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Darkness on the Edge of Town: Mapping 'Asian' London in Popular Culture

At the time, minority programming had a genre of its own. It was only made for those audiences. Asian people being funny wasn't on the radar.

(Anil Gupta, *Goodness Gracious Me* producer (Hundal 2005))

Guru's greatest strength is its heartfelt refusal to pander to a (white) audience's expectations of cornershop-owning Asian Britain. Many characters might easily be substituted for other races without undermining the storyline – yes, young Indians also swear, smoke, drink and screw.

(Review of film *Guru in Seven*, *Empire* magazine (Caterall 1998))

This chapter traces South Asian diaspora in post-colonial suburbia through popular culture. It focuses on this demographically young population, so effectively is about UK-based South Asian youth culture. The 'town' it takes for consideration is arguably not just a town but the super-diverse megacity of London, the United Kingdom's capital. The word 'Asian' itself is fraught with complexity. In UK parlance, it normally means populations with origins in the subcontinent or ex-British India. Yet it connotes a plurality of communities. Describing west London and its overspill alone, Malkani (2006:12) through the character Jas explains in slang style that 'the Sikh boys . . . ran Southall . . . the Muslim boys ran Slough. Hounslow's more a mix of Sikhs, Muslims an Hindus, so the brown-on-browns tended to be just one-on-ones stead a thirty desis fighting side by side'. The comment appears to be alluding to a divide and rule principle that had meant less unity within the old Asian-bloc category. Within these faith groups are Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Indians to name but three. The word 'desi' is often taken by these groups to refer to 'of the homeland' e.g. a second generation Asian might express a longing to return to their parents home 'to eat some desi (home-cooked) food'. As a result of global crises such

as the 9/11 terrorist incidences the term 'Muslim' has become increasingly perceived to be a problem category by the host community as they themselves become aware of the vast internal diversity in linguistic, faith and national terms masked by the word 'Asian' and all the othering implied by it. Religion as referred to by Malkani's character Jas is the biggest fault line in the light of global events including 9/11 and the 2005 London bombings of 7/7 in which Muslims were implicated. The chapter looks at popular cultural production and reception as well as the interplay of orientalism with a firmly occidental setting: suburban London which in itself is often considered inferior to 'London proper'. The subject has specific resonance to my own circumstances as someone who both lives and works in outer London confounding the received wisdom of the suburb as an exclusively residential area sustained by the city centre which acts as business district with transport routes radiating out from it.

Situating London's suburbia and the place of Asians within it

In his exhaustive study of London titled simply that, Peter Ackroyd (2000:279) refers to the purpose of suburban movement as 'to escape the sheer proximity of other people and other voices . . . the principle of exclusion . . . surrounded and protected from the depredations of the city'. There is a principle known as 'white flight' that is seen as one of the motivating factors behind relocation to the suburbs. It is an unspoken constituent part of the suburban allure that part of what was being escaped was ethnic populations. Frey (1979:426) has stated that in the US post-war movement of suburbanization, 'evidence . . . suggests that racially motivated movement patterns and discriminatory housing practices, when superimposed upon market forces of the period, served to exacerbate the selective mobility of whites to the suburbs'. Yet contradictions abound in thinking about the metropolis of London in relation to the usual received notions of suburbia in design and ethos as all about wanting to hark back to a mythical golden imagined age of English purity as seen in its retro street names implying placidity, for example 'dells', 'wayes' etc., and architecture, for example the neo-classical, sub-baronial or mock Tudor building styles. Contemporary London, as the 2005 winning bid for the highly successful Olympic games of 2012 stressed, is about the world in one city with its polyglot population of multiple creeds, colours and sexual orientations who call it home. It is awash with contradictions, sometimes constructed as happy multicultural melting pot but at the same time is home to rampant neo-liberalism including the city of

London where unregulated financial trading with little accountability and no responsibility to migrant workers created the global economic meltdown (Massey 2007). The design of its underground stations, particularly when tube lines were extended out to the suburban hinterlands, were fashioned as distinctly futuristic accompanied by advertising stressing the new labour-saving homes speculatively springing up with them. Crucially, the same largely interwar suburban houses are now prized locations for the population of the post-colonial Asian settlement who now buy and sell them on the open market. Furthermore, London contains suburbs that stray from the stereotypical template of white suburb such as Southall which has been a long-standing area with connections to the Punjab (Gillespie 1995; Brah 1999; Nasser 2004). In past decades, Wembley and Harrow have become increasingly 'Asian' with Gujeratis favouring these areas for residential settlement. Even the assumption that suburban residential dwellings are for single nuclear family units is not automatically the case in Asian suburbia where several generations under one household is not necessarily uncommon.

In the popular culture discussed in this chapter certain locations are more prevalent than others. Back in 1939, the hero of the Orwell novel *Coming Up For Air* discussed in Chapter 2 George Bowling escapes his suburban daily surroundings for a journey back to the countryside of his childhood. The journey takes in

> outer London . . . the Uxbridge Road as far as Southall. Miles and miles of ugly houses, with people living dull, decent lives inside them. And beyond it London stretching on and on, streets, squares, back-alleys, tenements, blocks of flats, fried-fish shops, picture-houses on and on for twenty miles, and all the eight million people with their little private lives which they don't want to have altered. (Orwell 1939:214)

Nirpal Daliwal (2007) states: 'Sandwiched between the leafy bourgeois west London environ of Ealing and Heathrow, Southall is recognised throughout the world as "Little India", a place akin more to Mumbai than a British suburb.' Yet this characterization misses the point. Southall, in many ways, *is* a thoroughly contemporary British suburb displaying (perhaps in a more extreme fashion than elsewhere) the characteristic of diversity that is a defining feature of UK suburbia attached to the big multicultural cities of today. Tim Lott like Daliwal has negative recollections of growing up in Southall captured in his memoir which details a nightmare world of narrow-minded post-war suburban England (although Lott's account has attracted criticism from Avtar Brah 1999). Furthermore Southall today is markedly different in character now

than Lott's retrospective 1960s/1970s youthful memories of repression and a close-knit community. Southall has become home to numerous newer groups in post-millennial times. In 1993, McAuley stated of it, 'walking down these streets you will see few except Asian faces', but if he were to take a trip there today, he would doubtless see Polish and Somalis too. Their shops and specialist businesses which can include DVD and book stores help give the lie to suburbs as cultural deserts. It always numbered Afro-Caribbeans as remembered by Kwame Kwei-Armah on his documentary, *The House I Grew Up in*, broadcast in 2009 on BBC Radio 4 which described 1970s Southall when Asians were moving in, white families were moving out and the Afro-Caribbean community were left marginalized. Many of the black and Asian pioneering Southall settlers of the 1950s onwards have moved on and their children choose to set up independent residence elsewhere. Brick Lane is another (inner London) area associated with migration at large. Previous arrivals such as the French Hugenots and East London Jews suburbanized out but Bangladeshis are the most prevalent group now among a multitude of others – so much so that in 2002 one of the council wards had its name extended to 'Spitalfields and Banglatown'. Sandhu (2003a) talks about the cacophony of different sounds making up the soundtrack to the area, a veritable aural assault:

> Some amped-up desi beats CD that a carload of teenagers are nodding their heads to, the cries of a dosser who has been set on by a gang on an idle summer's day, a heated argument at an intersection between a Turkish and a Somali driver, a police helicopter roaring overhead in the middle of the night – everything rears up and assaults your ears, forcing you to learn about the neighbourhood and deal with newness in a way that is utterly unfamiliar to Asians who grow up in more sedate, affluent areas.

However this implied suburban tranquillity is a rarity in the multi-ethnic megacity where previously sleepy shopping parades are infused with vendors of exotic produce playing the sounds of their homelands in their shops, for example Burlington Road in the New Malden district of Kingston in South West London of which one blog poster commented disapprovingly (New Malden People 2011):

> it's become a very messy and untidy road. the shops don't look enticing, and with such a large choice of Sri Lankan and Korean supermarkets to choose from, it would be nice to balance it out with perhaps . . . Just somewhere to get a pack of sausages and yorkshire puddings when you forget them on a Sunday!

Southall and Brick Lane have more in common than their relative geographical positionings respectively at the edge of the city and nuzzling its core may suggest and the evidence of diversity has made itself felt on many suburban streets.

The attention commanded by Asian youth in academia and the media has waxed and waned over the years. The 1970s arguably represented a peak in Britain for youth culture studies, during this period the CCCS (Birmigham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) was prolific in output but Asian youth were not uppermost in their analyses. Indeed articles addressing Asians could appear with phrases like 'paki-bashing' in their titles (see Pearson 1976). In terms of mainstream visibility, television has been the most powerful medium at bringing British Asians from 'out there' to the nation's front rooms. Sardar (2008:232) has written that the early specialist Asian-aimed programmes were aimed principally at persuading Asian women to learn English in keeping with the BBC's Reithian public service remit. Certainly their target audience was not Asian youth. We can also draw a distinction between representations of Asians in Asia and those domiciled in the United Kingdom. Sardar (2008:250–1) reels off a list of colonial era dramatizations of British-ruled India including the *Jewel in the Crown*, *Passage to India* and *The Far Pavillions* before concluding that such nostalgia-infused offerings 'authored a vision of all things Indian which in insidious ways controls contemporary attitudes to the settled communities of British Asians'. Certainly these scenes of heat and dust were unrecognizable to most everyday second-generation Asians living in the United Kingdom. Asian youth could instead be sighted often in defensive roles, for example as the quivering victims of school-bully Gripper Stebson suffering behind the bike-sheds racism on the 1980s BBC childrens drama set in a fictitious comprehensive school *Grange Hill* (1978–2008). The programme's location was never explicitly stated although early series were recognizably set in suburban London with production moving from 2003 onwards to Liverpool. At other times in one-off television plays and drama series such as *King of the Ghetto* (a series about British Bangladeshi tensions in 1986) and *Shalom Salaam* (1989 series about a taboo Muslim/Jewish love affair) the inner city seemed to be a more staple setting for Asians on television; the latter featured Bradford in West Yorkshire, a well-known area of Pakistani migration which has attracted a fair share of hand-wringing from academics and think-tanks (Alam and Husband 2005; Hussain and Bagguley 2005). In the United Kingdom, 1997 was almost a peak in media interest in Asian youth as a new 'Asian underground' club scene emerged from some of the more fashionable spots of central London; however, the term 'Asian' itself has unravelled somewhat since. When, long before 9–11, in summer 2001 northern English towns witnessed riotous friction between British-born

Asians, extreme right-wing sympathizers and the police, Hindus were quick to claim that these clashes were not 'Asian riots' as the police labelled them but were Muslim riots as those concerned were of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origins (Huq 2003). Reasons were manifold, including the principal driver of structural disadvantage coupled with racist provocation. Subsequent years have seen the rise of a politicized Islam led by charismatic imams and followed by youth who are asserting religious identities that their parents frequently downplayed. Minority communities once seen as passive and quiescent have increasingly flexed their muscle. The government has been keen to downplay any link between domestic events and foreign policy but the United Kingdom's joining with the United States in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not help New Labour's image among Muslims, leading to the loss of Labour suburban parliamentary seats such as Hornsey and Wood Green and Manchester Withington from the party in 2005, and the inaction over Israel's bombing of Gaza might have possibly served to reinforce resentment. The coalition government has since assuming office have not reversed Labour's a cross-departmental initiative entitled 'Preventing Violent Extremism' which ostensibly is designed at countering international terrorism but tellingly provides funding for Muslim groups providing that they are from the 'right' persuasion.

On-screen – Asians on television

In the *Good Life* episode 'The Guru of Surbiton' (1975) from series 2, a number of themes surface including student radicalism, community activism and ethnicity. The good-hearted couple Tom and Barbara Good take in an earnest long-haired student couple who seem to talk in the language of counter-hegemonic resistance to help with harvesting crops grown in their garden and other chores. The students then attempt to buy up the house next door in order to start a hippy commune. Margot, Gerry and the Goods set up a committee to resist the move and block the purchase by any means possible, a plan that Tom eventually backs out of in a delayed reaction of disgust at the lifestyle-policing implications that resistance to the plans entails. In the end, the students withdraw their offer, and Tom and Barbara wish them well with some friendly advice to not take themselves so seriously. In the final scene, Margot pops over to declare that 'you and your hippy friends', as she calls the Goods disparagingly, have driven Gerry and her out of Surbiton. She explains how they are to move to Cobham (deeper into Surrey) as a solution only to be told to her palpable relief by Tom and Barbara that the commune is off. Tom then starts informing them of the new couple who have

decided to buy the house instead to Margot's increasingly delighted approval as the description continues: they are a banker, his wife who doesn't work apart from 'the odd charity dos' and two children at boarding school. Margot asks of their name so she can 'drop a notelet through' by way of a welcome. She gets the shock of her life and shouts out for Gerry in horror when she's told it is Mr and Mrs Aziz Mohammad Ibbin Khan. From the mirth and merriment that ensues, one can only assume that this scaremongering was a joke. Cue canned laughter and the closing titles. Here the possibility of immigrant Muslims next door is very much a threat not an opportunity. We see a clear case of othering leaving us to wonder which is worse: trustafarian hippy students who are white or a family who are to all intents and purposes the embodiment of respectability save for the fact that they are not white. It is a shame that this storyline was never developed – the family were never seen but instead were used as a comic device for cheap laughs. The show was recorded in an era when sightings of Asians on television could be described as somewhat sporadic, for example in news footage of the militant unionized women in saris striking at the Grunwick film processing plant during the mid-1970s industrial dispute or consigned to Asian slots with separate programmes such as the 1960s–80s Hindi language broadcasts of Sunday morning aimed at a pan-Asian audience of immigrant parents with presenters who looked like uncles and aunties deep in discussion interspersed with performances of classical Indian music.

By the second decade of the new millennium, Asians had become markedly more visible in mainstream media, particularly as presenters of the national and regional news bulletins. Anti-racism had ceased to be a fringe/loony Left concern and as part of the New Labour settlement became more of an accepted part of daily conduct which contributed to visibility of Asians in public life. The 2009 series of Channel 4's reality show *The Family* centred on an extended family of five Sikhs living in Berkshire with Heathrow airport looming large as an employer. The series was in a prime slot centring on a family of three generations under the same roof rather than them just playing bit parts – a departure from previous portrayals of Asians. As already seen, depictions oscillated between the stern aunties and uncles presenting Hindi-language programming tucked away in specialist slots, dramas on BBC 2, usually about the tyranny of arranged marriage or alternatively the terrified playground victims of school-bully Gripper on *Grange Hill*. The *impasse* was broken with the advent of Channel 4 with its attention to minority programming, for example the airing of Hanif Kureishi's film *My Beautiful Launderette*, initially created by Film4 for the cinema and the magazine show *Eastern Eye* presented in the English language, unlike the BBC equivalent at the time. The phrase 'artistic licence' in which realism can be

tempered with dramatic effect can operate as a cultural cop-out, an unofficially sanctioned caveat to justify artistic products lacking in the credibility stakes. In the cultural climate of twenty-first-century Britain, artistic licence is present alongside another vexed question: 'the burden of representation' which is concerned with the messages and meanings majority audiences take away from cultural products dealing with minority subject matter. This can make characters in Asian drama sometimes seem like cardboard cut-outs created only to prove a point. In the feverish times we live in, cultural sensitivities are heightened with 'Muslim', now a category apart from the 'Asian' bloc category.

The television sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me* takes the story up from the *Good Life* to see what happens when Asians *do* move to the suburbs showing different aspects of Asian Britain through a range of characters in comedy sketches. The programme enjoyed a successful run from 1998–2000. When it toured as a stage show in 1999, the accompanying press release commented on its 'success and universal appeal; at a time when Indian culture is having a big influence on music, fashion and now comedy . . . [it] has broken the mould of "ethnic comedy"'. Among staple characters were two rival aspiring middle-class families who appeared together weekly at awkward social gatherings revolving around golf and barbecues where they aimed to outdo each other. This itself is unremarkable in a suburban comedy of manners style. However, the anglicised foursome are both terrified of the revelation of their Indian backgrounds. The Kapoors always insist that the correct pronunciation of their name was 'Cooper' headed by the patriarch Dinesh Kapoor who called himself 'Denis Cooper' while the Rabindranaths preferred to be known as the Robinsons with mother Veena insisting that she be known as Vanessa. Both pairs were shown as extreme suburban social climbers desperate to fit in and to be seen as more British than the British. In the first series, the sketch in which they are introduced sets up the situation via a visit by the Rabindranaths to the Kapoors in their newfound surroundings of suburban Chigwell, which we interpret has meant a move 'up' in the world, although we are not told exactly from whence they came it is elsewhere in London. The mention of the son of the Coopers/Kapoors son going off to 'discover himself' on a gap year in India as well as the offer to serve Indian tonic water are sneered at by the Robinsons/Rabindranaths. Matters climax when, in what is clearly a racist incident, a brick is unexpectedly thrown by persons unknown through the front door. It is interpreted as 'a present' with a note attached. On closer inspection, the note rubber banded round it reads: 'Pakis go home.' There is a pause inviting a moment of suspense. Things are unfrozen and the canned laughter roars on again as we hear the words uttered in unison from all four present: 'quite right too'. Opinion polls have repeatedly shown that the

chief issues that concern suburb dwellers and the related demographic known as 'middle England' are fear of crime and immigration (Reeves 2007). This sketch suggests that this applies as much to Asian suburbanites as it does to more 'standard' white residents of suburbia. In a later episode at a family barbecue, union jack aprons are worn all round. This shows cultural convergence around at the appropriation of once Far Right imagery by Indians and the neutering of this formerly shocking symbolism by New Labour as part of the cool Britannia project. It would be erroneous to assume that minority electors are 'soft' on immigration issues. Indeed an opinion poll conducted for the BBC during the 2005 general election found that some 60 per cent of British Asian voters (of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin) replied that there are already too many immigrants in the United Kingdom.[1] The sentiment is counter-intuitive to that which one would expect from Asians but might find favour with David Cameron (and Angela Merkel), given recent speeches.

The children of the *Goodness Gracious Me* foursome, the next generation, we glean are more enlightened in their attitudes. The Coopers'/Kapoors' son is initially mentioned in passing as on a gap year in India before later appearing in the series. This sketch suggests that preservation of suburban racial purity applies as much to these Asian suburbanites as it does to more 'standard' white residents of suburbia – as long as they can pull the ladder up behind them after getting in themselves. In another role-reversing sketch, rich young gap-year Indians came on a coach excursion to see the beggars and street hawkers of London (the latter being a road-side *Evening Standard* stall-holding seller). At the end of their trip, one of the young Indian backpackers decides to stay behind and follow in the footsteps of some pioneering wayfarers of the 1960s, as he'd found his spiritual home. The punchline of the sketch turns out to be 'Hounslow', the suburban west London borough that has benefited from nearby Heathrow airport and Asian migration for the past four decades. In some ways, *Goodness Gracious Me* and the successor show *The Kumars at Number 42*[2] continued the historic television tradition that had persisted for many years whereby ethnic characters only really featured in situation comedy when they become the situation rather than characters in their own right who happen to incidentally be of minority ethnicity. In earlier times, the character Alf Garnett was a mainstay of BBC schedules since the pre-politically correct 1960s uttering foul-mouthed racist tirades both in *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966–75) and its follow-up *In Sickness and in Health* (1985–92), although black and Asians did not feature much in the programmes. Conversely the Asian-writing team making *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at Number 42* effectively made them agents of representation as well as the represented. The suburban idiom triumphed most markedly in the latter. The

premise was of a spoilt kid with his own home television studio trying to present a celebrity chat show but being constantly interrupted by his overbearing family members – the venal money-making father, mother trying to marry him off and crude grandmother. Part of the appeal of the show was the way that sometime other-worldly internationally known A-listers (e.g. David Hasselhoff) or even refined national treasures like Stephen Fry were transplanted to the cosy confines of comfortable suburbia: an unfamiliar setting for them in the viewers' eyes. In the 1970s shows *Mixed Blessings* (situation comedy of an interracial marriage), *Love Thy Neighbour* (a black couple next door) or *Diff'rent Strokes* (US white city-slicker widower adopts the black sons of his deceased black housemaid elevating them from Harlem to a swish city apartment). By the 1980s and the 1990s, black characters got their own shows which tended to be inner-city based, for example Channel 4's *Desmonds* (comings and goings at a Peckham barbers) and *The Cosby Show* (veteran black comedian Bill Cosby playing a doctor/father of four kids married to a lawyer). The latter was the most pioneering by centring on the affluent black Huxtable family living in New York's exclusive Brooklyn Heights neighbourhood, but the title indicates that this was formulated as a vehicle for Cosby. It was only when *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at Number 42* arrived that ethnic minorities were situated in suburbia in the United Kingdom. *The Boondocks* did the same thing for African Americans in the United States by animation, but in none of these examples were blacks and Asians present as 'another character', in each case their ethnicity conditioned the story.

Stranger than fiction

Hanif Kureishi's 1970s-set novel *The Bhudda of Suburbia*, arriving in 1990 after he wrote a string of plays is much celebrated as a work of suburban fiction unsettling received notions of class, sexuality, ethnicity and life on the periphery. Unlike the follow-up *The Black Album* (1995) or later short story/film *My Son The Fanatic* (1994/97), it is a largely secular story that does not explicitly deal with Islam. Muslim-born characters do not refrain from lewd practices, eating pork pies or 'drinking un-Islamic drinks' (Kureishi 1990:208). The novel is written in the first person. Its narrator and the nearest thing the book has to be a 'hero' is the pop-culture loving sixth-former and narrator Karim who makes a declaration of his identity at the outset stressing his suburban rather than Indian heritage: 'Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it was the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or

perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it' (Kureishi 1990:3). The story is a coming-of-age tale of this central character who inhabits Bromley, the same south-east suburb where Kureishi was raised as were other cultural alumni including science-fiction writer H. G. Wells (after whom the coffee shop of the town's Allders department store was named), the leading punk movement known as the 'Bromley contingent' (see Chapter 3), and David Bowie, who produced the score to the television series of the book. By the end of the book, Charlie has swapped loon pants for punk which in one of the book's many questionings of role and manifestations of masquerade, Karim sees as inauthentic as the following exchange between the two of them illustrates:

> 'Why not, Karim, Why not, man?'
>
> 'It's not us'
>
> 'But we've got to change. What are you saying? We shouldn't keep up? That suburban boys like us always know where it's at?'
>
> 'It would be artificial' I said. 'We're not like them. We're not from the estates. We haven't been through what they have.' (132)

Perhaps also the fact that Karim views the music as 'pallid [and] vicious' (130) also explains his disapproval as his own preference has been for the bloated colourful world of psychedelia into which foreign influences are more readily accepted than the back to basics three chord and more straightforwardly superficially 'white' prescription of punk, notwithstanding strong ties between the music and Jamaican reggae. Although Karim sees punk as a social housing movement, a significant volume of punk from Bromley and suburbs like it was practised by those who were 'playing' and experimenting with roles that were more downwardly mobile than their actual origins in the semi-detacheds of the city's outskirts. Indeed the character Charlie, who Karim has homoerotic fumblings with at the start in the attic room while both their parents are downstairs at a suburban soiree, was allegedly based on real life punk-star Billy Idol who attended grammar school in Bromley and later Sussex University before dropping out and becoming a key member of the Bromley set as described in Chapter 3.

The titular Bhudda is Karim's father Haroon of Indian birth who is married to his dowdy English mother. There is a sense that he is an aristocrat manqué, dispossessed of his heritage. All this is played out at the same time as Britain too has lost an empire and is seeking a role in the world. When Karim and Charlie are caught in a stoned semi-embrace, Haroon is disgusted and responds 'with utter contempt . . . It must have been his upper-class background' (18). There are references to the servants he used to have at his beck and call and the sunny

climes of Haroon's youth, juxtaposed with the reality of now: 'Dad had had an idyllic childhood, and as he told me of his adventures . . . I often wondered why he'd condemned his own son to a dreary suburb of London' (23). The poverty of rationing came as a shock and he ended up as a functionary in the civil service. 'His life, once a cool river of balmy distraction, of beaches and cricket . . . was now a cage of umbrellas and steely regularity. It was all trains and shitting sons, and the bursting of frozen pipes in January . . . the organization of love into suburban family life in a two-up-two-down semi detached in South London' (26). It seems Karim's English mother has also inherited the stories of patrilineal greatness: 'If Mum was irritated by Dad's aristocratic uselessness, she was also proud of his family. "They're higher than the Churchills", she said to people. "He went to school in a horse-drawn carriage." This ensured there would be no confusion between Dad and the swarms of Indian peasants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s' (24). Here is a reversal of the white society as superior and this particular Asian, not all Asians, as subordinate. Although Haroon is Muslim, caste is a key organizing principle of Hindu Indian society where everyone has a rank that is not easily transcended. In the eyes of the English host population, when migrants arrived in England, all Asians were rendered the same. The reality of life with no servants meant fixed gender roles too dissolved in blighty – Karim's father was probably expected to do his share of childcare with no *ayah* [servant girl] to share the load.

Oswell (2000:80) claims: 'Kureishi's representation of suburbia is not the fixed uniformity of Edwardian Dumroamin's, but a feast of cultures: a mix of Asian and white English, late hippy, glam rock and punk, S/M and wife swapping. Karim's flight is from a suburb and family, which is hybrid. Karim is an actor and his performances draw on these particular suburban and familial resources. In this way Karim is a *flaneur*, strolling through the detritus of the city and suburbs thumbing his nose at convention.' The book shows generational differences in perceptions of suburbia. Bromley is seen as socially superior and a safe haven by Karim's 'Uncle Ted', a family friend who along with his wife Auntie Jean sides with his mother after his parents eventually split. When he and Karim pass through inner-London locations on the train together as they near its London terminus, Ted explains, 'That's where the niggers live' (43). For Karim however, the big smoke has associations with exoticism rather than the inner-city danger as seen in his description of 'the slums of Herne Hill and Brixton, places so compelling and unlike anything I was used to seeing . . . rows of disintegrating Victorian houses'. From a present-day perspective, most of these same dwellings in Pooterish suburbia would be very likely to have been fiercely gentrified since then and become highly desirable period properties in close enough proximity to the city for an easy and

short commute. Although Oswell describes a hybrid world, we get the sense that for Karim, Bromley itself is a narrow-minded constricting location. In the private sphere, Haroon's memories of his lineage, imagined or real, predominate the family's self-positioning: By contrast in the public world, both he and Karim suffer various incidents of racism. At one of Haroon's séance-like gatherings, one guest asks if he has arrived by camel or magic carpet (12). When Karim almost falls off his bike in the street, a passer-by remarks, 'Get back in yer rickshaw'. One wonders if Ted had not known Karim personally whether he would have reacted in the same way. Of playground taunts, he opines, 'I was sick . . . of being affectionately called Shitface and Curryface . . . all my Dad thought about was me becoming a doctor. What world was he living in? Every day I considered myself lucky to get home without serious injury' (63). Here there is a pronounced mismatch between George Harrison-esque exoticization of a version of Asianness (Indians far off in India) and daily-lived experience (those who are in suburban London).

Although the book, which has inspired numerous academic analyses (e.g. Schoene 1998; Childs 2000; Oswell 2000; Maxey 2000; Nasta 2000), is formally divided into two, its structure could be divided into three: in the first part of the book, we get a fair amount of contextualization and scene-setting before the second section in which Karim comes into his own as an actor, and a process of self-discovery follows before finally the threads are tied together at the book's close. He is, by moving to inner London, in part reacting to his circumstances as is his father who begins a parallel career offering spiritual guidance to the locals. The popularity of Haroon's service spreads through word of mouth – 'They are looking forward to me all over Orpington' (21), he tells Karim; this newfound status and popularity compensating for his lowly pen-pushing status at the ministry. Through the keyhole as he accompanies his dad to happenings or listens in on rehearsals at home, Karim sees the irony in his reinvention: 'He was speaking slowly in a deeper voice than usual . . . hissing his s's and exaggerating his Indian accent. He'd spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, and now he was putting it back in spadeloads.' In this way, everyone is playing a role and perfomativity takes centre stage. The theatre is an apposite metaphor which recurs in the book. 'Chiselhurst [neighbouring suburb] had greenhouses, grand oaks and sprinklers on the lawn; men came in to do the garden. It was so impressive for people like us . . . Sunday visits to Auntie Jean we'd treat as a lower-class equivalent of the theatre' (29). Later on, the focus broadens as he runs away to join the theatre (literally) and experience new horizons provided by the lifeline of public transport to destinations such as West Kensington (125), taking the 28 bus to Notting Hill (206) or travelling by tube to squats in Brixton (238). There is a clear demarcation between the capital and its suburbs:

'In bed before I went to sleep I fantasized about London and what I'd do there when the city belonged to me' (121). A similar passage is to be found in *The Black Album* in which Shahid (1995:11) 'sat in the Kent countryside dreaming of how rough and mixed London would be, his brother Chili had loaned him *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* as preparation'. Needless to say, he longs to escape the unmean streets of Sevenoakes. Both Karim and Shahid, like their creator Kureishi, have a fantasized imagined version of London partly as a result of initial feelings of being outsiders from it; their fascination has been shaped from having grown up at the capital's edge, or at its extremity. Kureishi's characters express sniffy disdain for suburbanites as uncultured. The observation 'Few of them had even books in their homes – not purchased, opened books, but only gardening guides, atlases, Readers Digests' is condescendingly made by Shahid of his neighbours in *The Black Album* (1995:35). Similarly, in *Bhudda,* we are told that in Bromley 'when people drowned they saw not their lives but their double glazing flashing before them' (23). Yet given that life in Bromley (with its arts venue, the Churchill theatre), Sevenoakes and London's outer reaches are all becoming more city-like, such observations are outmoded and condescending.

Karim's suburban angst solidifies, and he seeks extracurricular diversions as the story develops. He befriends Terry who is full of the call for revolutionary socialism. 'I wanted to tell him that the proletariat of the suburbs did have strong class feeling. It was virulent and hate-filled and directed entirely at the people beneath them' (149). It is his theatre period that should allow reinvention par excellence, but there he finds himself typecast. When he is told by his director 'We need someone from your own background . . . Someone black' (170), he can't think of anyone apart from a Nigerian classmate that he's lost touch with. By his own admission, Karim whose nickname 'Creamy' has connotations of pigmentation as well as sexual shades admits, 'truly, I was more beige than anything' (167). Unsatisfactorily, he lands the role of Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, the qualification for which is ostensibly that he has seen the Disney cartoon. The choice is attacked by his favourite cousin Jamila as colluding with imperialism. Other characters he later develops are based on acquaintances including his uncle Anwar, proprietor of the ironically titled stereotypical corner shop 'Paradise Stores', and Changez, who has an arranged marriage to Jamila. After performing drama in America and seeing Charlie in his prime there who has long transcended 'the front page of the Bromley and Kentish Times', Karim boomerangs back to London. By the end, both of his parents have different partners. Surrounded by them, he sits down and feels a happy/sad/moving sentiment about his London existence. *The Black Album* (1995) contains the same central themes of escape and stoical ending experienced by Shahid as that of Karim five years earlier.

New directions in Asian fiction

While Kureishi has inspired a welter of academic literary criticism, his book was set in the 1970s and came out in 1990. More recently Gautam Malkani's (2006) Londonistan has offered a contemporary treatment taking Hounslow as its setting which is dubbed 'car park capital of the world'. The book is not to be confused with Melanie Phillips (2006) polemic Londonistan of the same year. Malkani's (2006) narrative style is memorable for its writing in a vernacular tongue of hybridized English incorporating Jamaican patois, text-speak and Hindi words as can be seen from this passage addressing the youth cultural ideal of not 'selling out' (in this case appropriate with the lifestyle of the majority white population) with a yearning of narrator Jas to escape his suburban surroundings:

> In't no desi needin to kiss the white man's butt these days, an you definitely don't need to actually act like a gora. Fuckin blanchod. din't matter what you called them. Coconuts, Bounty bars, Oreo biscuits or any other fuckin food that was white on the inside. Good desi boys who didn't ever cause no trouble. But how many a them'll still be here in Hounslow in ten years time, workin in Heathrow fuckin airport helping goras catch planes to places so they could turn their own skin brown? (Malkani 2006:23)

Throughout the book, Jas and his all-Asian peers negotiate and refer to various points of suburban west London including gentrifying river-side Brentford and Ealing Broadway station with its pinstriped commuting classes as they plan an elaborate and thoroughly modern heist involving mobile phones. They glide through the locational settings in various drive-by episodes using their parents' cars as they are nominal college sixth-formers and none has left the family home. The book contains some familiar Kureishi-esque themes (coming of age, masculinity, self-doubt), but is probably more remembered for the publishing hype surrounding it than its literary qualities – it attracted a record advance and even had a cinema-style trailer filmed as part of its publicity campaign. When central character Jas ventures out, it is to Kensington and Hyde Park Corner which we are reminded are each a straight ride down the Piccadilly line home. Various scams involving driving and mobile phones surface as well as forbidden interracial relations. First-person narrator Jas (2006:89) paints a picture of a landscape broken up with 'newsagents, halal kebab shops an [*sic*] minicab companies with Special Autumn Airport Fares'. Southall is referred to with reverence, for example the 'old days' of the rival gangs, the Holy Smokes and

Tooti Nungs which attracts the comment: 'Now those boys were the hardcore shit. I'm too young to be remembering much bout them' (Malkani 2006:84). At the beginning of the book, a white kid is subjected to the following accusation for calling Hardjit a 'paki' which illustrates the world of the boys beyond Hounslow (Malkani 2006:11):

> U cuss'd my sister an ma bredren. U cuss'd my dad, my uncle Deepak, u cuss'd my aunty Sheetal, my aunty Meera, ma cousins in Leicester, U cuss'd ma grandad in Jalandhar

The character is also inflamed by the insult 'paki' as he is not even from Pakistan in origin. When a gang fight is threatened, we are told that other lads from Southall and Slough may join in.

Around the same time, Nirpal Singh Dahliwal's *Tourism* (2006) came out narrating another first-person second-generation journey. In this instance, Puppy/Bhupinder frequents various central and inner-London hangouts with his friends who are a fashionable crowd but ultimately he cannot avoid coming back to see his mother in Southall when he is in need of money to bum some off her. There is a pronounced gulf between Puppy's mum's kitchen with its yellowing lino and the polished chrome minimalist surfaces in the flat of his journalist city-slicker girlfriend or the middle-class country home of the lawyer woman he lusts after. The book is graphic in its portraits of sexual encounters, masturbation and for the misogyny on display. We are told that Southall is 'petit bourgeois suburbia' inhabited by 'the Punjabi tribe' (40), while in Holland Park where girlfriend Sophie lives, 'It felt beautiful, stepping out if the house and into her car, exchanging nods with the couple who lives opposite, obvious millionaires who assumed I was one too' (52). In the 7.5 miles between the two locations on the same road the A4020 there is a wealth of difference from Southall's humdrum Edwardian and interwar semis to the imposing stucco-fronted dwellings of the super rich. Gentrifying inner East London cannot compete with this westerly wealthy species: 'They were a beloved elect: Europeans, Arabs, Americans and Jews; each saw other through a prism of money . . . Hackney's rich owned Land Rover Discoveries and Smeg fridge-freezers; Holland Park's owned *the world*' (53). Wealth seems to dictate his value system. On a return visit to collect post at the Hackney flat which is his official dwelling, he is reminded of his playground tormenters from schooldays on spying some trashy youth we are told: 'I hate poor white. No one is more stupid or useless. They made my life hell when I was a child' (115). While his brother has remained in Southall, dutifully running the family shop in his father's absence and is about to submit to arranged

marriage, Puppy has got out after doing a college course. He suffers acute embarrassment every time he returns as can be seen from this description: 'For her disappointments we suffered a mother who looked like an animal. Walking with her through streets, down supermarket aisles, we felt ashamed, revolted and guilty for feeling so' (34). This sort of disavowal is common among the children of suburbia of all ethnicities who have made it to London Travelcard zone 2, but here we see a sense of it being multiplied for those who have entered a metropolitan jet set where they are accepted for being exotic but will never shake off their ethnic roots. At a later point, Puppy becomes tongue-tied among his city-slicker friends because of the sound of his own voice: 'It was an absurd jumble of accents: cockney enunciation overlaid with a quiet drone from the Punjab . . . I was taken aback by how particular I was, rooted in time and place: everything about me came from the Punjabi suburb of west London. I felt embarrassed. I realised how outlandish my presence was here' (189). It seems to be the opposite of the old cliché 'it's not where you're from it's where you're at'. Here we seem to be told, you can take the kid out of Southall but you can't take Southall out of the kid. Puppy feels like a tourist looking in on the lives of white privilege that he can never fully belong to.

Meanwhile Shukla (2010:121) offers the following description of more upmarket Asian suburbia where front lawns have been tarmacked into carports:

> The walk to Harrow was ten minutes of winding through rows of terraced two-storey houses, all with the same façade: grey pebble-dash, white PVC doors and gravelled driveways. I always wondered what Indians had against grass and gardening because there wasn't a tuft of green anywhere in sight.

The remark is interesting to read alongside the Southall resident of Indian origin quoted in Oates (2003:105) who claims: 'When I first came to this country I was shocked by the difference of the weather, grey buildings, grey sky and dull clothes.' Southall is often seen by commentators as 'colourful' for the celebratory public display of its high street at festival times,[3] but the privatized exteriors of the Asian suburban side-street domestic dwellings described by Shukla are functional and drab rather than the riot of colour reserved for the interiors of ostentation of its high-streets and public thoroughfares. Pebble-dashed and stone-clad exteriors are part of what Lott (1996) found so hateful about the Southall he grew up in. In Govinden's (2007) novel, set in Surrey narrated by a half Tamil half-Jewish sixth form boy casual violence appears to be liberally practiced.

Suburbia is often a place associated with childhood, that its metropolitan critics end up fleeing. It seems that masculinity is an abiding theme of this

tranche of 'coming of age' suburban Asian novels. Chasing girls that are out of their league seems to be a central preoccupation for example for the first-person narrators of Shukla's *Coconut Unlimited* (2010) and Malkani's *Londonstani*. As well as describing the physical changes of puberty that the narrator and his mates are going through, Shukla (2010:95) confides in the reader: 'the truth of it was the band *was* to get girls' attention – but the attention of girls beyond the slim remit of Harrow, worldly (and preferably white) girls who liked hip-hop.' Elsewhere we are told, 'There was nothing for me here, something I mentally told myself every time I walked through Harrow. I had my sights set elsewhere, in London' (Shukla 2010:57). Daliwal (2006) displays deeply unpolitically correct misogyny in his narrator's graphic descriptions of sex that appears to have little connection to romantic love, a trait that has seen him likened by reviewers to novelist Michel Houellebecq (Charlton 2006; Saha 2006; Woolaston 2006). Certain titles are deemed more worthy of being considered as 'literature' than others who remain simply 'fiction'. Kureishi and Malkani have become the subject of academic articles and PhD thesis[4] while literary criticism of their female counterparts is by comparison muted with their work often not considered serious enough to rise above the more supposedly fluffy, insubstantial genre of 'chick-lit', for example the works of Meera Syal (1996; 1999) and Shyama Perera (1999; 2000; 2002). The multi-authored anthology of 21 stories promising to showcase new young British Asian writing edited by Bhanot (2011) in some degree aimed to reverse this and was greeted by mixed reviews.

Dhaliwal, Malkani and Kureishi are authors who have contributed to an increasing visibility of Asians on the British youth cultural landscape as well as in fiction contributing to an understanding of what we might term 'Asian (suburban) London'. In *Tourism*'s twenty-first century Southall, Asians are predominant on the landscape which is replete with 'pavements . . . full of people hawking Bollywood soundtracks while their asylum claims are processed' (Dhaliwal 2006:40–1), unlike the historical account of Bromley from *The Bhudda of Suburbia* where Karim is a rarity. Linked developments include the late 1990s emergence of the Asian underground club scene and the advent of series such as *Goodness Gracious Me* written and performed by young Asians. Novels by other second-generation hybrid writers such as Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* are also noteworthy, although these latter two were set in the inner London's Willesden and Tower Hamlets respectively. Malkani and Kureishi's tales from the outer reaches are more representative of demographic trends than usual inner-city = ethnic area clichés.

Suburban soundtrack case-study: Bhangra in Ilford

Contemporaneously with the mainstream cultural trend of Britpop was a parallel British Asian clubbing scene encompassing both bhangra music and the later style Asian underground. This helped to bring Asian youth away from the margins of youth culture. Among the sites of its practice were suburban clubs. The scene which is documented more fulsomely elsewhere including by myself (Huq 1996; 2003; 2006). It helped to bring visibility to a hitherto almost invisible community importantly in the suburbs as well as British cities. Sandhu (2003b:228) has written:

> Young Asians had no cultural ambassadors or role models. They lacked sporting heroes . . . Even more importantly they lacked an indigenous youth culture. They forged no musical alliances such as those between rude boy ska and skinhead stomp at the end of the 1960s or 1976's reggae-punk axis. It was these marriages encompassing fashion, music, sex and shared attitudes that helped to create the open-minded, pick'n'mix, urban British youth culture which flourishes to this day, through such style-magazine-designated epiphenomena as 'new Asian kool', 'bhangramuffin' and 'the future soundz of India', Asians have only recently entered.

Bhangra music had played a role in introducing Asian youth onto television screens and into Sunday supplements. Birmingham's Apache Indian fronted a 1995 television series for Channel 4 before the words 'reality' and 'television' had been yoked together in which the self-styled purveyor of bhangramuffin was seen criss-crossing India on a gruelling tour through India where he was garlanded at every turn and welcomed as quasi-royalty. The premise of the show is interesting as it begs the question of whether this music can be considered linearly or the story is more one of circuits of influences rather than one-way imports/exports. Yet it is still wedded to the seemingly unassimilable bhangra (although this icy status was starting to thaw somewhat) that had been a mainstay of the Asian wedding. In 1998, the single 'Brimful of Asha' by second-generation Punjabi Sikhs Cornershop from Wolverhampton made Number One in the UK charts; the first time such a feat had occurred for an 'out' Asian artist – I am not counting the East African Asian Freddie Mercury who denied his heritage throughout his life or Indian-born Cliff Richard in making this statement. The track 'Brimful of Asha' namechecked singers known to singer/songwriter Tjinder Singh through his parents' record collection, Asha Bhosle and Lata Mangeshekar and was celebrated by Radio 4 in a 30 minute

retrospective documentary in January 2013[5]. By 2004, BBC2 had launched *the Asian magazine show DesiDNA* which the BBC website describes as 'Focusing on the new generation of Asians breaking the mould and seeking out the hottest in Asian clubs, fashion, music and lifestyle in the UK and abroad'.[6] The show was firmly aimed at young and fashionable audiences featuring trendy DJs as its presenters unlike the bifocaled uncles and aunties in cardigans who had been the staple of the corporation's earlier Asian output. The emphasis on club culture and fusion music implies fluidity and mixity and a general progressive/ celebratory/hedonistic ethic as opposed to the patriarchy of arranged marriages and the caste system that used to dominate Asian onscreen imagery. Here were second-generation Asians having fun rather than toiling over examinations – although it is worth making an aside that universities were key in the importance of bhangra as the first generation of students living away from home coincided with the birth of British bhangra. Since then Asian-originating music has fused with numerous other musical and commercial styles and scenes, for example Panjabi MC of the hip-hop scene or the 2003 hit 'Bhangra Nights' by Husan that became a hit after featuring in a television advertisement for French car manufacturer Peugot.

As well as a metropolitan nucleus Asian clubbing has been played out in suburban locations and venues such as Ilford since the early 1990s. The effect of Asian settlement on Ilford's character can be seen from the shops in Ilford Lane, the Bollywood Bowl venue towards the rear of the town hall is another sign of the Asian character that Ilford has taken on. It offers on-site Indian cuisine and the popular Nandos restaurant in the same parade has also tailored its product to meet the needs of local diners with halal chicken, demonstrating the flexibility of capitalist chains somewhat in contradiction to the standardizing critique of Ritzer (1993). Predating this venue offering a restaurant and bowling were bhangra (Punjabi/ UK fusion musical) concerts that took place at local venues. This transcript from an event organizer interviewed in 1994 for my PhD shows how the Ilford Island nightclub had been identified as a suitable location in the mid-1990s:

RH: Why Ilford then?

J: Out of experience there are at least 60 per cent of Asians in Waltham Forest, that's 32,240 – one of the largest Asian populations in the country. All the kids were going west. Luckily we got this venue when we did. I know that Le Palais [in Hammersmith, west London], the Hippodrome [central London] and Kudos [Watford] are out of bounds. The three major promotion companies all have exclusive contracts.

RH: How many people are here tonight?

J: I'd say 6–700 at a glance. I've noticed strange quirks about the shows here. Normally at Bhangra is people in their early twenties, college kids. Here in East London there's not much [*sic*] places to go. I've seen people's Aunts and families here. At the other end there's the eight to nine year old generation.

The location of Ilford, to London's suburban east but not lying in profound, Essex has long been a place for suburbanization from London's East End including Jewish communities. Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are now making the same Eastward journey that Wilmott and Young (1957) traced in the classic book *Family and Kinship in East London* and subsequent studies (1963; 1967).

Other venues in the town now include the Coliseum, primarily a banqueting hall on Ilford High Street hired out for weddings which has hosted various bhangra happenings as has IF bar on Ilford Hill. The local Vue Cinema also includes Bollywood among its programming, offering instant escapism to ticket holders. In this way leisure, commerce and dining are all accommodating if not quite a purely cockney diaspora, a masala variant of it.

On-screen II – Asians on film

A different image of women and suburbia emerges from female writer/director Gurinder Chadha's films, where received ideas of Asian femininity are too on display. Helsby (2005:192–3) states, 'actor-led rather than star-led, social realism, heritage, nostalgia, literary adaptations, a quirky sense of humour, and class structure all contribute to an idea if Britishness in film'. Indeed Chadha has cited David Lean's *This Happy Breed* which contains various elements from this list as a major influence for its proto-typical realist intergenerational portrayal of suburban British family life.[7] Referring to his own childhood questioning of self-identity while growing up as a British Asian, Sukhdev Sandhu (2000) has claimed that Hanif Kureishi 'not only captured these anxieties, but offered for the first time a recognisable 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'. Although Kureishi and Chadha deal with ostensibly the same subject (second-generation Asians), the differences in their work are manifold. The exoticism of *My Beautiful Launderette* could almost feel other-wordly to most humdrum suburban Asians like myself. Sandhu (2000) itemises the dramatis personae in a non-exhaustive list including 'pushers,

tyrannical ex-foreign ministers, bogus mystics, brutalising landlords, togged-up likely lads, sex-hungry cripples [who] . . . exploit or augment their ethnicity at will'. Gurinder Chadha's characters are arguably more credible fully fledged and three-dimensionally written human beings than these caricatures. Chadha's films tend to revolve around strong female characters and are usually set in the suburbs – *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* is in Ealing and *Bend It Like Beckham* in Hounslow with the well-known Punjabi district Southall which borders these two areas identifiably present in both. The latter has been described by Donnell (2007:47) as 'both a feminist and a postcolonial triumph . . . [which] ends with a more celebratory and harmonious version of cosmopolitan conviviality than Stuart Hall or Paul Gilroy could have imagined', although there is criticism for the fact that the theme of queer sexuality is not directly addressed but only naggingly hinted at. Chadha managed to break out of the ethnic ghetto with *Beckham* which proved to be a mainstream box office success no doubt helped by a cameo appearance from the world-famous footballing personality featured in the title.

Gurinder Chadha's biography as a Southall-raised Punjabi is repeatedly stressed in profiles of her and interviews that she gives and her identity as a woman is also apparent in her directing: even the teen romance *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging* (2008) was from the girls' perspective. Strong women are commonly present in her work. In both the midlands-based *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010) the main lead is female and works with women suffering from domestic violence. These characters are portrayed in assertive crusading-for-social-justice roles that contradicts old stereotypes of the Asian female as doe-eyed and submissive. Bollywood Indian film aesthetics are here, as in a short scene of East is East where daughter Meera lets herself go dancing in the backyard to Indian music, transposed into true Brit/English setting. This technique was perfected perfected with different scenery in Chadha's later *Bride and Prejudice* (2005) with its dazzling visuals and choreography. Most of this later film was filmed in country houses but there were some flashes of life behind the door of an Asian suburban London semi.

There are numerous overlaps between the phenomena discussed in this chapter. Before he was known as a novelist, Hanif Kureishi wrote the screenplay for *My Beautiful Launderette* (1982) which was followed-up with *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) about a middle-class married couple on the edge of a heavily ethnic London inner-city war zone, who are in an interracial relationship with each other and extramarital affairs with others. Kureishi's 1991 film was entitled *London Kills Me*, demonstrating an ambivalent love/hate relationship towards the capital. In his films and books, characters often cavort around the

metropolis, they are attracted to the centre having broken free of the shackles of suburbia; London is their playground. Despite its title *The Bhudda of Suburbia* (1992 novel and later television series) finds the chief character escaping to London from narrow-minded far-flung suburb of Bromley. A similar journey is undertaken in the follow-up *Black Album* (1994 novel). When he broached the subject of Islamic extremism in Bradford (*My Son the Fanatic*), the review in *Empire* magazine noted (Parkinson 1998): 'Kureishi is less at home in Yorkshire than in the London suburbs and tends to overdo the references to early 60s grim-up-North movies. He also presents caricatures of the immigrant wife, the prosperous restaurateur and the arrogant German businessman.' The accusation of cardboard cut-out characters is frequently applied to white-authored arts dealing with minority ethnic populations but here the person accused is (mixed) Asian themself. Both this statement and the quote at the beginning of this chapter alludes to stereotypical Asians in popular culture. One of the stereotypes that attaches itself to ethnic minorities at large is of them residing in the inner city, but statistical evidence backs up the movement of them away from these districts and towards the suburbs (Hinsliff 2008, Peach 1996) confirmed by the 2011 census (Huq 2013). Elsewhere, Peach (1994) has claimed that West Indians in Britain face an 'Irish future' (languishing in the ghetto) while Asians face a 'Jewish future' of suburbanization (although Bangladeshis excluded from this). This now seems rather outdated as both groups have diffused in population to outer London often along familiar arterial roads and transport links, for example from Brixton to Croydon or Tower Hamlets to Redbridge, which includes Ilford as mentioned above. In some respects, Asians are 'normalized' away from being simply exotic fare once they penetrate the sort of arenas that are mainstream and reach the average suburban viewer so at the time of writing both the big national UK soaps have Asian families – Sinita and Dev on *Coronation Street* and the Ahmeds of *EastEnders* on ITV and BBC respectively. All have acted outside the traditional expectations of Asians.

Different hierarchies exist between high and low culture and what is considered worthy of academic/seminar-room study and what is lowbrow trash. This tension which has existed since cultural studies began is now joined by a technological divide. In an age of instant archival availability of source material, some films are more easily available than others ensuring longevity while others have faded. The Channel 4 financed low-budget film *Wild West* (1992) had a similar starting point to the *Commitments* in its good-time tale of an amateur country and Western band with the added element of band members being of Pakistani origin and the film's setting being the west London suburb of Southall allowing for some stereotypical Asian uncle baddies thrown in for good measure. Released as it was

in a pre-YouTube era, it has left very little digital footprint despite starring Naveen Andrews, later of hit US series *Lost*. A review at the time (Newman 1992) remarks that culture clash is a theme: 'the heroes' confusion of cultural identities – torn between Pakistan, Southall and Nashville – and a kind of defiant stupidity in their love of an unfashionable music form.' It concludes that the film does not however take itself too seriously offering the 'chance to have a giggle and to witness a complicated bit of modern Britain being allowed to enjoy itself on screen for a change'. The film then like *Goodness Gracious Me* in its own way helped to bring the element of humour into portrayals of British Asians and showed another side of suburbia than conventional understandings of it. Similarly, the London-set low-budget film second-generation Asian *Alfie*-like film *Guru in Seven* (1998) also has largely disappeared without trace although lead actor Nitin Ganatra later became one of television's most notable Asian faces as the father of the Ahmed family in BBC1's soap opera *EastEnders* (2007–present). The review that begins this chapter was written at the height of Asian visibility in mainstream British media claiming (Caterall 1998): 'Given the current vogue for all things curry-flavoured (from Cornershop to Kundun to Kureishi) [this] laughably low-budget affair might appear a hurried, zeitgeist-riding cash-in, with even less money than sense. Except it packs more energy, brio and honest-to-goodness spunk than many of the other more lavish products currently clogging the multiplexes.' Interest in British Asians in mainstream popular culture has arguably faded since although Bollywood itself is a regular box office success in venues such as the multiplexes in suburban and exurban locations across the United Kingdom such as the Feltham Cineworld or Trafford Centre in Manchester which each devote a number of screens to this genre. At the same time 'suburban dysfunction' as a recognizable strain of film seems to be solidifying; it is now a category on the Netflix on-demand film streaming service.[8]

Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has shifted in scope from those earlier taking not just one cultural form in its examination but instead looking across novels, musical and on-screen representations. Oates' (2003) respondent quoted above on p. 176 complained that on initial arrival to Southall in the 1960s from India the greyness of the area struck them. Today Southall is well known as a west London suburb of Punjabi-Sikh migration, often described in tourist guides as 'colourful' for its shopping parades of silks of all hues and proliferation of restaurants. A fuller exploration of 'Asian London' had time and space allowed could have looked less obvious examples and

at the built environment. The work of Nasser (2003, 2004, 2006) has shown how for example Asians are constantly adapting their environment. Using the examples of Southall and Bradford, she has found that loft and back extensions to Edwardian and Victorian houses are common to accommodate growing families and that many places of worship have been hewn from what were houses co-opted into sacred use before purpose built or simply larger premises have been found. The chapter has been selective in its choice of media forms to consider and media forms to analyse.

Sport is another popular cultural category through which the changing face of Britain has become apparent, peaking with the London 2012 Olympics. The boxer Amir Khan of Pakistani origin, although not from suburban London did hail from Bolton, Lancashire, which has in some respects been swallowed up by the Greater Manchester sprawl to become a Mancunian suburb. Burdsey (2007:623) remarks that his professional ascent constructed him 'as the "acceptable" or desirable face of British Islam'. Second-generation British Asian theatre too has flourished with plays such as the lavish West End *Bombay Dreams* (2002) or smaller community theatre affairs such as *Deranged Marriage*, *Desi Soulmate*, *Balti Kings*, *Papa Was a Bus Conductor* And *Unsuitable Girls* which outer-London venues like west London's Watermans Arts Centre and Theatre Royal Stratford East have been vocal in promoting. There has been a tendency towards adaptations transposing well-known tales to or shifting between genre for example the Bollywood version of *Wuthering Heights*, a stage version of Bollywood film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* as *Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings and a Funeral* and a stage play of Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Black Album*. Tapping into the reality-show vogue was the production *Britain's Got Bhangra* in 2009. From the same year the play *Shades* won writer Alia Bano an *Evening Standard* award for its story of a single Muslim London woman's quest for love, a further example in mapping Asian suburban London removing Asian females from the 'family' role that they are usually viewed in.

As outlined above, religion has become more pronounced as faith identities are no longer shied away from. The far right English Defence League have been provocative in their choice of locations to stage marches. As well as areas known for Muslim populations such as Tower Hamlets and Luton, they have selected Harrow as a destination, although their 2010 attempt stalled. The *Harrow Times* (Royston 2010) reported: 'An Islamaphobic group has reportedly called off a planned Harrow demonstration due to the start of its founder's trial.' New cases add themselves continually to the list of fictitious works representing the lived realities of Asian suburbia. Importantly these examples showing us multiple versions of both of these terms for example complimenting work set in the established settlement of Southall is newer work looking at Gujerati youth in Harrow (Shukla

2010) and those of Sri Lankan descent in Surrey (Govinden 2007). Two decades ago, Peach (1996:233) remarked: 'Indians in London have an outer- rather than an inner-city distribution' noting also an outward residential shift of the Caribbean born. Pakistanis in Bradford and Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets were rated as being the slowest to suburbanize however there is much evidence that this second group are redefining Asian London by moving to boroughs such as Redbridge in suburban East London. Sandhu (2003a) has observed that 'Brick Lane has always been a holding area, a temporary interzone for immigrants who have not yet fully settled in England . . . It's a slow and incomplete journey as far as many Bangladeshis are concerned. The canny ones, those with contacts or who strike lucky with property or businesses, move away, following the Central Line artery out to upscale areas such as Woodford and Loughton'. Bangladeshis have found homes in other East London boroughs including the distinctly outer-London Redbridge and neighbouring Newham which has campaigned to be reclassified as 'inner London' to receive increased government subsidy has also redefined east London's social composition and it is predicted that the Conservative-led government's restrictive cap on housing benefit claims will force populations requiring state assistance to live further and further away from central London. The journey from inner east London to suburban Redbridge undertaken by Bangladeshis is much like that which the Jewish made a century earlier as noted by Hall (2007) in the case of the Gants Hill neighbourhood and theorized at the level of Jewish migratory patterns at large (Waterman and Kosmin 1986). There are also examples of writing on Jewish suburban London, for example the Hendon-set novel *Disobedience* by Naomi Alderman (2006) about orthodox closed communities which garnered a review in *The Guardian* simply entitled 'this is Hendon', drawing attention to the incongruity between a location that is on the face of it unexceptional and the lives behind the closed Jewish orthodox communities described (Rabinovich 2006).

Around the time of New Labour's election associated cool Britannia rhetoric was invoked aiming to update traditional imagery of Britishness with more forward-thinking less hidebound conceptualizations, it seemed as if Asians had gone from invisibility to hyper-visibility. The journalist Sarfraz Manzoor (2008:257–8) refers to (i) Number One hit band Cornershop (ii) box office hit 1999 film *East is East* and (iii) Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* in the following observation:

> If someone had told me fourteen years earlier, when I had been watching Indian films with my family on our rented video player, that there would be a time when Asha Bhosle would feature in a number one hit single, I would have considered them insane. It was as insane as a group of British Asians becoming

> pop stars. As unlikely as the thought of being Asian might be considered as being cool, that white people might pay to watch a film about a Pakistani family growing up in the seventies or read a book about a Bangladeshi woman or laugh at a comedy sketch where the joke was on them and not the Asians performing the skit.

As a Punjabi Sikh raised in the provincial town of Gloucester, Sukhdev Sandhu (2003b:236) has claimed, 'Anti-suburbanism has a special resonance for young Asians. Their parents have traditionally seen the suburbs as a promised land, light at the end of the industrial tunnel'. Yet many second-generation Asians: the children of suburbia have themselves actively chosen suburbia as their own residential location on becoming adults themselves. A suburban sensibility can be discerned in much of the work reflecting Asian youth culture. The weekly chat show *The Kumars at Number 42* starring cast members of *Goodness Gracious Me* Sanjeev Bhaskar and Meera Syal is set around the exploits of an extended British-Indian family living in a detached mock Tudor house in suburban Wembley, north-west London.

Suburbia can be a creative hub too – imagined and real, from the Kumar's studio to the long-standing cultural production at studios in such outposts as Pinewood, Elstree and Ealing which all housed film studios. The Kumar's fictional home is at a site not far off from some of north-west London suburbia's contemporary emblematic features such as the United Kingdom's first IKEA superstore and the gigantesque Neasden Hindu temple BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir. As cultural constructs, both suburbs and Asians are in keeping with Benedict Anderson's (2006) notion of 'imagined communities', of which it is impossible to ever have contact with all of its members, or those who identify with them.

In *Simpsons* episode 'Insane Clown Poppy' from the year 2000 (season 12, episode 3), the characters watch a teen drama which parodies *Dawson's Creek* featuring Bumblebee Man as guest star included to exhibit inclusivity. Lisa remarks, 'I'm all for ethnic diversity, but this is just pandering'. The question of the presence of ethnic minorities on-screen to satisfy quotas is a perennial one. The producer of *Goodness Gracious Me* Anil Gupta has made the following claim regarding when he began his career at the BBC: 'At the time, minority programming had a genre of its own. It was only made for those audiences. Asian people being funny wasn't on the radar', (Hundal 2005). In the same interview, he voices suspicion at the positive action training schemes by the BBC and others designed to encourage under-represented groups into the media. Gupta

deliberately did not work on *The Kumars at Number 42* for fear of ghettoizing or pigeonholing himself as an 'Asian' but instead became executive producer of *The Office*. It is only when Asian suburban popular culture representation moves from marginal status to the mainstream that the journey of its cultural practitioners will be complete, yet colour blindness is also a pitfall if recognition of all difference must be erased out in the process. In 2011, controversy erupted over the highly exportable ITV programme *Midsomer Murders* set in a country village when the producer had to tender his resignation after explaining that its success was due to its all-white cast. The implication was that the unsayable had been said and that on-screen television diversity should be now a given. Ten years earlier, the then BBC controller Greg Dyke had made headlines for slating the corporation as 'hideously white'. There are fraught debates around 'the burden of representation' (Huq 1996) that are probably unresolveable to everybody's satisfaction. *Goodness Gracious Me* (which originally began life as a radio series) took its title from Spike Milligan's catchphrase when impersonating Indians in blacked-up tones, the sort of television that would be deemed politically incorrect and entail sackings in the present age.

This chapter has shown then that enduring stereotypical images of suburbia as culturally uniform were always difficult to apply to London and at a time that official British statistics can be painfully slow in documenting social change, contemporary on-screen representation and literary fiction has played a decisive role in exposing these old notions as woefully outdated. By Summer 2012, the findings of the decennial data collection exercise that resulted in the 2011 UK census had only just begun to appear in dribs and drabs. For many years previously, social scientists had had to rely on figures from 2001 – which in many ways given our accelerated culture was a different age before flat-screen television, text messaging and Wi-Fi internet were common in the suburban household. One of the key headlines the data spawned was that only 45 per cent of the capital now self-identify as 'white British' as London becomes more mixed, particularly in its suburban boroughs (Huq 2013). Fictitious representations of Asian London have moved on from old post-colonial narratives of arrival and initial settlement told so movingly for example in the Wole Soyika poem 'Telephone Conversation', to the stories of everyday second-generation life in the metropolis and its suburbs. Once sociologists talked about Asians 'caught between two cultures' (Anwar 1978) but now hybridity and new ethnicities are a given. In any case with demographers predicting on the basis on the 2011 Census findings that 'mixed race' will soon become the biggest category of ethnic group such essentialism and presuppositions of racial binaries and mutually

exclusive categories have little or no place in modern London. As old 'them' and 'us' boundaries dissolve, the same applies to the dangers of dichotomies when it comes to thinking about the inner city and the suburb.

Notes

1 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/frontpage/4496247.stm. Also a survey conducted by Ipsos Mori for the *Eastern Eye* newspaper before the 2001 General Election for Eastern Eye found that 90 per cent of British Asians were loyal to the United Kingdom in the war against terrorism (the figure among Muslims was 87 per cent).

2 A US version of this remade as the Ortegas (a Hispanic family) commissioned by the Fox networks was never aired due to scheduling difficulties.

3 For example in the *New York Times* exotic travelogue feature (Rappeport 2006): 'A Real Taste of South Asia? Take the Tube to Southall', oddly named so as there is no London underground line there.

4 Numerous articles on Kureishi have been penned. *Londonstani* was central to the thesis of Blake Brandes I examined at Kent University Autumn 2011.

5 http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pw38v

6 www.bbc.co.uk/asiannetwork/features/desi_dna.shtml.

7 www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/561.

8 https://signup.netflix.com/Search?v1=Suburban%20Dysfunction.