

Book review

Hybridity of Identity: The Culture Clash of Fundamentalism and Modernism in Hanif  
Kureishi's *The Black Album*

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A novel by a British Muslim of Pakistani descent, Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* intertwines a bildungsroman narrative of a young British Pakistani with a commentary of the contrasting cultures of Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernism.

Set in 1989, the setting of an ever-urbanizing London amidst its swing back from 1960's counterculture, in what could be termed as a Freudian return of the repressed, provides Kureishi with a vibrant landscape to investigate the postcolonial theory of hybrid identity as a new way of life. Published in 1995, the novel shares its title with musical artist Prince's 1994 album, who in being "half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho, too"<sup>1</sup>, underlines Kureishi's main argument of deconstructing fixed identity in favour of a fluid system, to prevent individuals being oppressed by their own identity. The novel's protagonist, Shahid Hasan, idolizes Prince as a "river of talent"<sup>2</sup>, from which the reader can determine the pop star to be a signifier of change, at a time when Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie had fuelled the inception of neofascistic Islamic religious structures.

The novel engages in a discussion of the divergent paths of fundamentalism and modernism, as Shahid battles with the turmoil of wanting "to belong to his people"<sup>3</sup>, but also wanting to experience unlimited pleasure. Kureishi allegorically represents the two opposing ideals in the mentors which Shahid serves simultaneously whilst he is undecided which to pledge allegiance to. Firstly, he is drawn in by Riaz Al-Husain, his neighbour and the leader of a group of Muslim students at his college. Riaz's version of Islamic fundamentalism, although attractive in terms of brotherhood and having strong cultural values, is an extremely virulent form of authority and becomes tainted by its attitudes towards women, morality, and literature. Shahid's other mentor is Deedee Osgood, his tutor at the college with whom he engages in an extremely physical affair, and the values she espouses resemble the anarchy of consumerism, but in facilitating Shahid's experimentation with sex and drugs, she stimulates his imagination. The thematic use of characters, along with the indecisive and "tepid"<sup>4</sup> Shahid, alienate the characters from the reader, instead reading as plot tools. They make the novel seem more like an argument at times and there is obvious bias toward the imagination and literature by Hanif Kureishi, a lifelong writer.

Although the characters are flawed, Kureishi's use of narrative structure in *The Black Album* is a strength of this novel. The oscillating nature of his protagonist's ideals are mirrored in the novel's loose construction, and even when the arresting sequence does finally arrive, as Riaz and friends burn *The Satanic Verses* in a show of aggression against freedom of speech, Shahid as the young hero still wants to "appear neutral"<sup>5</sup>. At the end, however, Shahid does betray his cultural ideology for pleasure and love, but the open-ended conclusion affirms the protagonist's continued search for self-identity as he deigns to live a life of "following his curiosity"<sup>6</sup>. Kureishi's experiment with hybrid identity is therefore successful, as he subverts the binary structure of appeasing any specific ideology.

## Bibliography

Kureishi, Hanif, *The Black Album* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)

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<sup>1</sup> Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2009) p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Kureishi, *The Black Album*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Kureishi, *The Black Album*, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> Kureishi, *The Black Album*, p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> Kureishi, *The Black Album*, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup> Kureishi, *The Black Album*, p. 274.

