

**Adriano Elia**

**“Yaars” in 1970s Suburbia: London in Hanif Kureishi’s Fiction.**

**Abstract I:** By discussing some aspects of Hanif Kureishi’s novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), this essay attempts to bring to light some of the most significant changes that have occurred in London since the 1970s, notably the transformation of its ethnic map and the role of the immigrant community, as well as the spread of Muslim fundamentalism. Kureishi’s skills in tackling highly debated issues such as race, religion, integration and identity give us a flavour of 1970s London, thus enabling us to attempt a comparison with today’s post-7/7 London.

**Abstract II:** Analizzando alcuni aspetti del romanzo di Hanif Kureishi *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), il presente saggio intende mettere in evidenza alcuni tra i più significativi cambiamenti verificatisi a Londra a partire dagli anni ’70, in particolare la trasformazione della sua mappa etnica e del ruolo dell’immigrato, e la diffusione del fondamentalismo islamico. Kureishi analizza acutamente questioni cruciali come razza, religione, integrazione e identità, e ci fornisce un efficace spaccato della Londra degli anni ’70, permettendoci di effettuare un paragone con la situazione della Londra attuale dopo i bombardamenti del 7 luglio 2005.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) by Hanif Kureishi belongs to the ‘London Novel’ literary sub-genre that has flourished in Britain since the 1980s. Much has been written about London, and several metaphors have been used in an attempt to define the city. Many scholars have adopted the city-as-text metaphor; John Clement Ball argued about a ‘semi-detached metropolis’; Iain Chambers about an ‘obscured metropolis’; Peter Ackroyd depicted London as a character; Iain Sinclair looked into London mythology; Michael Moorcock baptized it ‘Mother London’ (2). Literary tributes have always been devoted to London, at least - as Paul Bailey’s anthology (1996) shows - since 1180, when a monk named William Fitzstephen illustrated the delights of the city.

As well as works of sociology and contemporary history, also works of fiction, notably autobiographical novels, can be important sources to reconstruct socio-historical aspects of contemporary society. *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is a powerful case in point. My essay aims to consider 1970s London as it emerges from Kureishi’s description in order to compare it with the situation of post-7/7 ‘real’ London involving topical phenomena such as the significant transformation of its ethnic map and the role of the immigrant.

I would like to suggest a sociological reading of this novel. If literary works can be sociological documents bringing to the fore the *zeitgeist* of a certain period, then *The Buddha* (1990) provides us with a particular insight into 1970s London as seen by the protagonist, the young ‘almost’ Englishman Karim Amir. As we know, in the early 1970s Karim moves from South London

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(Bromley) to West Kensington, and is impressed by the metropolis that offers him an instant awareness of its immense possibilities, until then denied to those like himself who had to live a neglected life in the suburbs. I shall consider Karim's reflections on London first as an outsider living in Bromley, then as an insider playing a role in inner city life. The events narrated in the novel span virtually the entire decade and can give us meaningful suggestions about the flavour of 1970s London, thus enabling us to attempt a comparison with today's post-7/7 London.

*The Buddha* (1996) can be defined as a *picaresque bildungsroman* and is divided into two parts, "In the Suburbs" and "In the City" (3). First of all, let us look at 1970s London through Karim's eyes. As a teenager, Karim feels that in Bromley people were sacrificing happiness for security: "In the suburbs people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness. It was all familiarity and endurance: security and safety were the reward of dullness" (Kureishi, 1990: 8). Karim is looking forward to moving to the centre, and this becomes possible thanks to the love relationship between the so-called 'Buddha of Suburbia', that is Haroon, Karim's dad, a civil servant turned suburban guru, and Eva Kay, a sophisticated English woman fond of Eastern culture. Eva invites people over to experience Haroon's DIY Buddhist wisdom. Later, in order to escape the monotony of suburban life, Eva and Haroon decide to move to West Kensington, and an excited Karim follows them.

When this is about to happen, Karim constructs his own idealised vision of London, and his thoughts deserve to be quoted at length:

"In bed before I went to sleep I fantasised about London and what I'd do there when the city belonged to me. There was a sound that London had. It was, I'm afraid, people in Hyde Park playing bongos with their hands; there was also the keyboard on the Doors's 'Light My Fire'. There were kids dressed in velvet cloaks who lived free lives; there were thousands of black people everywhere, so I wouldn't feel exposed; there were bookshops with racks of magazines printed without capital letters or the bourgeois disturbance of full stops; there were shops selling all the records you could desire; there were parties where girls and boys you didn't know took you upstairs and fucked you; there were all the drugs you could use. You see, I didn't ask much of life; this was the extent of my longing. But at least my goals were clear and I knew what I wanted. I was twenty. I was ready for anything" (Ibid.: 121).

To Karim, moving to cool central London means experiencing a dreamy atmosphere made up of elements including sexual discovery, alternative music, drugs and, most of all, the hope of being considered 'white' and integrated rather than a suburban unsophisticated nerd. But strangely enough, once in London, the inexperienced suburban kid is disoriented by the metropolis and feels lonely, frustrated and inadequate:

"Being in a place so bright, fast and brilliant made you vertiginous with possibility [...] I felt directionless and lost in the crowd. [...] In London the kids looked fabulous; they dressed and walked and talked like little gods" (Ibid.:127-128).

This situation makes him depressed, and he wants to talk it over with Charlie, Eva's son, a wanna-be rockstar with whom Karim had already experienced his first gay love affair. At times London even frightens the suburban novice:

“The city at night intimidated me: the piss-heads, bums, derelicts and dealers shouted and looked for fights. Police vans cruised, and sometimes the law leapt out on to the street to grab kids by the hair and smash their heads against walls” (Ibid.: 131).

Indeed, this initial feeling of uneasiness does not last long, for within a short time he manages to secure a job as an actor with the company of the director Jeremy Shadwell. However, he is forced to have his skin darkened with black paint when playing Mowgli in Shadwell’s theatrical adaptation of Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894) in order to enhance his exoticism. Karim feels like a folkloric tool, but his ambition is stronger than his embarrassment. One night, the celebrated avant-garde theatre director Matthew Pyke attends *The Jungle Book* (1894) and offers him a job. But, once again, Karim is asked to play a naive Indian immigrant, a character inspired by his yaar (4) Changez, an Indian who had moved to London because of an arranged marriage with Karim’s cousin, the reluctant and self-confident feminist Jamila. With the help of Eva’s friends (and of his good looks and exoticism), Karim’s process of integration is almost immediate and this enables him to enjoy London life to the full. He soon feels a strong sense of belonging to what he defines as his new ‘house with five thousand rooms’:

“So this was London at last, and nothing gave me more pleasure than strolling around my new possession all day” (Ibid.: 126).

Back from a tour in New York with Pyke’s company, Karim cannot help noticing how London has changed for the worse while he has been away:

“I walked around central London and saw that the town was being ripped apart; the rotten was being replaced by the new, and the new was ugly”. (Ibid.: 258)

“[...] How London had moved on in ten months. No hippies or punks: instead, everyone was smartly dressed, and the men had short hair, white shirts and baggy trousers held up by braces”. (Ibid.: 270).

Karim’s adventures end with Eva and Haroon announcing their wedding while Margaret Thatcher is on television celebrating her victory at the 1979 General Elections.

As we have seen, Karim’s initial sense of displacement reveals an ambivalent vision of London, but when he becomes a successful actor he feels like a ‘real’ Londoner. The city is now sympathetic to him, and when he goes back to Bromley to see his family he notices how impoverished it is compared with the London he is now living in:

“As we loafed around I saw how derelict and poor this end of the city - South London - really was, compared with the London I was living in. Here the unemployed were walking the streets with nowhere else to go, the men in dirty coats and the women in old shoes without stockings. [...] The housing estates looked like makeshift prison camps; dogs ran around; rubbish blew about; there was graffiti. Small trees had been planted with protective wire netting around them, but they’d all been snapped off away. The shops sold only inadequate and badly made clothes. Everything looked cheap and shabby” (Ibid.: 223-224).

The BBC film adaptation in four episodes directed by Roger Michell dramatises and heightens this feeling by showing a seedy Bromley fraught with heaps of rubbish.

In fact, since the 1970s the interaction between suburbs and city has taken new unexpected shapes. Karim reveals an often idealised image of the inner city, but in the 1970s there was still a significant presence of Black and Asian slums in London. When Ted, Karim's working-class white uncle, takes him to White Hart Lane Stadium (North London) to see Tottenham Hotspurs playing, Karim thinks:

“Before crossing the river we passed over the slums of Herne Hill and Brixton [...] The gardens were full of rusting junk and sodden overcoats; lines of washing criss-crossed over the debris. Ted explained to me, ‘That’s where the niggers live. Them blacks’” (Ibid.: 43).

Ted has got a point when he says that in the 1970s blacks were segregated in Herne Hill and Brixton. In fact, according to the findings of the 1971 Census, the map of London's ethnic minority communities was reasonably definite and unambiguous (5). Areas such as the East End were crowded almost exclusively with South-Asian immigrants; whereas areas such as Portobello, Brixton and Notting Hill were the usual destination for immigrants from Africa and the West Indies. Relatives and friends rejoined the prime movers in later streams of immigration, leading to the creation of quasi-enclaves in peculiar areas of London. People like Moses Aloetta, the protagonist of Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), could offer to the newcomers help and advice for a quicker integration (Bald 1995:71-72). Selvon's novel shows a cold and unfriendly 1950s London, with areas such as Bayswater and Brixton inhabited by his 'lonely Londoners'. But I agree with Nahem Yousaf that Kureishi's 1970s inner London is not the same 'city within a city' as Selvon's, or as Timothy Mo's Chinatown in *Sour Sweet* (1982) (Yousaf 2002: 37). 1970s London seems to be in-between the ghettoised 1950s London and the over-globalised London of today.

Indeed, London's ethnic map today is much more uneven than in the 1970s (6). The 2001 Census shows that immigrant enclaves are less present than in the past: Indians or Jamaicans live all around London, and it is difficult to talk about 'Jamaican' or 'Indian' areas of London. Also, white Britons have been moving away from urban districts towards the suburbs or rural areas: many of those living in the East End moved eastwards towards Barking, Havering, Bexley and, most crucially and quite paradoxically, Bromley, Karim's place of birth (7). Therefore, ethnic minorities are less uniformly distributed around London than before. It is more difficult to tell what is centre and what is periphery, and the changing role of the immigrant has been going through a critical evolutionary process.

Reading *The Buddha* (2002), critics have identified categories such as in-betweenness, hybridity and liminality that illustrate the complex dynamics of race relations in contemporary Britain. In the 1970s, such critical categories had not yet been introduced to refer to the condition of black immigrants in the UK. Ever since the arrival in 1948 at Tilbury (London) of the *SS Empire Windrush* with nearly 500 Jamaicans from the West Indies on board, the problems of immigration and integration have been paramount in the UK. As early as 1958, the first race riots erupted in Notting Hill, and steps were taken in order to minimise the problem. In 1962 the first 'Commonwealth Immigrants Act' was approved; in 1968, Enoch Powell delivered his infamous anti-immigration speech, 'Rivers of Blood', where he quoted Virgil's line 'I see the river Tiber foaming with much blood' (8).

It seems to me that Rushdie's 1984 definition of the migrant is still valid, but cannot be applied to Karim and all second- and third-generation immigrants:

“A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of being human.” (Rushdie 1991 [1984]: 277-78).

In theory, British Asians like Karim, born and bred in the UK, should not suffer from any of these disruptions. They were born and brought up in Britain; they speak ‘proper’ English (and, more often than not, they cannot speak a word of their family’s language); and they behave exactly like their white fellows. Despite this, second-generation immigrants have always had to cope with their double identity. As Sukhdev Sandhu (2000) observes, they have had to reconstruct virtually *ex nihilo* their Asian part, of which - as England-born citizens - they have only a vague idea. When Karim attends the funeral of uncle Anwar, he thinks:

“But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now - the Indians - that in some way these were my people, and that I’d spent my life denying or avoiding the 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 [...] if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it” (Kureishi, 1990: 212-13).

The immigrant is a crucial figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and from 1948 onwards has changed his/her status. Unlike Karim, immigrants in the 1950s did embody what Rushdie meant as an immigrant: someone who was subjected to a triple disruption of place, language and social behaviour, and needed to find new ways of being human. Therefore, their sense of displacement led to a rejection (or a mimicry) of the Western socio-cultural behaviour, rather than to a negotiation of their identity. Over the years, the issue became more serious as a result of the progressive involvement of religious matters (i.e., Muslim radicalism) culminating in the 1988 public book-burning of Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* and the subsequent *fatwa* pronounced by the Ayatollah Khomeini in February ’89. Hybridity and cultural *metisage* were meant by Rushdie as positive features, but over the last decades they have been disrupted to the point of becoming virtually empty: it is hard to tell at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century whether such critical categories have still a meaning at all.

Since the 1970s, the condition of old and new immigrants in London has significantly changed. Besides a more intermingled London ethnic map, it seems to me that the spread of Muslim fundamentalism was the most striking event that characterised the last decades and climaxed in the July 7th 2005 London bombings. The Rushdie affair marked the beginning of the spread of Muslim fundamentalism among second-generation immigrants (9). Thus, it is a relatively new phenomenon, unknown or overlooked in 1970s London, partly instigated by the foreign policy of the British government since the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq. Also, the spread of Muslim fundamentalism was favoured by the fact that Anglican Church failed to take a strong position against it, and that in the UK there is not a very strong commitment to religious matters. According to the 2001 Census, a surprising 15% of people in Great Britain (8.6 million people, one-in-seven) said they had no religion, and this has probably contributed to bring about the ever-increasing growth of Muslim fundamentalism, even amongst seemingly well-integrated British-Asians.

In conclusion, in the nearly twenty years since its publication, *The Buddha* (1990) has confirmed to display Kureishi's skills in tackling highly debated issues such as race, religion, integration and identity in a light-hearted and inspired way, and has given us a chance to reflect on 1970s London as described in the novel and compare it with today's London. My reading of the novel has attempted to bring to light some of the most significant changes that have occurred in London from the 1970s onwards, notably the transformation of its ethnic map and of the role of the immigrant, as well as the spread of Muslim fundamentalism. Karim's ambivalent thoughts about London reveal its complexity and density. At the beginning of this essay, I hinted at the efforts made by much criticism to categorize the city through a variety of metaphors. Today, after 7/7, more than ever it seems impossible to identify London, because this tentacular metropolis is in a constantly unstable equilibrium.

#### NOTES:

1. Paper presented at the conference *Literary London 2006 Representations of London in Literature*, an interdisciplinary conference hosted by the Department of English, Maritime Campus, University of Greenwich, London, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> July 2006.
2. "London has always provided the landscape for my imagination [...] and I suppose becomes a character - a living being - within each of my books". This 1998 interview with Peter Ackroyd is available on [randomhouse.com/boldtype/1101/Ackroyd/interview.html](http://randomhouse.com/boldtype/1101/Ackroyd/interview.html) (last accessed on 25 May 2008).
3. See also Ackroyd, 2000; Ball, 1996: 7-27; Chambers, 1985: 1-23; Moorcock, 1988; Moorcock, 2001: 237-45; Onega, Stotesbury, 2002: 15; Bailey, 1996: vii; Fitzstephen c. 1180; Rennison, 1999.
4. See Moore-Gilbert, 2001: 126-7 and Thomas 2006.
5. The *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Pearsall J., Hanks P. 2001) states that 'yaar' (from Arabic *yar* via Hindi) is an Indian informal word referring to 'a friendly form of address'.
6. Source: *Census*, April 2001, Office for National Statistics.
7. See "London: A World in One City", 2005, in *The Guardian*, January 21.
8. It is significant that the 'whitest' place in Greater London, with 94.8 % of white Briton population, is Cranham (east of Havering, East London). The 'least white' place by far is Southall Broadway (West London), with the tiny percentage of 8.7 % White Britons. Tower Hamlets (East London) is the UK place with the highest percentage of Muslims (and the lowest of Indians). Source: *Census*, April 2001, Office for National Statistics.
9. See Phillips Mike, Phillips Trevor, 1998; Powell J. Enoch, 1969: 219. Delivered in Birmingham on 20 April 1968, Powell's speech alluded to a passage of Virgil's *Aeneid* (6, line 87); ("et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno"), where, according to a prophecy, on returning to Italy Aeneas would find war and 'foaming blood' in the river Tiber.
10. The book was first burned by Muslims in Bolton on 2 December 1988. In February 1989 the Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a *fatwa* and offered a \$1,000,000 reward for the assassination of Rushdie. See Kaleta, 1998: 121 and Modood, 1990: 143-160.

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