You Only Have to Wish High Enough – Gifts in Hanif Kureishi's *Gabriel's Gift*

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Abstract

Hanif Kureishi, whose works frequently explore the psychology and intimate life of his predominantly male protagonists, is one of the most acclaimed contemporary British writers of multiethnic origin. This article deals with his fourth novel, Gabriel's Gift *(2001), which, to a certain degree, reassumes the thematic tradition of his earliest works, namely his first novel,* The Buddha of Suburbia *(1990). It attempts to show that* Gabriel's Gift *can be read as a kind of sequel to its more acknowledged predecessor, though its main focus has shifted from racial and political issues to a more private, and also more light-hearted, exploration of the state of humanity. The last section focuses on one of the central characteristics of Kureishi's oeuvre, his celebration of London as a city of countless opportunities and a positive social and cultural diversity.*

Introduction

Gabriel's Gift (2001) is Hanif Kureishi's fourth novel, yet in many respects it can be understood as a sequel to his much acclaimed debut novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), which made Sukhdev Sandhu hail him as "perhaps the first – and certainly the best and most important – Asian chronicler of London" (Sandhu 153). While Kureishi's writing of the 1990s is represented predominantly by autobiographical and confessional fictions and screenplays, such as *The Black Album* (1995), *Intimacy* (1998), *My Son the Fanatic* (1997) and *Sleep With Me* (1999), *Gabriel's Gift* reassumes the tradition of his earliest works, namely his first novel, though it is more cheerful in spirit and much less thematically racial and political. As Thomas puts it:

> Kureishi seems to have lost faith, or lost interest, in the 1970s agenda which saw literature as an agent for political or social

> change. Now he is more likely to talk of literature's role in considering the 'human condition' than in examining the 'Condition of England' (Thomas 151).

The novel thus naturally follows the tradition of Kureishi's more recent works, which do not represent race and ethnicity at all. This "powerfully disrupts the notion of the "ethnic writer" as representative of a particular community" (English 110). It is, above all, the novel's optimistic belief in humanity that makes it a charmingly light-hearted, yet simultaneously thoughtful celebration of life. Besides this, *Gabriel's Gift* is in places hilariously comic, being "sketched with pastels, return[ing] to the Kureishi of sweet sarcasm and affectionate banter" (Jays). Unlike *The Buddha of Suburbia,* which also has a great affinity with the English comic novel but whose issues generally reflect broader cultural and social forces (Head 222-3), *Gabriel's Gift* exemplifies a much purer form of the genre.

It is not difficult to find several parallels between the main protagonists of *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *Gabriel's Gift*: both are ambitious teenagers with hopeful expectations about their future lives; both show artistic tendencies; both their fathers leave their families, which makes their sons act as go-betweens for their separated parents; both their fathers change their lives dramatically by finding fulfilment in teaching, almost becoming quasi-gurus; and both books end with a marriage, though Karim's parents do not get back together. It is not surprising then that the two teenage characters from *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim Amir and Charlie Hero, also appear briefly in *Gabriel's Gift*. However, there are also substantial differences between them, especially with regard to their race, where they come from and the relative success of people they meet. Gabriel and his family are middle-class British who live in central London, and Gabriel's father Rex used to be a very successful musician. Unlike Karim's family, they don't have to face racial prejudice, nor move upward on the social scale by leaving the geographic location in which they live. This geographical shift was probably made by previous generations, as we learn that Gabriel's grandfather was a suburban greengrocer. The novel also does not explore the theme of sexual identity, as there is no uncertainty concerning the main protagonist's sexual orientation (despite his occasional interest in cross-dressing, which is presented as some kind of imaginative rather than sexual game.) Moreover, unlike other Kureishi fictions, *Gabriel's Gift* employs several elements of magic and fantasy. In contrast to magic realism, the use here is symbolic. Gabriel's gift to materialise objects

through his paintings presents art as a kind of magic, which often defies rational comprehension. Gabriel's conversations with his lost twin-brother Archie indicate Gabriel's growing intuition and empathy, or, as Thomas puts it, "a metaphor for his emerging identity" (Thomas 152).

As a result, *Gabriel's Gift* is almost free of any racial, social and political criticism, which represents a significant component of *The Buddha of Suburbia*. This is also influenced by the fact that historically the action of *Gabriel's Gift* takes place more than twenty years later. The latter novel may be less ambitious, but it is simultaneously more contemplative and sensitive. On the one hand, especially due to its employment of comicality and the absence of social involvement, *Gabriel's Gift* lacks its predecessor's complexity and appeal, which made some less favourable reviews label it as a series of "superficial observations" with "particularly cloth-eared dialogues" and "characters lacking in depth" (Zacharek, Ball, M.). On the other hand, this is compensated for by its more profound focus on some previously explored themes and motifs, namely on the power of the imagination and creativity as well as what it actually means to be a human being in the alienating, yet not essentially hostile, world of the metropolis at the beginning of the new millennium. Moreover, these two central themes are presented as inseparable, crucially affecting each other, a fact that helps to create the novel's unique atmosphere and appeal.

Only because someone believes in you

The common denominator of both the novels is the theme of human imagination and creativity, which are viewed as essential for full self-realisation and, consequently, balance and happiness in life. While in *The Buddha of Suburbia* such potential is attributed almost entirely to the young generation, represented by Karim and Charlie, in *Gabriel's Gift* it is extended to virtually every major character of the novel, regardless of age. If the ability to use the imagination for creative purposes is the most ready explanation of the gift in the novel's title, then there are in fact far more "gifted" people than Gabriel, even though his "gift" is no doubt central in the story. This ability itself is, however, presented as insufficient unless other people help you by putting their trust in you. Gabriel feels this when he cannot concentrate on anything after his father moves away from the household: "Why would anyone think they could achieve something? Only because someone believed in them." (GG 14)

The first character whose gift is mentioned is Lester Jones, the rock star, who has not only managed to retain his popularity for decades, but is also depicted as a versatile artist with "the force at the centre of the world which made precious and important things happen" (GG 44-5). Lester, "a David Bowie figure […] recognises in Gabriel a fellow traveller, and bestows on him the present of an original artwork" (Clark). He demonstrates to Gabriel that each work of art should be spontaneous, imaginative and thus original, along with the almost schizophrenic effect of what it means to be immersed in the process of artistic creation: "This is how I live twice. I live in the world, and then in memory and imagination" (51). Lester thus becomes a true role model and inspiration for the boy, who is still looking for his own field of creative self-realisation[1]. Although Gabriel understands that he should "follow Lester's example and go his own way" (GG 63), he is wasting his talent in copying other people's paintings. Such activity can be interesting as preparation, which is expressed in the metaphor of his making the painted things come into existence, but it does not make Gabriel an original artist. Only when this gift seems not to work any longer does Gabriel feel relieved and free to create only originals. He then turns to his cinematographic project. In his progress towards becoming an independent filmmaker, Gabriel is both directly and indirectly supported by other people's gifts, for example the producer Jake's ability to spot and financially support young people's talent, or his mother's heroic struggle in keeping the household going and sacrificing her dream of living a comfortable middle-class life.

However, there is one more exceptionally gifted person, who, like Gabriel, also has to undergo a painful process of self-discovery – Gabriel's father Rex. At the beginning of the story Rex is shown as being a far from perfect parent. Although he fulfills the role of his son's spiritual guide, he repeatedly fails in providing him with the necessary material support. He acts more like a close friend than a father. Interestingly enough, he finds sense in his disordered life through the activity he has always despised for not being inventive at all – teaching. His teaching turns into a kind of auto-therapy that helps him to recover from his confused and meaningless existence, and he soon discovers that it naturally combines the two things he needs to retain his vigour and optimism: music and being among young people. In addition, he comes to realise that teaching is a creative process after all. Through his teaching he also re-discovers and makes use of both the qualities he has long seemed to have forgotten, empathy and the willingness to listen to others, as well as those which used to enrage

Gabriel's mother, such as his noisy, child-like spontaneity and ironic carelessness. Rex's gift is that, as a teacher, he avoids being authoritative and self-centered, managing to be always on the pupils' side by putting himself in the background and by making them feel that they are discovering and learning things by themselves. The reward he receives for this is not only a feeling of reinvigoration, but, above all, a sense of responsibility for someone else that eventually enables him to regain what he loves most – his family.

One of the central themes in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and other works by Kureishi is what it means to be a first and second-generation immigrant living in England in the 1970s. This makes Richard Bradford claim *Buddha* that initiated a specific subgenre, the "Assimilated Postcolonial Novel." (Bradford 203) *Gabriel's Gift* operates on a much more general ground since it focuses on what it means to be a human being in the modern world more than twenty years later. By no longer showing a concern with social and racial issues Kureishi's fiction loses its political message, but simultaneously gains a new dimension, which is engaging because of the sensitivity and introspectiveness of its subjective perspective. On the one hand, the novel reassumes a theme typical of Kureishi's 1990s works – interpersonal, mostly intimate, relationships. Yet, the optimistic spirit of *Gabriel's Gift* differs from *Intimacy*, the mournful novel which preceded it. Although the protagonists of *Gabriel's Gift* have their flaws and disagreements, they are always able to find a way to reconciliation and the overcoming of obstacles.

Like many other Kureishi protagonists, Gabriel finds himself at the end of childhood, facing up to the seemingly inhospitable and shallow adult world. Kureishi knows that to idealise childhood and denigrate adulthood would be naïve and simplifying. However, he expresses his belief that certain childlike qualities, such as creativity and spontaneity, must be preserved in order to retain one's humanity. As result of this, *Gabriel's Gift* "is a coming-of-age story that suggests that no one ever really comes of age: It's simply too heartbreaking" (Zacharek). Some reviewers have considered the perspective of the novel as being the seeing of adulthood through the eyes of a child.[2] Yet, in my opinion, it is rather one of adulthood scrutinising itself in search of those child-like aspects that make grown-ups more human. The chief ambition of *Gabriel's Gift* lies in its attempt to define the "human condition," to show its very essence. From Kureishi's point of view this is represented by the combination of creativity and humanity, the potential of the imagination and the ability to treat others with natural kindness and open-mindedness. In other words, a human being is defined

by his or her creative power and constant willingness to step outside of their shell in order to approach other people, regardless of the ultimate otherness and insurmountable distance which is inevitably to be found between two people. The main characters in the novel also demonstrate a fundamental condition for achieving this potential – one must first come to terms with oneself and find balance and happiness in one's life in order to become capable of approaching other people with sincerity and understanding. Gabriel's father's frustration with the purposelessness of his life makes him unable to act as a responsible and confident parent and partner and results in the break-up of the family. Gabriel's mother is dissatisfied with her life for she feels that at her age she already deserves to be living a comfortable middle-class life, one that Rex ostentatiously despises as narrow-minded and tedious. She therefore sets all her hopes on Gabriel, whom she wishes to become a respectable lawyer even though she knows he hates the idea. It is only when the father regains his confidence, a sense of meaning in life and a regular income, and the mother realises her goal of a functioning household that they are able to understand their son's problems and provide him with the necessary support.

In the meantime, though, it is Gabriel who, forced by circumstances to leave his carefree childhood too soon, has to take over the role of spiritual and emotional guide for his confused and frustrated parents. This human gift of Gabriel becomes even more central in the story than his artistic one. As Diana Hendry points out, "what holds you is the tender, affectionate and funny relationship between father and son and the way Kureishi persuades you to love this down-and-out, baffled and inadequate dad" (Hendry). Having found out that no one else can bring his parents together, Gabriel assumes the responsible yet highly thankless role of a go-between for his parents, someone who helps them to find themselves and, possibly, each other again. Operating as such a double agent consequently results in his being perpetually trapped between his father's and mother's antinomies, but also between their and his own demands, wishes and preferences. However, Gabriel is a quick learner who manages, though with the help of several necessary and hurtful lies and deceits, to make his parents realise that they love and need each other after all, while, at the same time, asserting his own will and ambition. Yet there is one more added value Gabriel gains as a reward for his determination, patience and assertiveness, which he also learns from the personal examples of Lester Jones, Jake and Speedy – the ability to approach other people with tolerance and understanding. This is nicely depicted in his evolving relationship with

Hannah, the unfortunate Eastern European refugee who is hired by Gabriel's mother to look after him after his father leaves the household. While at first he finds Hannah an easy target for his scorn and sarcasm, mocking unscrupulously her bad English, odd habits and petty vices, such as overeating while watching TV soap operas, he eventually comes to like her. He learns to emphasise with her by understanding that her situation is in fact far more desperate than anyone else's since she has literally no one and nowhere to escape or return to.

Cheerful London

There is one more aspect which has not yet been mentioned and which makes *Gabriel's Gift* a kind of a sequel to his earliest narratives – its view of London as a beloved place of freedom, limitless opportunities and possibilities. Unlike *The Buddha of Suburbia*, it does not explore the suburbs as "sites of surface and display, where the boundaries between public and private are both installed and constantly undermined" (Brook 210), but concentrates entirely on metropolitan London. Like *The Buddha of Suburbia*, however, the novel sees London as 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 theatricality and artifice" (Ball 229). Gabriel, like Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, possesses the gift of being a passionate observer of the city and its changing character while walking its streets. While he is walking to the bar where his mother has just found a new job, the reader is given the most detailed and vivid of observations:

> The city was no longer home to immigrants only from the former colonies, plus a few others: every race was present, living side by side without, most of the time, killing one another. It held together, this new international city called London – just about – without being unnecessarily anarchic or corrupt. […]
>
> Their neighbourhood was changing. Only that morning a man had been walking down the road with a mouldy mattress on his head, which you knew he was going to sleep on; other men shoved supermarket trolleys up the street, looking for discarded junk to sell; and there were still

> those whose idea of dressing up was to shave or put their teeth in.
>
> However, there lived, next door, pallid television types with builders always shaking their heads on the front step. If you weren't stabbed on the way, you could find an accurate acupuncturist on the corner, or rent a movie with subtitles. In the latest restaurants there was nothing pronounceable on the menu and, it was said, people were taking dictionaries with them to dinner. In the delis, queens in pinnies provided obscure soups for smart supper parties. Even ten years ago it was difficult to get a decent cup of coffee in this town. Now people threw a fit if the milk wasn't skimmed to within a centimetre of its life and the coffee not picked on their preferred square foot of Arabia. (GG 8)

The narrative's language and spirit are remarkable in this passage. The language is very spry and evocative, "imbued with the energy and brio of its adolescent protagonist" (Thomas 151), yet realistic and rich in both its comic and disturbing details. The novel is a third-person narration written from the perspective of a fifteen-year-old boy, and most of its language reflects this. But when it comes to the observations about London and its variability, it is easy to detect that they echo Kureishi's own thoughts, characteristically combining a glorification of the city with down-to-earth, "warts and all" evocations of its less admirable aspects. The result is that Kureishi manages to write a paean to the city without being sentimental or idealising. His London at the beginning of the new millennium is free from the racial and social tensions typical of his earlier works, namely the film scripts *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and *London Kills Me*. Racial and political violence is rather sporadic. The decades of encounters between numerous ethnicities have shaped the city into an international metropolis with enough vigour to function despite its quasi-Babylonian character, some of its inhabitants' narrow-minded mores, and continuing problems with poverty.

It is not only Gabriel's view of the city that is expressed in the novel. Hannah, the Eastern European maid in Gabriel's household, is an example of a new but elderly immigrant lost in the city's babble of streets and languages, which she is not yet able to understand. Leading her through the streets, Gabriel notes that

> seeing the various neighbourhoods from her point of view – for a while it seemed advantageous to pretend to himself that he was in Calcutta […] She was solid, Hannah, and, back on the street, moved only slowly, with a kind of shuffle, whereas everyone else was engulfed by the stream; a moment's hesitation could engender a homicide. Gabriel tried to stand between her and this eventuality. (GG 88)

Hannah's problem lies in her inability to adapt to the pace of the city's life. The London of *Gabriel's Gift* is cheerful and optimistic; yet, as in each metropolis, it can be rather discriminatory against people like Hannah, since it favours those who are active, purposeful and businesslike. Rex, Gabriel's father, knows this and refuses to leave the city no matter how expensive it might be for a jobless person like him because "for him, the rest of the country was a wasteland of rednecks and fools, living in squalor and poverty" (GG 28). However, Rex's love of London is based on the bygone times of his career as, in the first half of the novel, we find him nearly beaten by the city and living penniless in a small, shabby rented flat. It is only when he finds his talent for teaching music and starts making money that he re-discovers his beloved city. And so, getting ready for his lesson in South London, he excitedly reveals his restored state of mind to Gabriel:

> I'm going all over the place and I'm enthusiastic about certain bridges and houses, funny streets, Spitalfields, Brick Lane, the City – like a tourist. When I'm out there I feel fragile, like an old man now, as if I could be easily knocked over. Yet it's as if I'm seeing it again for the first time in years. Things are turning from grey into colour. (GG 134)

Despite many celebratory passages about London, the city is far from being depicted as an idealised milieu. Its streets are just as busy and crowded as those in other large metropolises and are therefore safe only for highly alert walkers. Gabriel describes such an image of the city centre on a late Sunday afternoon:

> In places the crowd was so tight that he had to stop altogether and lean against the wall. Blasts of heat from the open doors of the bright shops and from the Underground grilles in the pavement made him wonder if he weren't in

> hell. He believed he could easily have been carried around a shop, through the changing rooms and out into the street again without touching the polished pine floor. (GG 127)

Kureishi's London is cheerful, but not for everyone. On the one hand, it is an immense, living predatory organism, ready to devour those who lack the necessary protective mechanisms, yet those who are confident and active enough to exploit its countless opportunities will always be granted a view of the more affable side of the city. As David Jays puts it, *Gabriel's Gift* is not "a swarming London novel, but a charming, light-textured fable about talent, about how single-minded creativity might embrace and even be buoyed by the heartbreaking muddle of everyday life" (Jays).

It is primarily Gabriel who identifies the city with his optimistic future plans and prospects. For him, London is not only a source of present worries as it is for Hannah, or of past pleasures, as it is for his father, it is also a future, a promise, an affirmation that the combination of a strong will, high ambition, hard work and a dose of his "gifts" will guarantee him a happy and successful life. He thinks about this as he is transported around London by Lester's driver: "As they drifted past the landmarks, Gabriel fell into a dream of the future, imagining his adventures, the films he'd make and scripts he'd write. […] What a bright place London was, he thought. Here anything could be achieved! You only had to wish high enough!" (GG 154). The London of *Gabriel's Gift* thus represents a confirmation of *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s hopes in the form of Charlie Hero's and Karim Amir's prosperous careers, and simultaneously the assurance that something similar is likely to happen to Gabriel, too. It is a city of possibilities which belongs to those ready to make the sacrifices necessary for them to be rewarded by the city and have their dreams come true. Lacking any deeper racial, social or personal concerns, *Gabriel's Gift* explores the very nature of the fictional world which Milan Kundera (43) calls "the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable of'. The novel may be neither as ambitious nor as complex as *The Buddha of Suburbia* or *The Black Album*, nor does it 'mark a distinctively new phase in Kureishi's work" (Thomas 157), but it undoubtedly represents a refreshing change from the tone and spirit of its immediate predecessors.

Notes

[1] In an interview with Robert McCrum Kureishi explained that David Bowie himself was behind the novel's origin as he had asked Kureishi to write a book he could illustrate.

[2] See, for instance, Owen (2001).

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