

Hanif Kureishi and the Politics of Comedy

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difficile est saturam non scribere

– Juvenal, *Satires* I.30

Born in the London suburbs in 1954, of a Pakistani father and an English mother, Hanif Kureishi emerged in the 1980s as one of the most prominent cultural producers of the British Asian community. His first film, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), brought him unexpectedly to commercial success and a mainstream audience, a position consolidated by his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). Since 1997, his work has turned from a concern with questions of “race” to an exploration of masculine sexuality and of the difficulties of adult relationships. Throughout, it has remained characterized by an irreverent strain of comedy. In this essay, I will analyse the political significance of this comedy, from Kureishi’s early responses to institutionalized racism to the more controversial sexual politics of his recent fiction.

Kureishi grew up aware of the immediate political effects of comedy. In “The Rainbow Sign”, he describes the effect of the racist jokes that were institutionally sanctioned by being broadcast on British television in the 1960s:

Television comics used Pakistanis as the butt of their humour. Their jokes were highly political: they contributed to a way of seeing the world. The enjoyed reduction of racial hatred to a joke did two things: it expressed a collective view (which was sanctioned by its being on the BBC), and it was a celebration of contempt in millions of living rooms in England.¹

This kind of comedy has a direct political effect for Kureishi, raising the hostility it expresses to the socially acceptable level of the shared joke. As Freud pointed out, jokes are an essentially social practice. He writes, “Every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychological conformity”, which is itself a result of

far-reaching social conformity.² Racist jokes are a species of what Freud calls hostile jokes, which allow their hearers the forbidden satisfaction of aggressive instincts under the disguise of the legitimate pleasure of the form of the joke. These jokes “bribe the hearer with [their] yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation”, and “[divert] our interest ... completely from the question of whether an injustice has been done to the poor [object of the joke]”.³ In Kureishi’s analysis, racist jokes allow their hearers to strip their objects of dignity, humanity and rights, and they legitimate this aggression as a shared norm of the community in which they are told. When they are told on state television, this community extends potentially as far as the entire state. It is for this reason that Kureishi thinks of racist humour as comparable in effect to the speeches of Enoch Powell, who “helped create racism in Britain and was directly responsible not only for the atmosphere of fear and hatred, but through his influence, for individual acts of violence against Pakistanis” (“RS” 76). This responsibility, in Kureishi’s view, is shared by the authors of racist comedy.

Kureishi dramatizes the social effect of such comedy in *My Son the Fanatic*. Parvez, the Pakistani taxi driver, takes his German client and the prostitute Bettina to a night club in the Northern English city in which the film is set, where “*a fat vulgar Comedian is telling a stream of coarse jokes*”. The scene inside the club opens with a shot of “*the open mouth of [the] Comedian*”, emphasizing his words, their irrationality and the function they will have in the scene.⁴ During the ensuing dialogue, the camera cuts to a shot which portrays the direct effect of racist jokes:

The spotlight is on Parvez’s face, and the Comedian is telling Paki, Rushdie and Muslim jokes. Parvez realizes everyone is turning to look at him, laughing and jeering. He is the only brown face there. He looks at the hostile faces, confused. (MSF 46)

It is not only collective contempt and hostility that Parvez faces from the crowd as a result of these jokes, but also the threat of real violence, as a brawl begins to break out:

At the next table a white man has picked up a bread roll and is about to lob it at Parvez. Bettina throws a glass of water over him. Everyone freezes. The Bouncers move towards them. (MSF 46)

As in Kureishi's comments on the significance of the BBC in broadcasting such jokes, in this scene their effect is institutionally sanctioned, so that Parvez can expect little or no social protection. The German comments, "I will inform the police of his disgust", to which Bettina replies, "They were sitting at the next table" (MSF 47).

Kureishi recognizes that if comedy can reinforce racism in this way, it can also be used as a critique of racism and as a form of protest against it. This is one of the primary purposes of the irreverent wit by which his writing is characterized. In a review essay, Sukhdev Sandhu testifies to the liberating function of Kureishi's work as it was received by British Asian readers and audiences, accustomed only to stereotypes and caricatures of themselves in British culture:

Kureishi's work not only captured [our] anxieties, but offered for the first time a recognizable portrait of British Asian life. Previously we had made do with sitcoms such as *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* and *Mind Your Language*, in which Asians wore comical headwear and were the butts rather than the tellers of jokes.⁵

Kureishi's work, on the other hand, was realistic, contemporary and knowing. "Sarky and sussed to the point of being obnoxious, he'd lay into Norman Tebbit, cheer on Poll Tax rioters and celebrate orgiastic youth."⁶ As Sandhu writes, in a sentence that sums up the counter-political effects of comedy in his work, "Kureishi's provocation made us laugh, confident, fighting fit."⁷

Freud, too, is well aware of the critical function of jokes. He links it to the aggressive function of hostile jokes, inasmuch as critical jokes allow us to overcome an external or social obstacle to the expression of an aggressive instinct, as opposed to the internal or moral obstacle which is overcome in the hostile joke. He writes:

Tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness and criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority.⁸

Indeed, Freud distinguishes a class of jokes, which he calls “cynical”, whose objects are society’s ruling institutions and ideologies. He maintains that the meaning of these jokes can easily be translated, namely that “the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless morality”, especially insofar as contemporary morality can be conceived as a “selfish regulation laid down by the few who are rich and powerful and who can satisfy their wishes at any time without any postponement”.⁹ In “The Rainbow Sign”, Kureishi tells us that, from an early age, he responded to the hostility institutionally endorsed in racist jokes with a critical or “cynical” humour of his own. He writes:

At school, one teacher always spoke to me in a “Peter Sellers” Indian accent. Another refused to call me by my name, calling me Pakistani Pete instead. So I refused to call the teacher by *his* name and used his nickname instead. (“RS” 73)

At school in the 1960s, this kind of critical comedy “led to trouble”, but as Kureishi began working in fringe theatre in the 1970s, he found an audience more responsive to what has remained a strong current in his work. As he writes in the introduction to *My Beautiful Laundrette*:

The film was to be an amusement, despite its references to racism, unemployment and Thatcherism. Irony is the modern mode, a way of commenting on bleakness and cruelty without falling into dourness and didacticism.¹⁰

By the 1980s, Kureishi had become disillusioned with the failure of the radical politics of the 1970s, and of the fringe’s attempts to produce a theatrically effective means of expressing these politics. As he writes in the introduction to his early plays, “It was depressing: there was no breakthrough. Like other vestiges of the 1960s, the fringe became self-indulgent.”¹¹ It ended up, in Kureishi’s view, “confirming a leftist audience in its prejudices just as much as a bourgeois audience was confirmed in its own”.¹² By the time he writes *My Beautiful*

Laundrette, he has come to believe that an ironic portrayal of the lives of British Asians under the Thatcher government is the most effective cultural means of criticizing the racism fostered by that government. The racism of the New Right, of which the Thatcher government of the 1980s was the most significant political expression in Britain, is well known and well documented. Margaret Thatcher's anti-immigration policies, her demonization of the "loony Left", which comprised anti-racist local government structures, and her ideological fusion of ideas of nation with those of race, all worked to constitute Britain's immigrant communities as a cultural threat to be countered. As Norman Tebbit, Chairman of the Conservative Party under Thatcher, said in 1990:

In recent years our sense of insularity and nationality has been bruised by large waves of immigrants resistant to absorption, some defiantly claiming a right to superimpose their culture, even their law, upon the host community.¹³

Anna Marie Smith comments:

The Thatcherites were able to construct the black immigrant and dangerous queerness such that they operated as particularly credible figures of outsider-ness. These demonizations were central to the legitimations of specific authoritarian measures, such as the intensification of racially defined immigration policies and the reduction in local government autonomy, and to the more general re-orientation of the British right wing from the pragmatic "consensus" approach to a radical right-wing populism.¹⁴

In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi portrays British Asians as precisely the kind of self-interested entrepreneurs that Thatcher's free market and minimal state policies were intended to foster. This irony is well summed up in the wealthy and unscrupulous businessman Nasser's toast to the laundrette his equally unscrupulous nephew Omar has made successful:

Nasser: We'll drink to Thatcher and your beautiful laundrette.

Johnny: Do they go together?

Nasser: Like dall and chipatis! (*MBL* 37)

A simile drawn from a culture that New Right ideology condemns as alien within Britain is used to express the success of members of that culture in precisely the kind of individual enterprise which that ideology promotes. The use of the phrase which gives the film its title here emphasizes the centrality of this kind of irony to its meaning.

Kureishi's portrayal of Omar – who refers to himself punningly as “Omo” – as homosexual functions in a similar way. Margaret Thatcher's government condemned homosexuality, forbidding local authorities in Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1987-88 either intentionally to “promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality” or to “promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”.¹⁵ Kureishi responds ironically to this political culture by portraying the main protagonist of his film both as homosexual, and demonized as such by New Right ideology, and at the same time as precisely the kind of economic agent that ideology intended to promote. In a similar way, the laundrette of the film's title is named “Powders”, in a punning reference to the drug-dealing by which Omar raised the capital to make it viable, ironically representing the contradictions in Mrs. Thatcher's moralistic ideology of individual enterprise. Furthermore, Omar changes the laundrette's name from its original “Churchills”, which it bears whilst still “*in a bad condition*”, and “*situated in an area of run-down second-hand shops, betting shops, grocers with their windows boarded up, etc.*” (MBL 20). This irony suggests that the kind of England represented by the name of Churchill, although held up as an ideal in New Right rhetoric, is in reality a past age of which only decaying relics remain, whilst precisely those characters demonized by that rhetoric – homosexuals, Asians, drug-dealers – represent the reality of contemporary Britain.

Kureishi regards this kind of irony, which pervades *My Beautiful Laundrette* and much of his earlier work, as the most effective contemporary cultural form of critique not only of racism but also of the entire political culture of which it is a part. He does not say so explicitly, but this effectiveness derives

in part from the especially appropriate characteristics of irony as a form in which to criticize this kind of ideology, insofar as it already consists of precisely the kind of contradictory senses which irony explicitly puts into play. The classical definition of irony, by Quintilian, is a figure of speech in which we understand the opposite of what a speaker says.¹⁶ D.C. Muecke argues that the common principle of ironic expressions is a “contrast between an appearance and a reality”, in which “the real meaning is meant to be inferred either from what the ironist says or from the context in which he says it”.¹⁷ In this sense, the New Right ideology of race is already a kind of unconscious irony at several points, and Kureishi’s aesthetic use of the device simply makes manifest the internal contradictions latent in it. The point at which this ideology depends most upon a play of contradictory senses is in its use of the concept of nation. By fusing this concept with that of “race”, Margaret Thatcher was able to refer to Britain’s “national” culture and values, but to mean the culture and values of Britain’s white majority alone. In a 1978 speech on immigration, she says:

People are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture. And, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world, that if there is a fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.¹⁸

At one level, the “people” here, with their “British character”, means the national population as a whole, but at another, the terms are intended to refer to the nation’s white majority alone. Paul Gilroy describes the prevalence of precisely this kind of play of meaning in the Conservative ideology of the 1980s:

The politics of “race” in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between “race” and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity.¹⁹

Anna Marie Smith also analyses the way in which racial intolerance is “de-racialized” in this kind of discourse into a humanism that claims that it is a natural instinct of racial groups

to want to defend their national and cultural borders against the influx of alien racial groups. In this way, she writes:

The new racism teaches the racist that she has never been racist, that the racial minorities themselves would pursue exactly the same policies in their own “homelands”, and that the preservation of racial-cultural-national purity is the best defence against racial tensions.²⁰

Like the concept of nation in Conservative ideology, this device depends on a contradictory play of meanings, so that what is in fact a historically and politically determined racial antipathy is described in terms of a universal and natural human instinct. One of the reasons that Kureishi can regard irony as the modern mode of political representation in the 1980s, especially of the lives of British Asians, is that the ideological discourses by which they are surrounded are themselves constituted by the kind of internal contradictions that irony makes explicit. As several commentators point out, Thatcher and the New Right were careful in practice to keep re-defining the terms of their discourse according to the necessities of changing circumstances, so that “by focusing on this now and that then, potential contradictions dissolve”.²¹ Kureishi’s ironic mode, especially in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, refuses to allow the ideology to be tactically re-structured in this way, but fixes its contradictions at a given point into an aesthetic form. In this way, it constitutes a cultural form of protest against the injustices which this ideology serves to legitimate.

One of the explicit reasons Kureishi gives in the introduction to *My Beautiful Laundrette* for his preference of irony in cultural representation is that the film is also intended “to be an amusement”, and to allow its audience the pleasure of comedy. Kureishi writes, “Ever since the first time I heard people laugh during a play of mine, I’ve wanted it to happen again and again” (*MBL* 5). The pleasure afforded by comedy is in itself, for Kureishi, a politically significant value. As he emphasizes on many occasions, he was formed by the culture of the 1960s. In “Some Time With Stephen”, the diary extracts published with the screenplay of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, he writes:

The attitudes that formed me are, briefly: that openness and choice in sexual behaviour is liberating and that numerous accretions of sexual guilt and inhibition are psychologically damaging; that the young are innately original and vigorous, though this special quality is to do with not being burdened with responsibility and the determinations of self-interest.²²

Kureishi sees the pursuit of pleasure as a basic social right and goal. He writes, “I imagine the desire for more freedom, more pleasure, more self-expression to be fundamental to life.”²³ Any kind of political organization or programme which prohibits this kind of free self-expression is, for Kureishi, an oppressive one, which denies its citizens a basic right. Margaret Thatcher’s ideology of “Victorian values”, like individual provision, family discipline, self-control and self-reliance, in whose terms she represented her minimal state economic policies, was precisely such a programme. In “Eight Arms to Hold You”, Kureishi recalls a speech in which Thatcher had reflected that, during her childhood, she felt that, “To pursue pleasure for its own sake was wrong”. He writes:

It isn’t surprising that the 1980s *mélange* of liberal economics and Thatcher’s pre-war Methodist priggishness would embody a reaction to the pleasure-seeking of the 1960s and 1970s, as if people felt ashamed, guilty and angry about having gone too far, as if they’d enjoyed themselves too much.²⁴

When reaction of this kind against the pursuit of self-fulfilment is promoted at governmental level, in Kureishi’s view, that government is acting against the interests and rights of its citizens. It is in this sense that he describes the 1980s as “ten years of repression”. The pleasure aroused by comedy is a value in itself for Kureishi, since pleasure is a fundamental goal of human life. Furthermore, in the “authoritarian 1980s” especially, affirming this value in practice constitutes a form of protest against a government whose policies and ideology curtail the individual’s right to pursue it. Kureishi sums up this political function of comedy well in his diary when, describing the 1980s as ten years of repression, he writes, “I haven’t been able to take them seriously.”²⁵

If irony has the critical function I have discussed so far in Kureishi's work, it is nevertheless not restricted to that function. Just as Kureishi can use comic devices which put into play a critical perspective upon a dominant ideology, so he uses the same devices in contexts where it is precisely the dominant perspective that they put into play. The ironic play of meaning which pervades Kureishi's work is not contained within the boundaries of the political views he expresses either directly in prose or in his fictional works themselves. So, in *My Son the Fanatic*, Parvez's son Farid, having taken up an extremist form of Islam, breaks his engagement with Madelaine, daughter of the Chief Inspector of Police. When Parvez goes to speak to Madelaine, she tells him, "Farid told my father he was the only pig he'd ever wanted to eat" (*MSF* 30). The play of meanings in this joke is structured in such a way that it is precisely the values which the screenplay represents as negative, those of Muslim "fundamentalism", that the audience is invited to accept as a shared norm in enjoying it. As Freud writes, every joke calls for a public of its own, and this one calls for a public which shares just those ideas which Kureishi condemns in the screenplay. In the introduction to *My Son the Fanatic*, Kureishi is unequivocal in his rejection of extremist forms of Islam: "Muslim fundamentalism has always seemed to me to be profoundly wrong, unnecessarily restrictive and frequently cruel" (*MSF* xii). The fundamentalist values Farid takes up in *My Son the Fanatic* are represented as oppressive. His group organizes a demonstration against the local prostitutes, which turns to violence. Farid himself is portrayed abusing one of them, Bettina, his father's lover: "*The boy looks at her for a moment then, with the Maulvi's eye on him, spits in her face*" (*MSF* 114). The maulvi's gaze here represents the social sanction given to this kind of abuse by the fundamentalism in which he instructs Farid's group. We also hear of further violence against the prostitutes:

<i>Prostitute 1:</i>	That lad and his people look at you like scum and frighten the punters.
<i>Parvez:</i>	What do they say?
<i>Prostitute:</i>	Abuse.
<i>Prostitute 2:</i>	A little one was beaten up.

Prostitute: The dirty bastards carried her up to the moors and did her all over. She was only fifteen. (MSF 99)

The value on which Farid's joke depends, then, is firmly inscribed in the context of this screenplay within an oppressive system of values. This system is also represented as a denial of the kind of individual self-fulfilment that Kureishi sees as a political right. Nevertheless, the pleasure of the joke is offered to the audience precisely insofar as it is invited to share this value. It is the same with Farid's response to his father, when the latter confronts him about the broken engagement. Farid is aware that Parvez is secretly seeing Bettina, the white prostitute, and says of his former fiancée Madelaine, "She is absolutely not right for me. But perhaps for you..." (MSF 60). This kind of irreverent wit, which we associate most closely with Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, as he refuses to be dominated by the racist ideologies of 1970s London and its suburbs, sits oddly but just as effectively in the speech of Farid as he defends precisely the kind of authoritarian ideology which Kureishi uses the wit of Karim to criticize. The value expressed in this joke, "We do not associate with white women", along with the connotation, "They are comparable to prostitutes", could hardly be more repugnant to Kureishi or to the values he expresses in *My Son the Fanatic*. Nevertheless, he is just as able to create comic effects which derive from and invite us to share this kind of value as he is to make jokes with a critical function.

Nowhere is Kureishi's wit more ambivalent than in his portrayal of gender relations. Ruvani Ranasinha argues that the ironic distance Kureishi maintains with respect to almost every political stance he represents constitutes a "refusal to commit" to any such stance himself.²⁶ This is an ethical failure for Ranasinha, who looks to a minority artist like Kureishi for a "narrative of resistance that 'subverts or liberates' without ambiguity or contradiction".²⁷ In the examples I have analysed of jokes which derive from values Kureishi does not share, it still remains clear which values he does hold, and which he expresses in the works of which these jokes are part. It is true that the jokes undermine the coherence of the system of values articulated in these works. If the extremist form of Islam which Farid embraces in *My Son the Fanatic* can generate the pleasure

of a good joke, it cannot at the same time remain on the negative side of the screenplay's axiology as a system which denies legitimate pleasure. Despite the possibility of this kind of deconstructive reading, however, the general intention of a screenplay like *My Son the Fanatic* remains clear. When it comes to the representation of sexual politics in Kureishi's ironic mode, however, it is no longer clear which of the many sets of beliefs and values upon which his jokes depend can be isolated as the governing intention behind them. His humour can both support and denigrate feminist politics, to the point where it cannot clearly be discerned what kind of sexual politics his work as a whole expresses.

On the one hand, Kureishi's women characters can use an ironic wit with a critical function precisely analogous to that of his critique of racist ideologies. In *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Rosie refers to men as "the unfair sex", subverting the language of patriarchal ideology with a critical response to such ideology in the same language.²⁸ The contradictory play of meanings she generates in the word "fair", and in the phrase it governs, enacts at a semantic level the social contradiction of the ideology in which the one sense of the phrase is inscribed by the feminist response which would articulate the other. In a similar way, in *Borderline*, Amina responds to her idealistic but abusive boyfriend Haroon, as he tells her why he is about to leave their Asian community and her, having slept with her and spoiled her reputation in that community:

Haroon: We've got to engage in the political process. Not just put out fires when they start them...Get educated and inside things. The worm in the body, Amina.

Amina: The worm in the body. Sums you up. Especially in bed.²⁹

Here Amina redefines the phrase that Haroon had used to express a political ideal for improving the lives of the Asian community, to respond that his sexual relationship to her has not improved her life at all. Again, her joke embodies in its semantic conflict the political conflict of feminist critique with the kind of male discourse which effaces sexual relations from the political sphere.

On the other hand, Kureishi can equally make jokes at the expense of his women characters, which invite the audience to participate in the kind of system which the jokes I have just discussed function to criticize. This is especially striking insofar as Kureishi portrays with some pathos the suffering of his women characters. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, after Karim's father comes home drunk and having begun his affair with Eva, he sulks for a week in response to his wife's disgust. As the family sit in silence over dinner, Karim narrates:

Once Mum burst into tears and banged the table with the flat of her hand. "My life is terrible, terrible!" she cried. "Doesn't anyone understand?"

We looked at her in surprise for a moment, before carrying on with our food. Mum did the washing-up as usual and no-one helped her.³⁰

Once her husband actually leaves her for Eva, Karim's mother suffers a complete breakdown, of which Kureishi writes, "Her mind had turned to glass, and all life slid from its sheer aspect" (*BS* 104). Such an unhappy character as Karim's mother does not find much funny, and in particular jokes made at her expense simply do not work: "Mum wasn't a satisfactory teasing victim, not realising you were supposed to laugh when mocked" (*BS* 5). Kureishi is nevertheless able to make precisely the kind of jokes at the expense of his women characters that Karim's mother here is simply too unhappy to find funny. In *My Son the Fanatic*, Parvez comes home wet and muddy after his early morning walk on the dales with Bettina. First we see his wife Minoos scrubbing his dirty shoes in the kitchen, after which she confronts him:

Minoos: We can't afford new shoes. You're not a coolie to carry baggage through mud.

Parvez: There are many abnormal occurrences in taxi business. (*MSF* 22)

This joke, in which Parvez's phrase "abnormal occurrences" is intended to mean a possible but legitimate set of circumstances in which he could have come home dirty, but refers also to the real circumstance of his walk with Bettina, depends on events which cause Minoos real suffering. She is already unhappy as a

Pakistani wife in England, shouting at Parvez, “I hate this dirty place! The men brought us here and left us alone!” and that without her son, “I will be here alone, like the English women, waiting to die” (*MSF* 121, 119). Parvez’s love for another woman increases this unhappiness, but it is nevertheless a subject about which Kureishi can make a joke, and which he invites his audience to enjoy. In a similar way, one of the most controversial sentences in *Intimacy*, “There are some fucks for which a person would have their partner and children drown in a freezing sea”, is followed by a joke: “My kingdom for a come”.³¹ *Intimacy* was widely criticized in the press for the cruelty of its portrayal of a man leaving his partner and children for a younger woman, especially in the light of the story’s close resemblance to events in Kureishi’s own life. It was described as “a repugnant little book”, “misogynistic hatred” and a “terrifying account of male inhumanity”.³² His former partner and the mother of his first two children, Tracey Scoffield, was reported to have described it as explicitly “malicious” towards her and the children.³³ However one-sided many of the reviews may have been, Jay knowingly hurts his partner Susan and their children by leaving them for a younger woman, just as Kureishi hurt his former partner by writing the novella. Nevertheless, at Jay’s most explicitly callous moment concerning the desire which has led him to leave his family, Kureishi can have him make a joke about it. “My kingdom for a come” depends for its effect on its condensation of the two cultural references and the sexual pun. It invites us to enjoy at the level of humour its reference to Jay’s capacity to leave everything he has in pursuit of a primarily sexual pleasure at the same time as the novella of which it is a part makes clear the damage this decision has done to his partner and children.

Kureishi maintains an ironic distance from both the feminist and anti-feminist politics his characters articulate, to the point where it is not clear what kind of sexual politics the works written in this ironic mode express. The contradictory play of meanings in this mode can be described in terms of Bakhtin’s account of heteroglossia in the novel. The kind of jokes I have discussed in Kureishi’s work are what Bakhtin calls “hybrid constructions”, in which the meaning of an utterance, along

with the social point of view in which it has this meaning, is subverted by the counteraction of another meaning, which derives from another social perspective. Cynthia Carey analyses the critical function of Kureishi's style in terms of Bakhtin's theory. Thinking of the latter's account of Rabelais' "carnavalesque opposition to the lingering authority of the medieval church", she writes, "Hanif Kureishi's irreverent and often verbally preposterous oppositional agenda may usefully be compared to Rabelais' work in this perspective."³⁴ In fact, Kureishi can best be compared to Bakhtin's Rabelais not just insofar as he subverts the language of ideology with that of critique, but rather insofar as, in the ironic mode which pervades his work, he subverts every positive language and point of view whatever. In "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin describes Rabelais' style as that of a kind of pure parody, with no positive stance to which that parody refers back:

In Rabelais...a parodic attitude toward almost all forms of ideological discourse – philosophical, moral, scholarly, rhetorical, poetic, and in particular the pathos-charged forms of discourse...was intensified to the point where it became a parody of the very act of conceptualizing anything in language.³⁵

Whereas Rabelais criticizes every kind of positive discourse in this parodic style, for Bakhtin, he does not substitute for them a preferable positive discourse of his own:

The truth that might oppose such falsity receives almost no direct intentional and verbal expression in Rabelais...It reverberates only in the parodic and unmasking accents in which the lie is present. Truth is restored by reducing the lie to an absurdity, but the truth itself does not seek words.³⁶

Kureishi's irony functions in a precisely analogous way. There is no position that he does not represent ironically, and no set of values implied by this irony about which he cannot also make a joke. There is no positive form of discourse which Kureishi's work at one point seems to express which is not the subject of a joke which invites us to criticize it at another. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye argues, "The movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another."³⁷ In

the case of Kureishi's comedy, this movement is entirely implicit. His ironic mode functions as a criticism of every ideology at work in contemporary society, but without positing any kind of alternative politics on which another could be based. In *Intimacy*, Jay calls desire, which "mocks all human endeavour" but nevertheless "makes it worthwhile", the "original anarchist" (I 44). This is perhaps the best figure in Kureishi's work for the political function of the comedy which characterizes so much of it. There is no politics expressed in that work, however strongly, of which its comedy is not also a critique.

- 1 Hanif Kureishi, "The Rainbow Sign", in *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings* (London: Faber, 1996), p. 76. This work is hereafter cited in the text as "RS".
- 2 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, tr. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 203.
- 3 Freud, pp. 147, 148.
- 4 Hanif Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 44. This work is hereafter cited in the text as *MSF*.
- 5 Sukhdev Sandhu, "Paradise Syndrome", *London Review of Books*, 18 May 2000, p. 33.
- 6 Sandhu, p. 35.
- 7 Sandhu, p. 35.
- 8 Freud, p. 149.
- 9 Freud, p. 155.
- 10 Hanif Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, p. 5. This work is hereafter cited in the text as *MBL*.
- 11 Hanif Kureishi, *Plays One: The King and Me, Outskirts, Borderline, Birds of Passage* (London: Faber, 1999), p. xv.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Cited in Charles Husband, *"Race" and Nation: The British Experience* (Bentley, Western Australia: Paradigm, 1994), p. 41.

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- 14 Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 32.
 - 15 Cited in Smith, p. 183.
 - 16 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 9.2.44.
 - 17 D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 33, 35.
 - 18 Cited in Martin Barker, *The New Racism* (London: Junction, 1981), p. 15.
 - 19 Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 45.
 - 20 Smith, p. 57.
 - 21 Husband, p. 38.
 - 22 Hanif Kureishi, "Some Time with Stephen", in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid: The Script and the Diary* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 77.
 - 23 Ibid.
 - 24 Hanif Kureishi, "Eight Arms to Hold You", in *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*, p. 116.
 - 25 Kureishi, "Some Time With Stephen", p. 77.
 - 26 Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002), p. 5.
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