



'Not English but Londoners': Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*

Yael Maurer
(Tel Aviv University, Israel)

The Literary London Journal, Volume 11 Number 1 (Spring 2014)

Abstract: This article traces the ghostly return of the British Empire's colonial past to Thatcher's England in the 1987 film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. The film's protagonist Rafi, a corrupt Pakistani politician re-entering the lives of his son Sammy and his wife Rosie, is haunted by the ghost of his past sins and finally takes his own life. London is chosen as a site of this ghostly return, thus further highlighting the presence of the after effects of British rule in a city that is seemingly the epitome of a new form of national identity.

Keywords: Stephen Frears, Hanif Kureishi, London film, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Thatcherism

Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, the 1987 film written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Stephen Frears,¹ enacts the problematic return of the British Empire's colonial past in the form of a corrupt Pakistani politician re-entering the lives of his Londoner son Sammy and his white English wife, Rosie. Rafi, Sammy's father, is haunted by the ghost of his past. The torture ordered by Rafi when he was a figurehead of the brutal postcolonial military of the newly created Pakistan is unearthed by a lesbian, interracial couple, Rani and Vivia, and ends in Rafi's suicide. Thus, the ghostly past has the final say in the film. This article traces the return of the repressed in ghostly form as the central concern of the film, suggesting that the portrayal of Thatcher's London as a site of this spectral return serves to highlight the presence of the after effects of British rule in a city that also seems to epitomise a new form of national identity.

The former capital of the British Empire is presented in the film as a multicultural and multi-sexual space where different couplings enact diverse racial, sexual and social options. The city described in the film is also a city at war. It is compared to Beirut at one point, and the sense of chaos permeates the film. However, despite the film's grim depiction of these socio-political realities, it nonetheless both invokes and enacts the possibility of alterity.² Sammy's words, quoted in the title of this article, are emblematic of this divide between London and England. They echo Kureishi's own words in 'Some Time with Stephen', his diary recording the making of the film: 'I'm no Britisher, but a Londoner' (164). London is thus imagined as an alternate locale: a non-England where multiple options can thrive.

This view of London in the film is tied to its post-Empire existence as a city of migrants which is 'colonized in reverse' carrying 'overtones of the legacy and burden of past encounters in faraway contact zones' (Clement Ball 15). The burden of 'past encounters' is at the centre of the film. The dynamic interchanges between past and present are dramatised in the coming together of an array of multiracial characters and given form in the figure of the ghost which signals the burden of the colonial legacy on the postcolonial present. As portrayed in the film, London is both a local place and a global/symbolic space. It is thus imaginatively inhabited and continuously in the process of translation into text and narrative (Clement Ball 18). In this sense, the London presented in the film is both real and metaphorical. The ghost figure becomes the central locus of this metaphorical dimension of the city space. However, it is important to point out that these imaginative possibilities, while present as options, do not obscure the grim political realities which the film sets out to critique. Kureishi has described the film as his 'declaration of war against Thatcherism in England' (Smith 70). The film 'declares war' on Thatcher's England while simultaneously evoking London as one possible counter-narrative to Thatcherism.

The contradictory visions of London in the film – it is both a site of alterity and a war zone, a place of ghostly encounters with grim past crimes and a vibrant global city – are dramatised in the film. The opening sequence shows the mother of a young black man shot dead by the police, echoing the tragic shooting of Dorothy Groce on 28 September 1985 by police in Brixton, an event which sparked the Brixton Riots, while the film ends with Rafi's suicide and Sammy and Rosie's reunion. The two brutal deaths that frame the film enact the violent nature of post-Empire Britain in Thatcher's time. However, the father's death signals a moment of rupture, a breaking away from the old regime, which may also become a new beginning for the new generation, embodied by Sammy and Rosie who see London as a home that is 'not England'. Thus, London is a city dominated by racial tensions and riots but also a space that offers redemptive options.

The film locates London as this site of alterity by presenting an array of characters that represent social, racial and sexual diversity and thus provide a counter-narrative to the idea of a unified British nation voiced by Thatcher's call for a 'British nation with British characteristics' (qtd in Segal 282). The protagonists, Sammy and Rosie, represent an alternative to this notion of the 'British'. Rosie, as her name suggests, may be the prototypical 'English Rose', while Sammy is a man of Pakistani descent whose name belies his origins as 'Samir'. The other characters in the film offer different options of alterity: Rani and Vivia are a lesbian, mixed race

couple, Danny/Victoria is a young black man whose gender identity seems fluid as his dual name suggests, Alice, Rafi's former mistress, is the representative of the white colonial longing for the glorious days of Empire, and Anna, Sammy's lover, is an American photographer enchanted by the idea of the 'exotic' Indian man. The film presents a possibly utopian option of coexistence within a harmonious city space but this remains merely an option. The violence which permeates the film is a constant reminder of the grim socio-political realities that disrupt harmony and insist on the vexed nature of Britain's colonial past.

The film does present us, however, with a scene of sexual joy which may be seen as an example of this possible utopian space. In one of the film's most famous scenes, the sexual montage, we see a layering of different characters in the midst of lovemaking. This scene is mirrored in the final scene of the film where the meeting of the characters is not so joyous. The film ends with a scene of rupture: the eviction of tenants from their caravan homes in South London, in what the script describes as a 'waste land'. In this final scene, the different characters in the film bond for the last time, with Rafi who, as Vivia – who becomes instrumental in unveiling Rafi's lurid past – sardonically points out, has 'finally joined the proletariat' (172). In this sense, the final scene both dramatises the possibility of a coming together of diverse people, joined in a common cause, and is also a sign of failure. The tenants are evicted and Thatcher's policy is successful. The film ends on a personal note. We see Sammy and Rosie comforting each other after Rafi's death. (176). The father's suicide reunites the couple. Sammy and Rosie, the couple who symbolises the meeting of 'East' and 'West', are back together. But the socio-political situation remains dire.

This socio-political situation is formed by Britain's colonial legacy which makes London a 'haunted city, subject to spectral invasions for an unquiet past' (Luckhurst 294). In this 'Gothic' city space, the appearance of different ghostly traces and the film's evocation of a ghost figure as a catalyst for Rafi's suicide, represents the past's chokehold on the present moment. In Homi Bhabha's terms, the return of the repressed past entails a 'narrative struggle' (Bhabha 295) between emergent forms of national narratives and the old forms of national identity. This return of the repressed in the form of ghosts evokes Freud's seminal essay 'The Uncanny'. Freud shows how personal and collective fearful experiences, which have been repressed, return in the form of anxiety and are expressed in the realm of the uncanny fear of death, the return of the dead and the magical/animistic powers attributed to words as creating reality. Freud further locates the uncanny effects in fiction (and one could extend his observation to the filmic narrative as an even more impressive way of producing such effects), as more persuasive. If we examine the ghost figure in *Sammy and Rosie* in these terms, we can see how it creates this effect as its presence becomes increasingly menacing with each manifestation. The ghost's early appearance as a familiar cabbie who takes Rafi back home is later transformed into an increasingly gruesome figure who becomes a stand-in for the many victims tortured by Rafi's henchmen. The ghost's visual presence in the film thus doubly marks it as both familiar and strange. In Freud's terms, 'the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*', it is 'something which is familiar and old – established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud 634). Freud associates our fear of the dead with our

primitive side which 'still implies the old belief that the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off' (635). Although the ghost may be interpreted as a projection of Rafi's guilt, its presence in the film is very vivid and it ties together national and personal guilt. Freud's location of the 'primitive' fear of the dead man coming back to 'carry off' the living is given form in Rafi's terror of the ghost and his final act of taking his own life. Interestingly, however, Kureishi's decision to end the film with Rafi's suicide was made rather late in the course of writing the screenplay. Kureishi relates the reasons for Rafi's suicide in 'Some Time with Stephen': 'I don't want him committing suicide out of guilt. It's that he's come to the end. No one wants him. There's nowhere for him to go, neither at home nor in Britain' (167).

Rafi's death then is seen as signalling the 'end' of one era and the possible beginning of another, as suggested above. Rafi's past political crimes are seen as inextricably linked to the British legacy of colonialism and his final undoing also marks the demise of Empire and the emergence of new forms of national narratives. The final meeting between Rafi and his former mistress Alice in her cellar, where Rafi is confronted by the ghost, demonstrates this collusion of the postcolonial present and the colonial past. On a personal level, the conflicted relations between Sammy and his father which are at the centre of the film may thus also be tied to this wish to 'kill the father' and replace his old rule with a new one.

Fathers Sons and Ghosts: *Sammy and Rosie's* Oedipal Drama

This vexed relationship between father and son is a recurrent theme in Kureishi's *oeuvre*. In his memoir *My Ear at His Heart* (2004), Kureishi describes the conflicted relationship with his own father. The father-son adoration/repulsion dynamic is also at work at Kureishi's most successful novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). Rafi Rahman in *Sammy and Rosie* is by far a more sinister figure than the charming but often deluded Haroon Amir in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, but the son's adoration of the father as a god in the novel, coupled with his disillusionment of this idea of the father as an all-powerful Buddha, is one of the major themes in the novel. This theme is echoed in *Sammy and Rosie* where Sammy's ambivalent relationship with his father is dramatised in even more vivid terms. Whereas in *Buddha*, the father's attempt to sell his version of Eastern wisdom to bored suburbanites is both ridiculed and admired by his son Karim, a teenager on the verge of adulthood, in *Sammy and Rosie*, the mature son has to come to terms with his father's past and, by extension, also with his collusion in his father's dark deeds. By accepting his father's money, Sammy seems to be willing to ignore what his wife and the other characters in the film insist on exposing: namely, Rafi's past crimes and his refusal to assume responsibility for what was done in his name, if not directly by him. The son's complicated love/hate relationship with the father is shown at the very beginning of the film. After the opening sequence discussed above, the film shows us Sammy in bed with his American lover, Anna. He does not go to the airport to welcome his father, thus leading to Rafi's first meeting with the cabbie, later transformed into the ghost of Rafi's past. Sammy reveals the ambivalent nature of his feelings for his estranged father, whose re-emergence on the scene is the catalyst for the film's action. He tells

Anna his father had abandoned him and that he thinks he never really wanted him (Kureishi, *Collected Screenplays* 97). However, Sammy also tells Anna about his visit to Pakistan, and describes his father as 'a great patriarch and a little king' (97). The son worships the father as 'king' while also wishing to dethrone him. If we employ a Freudian reading of this relationship, we can see that Sammy's wish is fulfilled with the father's death. Sammy can now be reunited with Rosie, and they may be able to continue their lives freed from the father's symbolic shadow. Thus Rafi Rahman becomes central not only because the revelation of his past crimes propels the plot, but also as his portrayal in the film remains the most nuanced. He is not a one-dimensional villain by any means. The conflicted and ambivalent presentation of Rafi's character in the film suggests that the film's 'didactic' nature is indeed, as Spivak would have it, not a one-sided condemnation of either colonial rule or postcolonial realities (Spivak 244).

In the figure of Rafi, the film succeeds in creating a character that is at once endearing and enraging. The first time we see him is on a plane to England. He is described as a man with an angelic face (Kureishi, *Collected Screenplays* 94). This detail becomes highly ironic as we soon find out that Rafi is anything but an 'angel'. Rafi wears English suits, hinting at his attachment to some aspects of British culture (94). In this first scene, he is eating a sherbet, which sticks to the end of his nose. Rafi thus becomes an almost comic figure. Seemingly, he is merely a harmless old man, enjoying life's little pleasures.

The next time Rafi appears in the film, however, traces of his lurid past appear. Rafi is on a taxicab on his way from the airport, after realising his son will not come to pick him up. The driver is 'an Asian man in a brown suit. One eye is bandaged and part of his skull has been smashed in' (96). This cabbie keeps haunting Rafi and becomes the ghostly revenant of his past crimes. On the ride, Rafi tells the driver of his notion of England, thus revealing the nature of his attachment: 'For me England is hot buttered toast on a fork in front of an open fire. And cunt fingers' (96). The cosy domestic scene, which reads like a parody of the Dickensian 'hearth and home', clashes with the comic addition which evokes the sexual aspect. Rafi lusts for the England he once knew. And as we later find out, he hopes to reunite with his former lover Alice, the quintessential representation of 'good old (colonial) England'. Rafi's character in the film is multi-faceted. He becomes a reference point for the other characters. His moral indignities, sexual prejudices and patriarchal stance reflect the other characters' varying degrees of liberalism. Kureishi chose Shashi Kapour, one of the most popular figures in Indian cinema, to portray Rafi. This choice signals his role as an (aging) lover. Kureishi describes the actor as exotic and regal in 'Some Time with Stephen' (156). This description chimes in with Rafi's portrayal as a very charming man, a 'king' among mere mortals. Choosing such a well-known actor for the role further indicates the role's importance. Kureishi locates Rafi as the film's central figure. We see the other characters in the film in light of his views of family, home and nation. His several roles in the film – father, lover, politician and finally, in a highly ironic twist, a leader of working-class rebellion – make his character the most well-rounded one in the film.

One of the most telling instances of this multi-faceted portrayal is related to Rafi's patriarchal stance and abhorrence of 'deviant' sexualities. As the lesbian couple

in the film, Rani and Vivia, are the 'whistle-blowers' who uncover Rafi's involvement in the torture of political dissenters in Pakistan, his encounters with the pair demonstrate the multiple conflicts at the heart of the film. The role of women in the film as agents of change and transformation becomes apparent, as it is the women, rather than the male figures, who insist on resisting patriarchal norms and Thatcherite family values. Rosie, for one, resists the traditional roles of wife and mother. Although she is Sammy's wife, she also has other lovers and does not hide that fact from her husband. She also thwarts Rafi's demands for providing him with grandchildren to satisfy his wish for a normative family. The women in the film thus 'queer' the notions of home and negotiate the gendered demands of the heteronormative nation-state (Gairola 125). Rosie, Rani and Vivia resist Rafi's patriarchal stance by not conforming to his idea of womanhood which hinges on heteronormative motherhood or heterosexual coupling. Thus for Rafi, Rosie's reluctance to have a child with his son Sammy makes her a potential lesbian, a fact which is emphasised by his explosive reaction to Rosie's comment on the beauty of a woman they see at a restaurant (Gairola 126).

In a similar manner, when Rafi first encounters Rani and Vivia in Sammy and Rosie's flat, the inextricable links between domestic space and the political sphere become apparent. In this first encounter, Rani instantly recognises Rafi as he arrives at his son's house. Rafi sees the two women kissing and is greatly disturbed by the sight. Rani questions Rafi about his political career to which Rafi replies: 'I'm here purely as a private person'. Rani responds, 'Mr. Rahman, someone like you can never be a purely private person' (102). No character in this film can ever be a 'purely private person'. The domestic sphere is implicated in the political and vice versa. Thus the final violent clash between Rafi and the lesbian couple, which follows Rafi's witnessing the couple in Sammy and Rosie's marital bed, becomes the climax of the film's disruption of the heteronormative order, so favoured by Thatcher's regime support of 'family values'. The mere sight of the lesbian couple in bed together enrages Rafi who responds with verbal abuse in Punjabi. The scene's comic nature stems from this use of 'colourful' language by the two South-Asians, Rafi and Rani. The English subtitles thus serve as an ironic comment on linguistic barriers (Spivak 250). The need to subtitle the Punjabi phrases in a way which would fit the white audience's expectations demonstrates the ways in which linguistic, cultural and social barriers are at work in the film. These barriers exist between audience and characters, between the migrant and the native and between the characters themselves. Rafi's abuse of the couple, '[what] are you doing, you perverted half-sexed lesbians cursed by God?' is formed as a question, highlighting his inability to grasp this spectacle (Kureishi, *Collected Screenplays* 159). Rani's response is vehemently graphic: '[come] here and let me bite your balls off with my teeth and swallow them! I'll rip off your prick with a tin opener! I'll sew live rats into the stomach of your camel, you murdering fascist!' (159).

The list of threats matches Rafi's overly ecstatic response as well as hinging upon ethnic stereotypes indicated by the use of 'camel' as an indicator of 'exotic' otherness. Both 'Indian' characters demonstrate their penchant for verbal abuse. The shared use of Punjabi also further highlights the tension between Rafi and Rani's shared identities as postcolonial migrants and Rafi's condemnation of Rani for being the wrong kind of

diasporic migrant by virtue of her socio-political 'queerness' (Gairola 133). Thus this scene becomes emblematic of the film's location of difference in the sexual and linguistic registers. Rafi's horror at the lesbians' transgressive presence is followed by his final encounter with the ghost. In that sense, one transgression, that of the heteronormative order which both Rafi and Thatcher's regime champion, is followed by another, the transgression inherent in the very act of unveiling the past as lurid and gruesome. Rafi's attempt to escape into the private realm by re-joining his former mistress Alice is undone by the presence of the ghost in Alice's basement.

The Ghost in the Cellar: Rafi's Encounter with the After Effects of Empire

The film locates the ghost of the former Empire in the cellar of Rafi's former mistress Alice, thus further dramatising the collusion between the notion of Empire and its postimperial traces. Significantly then, the scene takes place in Alice's cellar, the seat of a repressed past and the place where she keeps the relics of her own colonial past. Rafi sees the ghost and in his attempt to turn away from this uncanny sight, encounters another one: a picture of Alice in India as a baby (Kureishi, *Collected Screenplays* 164). Turning from one ghost invariably ends up by facing another: the ghost of the colonial past emblematised by the photograph. Kureishi reports of the need for this dramatic parting scene between Alice and Rafi in 'Some Time with Stephen': '[I] come up with a Miss Havisham scene set in the cellar of the house' (169). The allusion to Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations* symbolises the ways Victorian England is revived in Margaret Thatcher's time. Alice's cellar is the seat of the repressed colonial past. The cellar also embodies the Victorian mind-set seemingly brought back from the dead to live on in Thatcher's England. Alice, a firm believer in Thatcherism, chooses to ignore the fall of the British Empire, attempts to stop time and clings on to a decaying past.

In this dramatic scene in the cellar, however, Alice becomes another woman who accuses Rafi of his past personal and political crimes. She blames Rafi for 'having introduced flogging for minor offences, nuclear capability and partridge shooting' into his country (165). This accusation is doubly ironic coming as it does from Alice, a white middle-class woman who longs for the good old days of Empire which invariably led to the establishment of this military regime in Pakistan. However, her accusations serve to highlight further how even the most conservative woman character in this film still serves a somewhat subversive function as she forces Rafi to confront his past at the very site where her own past is so clearly displayed. Rafi comments in a sardonic aside to the ghost: 'How bitterness can dry up a woman' (165). Showcasing his misogynist attitudes and bonding with the (male) ghost, Rafi is still not completely undone by the ghost.

This reunion of the two former lovers, Rafi and Alice, and their final parting, then, becomes yet another comment on the vexed relations of East and West. Like Sammy and Rosie, here too we have a mixed couple, a mirror image of the film's protagonists and an ironic view of their possible future. Much like the younger couple, their relationship is hardly ideal. Their separation reflects Sammy and Rosie's impending separation which is only thwarted in the end by Rafi's suicide.

Rafi's multiple roles in the film reach a dramatic climax in the caravan park where he takes refuge. Danny lives in the caravan park, described in the screenplay as 'a waste ground' (168) about to be evicted by property developers. Rafi bonds with the dwellers of the caravan park and becomes their guide. As he tells Danny, 'Like you it's the middle class I hate' (167), a comment clearly directed at his recent encounter with Alice, the very embodiment of middle class values. Rafi advises the inhabitants to leave peacefully, '[we] must go. The power of the reactionary state rolls on. But we must never, never be defeated' (169). This revolutionary position, seemingly so at odds with Rafi's past, still makes sense in the film's evocation of Rafi's complex character. As noted above, Rafi is by no means a one-sided villain. His bond with Danny and the people in the caravan park may have to do with the sense that he too, like them, has nowhere left to go.

This sense of loss which leads to the suicide is manifested in Rafi's last encounter with the ghost. Rafi returns to his caravan to wash his face. The ghost takes on a gruesome form of 'human blood and hair and bone' in Rafi's washing bowl (169), thus echoing Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth who cannot get rid of the 'damned spot' (*Macbeth*, V, I). Like Lady Macbeth, Rafi too faces a tragic ending. And perhaps like her, he too is without remorse but only undone by the fact he has reached a 'dead end'. The accumulation of the marks of torture on the ghost's body, which grow with every new visitation, manifests the increasing pressure on Rafi. The body of the single 'cabbie' becomes the collective body of the many victims tortured at the hands of Rafi's henchmen. Thus the next time Rafi sees the ghost, the apparition has serious burns on his body and wears a rubber mask over his head (169). As the ghost performs the final unveiling, we can see that 'his head is half caved in and one eye (with the bandage removed) has been gouged out' (169). This sight corresponds to the details of Rafi's crime revealed by Rani and Vivia.

In response to Rafi's claim that he was 'not there' when the 'mischief' took place if it 'happened at all', the ghost replies: '[Y]ou were not there, it is true, though you gave the order' (170). Despite Rafi's disavowal, he is finally forced to realise the extent of his crimes. The ghost's parting words indicate the immensity of Rafi's crimes: 'All of human life you desecrated, Rafi Rahman!' (170). While indicating that Rafi's crimes are 'crimes against humanity', the ghost's words also link the personal and sexual aspects to the political aspects. Rafi is described as a lecherous man who uses his power to indulge in Western pleasures (170). This reflects Alice's accusation of Rafi for importing British customs to his Muslim country (165). The ghost's arguments, thus, can be read as a reflection of the accusations levelled at him by Rosie, Rani and Vivia, and finally also by his former mistress, Alice.

In this final confrontation with the ghost, Rafi's seemingly blasé attitude to his past is revealed as a sham. The ghost sits on the bed next to Rafi in a familiar gesture, thus making the 'uncanny' homely and familiar. He puts the pads connected to the wires on his temples on Rafi's eyes thus symbolically signalling his status as a 'corpse' even before he commits suicide. Rafi's life is over but the film does not leave us only with this dire vision. It presents us with another character that is slightly less than 'real' who becomes a different kind of 'ghost'; perhaps he can be viewed as the ghost of Britain's present and possible future: Danny/Victoria.

A Present Ghost: Danny/Victoria

Danny/Victoria, a young man who befriends Rafi and becomes Rosie's part-time lover can read as another ghost in the film's array of ghostly figures. The father-son relationship, a central feature of the film, is reworked here as Danny becomes a symbolic son and guide to the baffled Rafi who is unable to find his place in London, both literally (he gets lost in the city) and symbolically. Unlike any of the other characters, he is seemingly without fault; a naïve, child-like being whose very presence highlights the other characters' all-too-human flaws. Danny is curiously present in most of the scenes in the film from its opening shot to the last one. This omnipresence may suggest he plays the role of a Greek chorus of sorts, providing commentary on the film's actions, even without saying much. His very presence is an act of defiance to the ruling order. His interactions with Rafi and Rosie and his position as a voyeur, as when he looks through Alice's window, wearing a lady's hat, make him a 'a sweet fake drag queen, the other side of savvy lesbians, the nicest all-around hybrid you could wish for' (Spivak 253). Danny's very presence, his black body, as he becomes sexually involved with a white woman, confronts Britain with 'its racial tensions, its inability to accept difference' (Chatterjee 180).

While the film consciously employs unrealistic devices in the case of Rafi's ghost, this is not quite the case here. Danny's various roles in the film – lover, son and guide – place him in a unique position. The fluid gender identity hinted at by taking on the name Victoria (named after the tube station but also the Queen) thus positions him as a figure of difference. The choice of the name Victoria for a young black squatter becomes an instance of the reverse imperialism practiced by the previously colonised on the new Britisher (Chatterjee 180). Thus Danny/Victoria is both a symbol of the 'new' Danny Boy and the 'old' Victorian regime. His 'hybridity' is highlighted from the very time we see him, at the very beginning of the film. Kureishi's screenplay opens with Danny, described as a 'young black man... [standing] in the open doors of a tube train' (93). This first scene locates him as a character on the move. He is then present at the scene of the shooting, and his act of cutting the police tape suggests the notion of cutting through borders or social constraints. He can thus be read as an agent of change, a transgressive figure who does not abide by the rules.

The next time we see Danny is when he watches Rafi's arrival at his son's house: 'Danny stands apart from it all' (99). Danny is apart; he is positioned as a detached observer of the scene. Even though he has bonds with both Rafi and Rosie, they too seem only to enhance this quality. Danny's role as an observer, at times a voyeur – as when he looks through Alice's window – epitomises this otherness. His aloofness is also present in his other significant role, that of a guide to the baffled Rafi. Danny leads Rafi to Alice's house. On their first tube ride, he introduces himself: 'Danny, my name is. But people who like me call me Victoria' (118) and comments that the tube line is his 'office' (118). This signals that his 'job' is forever riding the tube and traversing the city. Like a modern day *flâneur*, Danny is an integral part of the city, yet also an aloof observer.

Danny is not only 'Victoria', however. As the band of musicians at the station see him, they call him 'Danny Boy' (119). The link to music is significant as it may signal

the vision of a harmonious future to come out of present chaos. Kureishi chose Roland Gift, the lead singer of the band 'The Fine Young Cannibals' for the role. He explains he chose Gift for his sexual appeal to women in 'Some Time with Stephen' (169). Kureishi further comments on Gift's own experiences with racism which would enable him to identify with the role, while providing instances of Gift's puzzlement at what the role entails. Gift asks why Danny has to have a girlfriend and a kid which Kureishi interprets as the actor's wish for a more 'romantic' character. Kureishi replies that the character is more complex this way since it's 'unreal enough and idealised as it is' (181).

Kureishi relates to the 'unreal' nature of the role but also to his attempts to give the character some complexity, indicating his awareness of the problematic nature of a character that seems too good to be true. Danny's body and his sexual appeal also account for his position at the centre of the film's sexual montage scene discussed above. The scene is a 'celebration of joyful love-making all over London' (157). The three couples in this scene (Sammy and Anna, Danny and Rosie, and Rafi and Alice) are joined in a view of London as the site of sexual joy. Thus here, as in Danny's other appearances in the film, he is perceived both as the marginal and the central figure. Rosie, the bourgeois social worker and Danny, the seemingly aimless traveller in London, represent the idea of boundary crossing. Their union breaks barriers of class and race, whereas Sammy and Rosie, despite racial differences, ultimately occupy an upper middle-class position.

However, this is only one aspect of this relationship. In a previous scene, Danny tells Rosie of his infatuation with her: 'I thought: Victoria, you're well outclassed there. Until I realized you were downwardly mobile!' (157). Rosie's interest in Danny, on the other hand, seems to centre solely on his body. She is not interested in his personal story or in his experience as a black man. Danny's ironic comment on Rosie's downward mobility shows he is very well aware of the exact nature of their relationship.

Danny is given the last word in the film, however. When Danny and his friends are forcefully evicted, he exclaims, 'Looks like I'm on my way out' (174). The tone is not desperate. It may even be triumphant. Danny's convoy is compared to 'the PLO leaving Beirut' (174). This statement both reiterates London's uneasy link to Beirut at wartime, but also signals the ways political resistance has not yet 'said the last word'. Danny/Victoria then is the 'ghostly' presence of England's present and the harbinger of its possible future. The dire ending belongs to the past embodied in the ghost who haunts Rafi to his end.

The film thus ends with an offer of resistance and the possibility of political change. The dramatic change in a no longer stable narrative of nation explored in this article is given form in the film's depiction of London. The film dramatises the ghostly return of the repressed to the former capital of the British Empire and presents us with the interlinked fates of whites, blacks, Pakistanis, Caribbeans and other 'others' who now live and interact in the city which is forever transformed by their presence. This change, which has intensified since the film was released nearly 30 years ago, implies a radical shift in the notion of national identity. If the characters in the film are

to be seen as embodiments of this new notion of national identity, then 'there is no England anymore' (Mohanram 130).

The film shows us, however, that there *is* London. The city is described in the film as 'twinned with Beirut' (113). It has 'estates that look as if they have been transplanted from the outskirts of Warsaw' (98). It is not 'the England' Rafi remembers (98). But this city is also a 'mass of fascination', as Sammy describes it to his father (111). London becomes a space of alterity. It offers multiple narratives of a no longer stable national identity. *Sammy and Rosie* thus remains a filmic testament to the vibrant nature of city space as it vies with the totalising tale of nationhood and a uniform national identity.

Notes

1. I am referring to Kureishi's screenplay in my analysis as well as to the final film version.
2. This view of the redemptive potential of sexuality is expressed in Kureishi's 'Some Time with Stephen: A Diary' where he expresses his belief 'that openness and choice in sexual behaviour is liberating and that numerous accretions of sexual guilt and inhibition are psychologically damaging; that there should be a fluid, non-hierarchical society with free movement across classes and that these classes will eventually be dissolved; that ambition and competitiveness are stifling narrowers of personality; and that all authority should be viewed with suspicion and constantly questioned' (166-167).

Works Cited

- Bhabba, Homi K. 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation'. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K Bhabba. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Chatterjee, Ranita. 'An Explosion of Difference', *Between the Lines*. Ed. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1996. Print.
- Clement Ball, John. *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2006. Print.
- Gairola K. Rahul. 'A Critique of Thatcherism and the Queering of Home in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*'. *South Asian Review* 32(3), 2011. 123-137. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. 'The Uncanny' (1919). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. Vol. XVII. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1971. Print.
- Kureishi, Hanif. *The Buddha of Suburbia*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990. Print.
- . *Collected Screenplays I*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003: 91-176.
- . *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004. Print.
- . 'Some Time with Stephen: A Diary'. *Hanif Kureishi: Collected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 2011. 149-227. Print.
- Luckhurst, Roger. 'Literary London: Post-, Ex-, Trans-, Neo-?' *English Studies in Canada* Jun-Sep 2005. 293-305. Web. 22 June 2014.

- Mohanram, Radhika. 'Postcolonial Spaces and Deterritorialized (Homo) Sexuality: The Films of Hanif Kureishi', *Postcolonial Discourse and Changing Cultural Contexts*. Ed. Gita Rajan and Radhika Mohanaram. London: Greenwood Press, 1995. 117-134. Print.
- Segal, Ronald. *The Black Diaspora*. New York: Farrar, 1996. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. New York: Walter J. Black, 1937. Print.
- Smith, Gavin. 'Sammy & Rosie: London Britches Falling Down', *Film Comment*: Sept. 1987, 23(5): 70-79). Web. 22 June 2014
- Spivak, Gayatri. 'Sammy and Rosie Get Laid', *Out in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

To Cite This Article:

Yael Maurer, "'Not English but Londoners": Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11, Number 1 (Spring 2014): 32-43. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2014/maurer.pdf>.