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Middle-Aged Men's Traumas and Elusive Freedom in Hanif Kureishi's Short Stories

Abstract

This paper sets out to explore a notion of freedom that Hanif Kureishi articulates in his short stories, focusing particularly on the collections *Love in a Blue Time* (1997) and *Midnight All Day* (1999). Kureishi's stories almost always narrated from the point of view of a middle-aged man are here analysed in the light of Zygmunt Baumann's theories of liquid modernity and liquid love. The paper attempts to demonstrate that these men are confined to a sort of a perpetual treadmill of misery. It is argued that most protagonists of his stories are largely unable to manage their lives and relationships, living in a contemporary world that allows individuals to enjoy excesses of freedom and infinite possibilities.

Keywords: Hanif Kureishi, short story, middle-aged, freedom, liquid modernity, liquid love, family

Somewhere towards the end of Hanif Kureishi's 1995 novel *The Black Album*, the main protagonist, twenty-year-old Shahid Hasan, enthusiastically embraces the prospect of breaking free from the constraints of race that heavily determine his identity throughout the narrative: "There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity" (274). A member of second-generation immigrants from India in contemporary Britain, faced with demands of his friends who have turned into religious radicals, he seems able to finally assert himself as an individual unburdened by his non-British origins, which constituted this 'fixed self' for much of his life. In a similar vein, in Kureishi's semi-autobiographical novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* published five years earlier in 1990, mixed race Karim Amir

struggles to come to terms with being “a funny kind of Englishman, a strange breed ... emerging from two old histories” (3). In the course of the novel, Karim manages to flee the drab South London suburbia, both literally and metaphorically by constantly (or why not daily) probing his “several selves” in order to find his own way of “being in the world.”

It is obvious that what mostly concerns both of his young protagonists is to what extent they are allowed to be “free” or to be who they are in terms of their (bi)racial background, as non-white or Asian-British in the context of end-of-century British society still looking down on them as “Britain’s children without a home” or those “caught between two cultures” (Kureishi, “Bradford” 48).

Whereas in *The Buddha* Karim tries hard to prove that he is Englishman enough despite (or because) of his skin colour, in *The Black Album* Kureishi complicates the issue further: on the one hand his Shahid is as much keen on everything that Western culture has on offer, but on the other, constantly feeling guilty he is dangerously drawn to his fundamentalist friends. Ironically, just as white British society/culture constantly perpetuates his identity of the Other,^[2] the Muslim community goes into another extreme by retreating into religious fanaticism which does not allow for any alternatives to the fixed self whatsoever. As Kureishi sums it up, the wish for “rigid, exclusive identities mirrors extreme Islam itself; it is an attempt to counter fundamentalism with more fundamentalism” (102). Needless to say, extreme Islam is keen to see the West as “corrupt and over-sexualized,” “chaotic, over-individualistic”; there was “too much freedom” (“*The Word and the Bomb*” 103).

This notion of being exposed to ‘too much freedom’ that young Muslim radicals of Kureishi’s early fiction so fiercely oppose is exactly what protagonists of his later fiction, especially in short stories, tend to enjoy excessively and cannot get enough of. What I would like to focus on in this paper is a concept of freedom that Kureishi articulates in his short stories almost always from a male point of view. In the collections published in the late nineties, *Love in a Blue Time* (1997) and *Midnight All Day* (1999) and later in the stories published throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century,^[3] Kureishi mainly detaches himself from the themes of race and racism, expanding the idea of the free and unfixed self to a more universal level. As Petr Chalupsky argues, Kureishi turns to a more private and introspective narrative perspective focusing on the ideas, feelings, anxieties and

obsessions of the predominantly male characters. Also, this shift from public to the personal is mostly reflected in the scrutiny of middle-aged men's traumas (63).

Let us see what the protagonists of these short stories are like and why are they traumatised in the first place? As opposed to the optimism of his young protagonists in *The Buddha* and *The Black Album*, who are both 'going somewhere' eager to live their lives to the fullest (*The Buddha* 3), what features prominently in most of his short stories is a pervading notion of frustration, failure, and the unsatisfactoriness of life. His men are now usually in their mid-forties, deeply dissatisfied with a marriage or relationship they desperately want to get out of, having an affair or multiple affairs, or already divorced with children, and in another (again more often than not unsatisfactory) relationship. These men seem to be on their way down, although the motif of new beginnings runs through many of the stories. It is significant that they are all engaged in creative jobs linked to film and writing: they are more or less accomplished writers, screen writers, film directors and editors, or actors. Professionally they seem to achieve a certain level of success they can show off at some point in their lives, but privately they fail as they almost always destroy what they have created – personal relationships – and rush headlong into creating (and possibly destroying) new ones.

Jay, the narrator of the 1998 novella *Intimacy*, published right between *Love in a Blue Time* and *Midnight All Day*, can be considered a more elaborate version of the protagonists of his short stories. He is a middle-aged writer who is just about to leave his partner, a woman he no longer loves, and their two small sons. In the course of one night prior to his leaving, he gives us a sort of confession pondering on their failed relationship along with his philosophy of life: "The family seemed no more than a machine for the suppression and distortion of free individuals" (55).

Through the very intimate first-person narration, Jay comes across as deeply frustrated, somewhat condescending and as a man trapped in the family apparatus. Needless to say, just like many of his married counterparts in other stories who do not want to be confined to the daily humdrum of the family life, he is involved in an affair with a girl half his age. After all, in his view, "the happy family" is nothing but an illusion we all like to believe, "the dream, or nightmare," "one of the few Utopian ideas we have, these days" (77). In the afterword of the Croatian translation of *Intimacy* appropriately titled "Traumas of Love Utopia," Žarko Paić claims that what Kureishi tries to create here is "a fictional representation of the social trauma from a point of view of a man who decides to

choose a different life path for himself.” This man’s suffering is, according to Paić, set in a postmodern society freed from all constraints, and there is nothing left but pleasure, emptiness and search for other forms of utopia (104).

Avoiding the responsibilities and exigencies of the family almost always portrayed as painfully dysfunctional and wanting to enjoy life in the way your younger self would, is, of course, just as illusionary and utopian. That does not prevent Kureishi’s protagonists, however, from jumping onto a perpetual treadmill seeking happiness, or in their case, more freedom from daily grind and social prohibitions, and especially more sexual pleasure. A typical protagonist of these short stories is, as Chalupsky aptly terms, “a perpetually deprived postmodern happiness-seeker” (63), and his search for happiness usually turns out to be a vicious circle he cannot get out of. Roy, a failed video director in “In a Blue Time” whose wife is pregnant, feels that he has been “easily overrun” by her: “The child was coming; it gave him a vertigo” (13). Reflecting on the life he had before he settled down or, to be more precise, envisaging the life he could have outside the family, he comes close to many other protagonists of these narratives: “Roy looked at the picture of Keith Richards and considered how he’d longed for the uncontrolled life, seeking only pleasure and avoiding the ponderous difficulties of keeping everything together. He wondered if that was what he still wanted, or if he were still capable of it” (6). Many of these protagonists are no stranger to drugs, but Keith Richards as a worn-out quintessence of excesses of freedom and the glamorized “sex, drugs’n’rock’n’roll” lifestyle functions here only as a device to emphasize Roy’s naïve desire to get away from his present self – a middle-age loser with a child on the way.

Many of these men tend to behave like rabid (or why not say, uncontrolled) consumers in a shopping mall searching for a new product (stereotypically, a younger or more desirable woman) that would finally satisfy their needs but are usually unable to make up their mind and call it quits at some point. “Living in a world full of opportunities – each one more appetizing and alluring than the previous one,” as Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Liquid Modernity*, is

an exhilarating experience. In such a world, little is predetermined, even less irrevocable. Few defeats are final, few if any mishaps irreversible; yet no victory is ultimate either. For the possibilities to remain infinite, none may be allowed to petrify into everlasting reality. They had

better stay liquid and fluid and have a 'use-by' date attached, lest they render the remaining opportunities off-limits and nip the future adventure in the bud. (62)

Just like Jay in *Intimacy* who is not quite sure whether it is right to go on replacing people who do not provide what we need, and yet that is exactly what he is about to do, many protagonists here are torn by the same doubts. They are constantly and stubbornly drawn to the prospect of keeping it open, infinite, or fluid, as Bauman would have it, as they believe they will be able to stay unattached and hence free to explore their options. The main protagonist of "Strangers When We Meet" is having an affair with a married woman and the two are about to spend the weekend together: "We intended to leave it open. Our first time away – in fact our first complete night together – was to be an adventure. We wanted to enjoy one another free of thought that she would have to return to her husband in a few hours" (*Midnight All Day* 6). In other words, why would you settle for the fixed role of husband/father or a monogamous partner when you can turn into someone else. Becoming someone who is much more difficult to pin down, someone who could be described as "exciting," "adventurous" or maybe even "cool" is the ultimate goal that many of these men want to achieve. This middle-aged coolness reaches a sad and pitiful climax in "The Tale of the Turd" when a good for nothing forty-something drug addict dates an eighteen-year-old girl who is totally fascinated by him: "She wants to try everything ... she's a determined little blonde thing, and for her friends it's fashionably exciting" (*Love in a Blue Time* 134).

Again, if we turn to Bauman and his concept of freedom attached to the fluid reality of contemporary living, "the freedom to treat the whole of life as one protracted shopping spree means casting the world as a warehouse overflowing with consumer commodities" (89). Once our protagonists regain what they consider freedom, usually after getting divorced or separated from a partner, they start anew and find themselves in relationships they want to get away from again. As the central protagonist of "Nightlight" says, "most of his friends, most of the people he knows, are on the move from wife to wife, husband to husband, lover to lover. A city of love vampires, turning from person to person, hunting the one who will make the difference" (*Love in a Blue Time* 143). Divorced, with a string of short-lived affairs behind him, this man exists in a world where it is not much likely that this frenzied vampire-like search will ever be stopped (except maybe by the frailty of old age). The vicious circle of wanting to enjoy and provide oneself with more and more

consumer goods never stops spinning for these men. “They may as easily discard the possessions which they no longer want as they could obtain those which they once desired” (Bauman, *Liquid Love* 89). Or in the words of Renata Salecl in *The Tyranny of Choice*, we live in a society that promotes limitless satisfaction and self-fulfilment, but which nonetheless thrives on dissatisfaction. When the obstacles to our satisfaction cease to exist and we get what we wish for, we may also have the feeling that this is not what we wanted at all and begin to search for something else. Such manifestations of dissatisfaction are an intrinsic part of how desire operates (90). This is exactly how desire operates in the fictional world of these stories leaving Kureishi’s protagonists perpetually deprived.

Very rarely does the author portray a relationship which is emotionally and sexually fulfilling, and which provides his men with that elusive state of happiness. In “Four Blue Chairs,” for example, there is a sense of a precarious new beginning for John and Dina who were, typically for Kureishi’s characters, both married when they started the affair. Now we see them getting new chairs for the apartment they have rented and looking forward to their future together. They are “occasionally looking at one another, far away across the shop, or closer, side by side, thinking in astonishment, that is him, that is her, the one I’ve chosen, the one I’ve wanted all this time, and now it has really started, everything I have wished for is today” (*Midnight All Day* 56). In more recent stories, like “Remember This Moment, Remember Us” or “Hullabaloo in the Tree,” Kureishi portrays their circumstances with a similar sense of warmth and possibly a happily-ever-after concept of the family. As the protagonists age and mature with the author, some of them seem to be more at ease with their identity embracing their present and future selves. They are finally able to enjoy their lives and seem less likely to discard their ‘possessions’ or that what they have created as mature men any time soon.

For the majority, however, the prospects of living in the liquid world of infinite possibilities are rather bleak and depressing; there is always the danger of stumbling upon and re-enacting an experience similar to one they have already had. “No union of bodies, however hard one might try,” Bauman argues in *Liquid Love*, “can escape social framing and cut out all connections with other facets of social existence.” (51) One of the recurrent motifs Kureishi uses here, directly related to the notion of starting anew his men so desperately crave, is the issue of unwanted pregnancy, the state in

which we find many girlfriends and, only sometimes, wives. “Can the sexual encounter,” Bauman is asking us, “be kept in isolation from the rest of life’s pursuits, or will it (will it tend to, will it be allowed to) spill over across that rest of life, saturate it and transform it?” (51). As we have already seen above in “In a Blue Time” pregnancy more often than not connotes another failure in life or yet another hindrance to the central protagonist’s freedom to spread himself out and develop his other selves, other than that of partner/husband/father. For Mal in “The Real Father,” his ten-year-old son is “not only what was commonly described as an ‘accident’, there has been no necessity for his birth at all” (Collected Stories 568). A short fling he had with his mother who refused to terminate pregnancy results in an extremely bad relationship between the weekend dad and his son. The unwanted child in this story also demonstrates rather brutally how many pregnancies (and relationships) in other stories might turn out eventually.

Most of his protagonists, however, already have children from previous relationships and are not especially eager to have more children. They are aware that along with the physical and emotional aspect of having children it involves a high degree of financial strain as well. According to Bauman, children are “among the most expensive purchases that average consumers are likely to make in the course of their entire lives” (Liquid Love 42). Besides, having children means

entering an open-ended and irrevocable commitment with no ‘until further notice’ clause attached; the kind of obligation that goes against the grain of liquid modern life politics and which most people at most times zealously avoid in other manifestations of life. Awakening to such a commitment may be a traumatic experience. (Liquid Love 43)

The trauma of middle-aged men, the term that we have seen Chalupsky and Paić use for Kureishi’s protagonists, acquires a new meaning here. Bad marriages, angry ex-wives, issues of alimony and financial struggles, small shabby flats in which they are forced to live with their new girlfriends, and finally unexpected (and unwanted!) pregnancies make part of their suffering. It is interesting that they are quite determined and selfish when it comes to abandoning the way of life that frustrates their self-fulfilment, but, on the other hand, when they actually start anew, they very often have no agency whatsoever, especially in terms of commitments such as having children.

In the possibly most desolate and depressing of Kureishi's short stories, "Midnight All Day," this lack of agency intertwined with a heavy burden of responsibility features perhaps most prominently. The central character is a film producer who seems to have totally lost control of his life. With a life brought to a virtual standstill, he struggles both professionally and personally. Unsurprisingly, he left his wife and daughter for a younger woman who is now heavily pregnant. Rather ambivalent towards making such a commitment again, feeling that he has already failed in the role of a father and husband, he is not sure what to do next and what decisions he should make:

At the beginning they had talked of an abortion; but neither of them could have lived with such a crude negation of hope. They loved one another, but could they live together? This was the ordeal of his life. If he was unable to make this work, then not only had he broken up his family for nothing, but he was left with nothing – nothing but himself. (Midnight All Day 165)

Abortion as a matter of choice or possible solution to the 'problem' of pregnancy is not at all surprising in this context of liquid modern life. For some men, like Mal in the above mentioned "The Real Father," it functions as an easy way out of the family deadlock they would be unwillingly confined to and which would clearly compromise their comfort zone. For Ian, the protagonist of "Midnight All Day," however, abortion is too radical a solution and not considered an option any more since there is a frail hope after all that with this woman and their child, he might realize a more meaningful and fulfilling life. The awareness of the vicious circle of life which does not stop spinning, for Ian and many other protagonists, is rather agonizing, and the notion of being unable to "make things work this time," after they have already failed in many of their roles, is frightening. That is why this particular story is imbued with an almost palpable sense of imminence.

Ian knows that he has to be "transformed from a man who could not do this with Jane, to a man who could do it with Marina" (170). Since the child is a life-long commitment that will bind the two of them, he is painfully aware that he has to create another appropriate identity for himself and his future family. This new identity, however, has nothing to do with free-floating tendencies that most of these men desire, exactly because he knows that he would otherwise end up as alone and miserable as ever. Just like John in "Four Blue Chairs" who knows that he "can't afford to have it

go wrong” (Midnight All Day 57), Ian is terrified that his transformation and his new self would turn out to be a disaster once again. Alan, another leaver in “Morning in a Bowl of Night,” is also afraid of making the same mistakes again, but unlike John or Ian who at least show willingness to finally commit, Alan strikes us as much more self-centred and insensitive. In his world, abortions seem like a regular occurrence. A divorced man with a child, he already finds himself in another relationship. His “present girlfriend,” an actress named Melanie, is pregnant and has “an appointment the next day, for an abortion” (194). We soon find out that that he has already been involved in two other abortions, which he comments with a shocking tone of nonchalance: “The first he had avoided by going away to stay with another woman. Of the second, he remembered only how the woman lay down on the floor and wept afterwards” (Midnight All Day 200). He left these women immediately after they terminated their pregnancies and believes that it is exactly what is going to happen this time, once Melanie has an abortion.

Like many of his divorced counterparts in Kureishi’s fiction, Alan knows well the ins and outs of the dysfunctional family apparatus, and flees from its bonds, leaving his wife and a small son. Afraid of falling for the same ‘utopian’ idea(l) and of losing his freedom again, he recklessly compromises and treads on the freedom of others, of women he gets involved with. Not only does abortion end life and prevent it from growing instantly and abruptly, but for his partner and ex-girlfriends it very probably implies “a crude negation of hope.” Alan is a man who certainly does not let sexual encounters spill over across the rest of his life and transform it: “Don’t let yourself be caught. Avoid embraces that are too tight. Remember, the deeper and denser your attachment, commitments, engagement, the greater your risk” (Bauman, *Liquid Love* 58). He seems to adhere to these rules of liquid modern life politics rather fervently, and it is very unlikely that he will change his ways although the story ends on a tentatively positive note: “He knew there was sufficient love and tenderness between them” (Midnight All Day 205).

Even those who seem to actually live out a stereotypical male fantasy (‘running away from it all with a woman of your dreams’) cannot help avoiding and eventually rejecting embraces and attachments, which at some point in their lives become too tight and overwhelming. The main protagonist of “Lately,” a story set in a seaside tourist town, away from London’s busy hustle and bustle, is throughout the narrative desperate to leave his girlfriend after a few years together.

“Running away with her” should have represented “an escape from futility”; now, however, he felt that “all he had to do was abandon her, flee and somehow achieve the same thing” (152). This man comes full circle. The verbs that Kureishi uses here, in only two sentences portraying his protagonist’s desperation (“run away,” “escape,” “abandon,” “flee”), are recurrent in many of these stories, and especially in this one, emphasizing how his men are perpetually at odds with the world around them, and how at the end of the day they always end up displaced, somewhere they do not want to be. Their desires always collide with mundane reality: “He wanted his freedom; he didn’t want Lisa.... Other people wanted you to live lives as miserable as theirs” (Love in a Blue Time 176).

As we have seen so far, it is taken for granted that in Kureishi’s stories it is mostly men who cheat and who tend to run away from the misery of their lives as far as they can. It is significant that when women cheat on their husbands (and there are quite a few female cheaters in these narratives, to be fair) we never see them quit a bad marriage. When the central protagonist of “D’Accord Baby” realizes that his wife is having an affair he starts frenzied rationalization:

Infidelities would occur in most relationships And why not, when marriage was insufficient to satisfy most human need? Nicola had needed something and she had taken it. How bold and stylish. How petty to blame someone for pursuing any kind of love! (Love in a Blue Time 54)

Insufficiency, a notion so heavily attached not only to the family and marriage but to most relationships portrayed here, runs like a leitmotif throughout Kureishi’s stories. In other words, if you feel that you are constrained and you eventually get bold enough to venture on one of life’s most essential pursuits, that of love, then it is quite alright to step out of the boundaries of family/marriage/relationship and claim your desires. Most of these men, as I have tried to argue here, follow this life philosophy, and some of the women are rather keen on it as well. Being on the receiving end of the burning desire for freedom and pursuit of love, however, is excruciating. This man who makes excuses for his wife’s affair is of course not convincing, as after the initial shock of finding out that he has been cheated, he feels utterly humiliated and eventually resorts to cheating himself. The whole story revolves around the “pleasures of revenge” (56) he rather smugly feels while scheming to spend the night with another woman.

This sexual encounter, like many others in the liquid world of Kureishi's relationships, seems to be for our protagonist a one-night stand soon to be forgotten, but hurt and desperation behind it are not likely to leave him for a long time. It would not be surprising if this marriage also ended up in divorce after which both partners will probably move on to someone else. However, numerous ex-wives and ex-girlfriends or those soon to obtain the hated prefix 'ex-' are forced to bear the brunt of separation in the first place. In one of the stories, the main character rather casually comments on relief rather than pain one should feel upon separation: "People speak of the violence of separation, but what of the delight. What could be more refreshing" (Midnight All Day 48). Of course, not even the most determined of these male cheaters and leavers get away with it that easily. Former relationships always lurk beneath the surface of these narratives. Even though new relationships are in the forefront, we often sense that the resent and fury of the exes left to deal with children and daily family routine on their own profoundly underline these stories.

The short story "The Umbrella," which could be easily imagined and read as a 'one-year-later' sequel to *Intimacy*, portrays rather graphically the taste of freedom the central character named Roger experiences in the aftermath of his leaving the family. Although the story is like most of other stories told from the male point of view, nowhere else is being on the receiving end of separation more palpable than here. Following an encounter between former (but not yet divorced, as Roger's wife refuses to get divorced) spouses while exchanging their two small sons, we again come across "the violence of separation" (187) culminating into "a deep intellectual and emotional hatred," Roger's wish "to pulverise his wife" (190), and, finally, the physical argument between the two. Needless to say, the delight of separation is nowhere to be found and is just another form of illusion. His desire to pursue freedom outside the family seems to come at a heavy price since the extremely bad relationship with his wife leaves him feels "stripped" of his "moral certainties." He admits, however, that there is "no just or objective way to resolve competing claims: those of freedom – his freedom – to live and develop as he liked, against the right of his family to have his dependable presence" (Midnight All Day 186).

This, of course, is the crux of the dilemma that Kureishi's men constantly face in the fictional world of these stories. The idea of freedom that these protagonists have in mind and so stubbornly seek eludes them because it is just as utopian as the idea of "the happy family," so heavily mocked by

Jay in Intimacy. Being part of the relationship, and especially the family, is not something that can be simply erased from one's life or just left behind, but these men tend to move on too easily. Claiming freedom to develop in whatever direction they like and challenge the concept of the fixed self, almost in the manner of their much younger counterparts in Kureishi's early fiction, seems quite naïve and strikes us as a belated effort. However, the prospect of this idea of freedom colliding with the inevitable consequences of social framing does not prevent them from moving. We have seen in these rather bleak accounts of urban existence in contemporary Britain that moving in the world of liquid modernity and infinite possibilities is not as easy and laidback as it would perhaps seem at first sight. There are no happy endings here. Most of Kureishi's short stories are unsurprisingly open-ended exactly because they are set in a contemporary world where living (and loving) implies, if we go back to Bauman, "being unable to stop and even less able to stand still." Being "bound to keep moving" (Liquid Modernity 29) and to constantly search for new commodities that would hopefully satisfy their needs, these men are incapable of settling down, let alone achieving that elusive state of freedom and happiness.

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[2] The Black Album is set in 1988/1989, as, according to Kureishi, the late eighties was a period relevant not only in the context of global politics, but also in terms of changes happening at home, in Britain: “Britain became aware that it was changing, or, in effect, had already changed from a monocultural to a multi-racial society, and had realised, at last, that there was no going back” (“Newness in the World” 114).

[3] In this paper I am using quotations from the collections *Love in a Blue Time* (Faber and Faber, 1997) and *Midnight All Day* (Faber and Faber 1999). I am also referring to some of the stories first published in *The Body and Other Stories* and *New Stories* which make part of *Collected Stories* (Faber and Faber, 2010).



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