Dreaming and scheming : reflections on writing and politics

Hanif Kureishi.

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DREAMING AND SCHEMING

Reflections on Writing and Politics

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Something Given: Reflections on Writing

'Now, whether it were by peculiar grace.
A leading from above, a something given . . .'
Wordsworth, 'Resolution and Independence'

My father wanted to be a writer. I can't remember a time when he didn't want this. There were few mornings when he didn't go to his desk – early, at about six o'clock – in one of his many suits and coloured shirts, the cuffs pinned by bejewelled links, before he left for work carrying his briefcase, alongside the other commuters. Writing was, I suppose, an obsession, and as with most obsessions, fulfilment remained out of reach. The obsession kept him incomplete but it kept him going. He had a dull, enervating civil service job, and writing provided him with something to look forward to. It gave him meaning and 'direction', as he liked to put it. It gave him direction home too, since he wrote often about India, the country he left in his early twenties and to which he never returned.

Many of my dad's friends considered his writing to be a risible pretension, though he had published two books for young people, on the history and geography of Pakistan. But even for my father, who loved seeing his name in print – I remember him labouring over the figures for average rainfalls, and on the textile industry – this was not authentic writing. He wanted to be a novelist.

He did write novels, one after another, on the desk he had had a neighbour build for him in the corner of the bedroom he shared with my mother. He wrote them, and he rewrote them, and he rewrote them. Then he typed them out, making copies with several sheets of carbon paper. Sometimes, when his back hurt, he sat on

the floor and wrote, with his spine pressed against the wardrobe. But whatever his posture, every workday morning I would hear his alarm, and soon after he would be hammering at his big typewriter. The sound pounded into us like artillery fire, rocking the house. He wrote at the weekends too, on Sunday afternoons. He would have liked to write in the evenings but by nine o'clock he'd be asleep on the sofa. My mother would wake him, and he'd shuffle off to bed.

In one sense his persistence paid off. By the time he was 60 he must have completed five or six novels, several short stories and a few radio plays. For many writers this would be considered a lifetime's work. Often he became dejected – when he couldn't make a story live; or when he could, but had to break off and leave for the office; or when he was too tired to write; and in particular when his books were turned down by publishers, as all of them were, not one of them ever reaching the public. His despair was awful; we all despaired along with him. But any encouragement from a publisher – even a standard letter expressing interest – renewed his vigour. Whether this was folly or dedication depends on your point of view. In the end all he wanted was for someone to say: 'this is brilliant, it moved me. You are a wonderful writer.' He wanted to be respected as he respected certain writers.

Once, in Paris, where I was staying, I went to a restaurant with one of my father's elder brothers. He was one of my favourite uncles, famous for his carousing but also for his violent temper. After a few drinks I admitted to him that I'd come to Paris to write, to learn to be a writer. He subjected me to a tirade of abuse. Who do you think you are, he said, Balzac? You're a fool, he went on, and your father's a fool too, to encourage you in this. It is pretentious, idiotic. Fortunately, I was too young to be discouraged; I knew how to keep my illusions going. But I was shocked by what my father had had to endure from his family. You couldn't get above your station; you couldn't dream too wildly.

Perhaps my uncles and father's acquaintances found his passion eccentric because Asian people in Britain hadn't uprooted themselves to pursue the notoriously badly paid and indulgent

profession of 'artist'. They had come to Britain to make lives for themselves that were impossible at home. At that time, in the mid-1960s, the images of India that we saw on television were of poverty, starvation and illness. In contrast, in the south of Britain people who had survived the war and the miserable 1950s, were busily acquiring fridges, cars, televisions, washing-machines.

For immigrants and their families, disorder and strangeness is the condition of their existence. They want a new life and the material advancement that goes with it. But having been ripped from one world and flung into another, what they also require, to keep everything together, is tradition, habitual ideas, stasis. Life in the country you have left may move on, but life in the diaspora is often held in a strange suspension, as if the act of moving has provided too much disturbance as it is.

Culture and art was for other people, usually wealthy, self-sufficient people who were safe and established. It was naive to think you could be a writer; or it was a kind of showing-off. Few of father's friends read; not all of them were literate. Many of them were recent arrivals, and they worked with him in the Pakistan Embassy. In the evening they worked in shops, or as waiters, or in petrol stations. They were sending money to their families. Father would tell me stories of omnivorous aunts and brothers and parents who thought their fortunate benefactor was living in plenty. They knew nothing of the cold and rain and abuse and homesickness. Sometimes they had clubbed together to send their relative to England who would then be obliged to remit money. One day the family would come over to join him. Until this happened the immigrant would try to buy a house; then another. Or a shop, or a factory.

For others, whose families were in Britain, the education of their children was crucial. And this, along with money, was the indicator par excellence of their progress in the new country. And so, bafflingly to me, they would interminably discuss their cars.

Even we had to get a car. Most of the time it sat rusting outside the house, and my sister and I would play in it, since it took Father six attempts to get through the Driving Test. He became

convinced that he was failed because of racial prejudice. Eventually he complained to the Race Relations Board, and next time he passed. Not long after he crashed the car with all of us in it.

Writing was the only thing Father wanted to be interested in, or good at, though he could do other things: cook, be an attentive and entertaining friend, play sports. He liked being a father. His own father, a doctor, had had twelve children, of which ten were sons. My father had never received the attention he required. He felt his life had lost 'direction' due to lack of guidance. He knew, therefore, what a father should be. It wasn't a question for him. He and I would play cricket for hours in the garden and park; we went to the cinema – mostly to watch war films like *Where Eagles Dare*; we watched sport on television, and we talked.

Father went to the library every Saturday morning, usually with me in tow. He planted notebooks around the house – in the toilet, beside his bed, in the front room beside his television chair – in order to write wherever he was. These notebooks he made himself from a square of cardboard and a bulldog clip, attaching to them various odd-shaped sheets of paper – the backs of flyers which came through the letter-box, letters from the bank, paper he took from work, envelopes. He made little notes exhorting himself onwards: 'the whole secret of success is; the way to go is; one must begin by . . .; this is how to live, to think, to write . . .' He would clench his fist and slam it into the palm of his other hand, saying, 'one must fight'.

Father was seriously ill during much of my youth, with a number of painful and depressing ailments. But even in hospital he would have a notebook at hand. When dying he talked of his latest book with his usual, touching but often infuriating grandiosity. 'In my latest novel I am showing how a man feels when . . .'

My mother, quite sensibly, wondered whether he might not be better off doing something less frustrating than shutting himself away for most of his spare time. Life was slipping away; he wasn't getting anywhere. Did he have to prefer failure as a writer to success at anything else? Perhaps she and he could do things together. Nothing changed, that was the problem. The continuous

disappointment that accompanied this private work was hard for everyone to bear, and it was the atmosphere in which we lived. Sometimes Mother suggested the illnesses were precipitated by his hopeless desire for the unattainable. But this was not something Father liked to hear.

He was convinced that she didn't understand what such a passion entailed. The fact was, she did. Yet he wanted to get to people. He had something to say and wanted response. He required attention. The publishers who rejected his work were standing between him and the audience he was convinced was waiting.

Father was good company – funny, talkative, curious, nosy and gossipy. He was always on the look-out for stories. We would work out the plots together. Recently I found one of his stories, which concerns the Indian servant of an English couple living in Madras before the Second World War. The story soon makes it clear that the servant is having an affair with his Mistress. Towards the end we learn that he is also having an affair with the Master. If I was surprised by this fertile story of bisexuality, I always knew he had an instinct for ironies, links, parallels, twists.

He liked other people and would talk with the neighbours as they dug their gardens and washed their cars, and while they stood together on the station in the morning. He would give them nicknames and speculate about their lives until I couldn't tell the difference between what he'd heard and what he'd imagined he'd heard. 'Suppose, one day,' he'd say, 'that man over there decided to . . .' And off he would go. As Maupassant wrote, 'You can never feel comfortable with a novelist, never be sure that he will not put you into bed one day, quite naked, between the pages of a book.'

It amused Father, and amazed me – it seemed like a kind of magic – to see how experience could be converted into stories, and how the monotony and dullness of an ordinary day could contain meaning, symbolism and even beauty. The invention and telling of stories – that most indispensable human transaction – brought us together. There was amusement, contact, entertainment. Whether this act of conversion engaged father more closely

with life, or whether it provided a necessary distance, or both, I don't know. Nevertheless, Father understood that in the suburbs, where concealment is often the only art, but where there is so much aspiration, dreaming and disappointment – as John Cheever illustrated – there is a lot for a writer.

Perhaps after a certain age father couldn't progress. Yet he remained faithful to this idea of writing. It was his religion, his reason for living, the God he couldn't betray and the God who wouldn't let him down. Father's art involved a long fidelity and a great commitment. Like many lives in the suburbs, it was also a long deferral. One day in the future – when his work was published and he was recognized as a writer – good things would happen to him and everything would change. But for the time being everything remained the same. He was fixed, and, from a certain point of view, stuck.

Writers are often asked – and they certainly ask themselves – what they would do if they were not published. I suspect that most writers would like to think that they would continue as they do already, writing to the best of their ability without thought of an audience. Yet even if this is true – that most of the satisfactions are private – you might still need to feel that someone is responding, even if you have no idea who they are. Until you are published it might be difficult to move on; you could easily feel that nothing had been achieved, and that by failing to reach another person – the reader – the circle had not been completed, the letter posted but not received. Perhaps without such completion a writer is destined to repeat himself, as people do when having conversations with themselves, conversations never heard by anyone.

Yet father would not stop writing. It was crucial to him that these stories be told. Like Scheherazade, he was writing for his life.

Where do stories come from? What is there to write about? Where do you get material? How do you start? And: why are writers asked these questions so often?

It isn't as if you can go shopping for experience. Or is it? Such an idea suggests that experience is somehow outside yourself, and must be gathered. But in fact, it is a question of seeing what is there. Experience is what has already happened. Experience, like love and hate, starts at home: in the bedroom, in the kitchen. It happens the moment people are together, or apart, when they want one another and when they realize they don't like their lover's ears.

Stories are everywhere, and they can be made from the simplest things. Preferably from the simplest things, as father would have said, if they are the right, the precise, the correct things, and if the chosen material is profitable, useful and sufficiently malleable. I say chosen, but if the writer is attentive the stories she needs to shape her urgent concerns will occur unbidden. There are certain ideas, like certain people, that the writer will be drawn to. She only has to wait and look. She cannot expect to know why this idea has been preferred to that until the story has been written, if then.

There is a sense – there has to be a sense – in which most writers do not entirely understand what they are doing. You suspect there might be something you can use. But you don't know what it is. You have to find out by beginning. And what you discover probably will not be what you originally imagined or hoped for. Some surprises can be discomfiting. But this useful ignorance, or tension with the unknown, can be fruitful, if not a little unreliable at times.

The master Chekhov taught that it is in the ordinary, the everyday, the unremarkable – and in the usually unremarked – that the deepest, most extraordinary and affecting events occur. These observations of the ordinary are bound up with everyone else's experience – the universal – and with what it is to be a child, parent, husband, lover. Most of the significant moments of one's life are 'insignificant' to other people. It is showing how and why they are significant and also why they may seem absurd, that is art.

The aged Tolstoy thought he had to solve all the problems of life. Chekhov saw that these problems could only be put, not answered, at least by the part of yourself that was an artist. Perhaps as a man you could be effective in the world; and Chekhov was. As a writer, though, scepticism was preferable to a didacticism or advocacy that seemed to settle everything but which, in reality, closed everything off. Political or spiritual solutions rendered the world less interesting. Rather than reminding you of its baffling strangeness, they flattened it out.

In the end there is only one subject for an artist. What is the nature of human experience? What is it to be alive, suffer and feel? What is it to love or need another person? To what extent can we know anyone else? Or ourselves? In other words, what it is to be a human being. These are questions that can never be answered satisfactorily but they have to be put again and again by each generation and by each person. The writer trades in dissatisfaction.

How, then, can the novel, the subtlest and most flexible form of human expression, die? Literature is concerned with the self-conscious exploration of the lives of men, women and children in society. Even when it is comic, it sees life as something worth talking about. This is why airport fiction, or 'blockbusters', books which are all plot, can never be considered literature, and why, in the end, they are of little value. It is not only that the language in which they are written lacks bounce and poignancy, but that they don't return the reader to the multifariousness and complication of existence. This, too, is why journalism and literature are opposed to one another, rather than being allies. Most journalism is about erasing personality in favour of the facts, or the 'story'. The personality of the journalist is unimportant. In literature personality is all, and the exploration of character – or portraiture, the human subject – is central to it.

Writers are often asked if their work is autobiographical. If it seems to me to be an odd, somewhat redundant question – where else

could the work come from, except from the self? – I wonder whether it is because there remains something mysterious about the conversion of experience into representation. Yet this is something we do all the time. We work over our lives continuously; our minds generate and invent in night-dreaming, day-dreaming and in fantasy. In these modes we can see that the most fantastic and absurd ideas can contain human truth. Or perhaps we can see how it is that important truths require a strange shape in order to be made acceptable. Or perhaps it is simply true that the facts of life are just very strange.

Still, it is odd, the public's desire to see fiction as disguised, or treated, or embellished, autobiography. It is as if one requires a clear line between what has happened and what has been imagined later in the construction of a story. Perhaps there is something childish about the make-believe of fiction which is disconcerting, rather like taking dreams seriously. It is as if we live in too many disparate worlds at once – in the solid everyday world, and in the insubstantial, fantastic one at the same time. It is difficult to put them all together. But the imagination and one's wishes are real too. They are part of daily life, and the distinction between the softness of dreams and hard reality can never be made clear. You might as easily say, 'we live in dreams'.

Sometimes I wonder whether the question about autobiography is really a question about why some people can do certain things and not others. If everyone has experience then everyone could write it down and make a book of it. Perhaps writers are, in the end, only the people who bother. It may be that everyone is creative – after all, children start that way, imagining what is not there. They are always 'telling stories' and 'showing off'. But not everyone is talented. It is significant that none of the many biographies of Chekhov – some have more of the 'facts' than others – can supply us with an answer to the question 'why him?' That a man of his temperament, background and interests should have become one of the supreme writers, not only of his time but of all time, is inexplicable. How is it that he lived the life he did and wrote the stories and plays he did? Any answer to this can only

be sought in the work, and it can only ever remain a mystery. After all, everyone has some kind of life, but how that might be made of interest to others, or significant or entertaining, is another matter. A mountain of facts don't make a molehill of art.

Writing seems to be a problem of some kind. It isn't as if most people can just sit down and start to write brilliantly, get up from the desk, do something else all day, and then, next morning start again without any conflict or anxiety. To begin to write – to attempt anything creative, for that matter – is to ask many other questions, not only about the craft itself, but of oneself, and of life. The blank empty page is a representation of this helplessness. Who am I? it asks. How should I live? Who do I want to be?

For a long time I went to my desk as if my life depended on it. And it did; I had made it so, as my father did. Therefore any dereliction seemed catastrophic. Of course, with any writer the desire to write will come and go. At times you will absolutely rebel against going to your desk. And if you are sensible, you will not go. There are more pressing needs.

There are many paradoxes here. Your work has to mean everything. But if it means too much, if it is not sufficiently careless, the imagination doesn't run. Young writers in particular will sometimes labour over the same piece of work for too long – they can't let it go, move on or start anything new. The particular piece of work carries too heavy a freight of hope, expectation and fear.

You fear finishing a piece of work because then, if you hand it over, judgement starts. There will be criticism and denigration. It will be like being young again, when you were subject to the criticism of others, and seemed unable to defend yourself, though most of the denigration people have to face has been internalized, and comes from within. Sometimes you feel like saying: Nobody dislikes my work quite as much as I do. Recently I was talking to a friend, a professional writer, who is conscious of not having done as well as she should have, and hasn't written anything for a while. She was complaining about her own work. 'It isn't any good, that's

the problem,' she kept saying. But as good as what? As good as Shakespeare?

You don't want to make mistakes because you don't want a failure that will undermine you even more. But if you don't make mistakes nothing is achieved. Sometimes you have to feel free to write badly, but it takes confidence to see that somehow the bad writing can sponsor the good writing, that volume can lead to quality. Sometimes, too, even at the end of a piece of writing, you have to leave the flaws in; they are part of it. Or they can't be eliminated without something important being lost, some flavour or necessary energy. You can't make everything perfect but you have to try to.

At one time I imagined that if I wrote like other people, if I imitated writers I liked, I would only have to expose myself through a disguise. I did this for a time, but my own self kept coming through. It took me a while to see that isn't a question of discovering your voice but of seeing that you have a voice already just as you have a personality, and that if you continue to write you have no choice but to speak, write, and live in it. What you have to do, in a sense, is take possession of yourself. The human being and the writer are the same.

Not long ago I was working with a director on a film. After I'd completed several drafts he came to me with pages of notes. I went through them and some of his ideas and questions seemed legitimate. But still I balked, and wondered why. Was this only vanity? Surely it wasn't that I didn't want to improve my film? After thinking about it, I saw that the way I had originally written it was an expression of my voice, of my view of the world. If that was removed, not much remained apart from the obligatory but uninspiring technical accomplishment.

One of the problems of writing, and of using the self as material, is that this will recall powerful memories. To sit at a desk with a pen is to recall familiar fears and disappointments – and in particular, conflicts – which are the essence of drama. This is partly the difficulty of coming to terms with the attitude to learning that

you have already picked up from your parents and teachers, from the experience of being at home and at school; and from the expectations of all of these. There is the inability to concentrate and the knowledge that you must do so for fear of punishment. There is boredom, and the anxiety that more exciting things are going on elsewhere.

How soon memories of this kind of learning bring back other discouraging ideas. The limitless power of parents and teachers – that they know everything and you know nothing, for instance; and that if you resist them you are either stupid or obstinate. You recall, too, somehow being taught that work is boring but that you must endure it; and that endurance – putting up with uninteresting things – is a necessary quality in the everyday world. You must be unquestioningly prepared for a good deal of tedium otherwise you are indolent or useless.

How soon, too, when you start to write, do several other things become clear. How much you want to succeed, for instance. Or how much you require the reassurance of some kind of success, or of some kind of enviable status that you believe that writing will bring. To begin to write is to recognize both how much you require such reassurance, and how far away it really is.

But you might also recall the concentration of childhood play – long periods of absorption and reverie as the unforced imagination runs. You concentrate then out of pleasure; there is no conflict. Often, the self seems to disappear. There is, however, a puzzle here. How is playing – playing with the language, playing with ideas – going to produce the necessary result? After all, children just play. They don't make complete objects. They don't revise; their games aren't for anyone else.

Perhaps writing requires the regularity of work and the inspiration and pleasure of play. But this inspiration and pleasure cannot just be conjured up on demand. Or can it? Children never think of such things. If a toy or game doesn't give them pleasure they throw it aside and seek something that does. But if you did that as a writer, just went off when you felt like it, nothing would get done. Or would it? A good deal of writing is finding a method

that will make the writing happen. And how the writing happens depends on the ideas we already have about ourselves. We shouldn't forget that we create our creativity, and imagine our imagination.

You have to tackle all this while knowing that these are, really, questions about who you are, and who you will become.

I started to write seriously around the age of 14 or 15. At school I felt that what I was expected to learn was irrelevant and tedious. The teachers didn't conceal their boredom. Like us, they couldn't wait to get out. I felt I was being stuffed with the unwanted by fools. I couldn't make the information part of myself; it had to be held at a distance, like unpleasant food. The alternative was compliance. Or there was rebellion.

Then there was writing, which was an active way of taking possession of the world. I could be omnipotent, rather than a victim. Writing became a way of processing, ordering, what seemed like chaos. If I wrote because my father did, I soon learned that writing was the one place where I had dominion, where I was in charge. At a desk in my study, enwombed, warm, concentrated, self-contained, with everything I needed to hand – music, pens, paper, typewriter – I could make a world in which disharmonies could be contained, and perhaps drained of their poison. I wrote to make myself feel better, because often I didn't feel too good. I wrote to become a writer and get away from the suburbs. But while I was there my father's story-telling enlivened the half-dead world for me. Stories were an excuse, a reason, a way of being interested in things. Looking for stories was a way of trying to see what was going on within and without. People write because it is crucial to them to put their side of the story without interruption. This is how they see it; this is how it was for them – their version. They need to get things clear in their own minds, and in everyone else's. To write is to be puzzled a second time by one's experience; it is also to savour it. In such reflection there is time to taste and engage with your own life in its complexity.

Experience keeps coming. If the self is partly formed from the blows, wounds and marks made by the world, then writing is a kind of self-healing. But creativity initiates disturbance too. It is a kind of scepticism which attacks that which is petrified. Perhaps this is a source of the dispute between Rushdie and the mullahs. Art represents freedom of thought – not merely in a political or moral sense – but the freedom of the mind to go where it wishes; to express dangerous wishes. This freedom, of course, is a kind of instability. Wishes conflict with the forbidden, the concealed, with that which cannot or should not be thought, and certainly not said. The creative imagination is usefully aggressive; it undermines authority; it can seem uncontrollable; it is erotic and breaks up that which has become solid. I remember some of my father's friends complaining to him about my work, particularly *My Beautiful Laundrette*. For Asians in the West, or for anyone in exile, intellectual and emotional disarray can seem unbearable. The artist may be a conduit for the forbidden, for that which is too dangerous to say, but he isn't always going to be thanked for his trouble.

I wrote, too, because it was absorbing. I was fascinated by how one thing led to another. Once I'd started banging on my typewriter, in my bedroom above Father's, I wanted to see what might be done, where such creative curiosity might lead me. You'd be in the middle of a story, in some unfamiliar imaginative place, but you'd only got there because you'd been brave enough to start off. I was impatient, which hindered me. As soon as I began something I wanted to get to the end of it. I want to succeed rather than search. I wanted to be the sort of person who had written books, rather than a person who was merely writing them. Probably I inherited father's desperation as a kind of impatience. I am still impatient; it isn't much fun sitting at a desk with nothing happening. But at least I can see the necessity for impatience in writing – the desire to have something done, which must push against the necessity to wait, for the rumination that allows you

to see how a piece of writing might develop or need to find its own way over time, without being hurried to a conclusion.

When, after my teenage interest in literature, I decided on graduating to do nothing but write, my enthusiasm and indeed my spirit fell away. I found that it is one thing to write for yourself in your bedroom after school, but that it is another to do it eight hours a day for a living. It was tough; the only response I met was silence and indifference. I starved myself of other people's attention and it is difficult to write in a vacuum, though this is what I did. From the window of my flat I would watch the people going to work in the morning, envying their hurry and purpose. They knew what they were doing; they weren't floundering.

I made myself sit for hours at the desk feeling nothing but a strong desire to be elsewhere. Eventually I would go elsewhere but would feel nothing but the desire to return to my desk. I'd stare at the paper, wanting it to come, wanting to force it, knowing it cannot be forced. But if you don't push a little, you feel helpless, as if nothing is being done. Learning to wait is a trial if you don't know what you're waiting for. Soon I found it difficult to go out; it was almost impossible for me to communicate; I couldn't see any reason to continue. Hatred of others and of myself was all I felt; and then despair. I made myself depressed.

I couldn't see the extent to which pleasure had to be part of the work. Perhaps I had picked this up from my father: writing is unrewarding in the long run. There is much rejection to bear. Mostly it is failure and defeat; a sort of prolonged martyrship. In fact, this wasn't my experience. As soon as I started to write plays they were produced. But I lived as if it were.

I knew I was a writer but no one else was aware of this important fact. I knew I was a writer but I hadn't written anything I was pleased with, anything that was any good or any use to anyone. In fact I didn't know what to write; I didn't know what my characters should say to one another. I'd write a line, scratch it out, write another, scratch it out, and despise myself for my failure. Writing was an excuse to attack myself. Father had both encouraged and

discouraged my efforts. He could be caustic, dismissive, curt. His contempt for himself and his own failed efforts were visited on me.

I was afraid to write because I was ashamed of my feelings and beliefs. The practice of any art can be a good excuse for self-loathing. You require a certain shamelessness to be any kind of artist. But to be shameless you need not to mind who you are.

Sometimes writers like to imagine that the difficulty of becoming a writer resides in convincing others that that is what you are. But really the problem is in convincing yourself. You can become trapped within an odd, Beckettian paradox. There is the internal pressure of what must be said. At the same time you are possessed by the futility of all speaking. The image I have is of an open mouth, saying nothing. It is as if you have translated your words into the language of zero at the moment of their delivery, for fear of how powerful they might be.

If there isn't a commitment, if you keep yourself semi-serious and don't quite believe in the writing project yourself, you can back out without feeling that you have failed. You recruit others, then, to convince you of something you don't believe yourself. But they will sense your scepticism and return it to you. It is only when you give yourself to your work that you will get anywhere. But how to get to that point?

The people outside on the street walking to work had 'discipline'. Surely, if I were to get anywhere, I had to sit still for long periods. Discipline, then, is a kind of violence and involves the suppression of other wishes. It becomes necessary when really you'd much rather do something else. Sometimes it is important to believe that behind everything worthwhile there is difficulty. It is imagined that difficulty and moral strength – or virtue – go together. It is as if the harder something has been to write, the more painful the conception, the better it will be.

If artists suffer it is not only because their work involves sacrifice and dedication. It is because they are required to have close contact with the unconscious. And the unconscious – bursting with desire

as it is – is unruly. That is often how creativity is represented, as being an unruly force, a kind of colonial mob or animal instinct that must be suppressed. Artists become representative of the unruly forces within everyone. They have to live these out, and live with them, all the time. It is the price they pay for 'talent'. If most people in the bourgeois world have to live constrained lives, artists do a certain kind of crazy living for those who can't.

One of the conditions of being a writer is the ability to bear and enjoy solitude. Sometimes you get up from your desk under the impression that your inner world has more meaning than the Real one. Yet solitude – the condition of all important creative and intellectual work – isn't something we're taught, nor is it much attended to as a necessary human practice. People often avoid the solitude they need because they will feel guilty at leaving other people out. But communing with yourself, the putting aside of time for the calm exploration of inner states where experience can be processed, where dim intuitions, the unclear and inchoate can be examined, and where the undistracted mind drifts and considers what it requires, is essential. In this solitude there may be helplessness. You may be aware of too much experience, and an inability to see, for some time, what the creative possibilities are.

The solitude of writing is not the same as loneliness or isolation. When the words are flowing the self disappears and your anxieties, doubts and reservations are suspended. There isn't a self to be lonely. But such solitude can become mixed up with loneliness. You can delude yourself that everything you need can be obtained within, in the imagination; that the people you create and move around as characters can supply everything that real people can. In a sense you are asking too much of your art. You have to learn to separate these things out. In that sense writing, or becoming a writer, is, like sexuality, a paradigm for all one's learning, and for all one's relationships.

I conceived the idea of what became *The Buddha of Suburbia* on the balcony of a hotel room in Madras, my father's birthplace.

Until then, as a professional writer, I had written plays and films, though I'd already published the first chapter of *The Buddha of Suburbia* as a short story. Ever since it had appeared in print the characters and situation remained with me. Normally you finish something with a sense of relief. It is over because you are bored with it and, for now – until the next time – you have said as much as you can. But I had hardly begun. I knew – my excitement told me – that I had material for a whole book: south London in the 1970s, growing up as a 'semi-Asian' kid; pop, fashion, drugs, sexuality. My task was to find a way to organize it.

Often, to begin writing all you need is an idea, a germ, a picture, a hint, a moment's recognition – an excuse for everything else you've been thinking to gather or organize around, so that everything falls into place. In the search for stories you look for something likely and malleable, which connects with the other things you are thinking at the time. I have to say that with *The Buddha of Suburbia* I was also excited by the idea of being occupied for two years, of having what was, for me, a big project.

Looking at the journal I kept at the time, I can see how much I knew of what I was doing; and, concurrently, how little. It had to be a discovery – of that which was already there. I am reminded of a phrase by Alfred de Musset: 'It is not work. It is merely listening. It is as if some unknown person were speaking in your ear.'

I spent ages trying to unblock myself, removing obstacles, and trying to create a clear channel between the past and my pen. Then, as now, I wrote pages and pages of rough notes; words, sentences, paragraphs, character biographies, all, at the time, disconnected. There was a lot of material but it was pretty chaotic. It needed order but too much order too soon was more dangerous than chaos. I didn't want to stifle my imagination just as it was exploding, even if it did make me feel unstable. An iron control stops anything interesting happening. Somehow you have to assemble all the pieces of your puzzle without knowing whether they will fit together. The pattern or total picture is something

you have to discover later. You need to believe even when the only basis for belief is the vague intuition that a complete story will emerge.

The atmosphere I had already. But the characters and the detail – the world of the book – I had to create from scratch. Establishing the tone, the voice, the attitude, the way I wanted to see the material, and the way I wanted the central character, Karim, to express himself, was crucial. Once I found the tone, the work developed independent life; I could see what should be in or out. I could hear the wrong notes.

The Buddha of Suburbia was written close to myself, which can make the writing more difficult in some ways, if not easier in others. I knew the preparation – living – had already been done. But in writing so directly from the self there are more opportunities for shame and embarrassment. Also, these characters are so much part of oneself, that you can almost forget to transfer them to the page, imagining that somehow they are already there.

There are other dangers. You might want the control that writing provides, but it can be a heady and disturbing sort of omnipotence. In the imaginative world you can keep certain people alive and destroy or reduce others. People can be transformed into tragic, comic, or inconsequential figures. They are at the centre of their own lives, but you can make them extras. You can also make yourself a hero or fool, or both. Art can be revenge as well as reparation. This can be an immense source of energy. However, the desires and wishes conjured by the free imagination can make the writer both fearful and guilty. There are certain things you would rather not know that you think. At the same time you recognize that these thoughts are important, and that you can't move forward without having expressed them. Writing might, therefore, have the aspect of an infidelity or betrayal, as the pen reveals secrets it is dangerous to give away. The problem, then, with explorations, or experiments, is not that you will find nothing, but that you will find too much, and too much will change. In these circumstances it might be easier to write nothing, or to block

yourself. If we are creatures that need and love to imagine, then the question to ask has to be how, why and when does this stop happening? Why is the imagination so terrifying that we have to censor it? What can we think that is, so to speak, unimaginable?

A block holds everything together; it keeps important things down, for a reason. A block might then work like depression, as a way of keeping the unacceptable at a distance, even as it continuously reminds you that it is there.

Once I'd embarked on *The Buddha of Suburbia* I found characters and situations I couldn't have planned for. Changez, in particular, was a character who sprang from an unknown source. I knew Jamila had to have a husband who'd never been to England before. In my journal of January 1988 I wrote 'Part of me wants him to read Conan Doyle. Another part wants him to be illiterate, from a village. Try both.' Originally I had imagined a cruel, tyrannical figure, who would clash violently with Jamila. But that kind of cruelty didn't fit with the tone of the novel. I found, as I experimented, that the naiveté I gave Changez soon presented me with opportunities for irony. If arranged marriages are an affront to the romantic idea that love isn't something that can be arranged, what would happen if Changez did fall in love with his wife? What if she became a lesbian?

Many of the ideas I tried in the book seemed eccentric even as I conceived them. I taught myself not to be too dismissive of the strange. There was often something in peculiar ideas that might surprise and startle the reader just as I had been jolted myself.

When my films were made and books published Father was delighted, if not a little surprised. It was what he wanted, except that it happened to me rather than to him. Towards the end of his life, which coincided with my becoming a professional writer, he became more frantic. He left his job, wrote more, and sent his books around the publishing houses with increasing desperation. At times he blamed me for his failure to get published. Surely I could help him as he had helped me? Even as he took pride in

what I was doing, my success was mocking him. For the first time he seemed to have become bitter. If I could do it, why couldn't he? Why can some people tell jokes, do imitations, juggle with knives and balance plates on their nose, while others can only make soufflés? How is it that people might persist in wanting to do something they will never excel at? Is writing difficult? Only if you can't do it.

I like to work every day, in the morning, like my father. That way I am faithful to him and to myself. I miss it badly if I don't do it. It has become a habit but it is not only that. It gives the day a necessary weight. I'm never bored by what I do. I go to it now with more rather than less enthusiasm. There is less time, of course, while there is more to say about the process of time itself. There are more characters, more experience and numerous ways of approaching it. If writing were not difficult it wouldn't be enjoyable. If it is too easy you can feel you haven't quite grasped the story, that you have omitted something essential. But the difficulty is more likely to be internal to the work itself – where it should be – rather than in some personal crisis. I'm not sure you become more fluent as you get older, but you become less fearful of imagined consequences. There has been a lot to clear away; then the work starts.

POLITICS & CULTURE

The Rainbow Sign

'God gave Noah the rainbow sign,
No more water, the fire next time!'

ONE: England

I was born in London of an English mother and Pakistani father. My father, who lives in London, came to England from Bombay in 1947 to be educated by the old colonial power. He married here and never went back to India. The rest of his large family, his brothers, their wives, his sisters, moved from Bombay to Karachi, in Pakistan, after partition.

Frequently during my childhood, I met my Pakistani uncles when they came to London on business. They were important, confident people who took me to hotels, restaurants and Test matches, often in taxis. But I had no idea of what the subcontinent was like or how my numerous uncles, aunts and cousins lived there. When I was nine or ten a teacher purposefully placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts in front of me and said to the class: Hanif comes from India. I wondered: did my uncles ride on camels? Surely not in their suits? Did my cousins, so like me in other ways, squat down in the sand like little Mowglis, half-naked and eating with their fingers?

In the mid-1960s, Pakistanis were a risible subject in England, derided on television and exploited by politicians. They had the worst jobs, they were uncomfortable in England, some of them had difficulties with the language. They were despised and out of place.

From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed.

It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else. I read with understanding a story in a newspaper about a black boy who, when he noticed that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water.

At school, one teacher always spoke to me in a 'Peter Sellers' Indian accent. Another refused to call me by my name, calling me Pakistani Pete instead. So I refused to call the teacher by *his* name and used his nickname instead. This led to trouble; arguments, detentions, escapes from school over hedges, and eventually suspension. This played into my hands; this couldn't have been better.

With a friend I roamed the streets and fields all day; I sat beside streams; I stole yellow lurex trousers from a shop and smuggled them out of the house under my school trousers; I hid in woods reading hard books; and I saw the film *Zulu* several times.

This friend, who became Johnny in my film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, came one day to the house. It was a shock.

He was dressed in jeans so tough they almost stood up by themselves. These were suspended above his boots by Union Jack braces of 'hangman's strength', revealing a stretch of milk bottle white leg. He seemed to have sprung up several inches because of his Doctor Marten's boots, which had steel caps and soles as thick as cheese sandwiches. His Ben Sherman shirt with a pleat down the back was essential. And his hair, which was only a quarter of an inch long all over, stuck out of his head like little nails. This unmoving creation he concentratedly touched up every hour with a sharpened steel comb that also served as a dagger.

He soon got the name Bog Brush, though this was not a moniker you would use to his face. Where before he was an angel-boy with a blond quiff flattened down by his mother's loving spit, a clean handkerchief always in his pocket, as well as being a keen cornet player for the Air Cadets, he'd now gained a brand-new truculent demeanour.

My mother was so terrified by this stormtrooper dancing on her doorstep to the 'Skinhead Moonstomp', which he moaned to himself continuously, that she had to lie down.

I decided to go out roaming with B.B. before my father got

home from work. But it wasn't the same as before. We couldn't have our talks without being interrupted. Bog Brush had become Someone. To his intense pleasure, similarly dressed strangers greeted Bog Brush in the street as if they were in a war-torn foreign country and in the same army battalion. We were suddenly banned from cinemas. The Wimpy Bar in which we sat for hours with milkshakes wouldn't let us in. As a matter of pride we now had to go round the back and lob a brick at the rear window of the place.

Other strangers would spot us from the other side of the street. B.B. would yell 'Leg it!' as the enemy dashed through traffic and leapt over the bonnets of cars to get at us, screaming obscenities and chasing us up alleys, across allotments, around reservoirs, and on and on.

And then, in the evening, B.B. took me to meet with the other lads. We climbed the park railings and strolled across to the football pitch, by the goal posts. This is where the lads congregated to hunt down Pakistanis and beat them. Most of them I was at school with. The others I'd grown up with. I knew their parents. They knew my father.

I withdrew, from the park, from the lads, to a safer place, within myself. I moved into what I call my 'temporary' period. I was only waiting now to get away, to leave the London suburbs, to make another kind of life, somewhere else, with better people.

In this isolation, in my bedroom where I listened to Pink Floyd, the Beatles and the John Peel Show, I started to write down the speeches of politicians, the words which helped create the neo-Nazi attitudes I saw around me. This I called 'keeping the accounts'.

In 1965, Enoch Powell said: 'We should not lose sight of the desirability of achieving a steady flow of voluntary repatriation for the elements which are proving unsuccessful or unassimilable.'

In 1967, Duncan Sandys said: 'The breeding of millions of half-caste children would merely produce a generation of misfits and create national tensions.'

I wasn't a misfit; I could join the elements of myself together.