

# Hanif Kureishi

(b. 1954)

## Biography

Hanif Kureishi was born in London in 1954, to a Pakistani father and an English mother. In 1976 he started his career as a dramatist and scriptwriter, which led him to become writer-in-Residence at the Royal Court in 1982.

In 1985 the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* was released: this was Kureishi's first screenplay, which won many awards and got an Oscar nomination for Best Screenplay.

In 1990 *The Buddha of Suburbia* was published, while in 1995 his second novel *The Black Album* appeared. In 1997 Kureishi published a collection of short stories, *Love in a Blue Time*, which includes the novella *My Son the Fanatic*. The film from *My Son the Fanatic* was released in 1998, when he also published his third novel *Intimacy*.

In 1999 a collection of short stories, *Midnight All Day*, appeared. In 2001 Kureishi published *Gabriel's Gift*, the story of a 15-year old boy who would like to become a filmmaker and his parents Rex and Christine. In 2002 he published *The Body and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories. *Something to Tell You* appeared in 2008 and *The Last Word* was published in 2014. His last novels are *The Nothing* (2017) and *What Happened?* (2019).

In December 2022 Kureishi was hospitalised following a fall in Rome, which left him with spinal injuries and unable to move his limbs.

## The migrant

Most of Kureishi's characters are Pakistani or of mixed race, with their roots in the Muslim world and their present in British life. They share features of travellers and settlers and define themselves by their diversity. After crossing geographical frontiers, they have to adapt to a new reality, since a return to the past is a lost dream. To survive in the new world, they must resist and cope with new values; to reach emancipation they have to accept the melange of culture and ideas resulting from the cross-fertilisation of the past and the present, the East and the West, the new and the traditional.

## Uncertainty and change

The cultural clash may be extremely painful in Kureishi's works, also because the values of British culture are questioned by the younger generations themselves, who express their own subcultures (hippies, punks, rockers...).

Therefore the confrontation with the present is extremely difficult because of the shifting certainties of our age and it becomes even worse for the Pakistanis like Omar's and Karim's father, torn between nostalgia for the past and the desire of integration. As Kureishi says, 'We live in an age of doubt and uncertainty. The old religions under which people lived for ninety-nine point nine per cent of human history have decayed or are irrelevant. Our problem is secularism.

We have replaced our spiritual values and wisdom with materialism. And now everyone is wandering around asking how to live.'

A way to cope with the problem of an uncertain identity is to look for camouflage: acting and the theatre are in fact a favourite metaphor, suggesting the need both to invent a new identity to hide the real one, and the need for flexibility to suit the times.

## London

Like Bombay for Rushdie, London becomes the centre of the world for the writer's characters, who lead their life either in its suburbs or in the city centre. However, they mostly are an underclass of youth, immigrants and intellectuals deeply affected by the stagnation of the city's suburbs (Notting Hill) and are therefore deeply attracted to the glamorous opportunities of the centre. London thus becomes a compressed metaphor of the Empire: the dynamic tension between its periphery and the centre gives Kureishi's characters a reason to live and leave the city's margins.

## Style

Some traditional formal features are detectable in the writer's style:

- many of his novels are coming of age stories or *bildungsromans*;
- some are picaresque novels;
- they often have the light, ironical or humorous tone of comedies;
- they show a Dickensian taste for realism and moralism.

However, the content is postmodernist since he faces problems like identity and multi-ethnicity in the post-colonial world.

## ***The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990)**

The novel pivots around young Karim, the son of a Pakistani bureaucrat whose father becomes a suburban guru (the Buddha of the title) and marries a follower after divorcing his first English wife. Karim's routine and frustrated life, therefore, changes radically and the novel becomes a journey into maturity, toward integration. The characters in the novel (father, mother, friends including the punk rocker half-brother Charlie Hero) grow up, become old and are modified by their choices: they are characters in progress and their identity is often blurred.

The book is set in the Thatcherite London of the 1970s shifting from glam to punk rock, from the hippie to the yuppie demographic, offering everyone opportunities, including the protagonist who eventually becomes an actor. In this *bildungsroman* (coming of age novel), Kureishi represents multicultural Britain by dealing with the marginalisation of a young boy who crosses many boundaries:

- spatial boundaries: London/the suburbs;
- racial boundaries: white/non-white;
- economic boundaries;
- cultural boundaries;
- sexual boundaries (heterosexuality/bisexuality).