

# *The Semi-Detached Metropolis: Hanif Kureishi's London*

JOHN CLEMENT BALL

Thinking the city moves towards thinking the world.

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POSTCOLONIAL THEORISTS AND critics are fond of the words “metropolis,” “metropole,” and “metropolitan.” Usually they employ these terms not to refer to a particular city, but to point more diffusely at sites of global hegemony. A dualistic view sets “metropolitan” governments, ideologies, or cultures against their subordinated counterparts at the non-metropolitan “periphery.” But in a spirit of spatial abandon this binary metaphor gets aligned freely with an array of geopolitical paradigms: the older West-East model, the newer North-South one, Europe and its colonies, the centre and the margin. The “metropolis” may therefore designate the West, the North, or the Euro-centre; the problem of where, exactly, such a place *is* can usually be deferred by claiming it not as a place so much as a conceptual space. When we hear of “metropolitan intellectuals” we may picture them speaking from New York or London or Paris, but they may also be found in Brooklyn or Brisbane or Paris, Ontario. In a post-modern era that has been characterized in terms of globalization and time-space compression, of simulacra and cyberspace, the dislocation of the metropole may be considered a non-issue, even something to be celebrated. But where does that leave London, the “*Imperial city*” and “fount of Empire” (Young and Garside 333), which can justifiably claim to be the “real” metropolis at the centre of the centre? As a “world city,” what specific place or referential function does it retain in a metropolitan world?

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In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams writes that contemporary designations of the major industrialized societies as “metropolitan” are linked to imperialism’s reorientation of a historical relationship between “city” and “country” from national to international space (279). Intricate vectors of labour and capital, cultural dominance and political control had always been generated between British cities (especially London) and outlying rural areas; these became, in the era of Empire, expanded and reconfigured on a global scale as a set of dynamic interactions between Britain as a whole and its colonies. The country (in the sense of “nation”) became metaphorically the city (the new “metropolis”), while a significant portion of the rest of the world became a new version of “country.” At that point, “London” and “Britain” could relatively unproblematically be made to represent or stand in for each other. London had long dominated Britain politically, culturally, and economically, and it could be seen by the nineteenth century to be a microcosm “producing and reproducing, to a dominant degree, the social reality of the nation as a whole” (Williams 148). But with the dissolution of Britain’s empire after the Second World War, political imperialism mutated into less direct forms of economic imperialism (or neo-imperialism) increasingly decentred from the old European axis and involving new “metropolitan” powers such as the United States. At the same time, as Roy Porter writes in his social history of London, “Britain’s imperial chickens came home to roost” (354): an influx of “New Commonwealth” immigrants arrived to fill a shortfall of labour needed for post-war reconstruction. Apart from certain smaller cities such as Bradford, London was the place most visibly changed; its racial demographics saw a disproportionate decline in white dominance compared to those of the nation as a whole. With this so-called “reinvansion of the centre,” the directionality of imperialism was reversed. Where once London reached out expansively into “the world,” now the world began to shrink in upon London. But when the metropolitan city starts to absorb the “country” in the sense of colony, can it still substitute for “country” in the sense of nation—especially given the historical associations of “nation” with a unitary category of race?

Hanif Kureishi, a London-born and -based writer with a Pakistani father and an English mother, would seem to think not. "I'm no Britisher, but a Londoner," he writes in a published diary ("Some" 133); "Neither of us are English, we're Londoners you see," says Sammy in the film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* ("Sammy" 234). Yet when Kureishi revises T. S. Eliot's famous catalogue of British culture to include "yoga exercises, going to Indian restaurants, the music of Bob Marley, the novels of Salman Rushdie, Zen Buddhism, the Hare Krishna Temple, as well as the films of Sylvester Stallone, therapy, hamburgers, visits to gay bars, the dole office and the taking of drugs" ("Bradford" 168-69), what he calls "British people" sound closer to Londoners than to Welsh miners or farmers from the Cotswolds. Kureishi's London is a cosmopolitan space not fully attached to or detached from either British nation-space or some nationless world-space. It hovers interstitially between the two.

This paper attempts to "read" Kureishi and London together. It has been said that a city is a text—one that can, like a novel or film, be read for its stories and histories, for the ideologies it reflects and the power relations it inscribes. Using perspectives drawn from literary theory, history, urban studies, and cultural geography, this study examines a web of discourses about London to which Kureishi's work belongs and contributes. It locates his work in a tradition of "new Commonwealth" representations that do for the city what Homi Bhabha claims narratives of "heterogeneity" do for the nation: "split" its essentialist identities, and show it to be "a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities . . . and tense locations of cultural difference" (148). London is a postcolonial site characterized by a rich liminality, and in Kureishi's work its "in-betweenness" is both racial and geographical, and both politically and performatively enabling. Kureishi's "London" can be called a semi-detached signifier: it is and is not Britain; it is and is not the world.

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The idea of London as a microcosm containing not just Britain's but the world's national and ethnic diversity is not a new idea.

Jews had a significant enough presence in thirteenth-century London to be considered worthy of expulsion. Porter describes “swarms of migrants” from rural England and abroad during early Tudor times (42), and Queen Elizabeth complained in 1596 that London’s “divers blackamoors” were “to manie” in number (qtd. in Jackson 134). Wordsworth, in Book VII of *The Prelude*, writes of London as a global potpourri:

Among the crowd all specimens of man,  
Through all the colours which the sun bestows,  
And every character of form and face:  
The Swede, the Russian; from the genial south,  
The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote  
America, the Hunter-Indian; Moors,  
Malays, Lascars, the Tartar, the Chinese,  
And Negro Ladies in white muslin gowns. (221-28)

Victorian writers of books anatomizing London’s labouring and poorer classes drew on a heightened popular awareness of Empire to conflate subjected but threatening classes at home with subjected but threatening races far away. In *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1902-04), Charles Booth writes: “As there is a darkest Africa, is there not also a darkest England? . . . May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone’s throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest?” (qtd. in Porter 277). Joseph Conrad, another keen observer of colonial “horror,” begins and ends *Heart of Darkness* (1902) by suggesting continuities and similarities between the Thames, the Congo, and the “dark places” through which they flow (7). Such figurative or analogous “horrors” became actual ones for many Londoners when West Indian, African, and South Asian immigrants arrived in the hundreds of thousands during the 1950s and 1960s. The contemporary descendents of Elizabeth I and Booth are not just Britain’s high-profile Enoch Powells, but also the white louts of Kureishi’s film *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Unemployed and feeling threatened by peoples who once came to Britain “to work for us” (“My” 73), they too conflate race and class when they reject the idea of a white boy (one of “us”) working under an upwardly mobile South Asian (one of “them”). And they conflate race and nation in their assumption of an

England that properly belongs to whites: "Get back to the jungle, wog boy," they snarl at Omar (62).

By writing about "my city" ("Some" 133), Kureishi resists and critiques such racially exclusive attempts to repossess London. He asserts his proprietary right (and that of others in minority subject positions) to inhabit and represent the city, however idiosyncratically and however un beholden to mainstream culture's constructions of it. If imperialism involved what David Harvey calls a deterritorializing of the world's spaces—a stripping of "previous significations"—followed by a "reterritorializing" of them to suit the needs of new occupants (*Condition* 264), then Kureishi's texts enact a comparable process. Metaphorically they de- and reterritorialize London as a cinematic location and setting for fiction. And as witnesses to the new imperialism-in-reverse they document the actual colonizing of London's spaces by its New Commonwealth citizens.

In doing so, Kureishi's work joins a substantial group of post-colonial texts that have engaged with London. An influx of young Caribbean writers in the 1950s—among them V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, and George Lamming—made London "indisputably the West Indian literary capital" (Ramchand 63). They wrote about their island homes and their new metropolitan ones, and, as Austin Clarke writes in a memoir, when their voices were "pelted back to [West Indians] on the BBC" (in the *Caribbean Voices* program), the colonial legacy ensured that their metropolitan platform gave "these cricketing voices" an authority far beyond what they would have been granted on island radio (15). A pattern was established by these early Commonwealth writers that has been continued by such darlings of the London literary scene as Kureishi and Rushdie: London was significant not only as a place to write about, but as a base to write from—a pre-existing community of writers, readers, and publishers that could be infiltrated. But even as they used London's structural and institutional supports as a leg up to their own cultural ends, the early "New Commonwealth" writers offered spirited resistance to the social conditions they and other immigrants encountered. In their novels and autobiographical writings, they appropriated London as a social space marked by specific racial

and cultural experiences, and as a site that was both enabling and limiting. It may be easy now to take for granted the audacious novelty of a book like Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which for the first time spoke London in a strong West Indian accent. At the time it was a bold announcement of proprietary interest, of presences and absences in the metropolis.

As subsequent generations of writers laid claim to the city—among them Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Anita Desai, David Dabydeen, and others—the profile of the immigrant writer's London was enhanced. London was continually reinvented, reimagined from different locations, perspectives, and subject positions. By de-centring London, these writers were reflecting its historical geography as “a collection of villages” whose “higgledy-piggledy expansion around many centres” has often been contrasted to Paris's centralized planning and “unified civic design” (Thornley 186, 135). If London looks like a centre from afar—from colonial/ex-colonial space and from a global geopolitical perspective—up close it reveals the innate uncentredness of its local reality. Personal or cultural use can be made of what Harvey, after Henri Lefebvre, sees as “a permanent tension between the *appropriation* and use of space for individual and social purposes and the *domination* of space” by institutionalized forms of power (*Urban* 177). A neighbourhood such as Brickhall in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) can become a local off-centre, a space of difference, resistance, and transformation within the metropolis, as can commercial spaces like Kureishi's laundrette or the Chinese restaurant in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982).

A useful model for the postcolonial resistances exhibited by such texts can be found in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau sees the appropriative use of social space as analogous to the subversive transformations colonized peoples enacted upon the cultures imposed on them. In a similar spirit to Bhabha's early essays (85-122), de Certeau writes that Indians colonized by the Spanish may have seemed submissive but they “nevertheless often *made* of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; . . . their use of the dominant

social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it" (xiii). De Certeau's topic is not postcolonial resistance per se, but various forms of consumption and use of cultural and social dominants; these uses he calls "tactics" through which "the weak" can "turn to their own ends forces alien to them" (xix). His best-known example is the act of walking in the city. As "the speech act is to language" (99), he writes, so the individual journey or itinerary through city streets is to the totalized city of the map. To walk through a city is individually to reinscribe it. It is also to "actualize" the city as a function of time and narrative, and thus to de-emphasize its qualities of planned and static and organizing "place" in favour of active and spontaneously reorganized "space" (117-19). It is, in effect, to take over the city, to claim it in the image of one's own story, one's own unique tour through its spaces.<sup>1</sup> A key effect of this re-placing of the city is that proper names—of streets, landmarks, even the city itself—gradually lose their old significations. As they are "used," de Certeau writes, "these words . . . slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them." Once proper names become worn away and emptied out, "They become liberated spaces that can be occupied" (104-05). This is another sense in which "London" becomes partly detached from its former meanings. As a form of appropriative resistance from below, the actual or literary-representational "use" of the metropolis by new occupants borrows certain hegemonic practices—what Derek Gregory calls the "spatial strategies" of dispossession through naming, or writing a new land in one's own image (168-73)—by which representatives of the imperial metropolis long ago imagined their entitlement to the far-flung spaces they invaded.

If the process of reterritorializing London as location and signifier began in earnest with the first wave of postcolonial London narratives, it was continued by so many subsequent texts that one might well argue that Kureishi's work, together with that of Rushdie, Caryl Phillips, and others of his generation, inscribes a very different London—one already given a substantially new face by the accretion of postcolonial stories on top of the earlier layers of Chaucer, Johnson, Dickens, Woolf, and Eliot.

One might regard Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), for example, as a novel that could not have been written 40 years ago. Its conflation of London and Calcutta into overlaid narrative space—each city and its people becoming mirror images of each other—might have seemed too radical or improbable. Its obliteration of the distance between “us” and “them” would perhaps have seemed wrong, scandalous. In a similar vein, Rushdie's remark that “the act of migrating from Bombay to London is perhaps not as far as to go from an English village to London” (Ball 32) might have seemed less plausible before London's postcolonialization. But even in the limited discourse of literary history it would be naively overstating the case to see “London” as a fully renovated signifier. Recent African fiction (e.g. Achebe, Vassanji, Emecheta) continues to show how “been-to” and “London-returned” characters are seen to have been made special by exposure to a privileged cultural and educational milieu; such characters continue a tradition that goes back through Naipaul's Owad in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) to the early Indian nationalist leaders: Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Patel. Rushdie's Saladin Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses* can misinterpret the signifier “London” as outrageously as Naipaul's Ralph Singh did in *The Mimic Men* (1965) a generation earlier; as Singh must revise his dream of metropolitan “order” when London turns out to be only “the greater disorder, the final emptiness” (18, 8), so the anglophile Chamcha, besieged by London's carnival realities, is shaken out of the anachronistic “dream-city” of “poise and moderation” he thought he inhabited (37). Kureishi, with his multiracial affiliations and intergenerational focus, uses such tensions between “old” and “new” visions of London to animate his work.

The city encourages contradictory views. London may, as a “world city,” be “increasingly ‘unhooked’ from the state where it exists” (King 145), yet for many it still represents all that is English. Moreover, for all that its real face has changed, and whatever role postcolonial writers may have had in de-centring it, London continues to project and to be associated with images of the old imperial city at the fulcrum of world culture and political influence. History is quite deliberately kept alive in London's



marketing of itself as a business centre and tourist destination rich in the pleasures of its former power and glory even as its infrastructure declines, its Empire vanishes, and its global stature withers. In Kureishi's words, "If imperialism is the highest form of capitalism, then tourism is its ghostly afterlife in this form of commerical nostalgia which is sold as 'art' or 'culture'" ("Some" 141). The London that is semi-detached from its national home is also only semi-detached from its own past, and for Kureishi this makes it susceptible to a flattening-out into spectacle and commodification. London emerges in his work as a site not only of appropriation and resistance but of performance, display, and artifice. In this latter guise it has as much in common with the high-tech, futuristic "nowhere city" of recent theory<sup>2</sup> as it does with Lewis Mumford's view of the ancient city as "above all things a theatre, in which common life itself takes on the features of a drama" (115). And between those historical poles, it is not far from Wordsworth's view of a London in which, as Charles Molesworth writes, "The particularity of individual human existence is distorted into an objectified world of display and proclamation whose rules are ultimately those of the market and the theatre" (17). Such a London may prompt a complete, ungrounded detachment, a wallowing in play, pleasure, and fluid subjectivity, but Kureishi will ultimately step back from that extreme.

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In the lyrical opening to *Colonial Desire*, Robert Young writes that London's global centrality (symbolized by the establishment of the Greenwich Meridian in 1884) masks a paradoxical "alterity of place." On one side of this temporal "zero point" is the Western hemisphere, on the other side "the East." The extraordinary act of splitting the world "not in Jerusalem or Constantinople but in a South London suburb" acknowledged "that the totality, the sameness of the West will always be riven by difference." Subsequent geopolitical and demographic changes have meant that this East-West "cleavage" has been "subsumed" into London, and that "the centre of the world . . . has become inalienably mixed, suffused with the pulse of difference" (1-2).

Among the quotations Young uses to support his idea of a divided British identity is Kureishi's idea of being "an inbetween" (3). Indeed, one might say that Kureishi is particularly well "placed" to represent a London that hangs liminally between sameness and difference, past and present, nation and world, centre and periphery. His ethnic hybridity makes him semi-detached (which is to say semi-attached as well) with respect to Britain's traditional racial-national culture and to that of Pakistan and the larger Indian subcontinent. His major works—the films *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1988), and the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990)—dramatize contradictory images of London through conflicts among racial groups, and among different generations and economic classes within the same group. All three texts, in different ways, display the gaps opened up by perceptions of London as both a local and an international space.

*My Beautiful Laundrette's* central conflict pits the disenfranchised and reactionary white thugs against Omar, the Indian-English entrepreneur. But Omar's employment of Johnny as a white man Friday shows that, even in what Rushdie calls "The New Empire Within Britain," the tables can be turned on the racialized hierarchies of labour that obtained in imperial space. The London that Omar invents for himself mediates the polarized views of his uncle and his father, both first-generation immigrants. Uncle Nasser, the businessman, sees London as a space of opportunity, "a little heaven" where "you can get anything you want [if you] know how to squeeze the tits of the system" (106, 48). His politically incorrect pragmatism elides issues of racial or group identity; he says, "There's no race question in the new enterprise culture" (77). By contrast, Hussein, Nasser's brother, is a dissolute, disillusioned socialist who feels that "We are under siege by the white man"; "This damn country has done us in" (50, 105). But his grumpy radicalism has some blind spots; in his disappointment at Omar the "underpants cleaner" who will "kiss their arses and think of yourself as a little Britisher" (90, 58), he appears not to grasp the significance of Omar's reclamation of Johnny. Like the Indians once recruited by British imperialist armies to keep order among their fellows

and protect British institutions, Johnny is hired in part to shield Omar and his laundrette from hostile elements of London society. Omar takes on the mantle of Nasser's "enterprise culture" with a social agenda worthy of his father: "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 round the place. And what are you doing now? Washing my floor. That's how I like it" (88).

Omar may never lead the grand working-class revolution his father desires, but on a local level he successfully challenges the dominant social order. Kwame Anthony Appiah defines the "post" in "postcolonial" as a "space-clearing gesture" (348); with his spruced-up laundrette, Omar clears and reinvents a post-colonial space in the middle (if not the centre) of the old imperial metropolis. At the end of the film this space is under siege, a sure sign of its significance. And if there is an ironic gap between the laundrette and an equivalent power-base in colonial time-space—say, a government house or regional headquarters—in a new world order that has cashed in "political imperialism" for the "economic, monetary and commercial controls" of neo-imperialism (Williams 283), it is fitting that the space of occupation be a small, coin-oriented business. The washing machine's process of cleansing by agitation is oddly suitable as well. Moreover, with Omar poised to take over more laundrettes, and with Johnny's crisis of loyalties resolved, the playful splashing of the final scene hints at a new order to come in this microeconomy—one that could replace the vengeful satisfaction of Omar as boss and Johnny as boy with a more equitable partnership inspired by the mutuality of erotic love.

Kureishi's first film delineates spatial boundaries that may be either transgressed or shored up in the name of urban resistance and transformation. Johnny's story represents both possibilities: from squatting on private property to helping Nasser turf out squatters and Omar secure his laundromat. Kureishi uses a small number of very localized spaces to tip the balance implied in Lefebvre's spatial binary—private appropriation vs. public domination—towards the former. By "using" London in de Certeau's liberatory sense, his characters support a vision of the city as a composite of individual actions and sub-communities; as Harvey

notes, such uses allow disenfranchised or minority groups to establish power bases and so contribute to the building and changing of the city (*Urban* 241).

While the visual mode of *My Beautiful Laundrette* is unadorned, low-budget naturalism, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is more surreal and stylized, more given to spectacle and incongruity. In part this is a function of its opening out to a broader visual and spatial canvas, an expanded urban landscape. But it may also represent a shifting concept of place—of where and what “London” is. In such big scenes as the riot, “the ‘fuck’ night” (Kureishi, “Some” 181), and the clearing of the waste ground, Kureishi (with the director, Stephen Frears) makes London a site of romanticized urban rituals and showy events; the central characters parade through these with an eerie detachment and sense of normality. Kureishi signals an awareness of the city as an enabling space for spectacularization and artifice which he develops further in *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Thematically his second film, like his first, explores incompatible visions of London. The discrepancies between such visions are often ironic to the point of grotesqueness. Sammy’s description of metropolitan life as blissful weekend walks, bookshop browsing, and lectures on semiotics creates an idyllic image of freedom that seems almost vulgar beside the scenes of mob violence and police in riot gear. But it has precedents: colonial administrators often experienced a similarly disconnected lifestyle and sense of place. The film’s central images of derelict neighbourhoods and homeless gypsies, of aggro and violence, revise the imperial metropolis remembered (or imagined) by Sammy’s father. For Rafi, “my beloved London . . . is the centre of civilization—tolerant, intelligent and completely out of control now, I hear” (206). If that postscript implies some awareness that London is not what it purportedly was, Rafi’s story in the film is still bound up with his mistaken belief that by migrating to London he can be as free as his son, and escape the consequences of far-away political activities. He is, of course, proved wrong. Like the narrator in Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, he is forced to abandon his faith in “the reality of nations and borders” and the separateness of distant spaces (Ghosh 214).

Now that the old Empire (the "new Commonwealth") is compressed into London, how can the metropolis be a haven set apart from the forces that disturb his peace and threaten his life in the unnamed country (probably Pakistan) where he tortured and killed? In a city that has absorbed so many elements of his former nation, he must confront political enemies and endure haunting by ghosts from his past, almost as if he were back home. Distant spaces have become merged. Early on Rafi wittily acknowledges London as a global, supranational space: "Is this world war typical of your streets?" (203); "You can have the money provided you buy yourself a house in a part of England that hasn't been twinned with Beirut!" (213). At the end, the convergence of the world upon his metropolitan space of retreat hems him into a corner and prompts his suicide. The space-clearing scene on the waste ground just before his death symbolizes Rafi's homelessness in a London emptied out of the kind of neutral zones where he might live peacefully, and suggestively connects his plight with that of "inner city" Londoners unhoused by Margaret Thatcher's government.

The London of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is a more spatially differentiated city than in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. The "inner city" takes on special resonance as a "mass of fascination" that Sammy and Rosie refuse to leave, even when Rafi offers financial incentive. "It's cosmopolitan, Pop," says Sammy, defending his choice: "Leonardo da Vinci would have lived in the inner city" (211). Ironically, its cosmopolitanism makes the centre's centre especially detached from a traditional British ethnic-national space. As one geographer observes, "the closer one moves to the centre of Greater London, the smaller the proportion of the population born in the UK" (King 141); these demographics may cause the "inner city" to be stereotyped as a "black" space "characterized by lawlessness and vice" and contrasted with the mythic real England located in the countryside (Sibley 42, 108). In the inner city one encounters the "London" that most resembles and includes the racial diversity of "the world." It is here, in Sammy and Rosie's home and among their cosmopolitan friends, down the street from a flat where a white policeman kills an innocent black woman, that London first disagrees with Rafi.

The peaceful space he seeks is really more "England" than "London," and his best chance of finding it would seem to be in the suburbs, at the home of his old lover, Alice.

In Kureishi's opinion, "England is primarily a suburban country and English values are suburban values" ("Some" 163). Historically, modern suburbia began in London (Fishman 18-72); it developed in the eighteenth century during the early stages of high imperialism. While Britain's armies and capital were reaching out to the far corners of the earth, its cities expanded by what one historian calls "colonizations of growing territories" (Thompson 11).<sup>3</sup> Suburbia became a hybrid space between nature and community, country and city; if the semi-detached house was invented "to produce scaled down and watered down versions of aristocratic [country] housing arrangements suited to smaller incomes," it was also an emblem of success for those who moved out there from the city (9, 2). Its spatial in-betweenness has a temporal corollary: suburbia can represent the "undefined present" caught between "an image of the past" Williams identifies with the country and "an image of the future" he associates with the city (297). Alice thus "fits" in suburban space as an apparently idle representative of a faded gentry, a child of the Raj in its twilight suspended between a past she cannot abandon and a future that passes her by. Hers is a space caught between "country" and "city"—where "country" connotes the past, colonial India, "old England," Rafi as her lover; and "city" connotes the future, the "world metropolis," Sammy and Rosie's new England, Rafi returning too late. Any hope Rafi has of finding sanctuary with her is based only on the first part of this binary. But finally Alice's accumulated bitterness ensures that Rafi's past private life will return just as his past public life does—not to comfort or accommodate him but to haunt him and displace him.

This complex spatial differentiation of the metropolis is elaborated further in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Karim describes himself as "an Englishman born and bred . . . , from the South London suburbs and going somewhere" (3). To say this much is already to challenge the view of H. G. Wells (who is something of an idol to Karim) that the unfinished space of suburbia is composed of

“roads that go nowhere” (Wells 41-43). Of course, Wells tells only half the story: the physical roads may be aimless dead-ends, but since it began suburbia has been a place from which to commute into town every day. However, spatial-literal movement (traveling) is not the same as social mobility (“going somewhere”), which may or may not require a trip. When Karim insists that “our suburbs were a leaving place” he means both, and has something grander in mind than a commute: namely, “the start of a life” (117). His leaving is a one-way journey, a permanent relocation in a new and stimulating urban space. The city is a space of discovery, experience, indulgence, and consumption called “London”; in this semiotic geography, Bromley and the other outer suburbs are not “London” but the equivalent of Williams’s “country”: the past one leaves behind, the “birth” that gives way to the city’s “learning” (Williams 7). Karim’s move from the suburbs to “London proper” becomes a local, miniaturized version of postcolonial migrancy and culture-shock—the move from ex-colony (country) to metropolis (city). This London not only includes “the world” in the sense of peoples, it also (as “Greater London”) replicates within its borders the world’s spatial patterning.

The novel is full of remarks that reflect its overlaying of analogous global space on local metropolitan space. Three examples will serve as illustration. First, Karim’s first impressions of London expose a gap of difference that seems unbridgeable: “In London the kids looked fabulous; they dressed and walked and talked like little gods. We could have been from Bombay. We’d never catch up” (127-28). Second, his and Charlie’s inferiority complex has roots in a centre-envy they felt in the suburbs, where “To have an elder brother who lived in London and worked in fashion, music or advertising was an inestimable advantage at school” (8). Third, when Eva, like Karim, journeys to inner London, she seeks “to scour that suburban stigma right off her body”; Karim sees through her, however: “She didn’t realize it was in the blood and not on the skin; she didn’t see there could be nothing more suburban than suburbanites repudiating themselves” (134). Beneath the surface of each of these passages lies a clever intercontinental analogy. And while each parallel im-

plies a spatial reduction — a squeezing of physical scale — there is a corresponding reduction of dimension that generates irony. Dynamics of difference that in contexts of colonialism and post-colonial migrancy hinge on matters of race, hegemony, culture, and capital shrink down in metropolitan space to the ephemeral realms of fashion and style, of pop culture, image-making, and the abstractions of what Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital.” In the first passage, then, Karim’s observation recalls the colonialist’s assertion of racial, cultural, and religious superiority, but dilutes it to an image of two impressionable teenagers admiring the glittering surfaces of stylistic others who seem like “gods.” The second example implicitly takes colonial and postcolonial societies’ awe of Oxbridge-educated “been-to’s” and recasts it as the second-hand glory reflected by a relative who works in trendy, image-driven professions in town. And third, if Eva’s desire to shed her suburban skin resembles processes of acculturation, assimilation, or deracination that most immigrants to some degree go through, Karim’s idea of the suburbs as “in the blood and not on the skin” is a deliberately outrageous appropriation of race-politics language to describe a bored suburbanite’s makeover.

Bromley equals Bombay: such ironic confluences of spaces and processes are characteristic of London in at least one way. The city has become deindustrialized; where once it manufactured ships and telephones and clothing and food, London now orients its economy towards the intangible products and services of high finance, tourism, fashion, advertising, marketing, and culture. As Anthony King remarks, “Increasingly, investment is put into changing consciousness rather than producing goods” (119). This reorientation from solid thing to abstract image, from the spatially substantial to the spatially insubstantial, mirrors the direction of Kureishi’s ironic translations. His “London” thus becomes a site compatible with some influential concepts of “postmodernity”: Baudrillard’s “simulacrum” as the replica of the vanishing “real”; Jameson’s “depthlessness” as an aesthetic consequence of late capitalist commodification; Harvey’s “time-space compression” as the annihilation of boundaries that technology and multinational capital can accomplish. Kureishi’s



novel is not a "postmodern fiction," but it does depict the move downtown as a journey into postmodern space, and this generates important ironies between the local and transcontinental versions of migration the book depicts.

For instance, when Karim's father, Haroon, moved from Bombay to Greater London, he left a quasi-aristocratic freedom for a workaday prison: "His life, once a cool river of balmy distraction, of beaches and cricket, . . . was now a cage of umbrellas and steely regularity" (26). After adjusting to his reduced circumstances, Haroon "spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous" (21). Karim, by contrast, finds his small-scale migration from Bromley to London to be a release from imprisoning adolescence to adult freedom. And where his father becomes an acculturated Englishman, Karim the "Englishman born and bred" gets in touch with his Indian origins. However, his embrace of an ethnicity that had been a childhood burden takes place on the level not of identity but of artifice and image—performing Kipling's *Mowgli* and his own imitation of *Changez* on stage. Likewise, Haroon's second "migration"—also from the suburbs to downtown—corresponds with his metamorphosis into a "Buddha" with an exaggerated Indian accent and a *salma-gundi* of Eastern mystical platitudes. Father and son both become faux-Indians, successfully marketing back to the English warmed-over versions of their own popular appropriations of Indian culture. In this collapsed "world" in downtown London—a world of parody, pastiche, simultaneity, and simulacrum—they are no more authentically Indian in their roles than Charlie is authentically punk or Eva authentically artsy. But when the image takes over from the actual, when notions of authenticity and inauthenticity fall by the wayside (Jameson 62), the artificiality may not matter.

Or does it? Amid all this parodic duplication and reduplication, one important difference is preserved. Karim and Haroon may pursue similar goals of freedom, education, fulfillment of desire, and exploitation of ethnic identity in their journeys to the postmodern world city, but elsewhere in the novel the first and second generations are not so easily synchronized. The standoff between the traditional father Anwar and his Westernized daugh-

ter Jamila may parodically mimic Gandhi, but Anwar's hunger strike is a sincere act. However absurd and dislocated it may look, it reflects the real pain and crisis of a physical migration that did not coincide with psychic migration. Anwar's return to his origins is of a different order than Karim's or Haroon's. Without leaving the suburbs, he returns "internally to India" as a way of "resisting the English here" (64). He does not want an actual trip home, but by imposing his traditional authority on Jamila he combats (successfully if only symbolically) his daughter's cultural reorientation. However pathetic (and unsatisfying even to him) his coercion may be, its integrity and time-honoured cultural grounding give it an old-fashioned air of authenticity. The novel thus contrasts the intercontinental and the intra-urban migratory experiences that it so provocatively and playfully analogizes. The former, as exemplified by Anwar, Changez, and the "old" Haroon, produce deep pain, confusion, and crises of identities. The latter, as performed by Karim, Charlie, Eva, and the "new" Haroon, result in sensual pleasures, cunning, and the exploitation of identity as a fabricated image. Through counterpoint and juxtaposition, each keeps the other in perspective, and dimensionality starts to look like a function of mileage.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* thus qualifies and ironizes the author's previous constructions of London as an enabling space inclusive of peoples and processes that represent "the world." However cosmopolitan it may seem, however demographically diverse and detached from Britain, Kureishi's "London" will at a certain point flatten that world into a spectacle. Though seeming to compress world-space, it cannot substitute for the world since there will always be psychic and geographic gaps that only the real traversing of cultural and physical distance can overcome.<sup>4</sup> Anwar's folly could have been avoided if he had made a real rather than imaginary journey home and met Changez first. And only in London does Haroon's Buddha routine have any exchange value; in Bombay he might trade on his Englishness, but not his self-help spiritualism. At one point in the novel, Karim describes the metropolis as a shabby theatre: "As your buttocks were being punished on steel and plastic chairs you'd look across grey floorboards at minimal scenery, maybe four chairs and a

kitchen table set among a plain of broken bottles and bomb-sites, a boiling world with dry ice floating over the choking audience. London, in other words" (207). Perhaps, like the Dickensian film-set in *The Satanic Verses*, this is the controlling image of Kureishi's London: a theatrical space where value derives not from being but from seeming, where one can travel the world while sitting still without ever quite forgetting that the "real world" outside is a very different and distant place.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Richard Sennett recommends that city spaces always be designed with "weak borders" and flexible functions, precisely to encourage "the narrative use of places" and thus "to permit space to become . . . encoded with time" (196).
- 2 The phrase is from Burton Pike (129), after a novel by Alison Lurie. Ideas about the spectacularization and commodification of the (post)modern city are advanced by numerous theorists, including Lefebvre (73, 171-73) and Harvey, *Urban* (270-73).
- 3 There are some fascinating parallels between the histories of suburbia and of empire. Imperial and suburban expansion occurred not only simultaneously, but for some of the same reasons: the desire for economic growth and investment of surplus capital and labour; a pioneering attraction to spatial frontiers; a sense of race- or class-based superiority and exclusivity; and, as a function of that sense, an evangelical moralism. The wealth that funded suburbia in its birthplace (London) came from merchants profiting from imperial trade. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw both suburbia and empire valorized and celebrated, while the eventual disenchantment with both after World War Two (though only the latter was dismantled) has at least one cause in common: both "peripheries" were seen to be economic drains, either in terms of lost tax base or high maintenance costs, on the "centre." (See Fishman, King, Thompson, Wood.)
- 4 Gayatri Spivak seems to be proposing a corollary of this idea in her essay on *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. She reads Sammy's remark that he and Rosie are not British but Londoners as "a challenge to the refusal of entry into the nation that is the lot of the migrant":

If it can be said that in cities is the sublation of the nomadic and communal living of forest and village, we have guarded that anthropological fiction in words like politics and citizenship. . . . Yet Britain and India are still nations—a fragile rational fiction that serves well in wars, border disputes, daily suspicion, and prejudice. If in the urban public culture of the migrant these hostilities are provisionally suspended, should we declare the world in its model and predict a world-peace telos, banal as any other, in the utopian nonrecognition that the hybridization of "national" cultures—through imperialism and development—does not resemble migrancy? (252)

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