

HO Nazareth on Kureishi and his critics

Out Of The Ghetto

English literature, certainly since the late-19th century, has been indebted to foreigners and ex-colonials for a lot of modern writing that has internationalised its scope and perspectives. The over-cultivated piece of ground which English literature used to inhabit has been pretty much given over to hack writers and literary critics. Meanwhile, the writers here of foreign origin (Dhondy, Ishiguro, Mo, Phillips, Rushdie) are looking at Britain with new eyes. And the Britain they write about is different, not simply because of the war and the end of empire. The process of settlement by waves of ex-colonials adds further social juxtapositions, confrontations and experiences to be captured by pinned and wriggling words.

These writers have not had the benefit of literary criti-

When Farrukh Dhondy's tv series *King Of The Ghetto* was shown by the BBC, a few Bangladeshis picketed TV Centre to show their disapproval of his portrayal of the denizens of Brick Lane. When Rushdie expressed sentiments suitable to the 'cause', he was applauded. But when he claimed the critical freedom of the writer, the same mentality was partly responsible for making him a target of abuse.

I have followed Hanif Kureishi's work in recent years with great interest, which his first novel *The Buddha Of Suburbia* (Faber, hbk £12.99) reinforces. He is the first 'Asian' writer born in Britain to have broken from the dutiful, worthy, 'positive image' constraints with which a race-relations mentality has shackled would-be writers. Dhondy and Rushdie were born elsewhere, and this is reflected in their work. Kureishi is the only homegrown 'Asian', who nevertheless shares the 'two-camera' or stereoscopic observation of British society. He has felt the brunt of disapproval too. My *Beautiful Laundrette* was picketed by Pakistanis at a New York cinema, and he was physically attacked in Bradford for portraying the lead Pakistani character as a homosexual. All the more reason to commend him for continuing to assault the fossil culture that such a mentality promotes.

The novel continues where his film scripts left off: 'Like many Muslim men - beginning with the prophet Mohammed himself, whose absolute statements, served up piping hot from God, inevitably gave rise to absolutism - Anwar thought he was right about everything.'

In some respects, perhaps, the story parallels his own experience. Karim Amir begins his tale with the experience of growing up in suburban Beckenham and ends it living, some years later, in West Kensington. A teenager of mixed parentage, and bisexual orientation, he becomes an actor: acts the Paki but resists being identified as one. His life

on the margins he eventually accepts with a sense of belonging. *Outskirts*, *Borderline*, are names of Kureishi plays, confirming this preoccupation with outsiders.

His sardonic novel is a compelling read, partly because of the distance its narrator keeps or is kept from 'official' society of whatever orthodoxy. The Buddha of the title is closer in his philosophy to Sufism than to Buddhism, and the woman he takes up with, and eventually marries, Eva, is an Amazon of the social whirl. She has lost one breast to cancer, but survived to become an interior decorating 'success'. Sadly, some of the half-baked notions of the characters have spread to the writing. So serious a factor as a severed

breast figures only at the beginning and end of the book, and not in the main body of her story. The Indian English is less than convincing. The realities of the actor's experience are glossed over.

The strength of the book lies in its reflection of the 70s from the marginal's viewpoint. The men tend to be weak, relying on the rituals of past domination over women, while the women grow in strength and stature. Karim's sexual encounters are many and energetic, but rarely include a sensual or emotional high. And the complex mixture of affection and scorn with which he regards his Indian father, rings very true of 'an Englishman born and bred - almost'.

Beatrix Campbell measures Labour's rebuilding Party Piece

What kind of party does the Labour Party want to be? It's a question that remains a conundrum - the party doesn't seem to be in conversation with itself in a way that would produce an answer.

This presents a problem to journalists who chronicle its affairs, not to mention its potential voters and its patient allies. However, *Labour Rebuilt, The New Model Party*, (Fourth Estate, pbk £6.95) by Colin Hughes and Patrick Wintour isn't about a new model party. Actually, it isn't about a party at all. Nor is it really about politics. It is more about the party as a caucus, or rather a coterie. Hughes and Wintour are proficient young writers, but this is an old way of writing history: the kings and queens method. Or maybe it's the Mandelson method.

The story isn't analogous to the New Model Army as much as king-making. It's the story of how the boy king becomes master in his own house.

Any estimate of this book needs to discover whether the problem is the authors or the party itself. Political journalism is not only a player in the political arena - this story confirms the tenacity of political journal-

ism in setting Labour's agenda in the 1980s, in the absence of Labour setting an agenda of its own. Generally, political journalism is good on gossip and bad on theory. And the enduring philistinism and pragmatism of British Labourism leaves it prey to a quaint journalistic ethic - that its all about telling people what somebody didn't want them to know. The what-really-happened-behind-the-scenes view of history.

These authors are cautioned by their own profession on the one hand and the culture of Labourism on the other, which reduces the politics to brokerage.

There's no explanation for the Labour left's extinction in less than five years, little or nothing on the re-making of the relationship between the unions and the party, not to mention the unions' role in Labour's modernisation, and there's only passing reference to one of the party's most dramatic discoveries once it started listening to women - that it was perceived as a useless (as in the opposite to useful), butch, boys' party which went about its business in a way that belied its rhetoric of equality and democracy.



cism of any authority to match their freshness. The liberals have tended to pat 'black writers' on the back no matter what. Others, with a combination of arrogance and ignorance, have paid lip service and passed on. The critical faculty has been under-exercised. Instead the place of the critic has been usurped by what I call a 'race-relations industry' mentality that has no intention of taking literature seriously. Its followers have applied the concerns of agitprop and advertising copywriters to literary writing and done no one any good.

Bob Rowthorn questions the forecasters

Megatrash

The meticulously blow-by-blow (literally) account of the party's defence and disarmament is perhaps a paradigm of the party's policy-making process where isolation, chaos and suspicion prevail. It was a classic case, too, of the Left more or less leaving the leadership to get on with making a mess of it, either by abstaining from the process or repeating antique rhetoric. The book's project is how the Labour Party of the 90s has been disciplined, purged and - at long last - professionalised. It wonders whether it will become 'massive and passive' or a 'mass radical, new model party'.

Something else comes to mind. Labour seems to have become a kind of anti-party, a party afraid of itself, fearful, too, of the people. A paranoid party. Paranoia intensified rather than relaxed with the Bennite reforms, when the membership won the right to police the leadership. But is that what people join political parties for?

A new charter of members' rights together with a massive membership campaign, propelled by general secretary Larry Whitty's department and supported by trade unionists like Tom Sawyer and Diana Jeuda, which sought to break with this corrosive culture, is not addressed - and yet it is the critical condition of the party, as a party, existing at all.

But the paranoia extends beyond the led to the leaders - activist... mobilisation... these have become unwords in the Labour leaders' lexicon.

The poll tax is a classic case. It is hated, it touches every adult, and yet the Labour Party leadership has refused to take responsibility for the prospect that people might want to do something. Isn't that what socialist parties, whether new or old models, are there for, to enable people to do something together? Labour's evacuation allows it to piously protest when there's a riot - 'honest guv, it wasn't us'. And so mobilisation is a crisis of law and order and the roundheads are, again, on the run.

'We stand at the dawn of a new era. Before us is the most important decade in the history of civilisation, a period of stunning technological innovation, unprecedented economic opportunity, surprising political reform, and great cultural rebirth.'

Megatrends 2000 (Sidgwick & Jackson, hbk £15.00) has received enormous media hype and will make its authors, Naisbitt and Aburdene, a fortune. Everyone loves predictions and this book is full of them, but if you are thinking of buying it, don't waste your money. The 10 key 'megatrends' which they claim to identify, are either of doubtful significance or already well-established and well-known. Already familiar trends are: the emergence of global lifestyles, the rise of the Pacific rim, the triumph of the individual, the emergence of the free market in socialist countries. Other supposed megatrends, such as the growth of do-it-yourself religions and the rise of women into leadership positions, are certainly genuine, but their global importance is grossly exaggerated by these authors.

The aim of this book is allegedly to make sense of the confusing mass of data which bombards us everyday from the media. In fact, the book is even more confusing than the reality which it is supposed to illuminate. The arguments are often jumbled and most of the book is really just a vast kaleidoscope of newspaper and magazine clippings. Moreover, on a number of fundamental issues the assertions are quite at variance with the facts.

'To make the most of this extraordinary decade,' Naisbitt and Aburdene tell us, 'you must be aware of the changes that surround you.... Without a structure, a frame of reference, the vast amount of data that comes your way each day will probably whizz right by you.' Some rather important facts seemed to have whizzed right past these authors. Anything which challenges their complacent belief in individualism and free markets is either ignored or brushed aside. For example,



they claim there will be virtually no limits to world economic growth in the 1990s, nothing significant to worry about in the realm of raw materials, energy or population. There will be no energy crisis because 'quite simply, the world is using less energy while producing more' (than in 1974). In fact, world energy consumption is now 25% above the 1974 level and is currently rising by a further 25% per decade. This massive growth will not cause a shortage of energy in the immediate future, but it may have serious environmental implications such as the greenhouse effect. In this 300-page book, less than two pages are devoted to environmental issues which, we are blandly assured, are all being sorted out by world leaders.

Concern about population growth is dismissed in the words: 'But population is pretty much under control, except in Africa, although the population doomsters continue to make their dire predictions.' This is absolute rubbish. World population is currently around 5.5 billion and, on the most optimistic assumptions about

Third World birth rates, will exceed 8 billion in the year 2025. Even then the population will still be rising and is unlikely to stabilise below 10 billion, which is almost twice the present figure. Most of this vast increase will take place in Asia and Latin America, and not in Africa as the authors claim. This is not a mere quibble about numbers. Population growth on such scale has appalling implications in terms of urban squalor and the environment. To limit this growth and deal with its consequences is likely to be the greatest challenge facing humanity in the coming century.

Energy and population are only two examples of where Naisbitt and Aburdene have got it totally wrong. Other examples abound, but there is no space to list them here. However, the basic message is clear. Despite its pretentious title, this book is ill-informed and misleading. Why such a book should have received so much praise is something of a mystery. In the confusing times we live in, I suppose there will be a ready-made audience for false prophets of every kind.*