpington but from India, and that means he should have an Indian accent. So Karim is forced to pretend it. At the beginning he tries to avoid it, but then he understands that even if he has to do something against his ideals, this is his only opportunity to be an actor and to leave the suburbs. So, again Karim pretends his Indianness in order to get something. In this case he manages to fulfil his aspirations and to move to London.<sup>99</sup>

Jamila criticizes Karim for the accent, accusing him of having no morality and the play of being full of Indians clichés. Also Haroon has some criticisms to do, against the production which is guilty of making his son look like “a Black and White Minstrel”, and against the “bloody fucker Mr Kipling pretending to whity he knew something about India”.<sup>100</sup>

During the preparation of a new play in which he has again the role of an Indian character, Karim has to face another problem linked to Indianness. He would like to base his character on Anwar, so he learns how to imitate him and then shows the outcome to Pyke, the director, and to the other actors. He puts on a little scene where Anwar is on hunger strike because his daughter does not want an arranged marriage, and then another scene where he acts madly against some imaginary white boys. Among his colleagues there is Tracey, a black woman who firmly objects to his new character. She affirms that it could damage the already bad image of the immigrants, because it highlights only those clichés which Western society consider strange and funny:

Your picture is what white people already think of us. That we're funny, with strange habits and weird customs. To the white man we're already people without humanity, and then you go and have Anwar madly waving his stick at the white boys. I can't believe that anything like this could happen. You

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98 Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 146.

99 *Ibidem*, 148.

100 *Ibidem*, 157.

show us as unorganized aggressors. Why do you hate yourself and all black people so much, Karim?<sup>101</sup>

Karim seems not to understand Tracey's opinion. But at the same time she makes the mistake to classify Karim in the wrong category. Indeed, he clearly does not feel to belong to Indian people, but to the English. So, while Tracey thinks that Karim's treatment of the matter is just racist against his people and himself, he thinks that it is just the way to handle it.

Yet, the director forces Karim to change the model of his character, and he feels this imposition like an unfair censorship. But again the young actor deals with this matter as he did before – he chooses to imitate Changez, underlining some aspect of his character and stereotyping him:

At night, at home, I was working on Changez's shambolic walk and crippled hand, and on the accent, which I knew would sound, to white ears, bizarre, funny and characteristic of India. I'd worked out a story for Changez character (now called Tariq), eagerly arriving at Heathrow with his gnat-ridden suitcase, having been informed in Bombay by a race-track acquaintance that you merely had to whisper the word 'undress' in England and white women would start slipping out of their underwear.<sup>102</sup>

Karim deals with the issue of Indianness like someone who has a Western background, in his case like an Englishman. He seems unable to identify himself with Indian people. Indeed, he does not care about the fact that his way to represent them could be interpreted in a racist way.

Only towards the end of the novel, during Anwar's funeral, he seems to feel a little guilty about his being incapable to accept his Indian roots. Actually in that moment he finally understands why he can totally consider himself an Englishman:

But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now – the Indians – that in

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101 Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 180.

102 *Ibidem*, 189.

some way these were my people, and that I'd spent my life denying or avoiding that fact. I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd been colluding with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them. Partly I blamed Dad for this. After all, like Anwar, for most of his life he'd never show any interest in going back to India. He was always honest about this: he preferred England in every way. Things worked; it wasn't hot; you didn't see terrible things on the street that you could do nothing about. He wasn't proud of his past, but he wasn't unproud of it either; it just existed, and there wasn't any point in fetishizing it, as some liberals and Asian radicals liked to do. So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it.<sup>103</sup>

Kureishi's Englishness gives him – and Karim – the possibility to analyse English society. Indeed, this novel investigates some cultural characteristics of Britain. The London setting gives the author the possibility to explore different forms of individual and community identity, and to analyse a space in which the traditional notions of national community are breaking down.<sup>104</sup>

In his novel Kureishi focuses on “Britain's youth and its sub-cultural styles and forms of expression”. His aim seems to be the study of how the new populations in Britain affect the birth of new kinds of British youth culture.<sup>105</sup> Vice versa, he highlights also how the new populations are affected by some British youth movements. Karim for example, dresses in a peculiar way, inspired also by some famous musicians of that time. Here is a description of his outfit on a special occasion:

It took me several months to get ready: I changed my entire outfit three times. At seven o'clock I came downstairs in what I knew were the right clothes for Eva's evening. I wore turquoise flared trousers, a blue and white flower-patterned see-through shirt, blue suede boots with Cuban heels, and a scarlet Indian waistcoat with gold stitching around the edges. I'd pulled on a headband to control my shoulder-length frizzy hair. I'd washed my face in Old Spice.<sup>106</sup>

These forms of expression concern also music, and London has always been

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103Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 212.

104Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 113.

105*Ibidem*.

106Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 6.

considered as one of the most important place in the world because of its innovations. In *The Buddha* there are a lot of references to popular culture and the developing of pop music, going from the Beatles in the sixties to punk and glam rock of the seventies. The study of pop shows the changes of society through the cultural revolution of the sixties, and the role it played “in building wider kinds of community”.<sup>107</sup>

Moore-Gilbert claims that Kureishi, through pop music and through the medium of music in general, is able to produce “relations between different ethnicities in contemporary society”.<sup>108</sup> This happens when his parents first meet and fall in love:

On Fridays and Saturdays they went to dances and smooched blissfully to Glenn Miller and Count Basie and Louis Armstrong. That is where Dad first laid his eyes and hands on a pretty working-class girl from the suburbs called Margaret. My mother told me that she loved him, her little man, from the first moment she saw him. He was sweet and kind and utterly lost-looking, which made women attempt to make him found-looking.<sup>109</sup>

Anyway, the celebration of pop does not stand for a rejection of traditional high culture. It is, indeed, a way to raise the issue about the importance of traditional culture.<sup>110</sup> In fact, throughout the novel several characters express their preference towards classic literature. Haroon's favourite writer is Chekhov, and “he always said that Chekhov's plays and stories reminded him of India”.<sup>111</sup> Even Charlie starts to get an education on classic culture after he has become famous: he needs it in order to take the right quotation from the right writer during the interviews.<sup>112</sup>

In this novel Kureishi analyses the issue of cultural nationalism by different points of view. He uses some of his characters' words to make clear that there still is someone who believes that “national belonging is associated with ethnic homogeneity”.<sup>113</sup> In other words, he deals with the issue of Englishness from the

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107Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 117.

108*Ibidem*.

109Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 25.

110Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 118.

111Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 114.

112*Ibidem*, 251.

113Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 131.

perspective of whites people who, in most cases, handle that subject in a racist way.

Karim finds himself in one of those situations. He goes and see Helen, a girl interested in him, and has a confrontation with Hairy Back, the girl's father:

'Helen, Helen!' I called, suddenly feeling quite attached to her. The front door opened. Helen's dad stood there. He was a big man with a black beard and thick arms. I imagined that he had hairy shoulders and, worst of all, a hairy back, like Peter Sellers and Sean Connery. [...] And then I went white, but obviously not white enough, because Hairy Back let go of the dog he was holding, a Great fucking Dane, and it padded interestedly towards me, its mouth hanging open like a cave. [...] 'You can't see my daughter again,' said Hairy Back. 'She doesn't go out with boys. Or with wogs. [...] We don't want you blackies coming to the house.' 'Have there been many?' 'Many what, you little coon?' 'Blackies.' 'Where?' 'Coming to the house.' 'We don't like it,' Hairy Back said. 'However many niggers there are, we don't like it. We're with Enoch. If you put one of your black 'ands near my daughter I'll smash it with a 'ammer!'<sup>114</sup>

Hairy Back sees the mixing of British people with others non-Western cultures as a threat for the purity of Englishness.

Also Karim's white relatives – Margaret's sister and brother-in-law – cannot help behaving in a racist way in the name of what they think Englishness is. Aunt Jean and Uncle Ted try to force Haroon's assimilation to British culture by calling him with the Western socially acceptable name Harry, while discrediting his passion for Buddhism.<sup>115</sup>

Kureishi analyses the issue of cultural nationalism also from the point of view of those who do not live in Britain. He highlights some peculiar way of thinking. Paradoxically sometimes Indians themselves tend to criticize their fellow countrymen: they blame them for not being able to fit in English society. For example Changez, a freshly arrived Indian who should marry Anwar's daughter Jamila, notices a clear lack of Englishness in several of his compatriots who live in Britain:

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114Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 40.

115*Ibidem*, 33.



'Look at that low-class person,' he'd say in a loud voice, stopping and pointing out one of his fellow countrymen – perhaps a waiter hurrying to work or an old man ambling to the day centre, or especially a group of Sikhs going to visit their accountant. 'Yes, they have souls, but the reason there is this bad racialism is because they are so dirty, so rough-looking, so bad-mannered. And they are wearing such strange clothes for the Englishman, turbans and all. To be accepted they must take up the English ways and forget their filthy villages! They must decide to be either here or there. Look how much here I am! And why doesn't that bugger over there look the Englishman in the eye! No wonder the Englishman will hit him!'<sup>116</sup>

Finally, Kureishi uses a particular character to deal with the issue of cultural nationalism: Jamila. She has a peculiar connection with this matter, or better she seems to be completely uninterested in it. When she was thirteen she used to go to Miss Cutmore's library, where the woman educated her on classic, post-colonial and African American literatures. Karim says that in those years she wanted to protect her Indian identity:

Compared to Jammie I was, as a militant, a real shaker and trembler. If people spat at me I practically thanked them for not making me chew the moss between the paving stones. But Jamila had a PhD in physical retribution. Once a greaser rode past us on an old bicycle and said, as if asking the time, 'Eat shit, Pakis.' Jammie sprinted through the traffic before throwing the bastard off his bike and tugging out some of his hair, like someone weeding an overgrown garden.<sup>117</sup>

Then she joins the Asian Youth Movement, and prepares herself, also physically, to drive back the marches organized by the neo-fascist parties in those areas where the Asian communities live. But in the same period her father decides that it is time for her to get married, and of course he was the one to decide the right husband for her. So, after a considerable amount of time spent for her political emancipation, Jamila finds herself trapped. She has to follow the rules, otherwise her father will commit suicide by stopping eating and drinking. Thus her ideas about cultural nationalism begins to crack. She understands how much narrow-minded could be an Indian, and finally goes

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<sup>116</sup>Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 210.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibidem*, 53.

to live in a commune.<sup>118</sup>

Jamila's refusal of cultural nationalism has several meanings: at the beginning she tries not to be tyrannized by her father who wants to give her in marriage to a completely stranger, then her reasons become more political. In fact “she sees herself as engaged in a struggle for social justice which necessitates the nurturing of broad solidarities, rather than following a particularist path which reflects the interests or predicament of a single constituency”.<sup>119</sup> That is why the commune where she goes to live is composed by people who have completely different interests. This happens because “for Jamila ethnicity is not an absolute and indivisible attribute to be defended at all costs, but constitutes the basis of mobilisation toward determinate ends, the achievement of which will, by inference, depoliticise ethnicity altogether”.<sup>120</sup>

Karim and Jamila represent two different models of a new British identity. They have similar backgrounds: they were born in England by Indian parents, although Karim's mother is English, so they belong to the second-generation immigrants. They both have been victims of racist episodes, to which they react differently: while Jamila was more warlike and used to beat the racists up even though she was a child, Karim just wished those episodes would stop:

I was sick of being affectionately called Shitface and Curryface, and of coming home covered in spit and snot and chalk and wood-shavings. [...] The other kids liked to lock me and my friends in the storeroom and have us chant 'Manchester United, Manchester United, we are the boot boys' as they held chisels to our throats and cut off our shoelaces. [...] One kid tries to brand my arm with a red-hot lump of metal. Someone else pissed over my shoes [...]. Everyday I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury.<sup>121</sup>

The difference between Karim and Jamila is that the former states to be an Englishman, while the latter does not ignore her Indian roots and fights in order to make them be respected. However, both of them manage to become part of English

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118Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 216.

119Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 133.

120*Ibidem*.

121Kureishi, *The Buddha*, 63.

society although they aim to different social classes: Karim climbs to success through his job as an actor. Jamila becomes a member of the Asian Youth Movement and goes to live in a commune.

### *The Black Album*

In 1995 Kureishi publishes *The Black Album*. He names his novel after a Prince's record which has a particular story. Indeed, it should have been released in 1987, but Prince decided to abandon the project. The main reasons for Prince's change of mind are various: it has been said that his recording company, the Warner Bros., cancelled the release because of the lyrics contained in the album. Prince confirmed that version and added he had a “religious experience involving a vision”. Some years later, Per Nielsen, who studied Prince's career and wrote several books on him, discovered the truth about the cancelled release: “Prince decided to scrap the album after an experiment with the drug MDMA (ecstasy) that resulted in a bad trip”.<sup>122</sup> It was officially released only in 1994. But some copies of Prince's 1987 *Black Album* survived the withdrawal and became one of the most bootlegged albums of all times.

So the title of Kureishi's novel refers to an illegal record of the years in which the story takes place. The book talks about Shahid, a boy who belongs to a well-off Pakistani family of first-generation immigrants. After his father's death, he goes to college where he meets a group of people who try to involve him in approaching the Islamic religion. From that moment on, Shahid will struggle in order to understand his identity. In other words he tries to state if he is completely an Indian or an Englishman. He seems unable to constitute a state of in-betweenness, to produce an identity based on the blending of the two cultures. Yet, he loves Prince and his music. Shahid himself and Deede describe the artist as a clear example of in-betweenness: “He's half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho too. [...] He can play soul and funk and rock and rap”.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup>[http://prince.org/faq/7\\_General\\_Prince\\_FAQ](http://prince.org/faq/7_General_Prince_FAQ) last visited on 21/11/2012.

<sup>123</sup>Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album*, London: Faber and Faber, 1995, 25.

Actually, at the beginning of the novel Shahid feels more like an English: when Riaz states that they are fellow countrymen his reply is “Well... not quite”.<sup>124</sup> His first doubts about his identity become concrete when he starts to see Riaz's group of fervent Islamic. On the day he meets Riaz for the first time, before he joins the group, Shahid makes an important confession to his new acquaintance:

[...] I sat in the office reading Malcolm X and Maya Angelou and the *Souls of Black Folks*. I read about the Mutiny and Partition and Mountbatten. And one morning I started reading *Midnight's Children* in bed. [...] Then I saw the author on television attacking racism, informing the people how it all arose. I tell you, I wanted to cheer. But it made me feel worse, because I was finally recognizing something. I began to get terrible feelings in my head. [...] I began to feel [...] in that part of the country, more of a freak than I did normally. I had been kicked around and chased a lot, you know. It made me terrifyingly sensitive. I kept thinking there was something I lacked. [...] Everywhere I went I was the only dark-skinned person. How did this make people see me? I began to be scared of going into certain places. I didn't know what they were thinking. I was convinced they were full of sneering and disgust and hatred. [...] I became paranoid. I couldn't go out. I knew I was confused and... fucked up.<sup>125</sup>

It seems that Shahid is telling the story about how he has become conscious of his Indian roots and accepted them. His readings of black literature and his awareness of being the only dark-skinned one make him almost go mad with paranoia. But when it becomes clear that Shahid is ready to join the first group of Islamic fundamentalist that comes on his way, he makes the real confession:

I wanted to be a racist. [...] my mind was invaded by killing-nigger fantasies [...] of going around abusing Pakis, niggers, Chinks, Irish, any foreign scum. I slagged them under my breath whenever I saw them. I wanted to kick them up the arse. The thought of sleeping with Asian girls made me sick. [...] I wouldn't touch brown flesh, except with a branding iron. I hated all foreign bastards. [...] I have wanted to join the British National Party.<sup>126</sup>

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124Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 2.

125*Ibidem*, 8.

126*Ibidem*, 11.

Shahid's confusion about his identity is due also to the education he receives from his family. His father managed to become a rich businessman thanks to his travel agency, and had no problems to make himself well-fitted in English society. He is described as a man who loved to show off his wealth, especially his house, where “the furniture was replaced every five years and new rooms were necessarily added”.<sup>127</sup> Although he behaved as a typical rich Englishman who lived during Thatcherism, he also kept some Indian attitudes. Indeed, he structured some parts of his building as a classic Indian house: he kept a room for himself and his friends where women were not allowed, while in another part there was a room for his wife and her friends.<sup>128</sup>

Probably the fact he left his homeland before the forced Islamisation has led him to be suitable for a more Occidental lifestyle. He had a passion for fashion and loved to dress himself and his family, especially his sons, in the finest clothes money could buy. Moreover, he was not ashamed to talk about sex with his children, indeed he loved Chili's tales of his sexual adventures and tried in a certain way to force Shahid to follow his brother's example.<sup>129</sup>

Finally, his conception about art, and about literature in particular, seems a mixture of Indianness and Englishness at the same time. After he discovered that Shahid has written his first tale, he told him:

'You're not the type to do this. Can't you stick to your studies? My nephews are lawyers, bankers and doctors. Ahmed has gone into the hat trade and built a sauna in his house! This artist types are always poor – how will you look relatives in the face? [...] Your type can never do this booky stuff. [...] Because these writers [...] Howard Spring, Erskine Caldwell and Monsaratt, for instance, they are concerned with flowers and trees and love and all. And that's not your area. We must [...] live in the real world.'<sup>130</sup>

He rejects art and literature, considering them frivolous. This could be a reasoning made by a Muslim, but actually he bases his argumentation on a clear materialistic thought: art does not pay, so it is useless.

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127Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 39.

128*Ibidem*, 51.

129*Ibidem*, 53.

130*Ibidem*, 75.

Even the reaction of Shahid's mother towards his tale was particular, but for different reasons from her husband. The short story was named *Paki Wog Fuck Off Home* and talked about a racist episode occurred to the author one day he was at school, when some boys shouted at him a racist chant. When his mother discovered it, she tore it up and gave reasons to her gesture telling that "People don't want this hate in their life". Kureishi says that for Shahid's mother was unbearable being a victim of racism, because she has been herself abused when she was young. Her reaction to that situation was to pretend that racism did not exist, even when "Shahid vomited and defecated with fear before going to school, or when he returned with cuts, bruises and his bag slashed with knives".<sup>131</sup>

From his parents Shahid derives also an almost complete ignorance about religion, as it is shown in this crucial episode:

In Karachi, at the urging of his cousins, Shahid had been to the mosque several times. While their parents would drink bootleg whisky and watch video sent from England, Shahid young relatives and their friends gathered in the house on Fridays before going to pray. The religious enthusiasm of the younger generation, and its links to strong political feeling, had surprised him. One time Shahid was demonstrating some yoga positions to one of his female cousins when her brother intervened violently, pulling his sister's ankles away from her ears. Yoga reminded him of 'those bloody Hindus'. This brother also refused to speak English, though it was, in that household, the first and common language; he asserted that Papa's generation, with their English accent, foreign degrees and British snobbery, assumed their own people were inferior.<sup>132</sup>

His ignorance of religious matters can be understood thanks to one of his father's statement about his faith: "Yes, I have a belief. It's called working until my arse aches!"<sup>133</sup>

In Shahid's family every member has a peculiar cultural identity. His parents are a sort of mix between Indianness and Englishness, while his older brother, Chili, is completely Westernised. He is described as a yuppie who loves to show off his wealth.

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<sup>131</sup>Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 73.

<sup>132</sup>*Ibidem*, 91.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibidem*, 92.

He dresses in Armani's suits, smokes Marlboro and wears Rayban sunglasses. He has never been politically committed, and he went to an anti-racist demonstration only once in his life. Kureishi says that, "when the National Front yelled, 'Get back, Pakis!' Chili, wearing a mink-coloured suit, had annoyed everyone by taking out his wallet, waving it at the racists and shouting, 'Get back to your council flats, paupers!'"<sup>134</sup> Ambition, his main attribute, leads him to make bitter observations about his fellow countrymen:

'You see them, our people, the Pakis, in their dirty shops, surly, humourless, their fat sons and ugly daughters watching you, taking the money. The prices are extortionate, because they open all hours. The new Jews, everyone hates them. In a few years the kids will kick their parents in the teeth. Sitting in some crummy shop, it won't be enough for them.'<sup>135</sup>

Chili is not the only character to be so Westernised. Indeed, also his wife Zulma behaves in the same way. She is so ambitious that she is the only woman who is admitted to the special room of Shahid's father. Kureishi describes her and Chili as arch-Thatcherites who use to go to dinner with influential people like bankers and politicians. When Shahid tried to remind her of how much racist the Thatcherites were, she retort by saying that "it was a colonial residue – the new money knew no colour"<sup>136</sup>.

Zulma, like her husband, expresses her opinion about Indian people. She focuses on those who have strong religious belief, like the fundamentalists belonging to Riaz's group. Trying to convince Shahid to quit the congregation she says:

'I'm explaining that religion is for the benefit of the masses, not for the brain-box types. The peasant and all – they need superstition, otherwise they would be living like animals. You don't understand it, being in a civilized country, but those simpletons require strict rules for living, otherwise they would still think the earth sits on three fishes [...] but these mind-wallahs must know it's a lot of balls. [...] These madmen are becoming far too mad.

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134Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 139.

135*Ibidem*, 201.

136*Ibidem*, 87.

It makes the derangement seem general.<sup>137</sup>

Strapper is another character who has a complex cultural identity. Beyond any doubt he is an Englishman, but the empathy he shows for Asian people makes him one of the most particular figures of the novel. He is a drug dealer whom Shahid meets at a pool party before they actually get to know each other. When the two manage to talk for the first time, Shahid soon thinks he has found a real ally of Indians. Strapper, while talking about his past, compares his situation to that of those people:

'The white capitalistic civilization has come to an end. [...] Police, courts, kids' homes, rehabilitation centres, social workers. I truly been inside the law, man. I can tell you, it's the white people who've treated me like shit. None of them believe in love outside the family. Blacks and Pakis, the Muslims, the people put down, and outside, they generous and lovin'. They know what mistreatment is.'<sup>138</sup>

Strapper says jokingly he feels like he had known Shahid for a while, because he is a delinquent, while Shahid is a Paki: they both are “a problem for this world”, he says bitterly. He thinks that English society discriminates him and the Indians in the same way. Nevertheless, when Shahid asks him if he knows where the racists live, Strapper does not tell him. He wisely states that to “find someone who hates another race” it is enough “to knock on any door”. However, Strapper really admires the Muslim community, especially for how Riaz's group has saved Chad's life from his drug addiction: “They are pure”, he says.<sup>139</sup>

Strapper, however, does not empathize and love all Asian people unconditionally. Indeed he does not stand people like Chili who have become “too fucking Westernized”, and condemns the Asians who strongly want to be like the English, considering their choice as “the wrong turnin'.”<sup>140</sup>

At the beginning of the novel, Shahid is very confused about his cultural

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137Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 186.

138*Ibidem*, 142.

139*Ibidem*, 144.

140*Ibidem*, 195.



identity. He thinks he is becoming a racist, paradoxically. When he meets Riaz and his group, he experiences for the first time that sense of belonging he has looked for a long time. Shahid finally feels accepted, although he does not understand what the aim of that group is. But at the beginning he does not care because he succeeds in making new friends who would call him 'brother'.

In his naïvety, he thinks that Chad's enquiries about the music he likes and the usefulness of reading literature is just a clever conversation between two college students. Chad discovers that Shahid has got the bootleg CD of Prince's *The Black Album* and then asks him why he reads so many books when there were so many things to do. Shahid tries to give an answer according to his high consideration of literature. Unfortunately, he does not understand that Chad is expressing the first restrictions of the Islamic religion: music and literature are just an entertainment, so they must be avoided to lead a honest life as an upright person.<sup>141</sup>

Simultaneously, Shahid meets Deedee Osgood, a college lecturer who has an inclination towards the studies of ethnic minorities cultures. Kureishi describes her as an unconventional teacher who could start a lesson putting on Jimi Hendrix's version of *Star Spangled Banner* in order to open a discussion about the US war policy. Shahid soon finds her course incredibly interesting, and goes to talk to her after the first lesson. They talk about Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, who were among the authors that Shahid liked to read. There, Deedee's proposal to write a paper about Prince for the course makes love spark between them.<sup>142</sup>

They start a love affair which confuses more and more Shahid about his identity. Indeed, he finds himself trapped between his desire to feel part of a community like Riaz's group and the pleasures that his relationship with Deedee could offer. Throughout all the novel Shahid is stuck between two completely different worlds which will cause him all the troubles he finds himself into during the story: the world of Indianness and that of Englishness.

The world of Indianness is represented by the character of Chad. In his adolescence belonging was an issue for him as it has been for Shahid. Deedee herself tells his story to Shahid:

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141 Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 20.

142 *Ibidem*, 25.

'He used to be called Trevor Buss. [...] He was adopted by a white couple. The mother was racist, talked about Pakis all the time and how they had to fit in. [...] He'd see English country cottages and ordinary English people who were secure, who effortlessly belonged. You know, the whole Orwellian idea of England. [...] The sense of exclusion practically drove him mad. He wanted to bomb them. [...] when he got to be a teenager he saw he had no roots, no connection with Pakistan, couldn't even speak the language. So he went to Urdu classes. But when he tried asking for the salt in Southall everyone fell about at his accent. In England white people looked at him as if he were going to steal their car or their handbag [...]. but in Pakistan they looked at him even more strangely. [...] Trevor Buss's soul got lost in translation, as it were. Someone said he even tried the Labour Party, to try to find a place. But it was too racist and his anger was too much. [...] It was fermenting and he couldn't keep it under.'<sup>143</sup>

Chad will find his sense of belonging thanks to Riaz's group. But he soon becomes an extremist, despite the fact he used to be addicted to drugs and to music. He completely changes his mind and his name too. Chad condemns art in its every shape, and even if he loves Riaz, he criticizes his decision to write a book of poetry about Islamic religion, judging him "too frivolous, too merry".<sup>144</sup>

Throughout the novel, Chad mistrusts Shahid because he lacks faith. He tries several times to keep him on the straight and narrow, after he notices Shahid's resistance to religion. Sometimes he gives him some advice, making endless discourses. For example Chad wants Shahid to understand that "pleasure and self-absorption isn't everything", otherwise men would "become beasts".<sup>145</sup>

Through Chad, Kureishi emphasizes the fact that in white society the imperialist idea is still alive. He tells the story of a girl, the daughter of Muslim parents, who fled from home and went to hide at Deedee's house. She "was forced to say that religion treats women as second-class citizens", Chad states, and then he asks: "Would I dare to hide a member of Osgood's family in my house and fill her with propaganda? If I did, what accusations? Terrorist! Fanatic! Lunatic! We can never win. The imperialist idea hasn't died."<sup>146</sup>

However, Shahid resists the restrictions he finds unbearable of the Islamic religion. When Chad bursts into his room turning off the music and telling him how he

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143Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 106.

144*Ibidem*, 69.

145*Ibidem*, 128.

146*Ibidem*, 229.

has been a slave to music, drugs and fashion industries, Shahid rebels. He says he has never been a junkie, and that life without music would be intolerable. Chad retorts by arguing that listening to music is a kind of slavery, and that “[they] are slaves to Allah, [...] He is the only one [they] must submit to.”<sup>147</sup>

After this discussion, Shahid starts to formulate a bitter theory which will increase his confusion about his possibility to belong to the world of Indianness:

His friends told stories, in religious form, about the origin of everything, about how God wanted them to live, about what would happen when they died, and why, while alive, they were persecuted. They were old and useful stories, except today they could be easily mocked and undermined by more demonstrable tales, which perhaps made those who held to ancient ones even more determined. The problem was, when he was with his friend their story compelled him. But when he walked out, like someone leaving a cinema, he found the world to be more subtle and inexplicable. He knew, too, that stories were made up by men and women; they could not be true or false, for they were exercises in that most magnificent but unreliable capacity, the imagination, which William Blake called 'the divine body in every man'. Yet his friends would admit no splinter of imagination into their body of belief, for that would poison all, rendering their conviction human, aesthetic, fallible.<sup>148</sup>

Deedee Osgood represents the world of Englishness for Shahid. He shares with her all those aspects of life which are forbidden by the Islamic religion. They both love music and literature, which they use to devour and to talk about endlessly. They like to be well-dressed and those superficial things as the fine clothes. Finally, they share the bed. Soon after they have known each other, they start a love affair. The beginning of their relationship is idyllic, although Shahid has to hide it from Riaz's friends and relatives. Nonetheless, they behave as if there is no tomorrow every time they manage to be together. They get laid, play erotic games – Deedee dresses Shahid as a woman and makes him up – go to clubs and to private parties, they drink alcohol and take drugs.

When Deedee finds out that his lover is trying to join a group of Muslims she cannot help telling him some awful things about Riaz, in order to take away Shahid

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147Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 80.

148*Ibidem*, 133.

from those people. She says that “Riaz was kicked out of his parents' house for denouncing his own father for drinking alcohol. He also reprimanded him for praying in his armchair and not on his knees. He told his friends that if one's parents did wrong they should be thrown into the raging fire of hell.”<sup>149</sup> She tries to discredit Riaz not because she is a racist, but because she is scared about what they could do to Shahid, to physically harm him. What she fears most is their absolute conviction to be right in what they do and say: “They 're devoid of doubt”<sup>150</sup>.

Deedee tries several times to convince Shahid to leave the group. She tries an expedient, attempting him to be reasonable: she starts to masturbate him in a club' toilet; after she manages to turn him on, she stops. When he begs her to go on with the massage, she asks him what his friends would say about him. Obviously, Shahid does not know what to answer, he likes sex and at the same time he knows it is forbidden for Muslim to do it just for pleasure. Deedee says they would consider him an hypocrite, and Shahid retorts by stating that he does not want to be told what to do. He just wants “to belong to something and not to be [always] outside of everything”. So, she asks him how could he want to follow such foolish rules, and says she “expected more of [him] than some dismal orthodoxy.”<sup>151</sup>

Anyway something occurs to Shahid that make him think Deedee is wrong about Riaz's group. He is patrolling an area where there have been some racial attacks to a Pakistani family. While he is walking around the block, he listens to a group of people singing *Rule Britannia*, and at the same time he notices the incredible poverty of the families living in that place and the human decay of those people. He cannot help thinking that it looks like a concentration camp. He understands that there is a complete absence of the work of the government. In that moment he agrees with Riaz about the fact that the lack of “God, political belief or spiritual sustenance” had made things worst. The only one thing Shahid manages to think about is Riaz, who could help those people “listening, handing out information, not dismissing them all.”<sup>152</sup>

Shahid divides himself between his want to be a part of a something and his desire to live as a free Britisher. Kureishi in this passage clearly explains the boy's

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149Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 109.

150*Ibidem*, 110.

151*Ibidem*, 161.

152*Ibidem*, 136.

confusion about his identity:

The silence of his room felt unnatural and oppressive. It seemed like days since he'd been alone. Who would be solitary if they could avoid it? He had been resisting his own company, running from himself. It wasn't mere boredom he feared; the questions he dreaded were those that interrogated him about what he had got into with Riaz on one side, and Deedee on the other. He believed everything; he believed nothing. His own self increasingly confounded him. One day he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite. Other times provisional states would alternate from hour to hour; sometimes all crashed into chaos. He would wake up with this feeling: who would he turn out to be on this day? How many worrying selves were there within him? Which was his real, natural self? Was there such a thing? How would he know it when he saw it? Would it have a guarantee attached to it?<sup>153</sup>

However, several happenings force Shahid to shake him up about Riaz's group. He is informed about the fatwa against Salman Rushdie for his book *The Satanic Verses*. According to the Islamic tradition a fatwa is an advice that a judge asks to a law expert about some aspects of the Shariah, the system of rules written in the Koran. It can have several applications, and could become also a death sentence.<sup>154</sup>

In his novel, Rushdie revises a Muslim tradition according to which the prophet Muhammad added some lines to the original corpus of the Koran, saying that three goddesses of Mecca revealed them to him. Then the prophet cancelled those verses stating that the devil had dictated them, this latter catching him in a moment of weakness. Rushdie changes the legend saying that it was the Archangel Gabriel who really inspired those lines.<sup>155</sup> For this reason the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini asked for a fatwa against the writer, who was accused of blasphemy and to have ridiculed Muhammad.<sup>156</sup>

Shahid cannot believe Chad's words. Clearly he thinks the Muslims are overreacting. Riaz himself believes the death sentence to be right. At this point Shahid shows to be uncomfortable with such a violent decision, and he states that a similar

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153Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 147.

154[http://www.why-war.com/commentary/2003/12/what\\_fatwa\\_islam.html](http://www.why-war.com/commentary/2003/12/what_fatwa_islam.html) last visited on 30/11/2012.

155Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, London: Viking, 1988.

156<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/rushdie-fatwa> last visited on 30/11/2012.

behaviour is not consonant with the general Muslim idea of being “loving people”. The answer he receives is the same old story about the order that has to be kept in a place where Indians are constantly abused.

Finally Shahid makes a question that displays his inclination towards Englishness: he asks Riaz if he likes to live in England. Riaz says he will never be able to consider that place as his home, because he cannot understand it. Then he makes the same question to Shahid, who answers: “It suits me. There's nowhere else I will feel more comfortable.”<sup>157</sup>

After that Shahid and Riaz have also an argument about literature and censorship. Riaz starts to accuse fiction to be a distortion of reality which is used by some authors who pretend to give the truth to the masses. Shahid instead says that literature helps people to become more aware of themselves and to reflect on their nature. As he says “A free imagination [...] range over many natures [...] looking into itself, illuminates others”. Riaz brands this capacity of the writer described by Shahid as “presumption and arrogance”.<sup>158</sup>

Yet, the fatwa is not the worst thing that makes Shahid's mind change little by little. Indeed, he is told that the rightness of it has been brought to light thanks to a miracle: God had written some holy words inside an aubergine. This prodigy was found out by a Pakistani couple who puts the vegetable at Islamic community's disposal to witness the revelation.

When Deedee knows about it she expresses her disbelief. She asks Shahid if he believes in a story like that, and waits for him to break down. Deedee just wants him to recognize how absurd the whole business is. Shahid puts up a weak struggle saying no one should judge other people's religion, and that the believers were just peasants who used to live in villages. However, it is clear that in his heart he does not believe in the miracle.<sup>159</sup>

In his confusion Shahid chooses to keep the distance from the group for a couple of days. But then he comes to know that they are planning to burn Rushdie's accused book in the college courtyard as a public demonstration. Chad and the others

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157Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 175.

158*Ibidem*, 183.

159*Ibidem*, 209.

find Shahid and order him to help them. He refuses to participate and had an argument with Chad. When he sees the group burning the book, Shahid understands he does not want to belong to that people any more:

He was mounting the stairs when, nearing his floor, he heard familiar voices. He cursed. Some of them must have gathered in Riaz's room. He started to turn round. He would get out. He had left the posse. He hadn't made a decision: the alliance terminated the moment Hat soaked the book in petrol. He had been taught much about what he didn't like; now he would embrace uncertainty. Maybe wisdom would come from what one didn't know, rather than from confidence. That's what he hoped.<sup>160</sup>

The condemnation of literature and free expression by the Muslims makes Shahid leave the group. He understands that the sense of belonging he felt when he met Riaz and the others for the first time it is not worth the completely rejection of something he loves. Moreover, there is another reason for him to quit the group: He abhors the violence they want to use in order to gain attention from the rest of society. At the end of the novel, they also try to enter Deedee's house to beat her and Shahid, but Chili beat them all.

Shahid's final conclusion is not to leave completely the world of Indiannes for that of Englishness, but to accept his in-betweenness. He decides not to have limits of any kind in building his own identity:

He had to find some sense in his recent experiences; he wanted to know and understand. How could anyone confine themselves to one system or creed? Why should they feel they had to? There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There has to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity.<sup>161</sup>

In conclusion, the main characters of the two novel handle the issue of Englishness in

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<sup>160</sup>Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 227.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibidem*, 274.

two completely different ways: Karim has no doubt about the fact he is an Englishman, and expresses just a little regret for having not even a trace of Indianness in his background. Shahid, instead, does not have Karim's confidence about his identity, and from the beginning he fights to discover to which culture he really belongs. He finally accepts his in-betweenness, without stating if he is English or Indian. However, the story of both characters ends well thanks to their main attitude: for Karim is the determination, that will enable him to resist all those people who tell he is not an Englishman, although he feels he is. For Shahid it is a sort of malleability, which helps him not to be confined by some concepts as Englishness and Indianness, choosing to be who he wants to be without restrictions.



### Chapter III

This last chapter will focus on Kureishi's works as a screenwriter. His screenplays were adapted into film by Stephen Frears, to whom Kureishi dedicates a couple of essays concerning their work together. The films analysed are *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and *My Son the Fanatic*. In each of them issues like Englishness, Indianness, state of England, race, ethnicity, in-betweenness and religion are explored.

The peculiarity is that these arguments are analysed from different points of view, according to the film discussed. In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Indianness, in-betweenness and Englishness are expressed through the characters of Papa, Nasser and Omar. While in the first two there is at least a trace of Indian culture, Omar represents the new Englishman, he is brown-skinned but culturally English.

In *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Kureishi makes a criticism of both Indian and English cultures. He uses English characters to analyse Indian culture and vice versa. On the background of a city in turmoil, Kureishi highlights the incongruities of the two cultures, thanks to his state of in-betweenness.

Finally, in *My Son the Fanatic* Kureishi talks about religion and fundamentalism discussing them from Parvez's and Farid's points of view. Parvez was born in Pakistan, yet he does not disdain English culture. Indeed, he prefers it to fundamentalism, which he finds full of hatred and violence. His thoughts are juxtaposed to Farid's belief. The boy was born in England but he rejects Western culture because of its alleged immorality.

Through his characters, Kureishi talks about the new identities that the mixing of different cultures has generated. As Moore-Gilbert states:

The utopian implication of Kureishi's films is that contemporary Britain has within its grasp the possibility of expanding traditional conceptions of national identity to create for the first time a genuine and revolutionary, though always *contradictory* rather than blandly harmonious, unity-in-diversity. If they attest to the final collapse of the post-war consensus, they

also point to the possibility of a new sense of national community built on the idea of pluralism and of non-hierarchical conceptions of difference.<sup>162</sup>

### *My Beautiful Laundrette*

Initially, Kureishi developed the script of *My Beautiful Laundrette* as a play. Moore-Gilbert states that when the film was released in the United States, it stirred up contradictory reactions: “In New York Pakistani activists picketed the cinema [...] and several minoritarian cultural critics have questioned Kureishi's integrity as an artist on this score.”<sup>163</sup> Yet, the film won New York Critics' Award and the Oscar nomination for Best Screenplay.<sup>164</sup>

New varieties of Englishness can be found in the main characters of *My Beautiful Laundrette*. They are expressed in those figures like Omar and Nasser, Salim and Cherry, Tania and Papa.

Nasser is a first-generation immigrant who has lived in England for most of his life. He succeeded in becoming rich and in gaining a place in English society, but he had worked really hard. In fact, when he blames himself for not having the time to visit his sick brother, Salim justifies him saying that he was “too busy keeping this damn country in the black.”<sup>165</sup> His in-betweenness is given by strong elements of both cultures: he still remembers the Urdu language, which he often uses to talk with his Pakistani friends; he respects Indian traditions such as arranged marriage, indeed he tries to organize it for his daughter Tania and his nephew Omar. At the same time he hates some characteristics of Indian people such as laziness. When his brother asks him to give a job to Omar, Nasser reminds him of the possibility he had already given to the boy: “He failed once. He has this chronic laziness that runs in our family except for me.”<sup>166</sup>

England really suits him, although he talks about it only in terms of money and

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162Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 92.

163*Ibidem*, 19.

164*Ibidem*, XVI.

165Hanif Kureishi, *Collected Screenplays*, London: Faber and Faber, 2002, 10.

166*Ibidem*, 7.

work. He says to Omar, who has just begun to work for him: “In this damn country which we hate and love, you can get anything you want. It's all spread out and available. That's why I believe in England. You just have to know how to squeeze the tits of the system”.<sup>167</sup> Nasser is a convinced Thatcherite and an entrepreneur. He uses to drink to Thatcher when one of his business starts in a good way, as in the case of the laundrette.<sup>168</sup> He does not care about the fact that an English Thatcherite would hate him because of his Indian roots and the colour of his skin. His ambition is stronger than any racism, and he starts to accept his nephew only when the boy begins to behave like him in business, without any kind of scruple.<sup>169</sup>

Nasser seems to lack any sense of belonging towards his homeland. In fact he has no problem in throwing out, with Johnny's help, one of his fellow countrymen who is squatting one of his apartments. When Johnny asks him if he knows that he is “giving ammunition to [his] enemies” in treating so badly his compatriots, Nasser replies, “But we are professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis. There's no race question in the new enterprise culture.”<sup>170</sup> This is why, sometimes, he is hated by other Pakistanis, such as the student living in his apartment who describes him as a “collaborator with the white man”.<sup>171</sup> Nasser really deserves such consideration: he seems to care for the English more than the Pakistanis. In fact, referring to Johnny and the other white boys like him, he says: “I wish I could do something more to help the other deadbeat children like him. They hang about the road like pigeons, making a mess, doing nothing.”<sup>172</sup>

Actually, Nasser does not side with anyone. He has no concern about the white society either, especially because of its racism. Indeed, talking about his brother's bad working situation, he says: “What change would the Englishman give a leftist communist Pakistani on newspapers?”, and then he strongly agrees with Zaki, one of his fellow countrymen, who makes Nasser's sentence more general and universally suitable for every Pakistanis: “What chance has the racist Englishman given us that we

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167Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 14.

168*Ibidem*, 44.

169*Ibidem*, 47.

170*Ibidem*, 50.

171*Ibidem*, 64.

172*Ibidem*, 54.

haven't torn from him with our hands?"<sup>173</sup>

Nasser treats with disrespect both English and Pakistani people. While he is assuring Omar about the good business the boy has done in taking the laundrette, he says: "What is it the gora Englishman always need? Clean clothes!", gora being a term Asians use to talk about white people. It is not as derogatory as the word Paki, but it is still a way to refer to men according to the colour of their skin.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, while he is giving a job to Johnny, he has a brief racist exchange in Urdu with Salim about Englishmen:

Nasser: Don't worry, I'm just putting this bastard to work.

Salim: The bastard, it's a job in itself.

Nasser: I'll have my foot up his arse at all times

Salim: That's exactly how they like it. And he'll steal your boot too.<sup>175</sup>

Nasser's sense of belonging seems not to exist. He does not care about those Pakistanis who had not been able to succeed in England, but at the same time he is not interested in English people either. The only factor that put him in action through all the film is the making of money. In fact, talking with his brother who confess his desire to go back in Pakistan, he says: " [...] that country has been sodomized by religion. It is beginning to interfere with the making of money. Compared with everywhere, it is a little heaven here."<sup>176</sup>

About the complexity of Kureishi's characters, Moore-Gilbert states something important: "By resisting the temptation to create positive stereotypes, Kureishi largely succeeds in presenting his British-Asian and migrant characters as ordinary human beings [...]. In doing so, however, he directly challenges the racist idea that other races than the one to which the racist belongs are ultimately lower forms of life."<sup>177</sup>

The character named Papa, who is Nasser's brother and Omar's father, is a typical first-generation immigrant. He is a bitter man who has not been able to adjust

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173Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 20.

174*Ibidem*, 22.

175*Ibidem*, 48.

176*Ibidem*, 86.

177Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 46.

to English society. Papa spends the whole day staying in bed and drinking vodka. He has lost his wife, an Englishwoman who committed suicide, and has no job. His main occupation is to worry about Omar's life. He wants his son to study hard to defend himself by the white supremacy: "You've got to study. We are under siege by the white man. For us education is power."<sup>178</sup>

Talking about Papa's character, Moore-Gilbert says: "Kureishi's films posit a direct continuity between some seemingly 'liberal' conceptions of 'Englishness' and the emphasis of contemporary extremists on racial 'purity' as a precondition of national belonging. In *Laundrette*, [Papa]'s depression and his wife's suicide, are directly linked to the harassment which they have suffered as mixed-race couple."<sup>179</sup>

Papa's preoccupation is linked basically to the condition of Pakistanis in England. He does not want Omar to study in order to get a well-paid job, but to understand the dynamics of the society in which his son is growing up. Unlike several other characters in the film who think their only weapon in the class struggle is money, Papa believes that knowledge is the way to defeat what is left of white imperialism. He is a kind of an idealist, and he often states his belief during the film. While he is talking to Nasser, after that Omar has begun to run his laundrette business, he says: "Help me. I want my son out of this underpants cleaning condition. I want him reading in college. [...] He must have knowledge. We all must, now. In order to see clearly what's being done and to whom in this country."<sup>180</sup>

Papa's condition of first-generation immigrant makes him more sensitive to racism. When Omar tells him that he has run into Johnny again, a former skinhead he knows since they were five, Papa goes mad. Although Johnny is not a racist any more, he still cannot forgive him: "He went too far. They hate us in England. And all you do is kiss their arses and think of yourself as a little Britisher!"<sup>181</sup> This is a classic example of conflict between a first-generation and a second-generation immigrant. Papa has suffered racism in a country he has probably idealised, and he arrives to the point of rejecting it. Omar seems not to care about racism, but this is due only to his youth. In fact, during the film he changes his mind about this issue, but unlike his father he has a

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178Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 17.

179Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 82.

180Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 67.

181*Ibidem*, 26.

different attitude towards it.

However, Papa is the character who most rejects any form of Englishness. He feels excluded by a society which despised him, and at the end of the story he expresses his desire to go back to Pakistan: “This damn country has done us in. That's why I am like this. We should be there. Home.”<sup>182</sup>

Cherry and Salim are two second-generation immigrants who behave like the white racists they hate so much. At the beginning of the screenplay, in the first scene where Salim throws the squatters out of the apartment, Cherry slaps the face of one of them who is yelling at her: “you pig, you scum, you filthy rich shit.”<sup>183</sup> They like to show their wealth off, and they do it also with their compatriots, humiliating them. Salim, for example, while he is drunk mortifies Zaki for his everlasting need of money: he throws some money on the floor, and when Zaki tries to pick it up, Salim kicks him.<sup>184</sup> He is one of those who uses to think that Pakistanis without money are nothing in England.<sup>185</sup>

Their sense of belonging is really strong. Omar asks Cherry if she has ever been in Karachi, and she answers: “[...] what a stupid, it's my home. Could anyone in their right mind call this silly little island off Europe their home?” Their accentuate Indianness makes them hate people with mixed origin like Omar. When Cherry is informed that the boy has never been in Pakistan, she says: “Oh God, I'm so sick of hearing about these in-betweens. People should make up their minds where they are.”<sup>186</sup> Salim expresses his hatred against the in-betweens even more harshly. While accusing Omar of his incapacity to run the laundrette business, he says:

[...] You've got too much white blood. It's made you weak like those pale-faced adolescents that call us wog. You know what I do to them? I take out this. (He takes out a pound note. He tears it to pieces.) I say: your English pound is worthless. It's worthless like you, Omar, are worthless. Your whole great family – rich and powerful over there – is let down by you.<sup>187</sup>

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182Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 85.

183*Ibidem*, 5.

184*Ibidem*, 23.

185*Ibidem*, 61.

186*Ibidem*, 18.

187*Ibidem*, 31.

Their dislike of the in-betweens derives from their hatred for English people, especially for the poor. Cherry abuses Johnny and treats him like an attendant during a party where the boy is a guest, ordering him to “take charge of the music”.<sup>188</sup> Salim tries to teach a double lesson at the same time, one to Omar and one to Johnny's friends; the three are in the car, and Salim sees the group of loafers:

These people. What a waste of life. They're filthy and ignorant. They're just nothing. But they abuse people. (To Omar) Our people. (To Johnny) All over England, Asians, as you call us, are beaten, burnt to death. Always we are intimidated. What these scum need – (and he slams the car into gear and starts to drive forward fast) is a taste of their own piss.<sup>189</sup>

However, the Pakistani couple's way of thinking and behaving is not so distant from that of the white racists who talk about the sense of belonging to the right people. When Johnny decides to work for Omar, his friends try to make him change his mind. Genghis, one of the gang, says to him:

Why are you working for them? For these people? You were with us once, for England. [...] I'm angry. I don't like to see one of our men grovelling to Pakis. They came here to work for us. That's why we brought them over. OK? [...] Don't cut yourself off from your own people. Because there's no one else who really wants you. Everyone has to belong.<sup>190</sup>

According to Moore-Gilbert, “Genghis' gang is disgusted by Johnny and Omar's contravention of the 'natural' order of things, in which non-whites should serve whites.”<sup>191</sup> In other words, the couple of Pakistanis and Genghis' gang think that whites and blacks should not mix, both for work and ethnicity questions.

Tania and Omar represent two strong identities in development, although they head for opposite directions. Tania is Nasser's older daughter. From the beginning of

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188Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 74.

189*Ibidem*, 79.

190*Ibidem*, 47.

191Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 76.

the film she shows an intolerance towards his father's way of thinking and towards those who behave like him. When she finds out that Nasser has a mistress, she says to hate the concept of family<sup>192</sup>, and from that moment on she starts to embrace the idea of leaving her parental home. What makes her sick of that situation is the selfishness of powerful people like her father, who think they can do whatever they want. She tries to protect Johnny from the members of her family who hired him just to exploit him<sup>193</sup>. When Nasser tells her that she and Omar have to get married, she replies that she would “rather drink [her] own urine.”<sup>194</sup>

Tania is an idealist, like Papa, but she is a feminist too. Before she leaves her family to go to London, she manages to get to know Rachel, Nasser's mistress, and to tell her what she thinks of a woman like her: “I don't mind my father spending money on you. [...] Or my father being with you instead of with our mother. [...] But I don't like women who live off men. [...] That's a pretty disgusting thing, isn't it?”<sup>195</sup>

Omar is a quiet boy who takes care of his widowed father. He seems happy and not bothered by his alcoholism mixed with a lot of regrets. He is planning to go to college, under his father's pressure, but before he leaves home, the same father asks to his brother Nasser to find the boy a little job for the summertime. Working for his uncle, Omar is charmed by Nasser's character. After a while, he starts to develop a sense of ambition which makes him shine to his uncle's eyes.

Unlike Nasser, Omar lacks those aspects of Indianness which characterize his uncle's identity. He does not understand a single word of Urdu, the language that the old members of the family consider as “his own”.<sup>196</sup> Moreover, he has never been in Pakistan,<sup>197</sup> and his strategy to hire another person to do his work in the laundrette is considered “typically English”.<sup>198</sup> It is possible to state that Omar is “an Englishman born and bred, almost”<sup>199</sup>, quoting Kureishi.

Nevertheless he has inherited from his father a sort of Indian pride, which can be seen in his outburst against Johnny for his past as a skinhead:

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192Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 22.

193*Ibidem*, 82.

194*Ibidem*, 76.

195*Ibidem*, 58.

196*Ibidem*, 40.

197*Ibidem*, 19.

198*Ibidem*, 41.

199Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London: Faber and Faber, 1990, 3.



What were they doing on marches through Lewisham? It was bricks and bottles and Union Jacks. It was immigrants out. It was kill us. People we knew. And it was you. He saw you marching. You saw his face, watching you. Don't deny it. We were there when we went past. [...] Papa hated himself and his job. He was afraid on the street for me. And he took it out on her. And she couldn't bear it. Oh, such failure, such emptiness.<sup>200</sup>

However, Omar's hatred seems due more to a sense of revenge than to a sense of belonging. The fulfilling of his ambition put him in a position of superiority towards the white people Johnny belongs to. When Tania asks him why he has left Johnny out of the house instead of make him come in, Omar says: "He's lower class. He won't come in without being asked. Unless he's doing a burglary."<sup>201</sup> Tania understands that he is becoming greedy as her father, and it is the same Omar to prove she is right when he rages against Johnny who is guilty of not being at work during the night shift:

I want big money. I'm not gonna be beat down by this country. When we were at school, you and your lot kicked me all around the place. And what are you doing now? Washing my floor. That's how I like it. Now get to work. Get to work I said. Or you're fired!<sup>202</sup>

Moore-Gilbert says that in this case Kureishi's aim is "to subvert a number of tropes in literary forms of colonial discourse [...]. Omar is the dominant partner. Johnny's dependence on Omar plays off the colonialist trope of 'the faithful servant'; and in providing Johnny with work, Omar contributes to his friend's moral regeneration in a way that parodically recalls the colonialist project of 'civilising' the brutal natives. Instead of the white colonial male enjoying the native female [...], the non-white Omar enjoys the native British man."<sup>203</sup>

Anyway, Omar represents a new variety of Englishness. He does not fight white society in the name of his Indian roots. He is just a materialist who struggles for wealth and power.

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200Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 53.

201*Ibidem*, 42.

202*Ibidem*, 65.

203Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 74.



The protagonists of *My Beautiful Laundrette*: Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis), Omar (Gordon Warnecke) and Tania (Rita Wolf).

### *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*

In this film Kureishi takes advantage of his in-betweenness to explore English and Indian cultures. He creates some characters who highlight the good and the bad in the two societies. Through their experiences, past deeds and their personalities, Kureishi draws attention to the several inconsistencies the characters find in each other culture.

Rafi is an Indian politician who had to leave the country because his life was in danger. He flies to London to join his son Sammy, whom he has abandoned five years earlier. Kureishi describes him as a man who does not disdain some aspects of English culture. In fact, “He is always exquisitely dressed in English suits.”<sup>204</sup> He spent part of his youth in England, as Sammy says: “When he was young and poor he lived in England. Then he went home to get powerful. He dumped me with my mother when they split up.”<sup>205</sup>

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204Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 94.

205*Ibidem*, 96.

However, Rafi finds out that England has changed a lot during his absence. When he arrives in London, his first impressions are not so good. Basically, he considers England as a “hot buttered toast on a fork in front of an open fire. And cunt fingers”<sup>206</sup> thus underscoring the hypocrisy of English society. He creates an image useful to make it stand out, emphasizing its lack of moral covered by an old-fashioned but attractive façade. Moore-Gilbert compares Rafi's statement to a scene of Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire*, “where the future Olympian Harold Abrahams is toasting teacakes while he meditates on the meanings of 'Englishness’”<sup>207</sup>.

When Rafi arrives to London, the city is in a turmoil because of some clashes between the black community and the police. An innocent black woman was killed by the police while it was looking for a boy. Rafi is scared by the dangerousness of the district in which Sammy lives. He tries several times to persuade his son to leave that part of the city and to move to a better area. Sammy, however, loves that quarter:

Rafi: My God, I can't understand it, why ever do you live here?  
Sammy: It's cosmopolitan, Pop. And cheap. [...] Leonardo da Vinci would have lived in the inner city.  
Rafi: You know that for certain, do you?  
Sammy: Yes, because the city is a mass of fascination.  
[...]  
Rafi: You can have the money provided you buy yourself a house in a part of England that hasn't been twinned with Beirut! Is there anywhere like that left?<sup>208</sup>

Nonetheless, Rafi does not have only prejudices against London. In fact, after he has stated that “the food in the West is a tribute to chemistry rather than nature”, he reveals also a high consideration of the city. He says that before the end of his days he “must know [his] beloved London again: [...] it is the centre of civilization – tolerant, intelligent and completely out of control now”<sup>209</sup>.

However, Rafi cannot hide his thoughts about the English working class, which he considers lazy:

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206Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 97.

207Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 78.

208Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 113.

209*Ibidem*, 104.

Rafi: There has been a strong hand on this country, yes?  
Rosie: The working class have not been completely beaten down by it but –  
Rafi: Exactly. In my country the English not-working class we call them. In my factory people really work. That is how wealth is created.<sup>210</sup>

Rafi's analysis of English society deals also with issues like colonialism. Here is an exchange with Danny, a black boy who helps him to escape from a riot and starts to follow him:

Danny: For a long time, right, I've been for non-violence. Never gone for burning things down. I can see the attraction but not the achievement. OK. After all, you guys ended colonialism non-violently. You'd sit down all over the place, right? We have a kind of domestic colonialism to deal with here, because they don't allow us to run our own communities. But if full-scale civil war breaks out we can only lose. And what's going to happen to all the beauty?  
Rafi: If I lived here... I would be on your side. All over the world the colonized people are fighting back. It's the necessity of the age. It gives me hope.<sup>211</sup>

Rafi is also worried about English people's racism which he thinks has remained unchanged. While he and Danny are going to Alice's house, some whites stop and stare at them. At first, Rafi replies to their stares with a polite smile, then he asks Danny for an explanation to that behaviour:

Rafi: Why are they looking at us like that?  
Danny: They think we're gonna rob their houses.  
Rafi: God, things have changed to little! Poor Alice – she was born and brought up in India, you know.  
Danny: She's black then?  
Rafi: No, extremely white. But her family were in India for generations. I think I probably threw anti-colonial stones at her father's house in Bombay.  
[...]  
Danny: You won't make it alone out here in the country.  
Rafi: This isn't the country, you damn fool. It's just respectable.<sup>212</sup>

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210Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 105.

211*Ibidem*, 122.

212*Ibidem*, 120.

Despite the fact that Alice had lived in India, and that she is still in love with Rafi, she cannot help saying something quite racist. Probably, the place where she is living now has affected her way of thinking. In fact, when they meet again after a long time they have not seen each other, she says: “Sometimes when you were in the government there, I'd see you on the TV, talking about some crisis or other. You were impressive, though I did come to associate you exclusively with aeroplane hijackings.”<sup>213</sup>

Rafi's worries about racism and inconsistency of white society is also supported by a shopkeeper who runs his business in the riot area. He complains about the fact that he has been robbed by the whites, and says: “[...] the trash took everything in the looting. They're jealous of us. But why? In this country aren't we all in the same position?”<sup>214</sup>

For these reasons, Rafi tries to convince Sammy to leave England and to start a new life in India. For Kureishi, this is an occasion to talk about belonging. When Rafi finds some home-made weapons, Sammy explains that they are for self-protection:

Sammy: [...] We're always getting burgled. Those depraved deprived are right out of control.

Rafi: Yes, London has become a cesspit. You'd better come home, Samir.

Sammy: I am home, Pop. This is the bosom.

Rafi: What a sullen young man you are. I mean, home to your own country where you will be valued, where you will be rich and powerful. What can you possibly like about this city now?

Sammy: Well... [...] On Saturdays we like to walk along the towpath at Hammersmith and kiss and argue. [...] Or we trot past the Albert Hall and up through Hyde Park. [...] We go to an Alternative Cabaret in Earl's Court in the hope of seeing our government abused. [...] we love our city and we belong to it. Neither of us are English, we're Londoners you see.<sup>215</sup>

According to Moore-Gilbert, the unconditional love for London of characters like Sammy is due to “Kureishi's sense that the major (post-)industrial cities are perhaps the best (and often the only) site through which ethnic minorities can gain access to a sense of 'national' identity that respects their cultural differences *vis-à-vis* mainstream

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213Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 121.

214*Ibidem*, 124.

215*Ibidem*, 140.

society.<sup>216</sup>

Rafi's criticism against Western society deals also with its attitude towards culture in general. In fact, he thinks that the English use to build theirs by mixing contrasting aspects of different cultures. This is, Rafi says, a symbol of their incongruity:

Anna: I do Gestalt therapy, an hour of Indian yoga, followed by Buddhist chanting. Do you chant?

Rafi: Chant what, my dear?

Anna: Mantras, to calm yourself.

Rafi: I am calm. It is agitation I seek. You young international people mystify me. For you the world and culture is a kind of department store. You go in and take something you like from each floor. But you're attached to nothing. Your life are incoherent, shallow.

Anna: I am for self-development above all. The individual reaching her fullest potential through a wide range of challenging experience.

Rafi: Ah yes. The kind of thing I used to call bourgeois indulgence in the days when I believed in reason and the struggle. My ideal evening was a dialogue by Plato followed by women wrestling in mud.<sup>217</sup>

Kureishi uses the characters of Rosie and Rani to highlight the inconsistencies of Indian culture. They have some behavioural features which Rafi cannot help judging, thus showing his hypocrisy. For example, they do not believe in those principles such as the importance of the family. Moreover they are feminists, and Rani is also a lesbian. Rafi's low consideration of this kind of women can be seen in two different moments of the film. While he is trying to convince Rosie to start a family with his son, he says: “[...] What about the sound of little footsteps, eh? Isn't about time? [...] I know you're a kind of feminist, but you're not a lesbian too, are you?”<sup>218</sup>

Anyway, his homophobia seriously jeopardizes his life:

Rafi: ([...] Hearing a noise in the bedroom he opens the door and sees Rani and Vivia in bed. He is very shocked and angry. He starts to abuse them in Punjabi. [...]) What are you doing, you perverted half-sexed lesbians cursed

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216 Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 84.

217 Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 146.

218 *Ibidem*, 115.

by God?  
Rani: Fuck off out of it, you old bastard!  
Rafi: God save my eyes from the sights I'm seeing!  
Rani: Come here and let me bite your balls off with my teeth and swallow them! I'll rip off your prick with a tin opener! [...] Who the fuck do you think you are! [...] That pigshit bastard, I'll crush his testicles right now! [...] (We see Rafi climbing out of the window.)<sup>219</sup>

Rafi's attitudes are mocked also by Sammy and Rosie who, among the other things, underscore his male chauvinism too:

Rosie: And did you see him filing his fingernails and –  
Sammy: Putting powder between his toes!  
Rosie: Or cutting the hair in his ears! D'you know he handed me his washing and said, 'Be sure not to use too hot iron on the silk shirts!'<sup>220</sup>

Anyway, Rani provides information about Rafi's past showing his hypocrisy. She collects and gives them to Rosie, in order to make her understand who her father-in-law really is.

At first, Rosie tries to put Sammy on his guard against Rafi. In fact, Rafi has promised to give his son a lot of money, so that he could buy a new house in a richer area of London. Rosie reveals to Sammy that she has visited the factory where his father made his money: “Dante based the Inferno on it. You don't have to be radical to see that to accept one penny from him is to get into bed with all kinds of evil.”<sup>221</sup>

Nonetheless, Sammy does not seem inclined to give the money back. So, Rosie decides to unmask Rafi during a dinner at a restaurant. This part of the film is the emblem of the clash between the two cultures:

Rosie: Didn't a journalist who once described you as balding have his teeth smashed in?  
Rafi: If his face had a mishap it improved his appearance. [...] Besides, his

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219Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 159.

220*Ibidem*, 124.

221*Ibidem*, 125.

wife stole underwear from Marks and Spencer's and lowered the reputation of my country.

Rosie: When you were in the government there, people – opposition people sometimes – were tortured and murdered, weren't they?

[...]

Rafi: Sometimes. A little bit. It happens in the world. It is necessary at times, everyone will admit that. [...]

Rosie: Didn't they have to drink the urine of their gaolers? [...] Didn't you hang mullahs – religious people – upside down on skewers and weren't red chillis stuck up their arses?

Rafi: If they were, it was a waste of food. [...]

Sammy: I think Rosie wants to say that charm is no substitute for virtue.

Rafi: Our government awoke the down-trodden and expelled Western imperialists! I nationalized the banks! I forged links with the Palestinians! [...]

Rosie: I just want to know –

Rafi: You know nothing but self-righteousness!

Rosie: What does it feel like to kill, to torture, to maim, and what did you do in the evenings?

[...]

Rafi: I was imprisoned myself, you know! For ninety days, ill with malaria, I didn't see sunshine! In the next cell lunatics screamed. Their voices were even more irritating than yours!

Rosie: You have increased the amount of evil in the universe.

Rafi: You've never suffered! Never had to make hard political decisions!

Rosie: Yes, every day in my work!

Rafi: You are only concerned with homosexuals and women! A luxury that rich oppressors can afford! We were concerned with poverty, imperialism, feudalism! Real issues that burn people!

Rosie: We're only asking what it is like to destroy another life.

[...]

Rafi: A man who hasn't killed is a virgin and doesn't understand the importance of love! The man who sacrifices others to benefit the whole is in a terrible position. But he is essential! Even you know that. I come from a land ground into dust by 200 years of imperialism. We are still dominated by the West and you reproach us for using the methods you taught us. I helped people for their own good and damaged others for the same reason – just like you in your feeble profession!<sup>222</sup>

According to Moore-Gilbert, this film is an occasion for Kureishi to talk about the “importance of recognising continuities between the colonial past and the neocolonial present [...]. However, the film suggests that Britain bears at least some responsibility for this lamentable state of affairs. [...] Some vindication of Rafi's views may be inferred from his very presence in London, a reminder that Britain has proved regrettably amenable to harbouring fallen Third World dictators.”<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup>Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 131 – 134.

<sup>223</sup>Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 77.



The virtual struggle between West and East is carried on also in some scenes where Rafi and Alice are protagonists. During the film, they use to talk about the social situation in the two countries. Through these two characters, Kureishi manages to attack both Indian and English middle classes, showing the incongruity of their discourses. In the first scene, Rafi talks about morality, and Alice underscores his despotic attitude:

Rafi: [...] The West has become very decadent, sex-mad and diseased since I came back. In my country you know what I did?

Alice: Was it terrible?

Rafi: I shut all the night-clubs and casinos. The women have gone back in their place. There is restrictions. There is order. There is identity through religion and a strict way of life.

Alice: It is tyrannical no doubt.

Rafi: While here is moral vertigo and constant change.<sup>224</sup>

In the second scene, Kureishi focuses on Alice's low consideration of the working and lower classes. Talking about the rioters, she displays her impatience at their dearth of submission to the established powers. She says: "I hate their ignorant anger and lack of respect for this great land. Being British has to mean an identification with other, similar people. If we're to survive, words like 'unity' and 'civilization' must be understood". When Rafi expresses his solidarity with the rioters, Alice says: "The things we enjoy – Chopin, Constable, claret – are a middle-class creation. The proletarian and theocratic ideas you theoretically admire grind civilization into dust!"<sup>225</sup>

Throughout this film, Kureishi's aim is to bring attention to some aspects of Indian and English societies, and to highlight their differences and inconsistencies. He manages to do it thanks to his mixed origins. In fact, although he has always lived in England, Kureishi takes an interest in Indian culture, and he studies its society. The result is a bitterly funny criticism of the two societies.

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<sup>224</sup>Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 154.

<sup>225</sup>*Ibidem*, 163.



Rafi (Shashi Kapoor) and Rosie (Frances Barber) during the dinner scene.

### *My Son the Fanatic*

In 1994, Kureishi wrote a short story named *My Son the Fanatic*, which was published in *The New Yorker*. Three years later, it became a part of *Love in a Blue Time*, a collection of short stories. In the same year, Kureishi wrote the screenplay of the film *My Son the Fanatic*. He based it on this little piece of writing.

It is the story of a man, Parvez, a Pakistani taxi driver who has been living in England since, as a boy, he left his homeland with his wife Minoo. The couple have a son, Farid, a model student who lately behaves in a strange way. Throughout his life, Parvez has worked hard to give to his family everything they need. At the beginning of the film, Parvez is working non-stop in order to pay for his son's marriage to the daughter of the chief inspector Fingerhut.

Kureishi uses this film to talk also about other issues such as society, race, ethnicity, Englishness, Indianness and in-betweenness. Even Moore-Gilbert states that “*My Son the Fanatic* is much the most significant example of Kureishi's enduring

interest in issue of race and ethnicity”<sup>226</sup>.

In the first scene, he attacks the white middle class, accusing it of racism and snobbery. In fact, Mr and Mrs Fingerhut seem annoyed by the presence and the behaviour of the Pakistani family. Mr Fingerhut looks in disgust at Parvez's taxi, and his wife is clearly uncomfortable while she is alone with them. Their deliberate ignorance of foreign cultures, thus their racism are highlighted through Minoo's words. When she says to Parvez that she has to go to the bathroom, her husband says: “Not again. They'll think we're Bengalis.” Minoo retorts by saying that “They couldn't tell the difference between a Pakistani and a Bengali. We're all the – [same to them]”<sup>227</sup>

Kureishi makes Parvez play the role of the in-between. This is one of the few times in which he gives to a first-generation immigrant that feature. In fact, Parvez has largely assimilated English culture to the detriment of his Indian roots. He uses to eat pork, to drink whisky, and at home he listens to Louis Armstrong's records.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, Parvez has a great knowledge of the place where he lives. When he picks up a costumer, he displays his skills. He uses to say: “Interested to see something of our glory, sir?”, as he was a real Englishman. In the screenplay, Kureishi writes that “[It] is an opportunity for Parvez to show off his knowledge of his adopted city, its geography and history. He talks about the mills, the great nineteenth-century entrepreneurs, the first Pakistani immigrants, and he points out their shop.”<sup>229</sup>

However, he does not completely disown his origins. When his prostitute friend Bettina takes him to a beautiful spot at the top of the hill, it reminds him of his adolescence in Pakistan. He says “There were places, back home, I used to go.”<sup>230</sup> When Parvez talks about the subcontinent, he still refers to it as his home. Yet, when Minoo asks him to go back to Pakistan, he refuses, stating that “there is nothing there for [him].”<sup>231</sup>

Actually, sometimes Parvez like all the old Pakistanis shows little consideration for his wife. In fact he mocks her when she states that she would have studied and go

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226Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 164.

227Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 283.

228*Ibidem*, 315.

229*Ibidem*, 285.

230*Ibidem*, 297.

231*Ibidem*, 282.

everywhere, considering knowledge to be out of reach for a woman.<sup>232</sup> Nonetheless, he is not a kind of patriarch who interferes with his relatives' lives. In fact, when he notices his son's change of attitudes, he refuses to investigate obsessively. He says: "I am observing daily. I don't want to be some fool interfering with his freedoms."<sup>233</sup>

Parvez's in-betweenness is probably due also to his natural refusal of Islamic religion. At first, he seems to ignore its basic rules. When Madelaine says that she has unsuccessfully tried to talk to Farid's group because "they wouldn't [...] meet women", Parvez is shocked. He retorts by saying that "everyone wants to meet women, surely!"<sup>234</sup> Later, he explains his loathing for religion:

Thing is, my father used to send me for instruction with the Maulvi – the religious man. But the teacher had this bloody funny effect; whenever he started to speak or read I would fall dead asleep – bang! [...] Naturally I also annoyed him by asking why my best friend, a Hindu, would go to Kaffir hell when he was such a good chap. His eyes would bulge fully out. [...] So he would clip my arms and legs with a cane – like this. Tuck, tuck – until the blood came! [...] But it took no effect. Still I would drop off. He selected another solution. [...] He took a piece of string and tied it from the ceiling to my hair – here. When I dropped off I would wake up – like thus! After such treatment I said goodbye permanently to the next life and said hello to – to work.<sup>235</sup>

Although Parvez prefers work to religion, he knows that earning money is not a way to happiness. In fact, when the German accuses him and the immigrants of lacking ambition, he says: "Sir, where has it got us, and how many of us are happy here?"<sup>236</sup>

Basically, Parvez is working-class man, but sometimes he behaves as he belonged to the middle-class. He considers his driver colleagues as low-class types, because "they can hardly speak English". He soaks middle-class hypocrisy up too: when the German tells him he has left his family, Parvez retorts by judging him: he says that to leave one's own family is "not a very nice thing", although he himself manages to destroy his, because of his selfishness.<sup>237</sup>

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232Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 299.

233*Ibidem*, 295.

234*Ibidem*, 304.

235*Ibidem*, 324.

236*Ibidem*, 321.

237*Ibidem*, 307.

However, while he is drinking whisky and listening to Louis Armstrong, Parvez finds out that Farid's change of lifestyle is due to his embracing Islamic religion. He catches his son removing and selling all the stuff from his room, his guitar too. Astonished, Parvez asks Farid: "Where is that going? You used to love making a terrible noise with these instruments!" Farid first mocks the moves of a ridiculous rock guitarist, and then says: "You said all the time that there are more important things than 'Stairway to Heaven'. You couldn't be more right Papa."<sup>238</sup> Parvez has the conclusive evidence to his suspicions when he sees Farid praying in his room.<sup>239</sup>

At first Parvez is shocked. He talks about it to Bettina, and it seems that he feels somehow responsible for Farid's change:

He used to love his clothes. At weekends he worked in those fashion shops. I've never known a boy with such enthusiasm for ironing. I was worried he'd gone homo. I told you, he did something modelling. In London they wanted him. I thought – anything he wants he can do. Now he has become – I never before cursed the day I brought us to this country.<sup>240</sup>

Actually, Farid's change is due to reasons that Parvez cannot even imagine. Farid tries to explain them by bringing his father to a rotten place, where there are kids who are starting fires and selling drugs:

Parvez: We have come from one Third World country to another. [...] Those boys are selling the drug.  
Farid: I was at school with those lads, until they burned it down.  
Parvez: They did it? What will happen to them?  
Farid: Some will die, or get snuffed. Many will go to prison. The lucky ones stay here, and rot.  
Parvez: This shows we must –  
Farid: I was like them, going to hell in a hurry.  
Parvez: When?  
Farid: Before I learned there could be another way.  
Parvez: But you were studying. [...] You fooled us.  
Farid: For months I was High and low at the same time, lying on the floor in bloody terrible places. I thought I could never get back.

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238Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 301.

239*Ibidem*, 315.

240*Ibidem*, 310.

Parvez: But what of Madelaine? You went to the Chief Inspector's house every night, to study and all.  
Farid: She was the same. [...] We did everything together.  
Parvez: Under his nose? But not now?  
Farid: I have returned from something – clean and serene. [...] Evil is all around. The brothers have given me the strength to save myself. In the midst of corruption there can be purity.<sup>241</sup>

Farid's new ideas and lifestyle bring him to look at things in a completely different way from his father. Their conceptions of England and English society are opposite. In fact, while Parvez considers the country to be a good place to work and make money, Farid thinks it is just a den of immorality where some actions have to be taken. His disgust for that place can be seen in his description of a part of the city he is showing to a Maulvi: “That extremely tall chimney on the left perfectly symbolizes the overblown egos of nineteenth-century British industrialists. It was built that high so the smoke from it would blow over the house of one of his rivals.”<sup>242</sup>

According to Moore-Gilbert, Kureishi's treatment of Islam in *My Son the Fanatic* is more complex than it seems:

In the first place (though this aspect of the script does not survive into the film), religion provides Farid with an escape route from a lifestyle which earlier threatened to destroy him. [...] Secondly, Farid's turning to religion is a credible rebellion against a parent who has anticipated more conventional forms of dissent, such as a career in pop music, by actively encouraging them. Thirdly, Farid's turn to Islam can be understood as a reaction against Parvez's extramarital relationship [...] and is thus an expression of solidarity with his mother.<sup>243</sup>

Moreover, says Moore-Gilbert, “Farid's abandonment of his accountancy studies signals his refusal to be part of an economic system in which humans, too, are simply commodities to be bought and sold.”<sup>244</sup>

However, also Parvez has his own ideas about Islamic fundamentalism and its

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241Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 344.

242*Ibidem*, 349.

243Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, 166.

244*Ibidem*, 167.

followers. When Farid asks him if they can put the Maulvi up in their house, Parvez proposes to set him in a hotel: “He'll stir up the pots, you don't know what these religious people are like, imposing mad ideas”.<sup>245</sup> Moreover, talking to Bettina about fundamentalism, he says:

The boys gather up and never stop talking about good and bad, or God says do this or that, or burn in hell, or celebrate in Paradise. [...] I'm tired of being instructed, as if I am a fool or a bad man without my own mind. You're right, they thirst for something. But why is there so much violence and hatred there?<sup>246</sup>

The juxtaposition of these two characters allows Kureishi to criticize some aspects of English society according to Islam and vice versa. For example, there is a scene where Parvez and Farid argue about the mix of different cultures. In this case, Kureishi highlights how fundamentalists are reluctant to accept cosmopolitanism:

Parvez: [...] What about the engagement, and this other marriage I am arranging, eh?  
Farid: I am intending to marry. [...] I have asked trusted people for a suitable girl.  
Parvez: You go to them secretly when I have hand-picked Miss Fingernhut! [...]  
Farid: You might not have noticed – Madelaine is so different. [...] Can you put keema with strawberries? In the end our cultures... They cannot be mixed.  
Parvez: Everything is mingling already together, this thing and the other!  
Farid: Some of us are wanting something more besides muddle.  
Parvez: What?  
Farid: Belief, purity, belonging to the past. I won't bring up my children in this country.<sup>247</sup>

In another scene, where Parvez and Farid are out at dinner, there is a long exchange about English society. Although Parvez does not side with the English, he is unable to understand why his son feels so much hatred against them. He tries to make some

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<sup>245</sup>Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 348.

<sup>246</sup>*Ibidem*, 368.

<sup>247</sup>*Ibidem*, 313.

questions to Farid, but the answers he receives, upset him:

Farid: Don't you know it's wrong to drink alcohol? It is forbidden. Gambling too.

Parvez: I am a man.

Farid: You have the choice, then, to do good or evil.

Parvez: I may be weak and foolish, but please inform me, am I really, according to you, wicked?

Farid: If you break the law as stated then how can wickedness not follow? You eat the pig. In the house. [...]

Parvez: In the days of the Prophet the pig was contaminated meat. Farid, this purity interest. What is it about?

Farid: Who in this country could not want purity? [...]

Parvez: Seriously, these English, you'd be a fool to run them down – [...]

Farid: They say integrate, but they live in pornography and filth, and tell us how backward we are!

Parvez: There's no doubt, compared to us, they can have funny habits and all –

Farid: A society soaked in sex –

Parvez: Not that I have benefited! Where do you think the drugs come from? It is Rashid's relatives sending them, yaar! Anyhow, how else can we belong here except by mixing up all together? They accuse us of keeping with each other. [...]

Farid: You see, we have our own system. It is useless to grovel to the whites! [...] Thing is, you are too implicated in Western civilization. [...] Whatever we do here will always be inferior. They will never accept us as like them. But I'm not inferior! Don't they patronize and insult us? How many times have they beaten you? [...] How can you say they're not devils?

Parvez: Not everyone, I am saying! Farid, this is not the village but our home country, we have to get along. Tell me something useful, boy. Is it true you don't love Madelaine?

Farid: What is that kind of love? Here all marriages last five minutes. Respect and devotion is better. [...]

Parvez: Why haven't you told me about this interest?

Farid: The irreligious find belief difficult to comprehend. Those who love the sacred are called fundamentalists, terrorists, fanatics.

Parvez: And this is why you've left Madelaine? [...]

Farid: The girl is okay, But Fingernhut... Do you think his men care about racial attacks? And couldn't you see how much he hated his daughter being with me, and how... repellent he found you? [...]

Parvez: Tell me that at least you are keeping up with your studies.

Farid: Papa, there are suffering men in prison who require guidance. [...] I have never met men more sincere and thirsty for the spirit. And accountancy... it is just capitalism and taking advantage. You can never succeed in it unless you go to the pub and meet women.

Parvez: [...] What's wrong with women!

Farid: Many lack belief and therefore reason. Papa, the final Message is a complete guidance [...] This is the true alternative to empty living from day to day... in the capitalist dominated world we are suffering from! I am telling you, the Jews and Christers will be routed! You have taken the wrong side! [...] It is you who have swallowed the white and Jewish propaganda that there is nothing to our life but the empty accountancy of things... of things...



for nothing... for nothing.<sup>248</sup>

The problem of Farid and his group, is their extremism. Parvez finds out that also the elders of the mosque cannot stand them. A man says: “They think everyone but them is corrupt and foolish. [...] They are always fighting for radical actions on many subjects. It is irritating us all here, yaar.”<sup>249</sup>

The radical actions they take include also the abuse of prostitutes in the street. Parvez is informed by one of Bettina's colleagues who tells him something shocking: “A little one was beaten up. [...] The dirty bastards carried her up to the moors and did her all over. She was only fifteen.”<sup>250</sup>

Kureishi compares different attitudes of the fundamentalists to show their hypocrisy. He uses the character of the Maulvi to display that kind of behaviour. In fact, he first stirs Farid's group up to make something against the lacking of moral of the English, and then asks Parvez a particular favour:

Maulvi: One word please. [...] I am in need of some legal advices. [...] My work is here. I will stay.

Parvez: And bring your family?

Maulvi: You knew that?

Parvez: You are so patriotic about Pakistan. It is always a sign of imminent departure.

Maulvi: Can you help me? In our own country we are treated badly, and everywhere else we are what? Pakis. [...]

Parvez: (To Farid) Your long-beard friend wants to stay in this immoral country. Knowing of my Fingerhut connections he asked me to help him with immigration.<sup>251</sup>

In other words, the Maulvi wants Parvez to pull a few strings to favour his admission, and that of his family, in England. He asks him, without any problem, to do something that is considered illegal.

Anyway, the fundamentalists manage to organize a demonstration against

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248Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 332 – 38.

249*Ibidem*, 328.

250*Ibidem*, 365.

251*Ibidem*, 373.

prostitution, during which the two factions shout abuse to each other. When Parvez sees Farid spitting in Bettina's face, he goes mad. He makes room for himself through the people and reach Farid. He takes him away, on his taxi.<sup>252</sup>

At home they begin to fight. Parvez is tired of his son's choices and wants the Maulvi out of his house. This is the last time Kureishi contrasts the two characters. Their quarrel represents once again the contrast between in-betweenness and recovered Indianness/fundamentalism:

Parvez: He could be Jesus Christ himself, but he is leaving!

Farid: If you shame me, I am going away too! [...]

Parvez: All right! I won't stand for the extremity of anti-democratic and anti-Jewish rubbish! [...]

Farid: Only the corrupt would say it is extreme to want goodness!

Parvez: But there is nothing of God in spitting on a woman's face! This cannot be the way for us to take!

Farid: Why are you so interested in dirty whores? [...] I never thought you were such a man! You are a pimp who organizes sexual parties! (Parvez grabs him and starts to hit him around the head. Farid falls backwards.

Parvez is so angry he grabs him again and continues to whack him.) You call me fanatic, dirty man, but who is the fanatic now?<sup>253</sup>

Even this time, Kureishi's aim is to talk about England by analysing its society. In this case, the only Englishman involved in this criticism is Kureishi himself. In fact, he uses a fundamentalist to observe English society and an in-between to observe Islamic fundamentalism. Through the two schools of thought Kureishi makes a general observation of the variegated English society.

In conclusion, from Kureishi's screenplays and Frears' films emerges a criticism of the whole English society. It is not only about white people, but also about all the immigrants and their sons who were born in England. Thanks to his condition of in-betweenness, Kureishi manages to analyse different aspects of the society, from the white entrepreneur to the Indian shopkeeper, from the white kid without hopes to the Indian businessman. Moreover, he shows how all these different identities can be considered part of a hypothetical new concept of Englishness.

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<sup>252</sup>Kureishi, *Screenplays*, 378.

<sup>253</sup>*Ibidem*, 380.



Parvez (Om Puri), Farid (Akbar Kurtha) and the Maulvi (Bhasker Patel).

## *Conclusions*

Through Kureishi's life and works, it has been shown how his belonging to English society enabled him to make several criticisms about the place where he was born. His mixed origins allowed him to observe Asian society in England and in its homeland too.

However, his analysis starts always from a Western point of view. In other words, his cultural background makes him observe society through the eyes of an European. This again confirms further the fact that Kureishi is by all means an Englishman. His in-betweenness instead, pushed him to study his father's homeland and its society. He applies this knowledge to Asian people's situation in England, so to understand the different dynamics of the multicultural English society. It can be said that Kureishi's mixed cultural background stands for the new kind of Englishness he talks about throughout his works. It is an Englishness far from the old conception which considered English only the whites. The new meaning of the term is now extended to all those people who find themselves in his same condition, and who obviously consider themselves English.

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