

**“WE ARE CHILDREN OF BRITAIN WITHOUT HOME”: A STUDY OF
HANIF KUREISHI’S *THE BLACK ALBUM***

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Abstract

The Oxford American Dictionary of Current English defines “Identity” as “the specific quality or condition of being a specific person or an object.” A person’s identity is determined in terms of his/her inherited traditions, particularly the inherited religion, of the community in which they happen to be born, the place and society, gender and last but not least the colour of the skin, the unchosen formats, to which Dr. Amartya Sen called the “pre-ordained truths.” Amid the present world of liquid modernity, multiculturalism and globalization, the unchosen artifacts happen to have become less important in constructing one person’s identity. The question is then what should be the parameters to judge or identify someone.

The paper “We are Children of Britain without Home”: A Study of Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album*, deals with the recurrent problem of the clash of cultures, East with West, the process of doing away with the confusion and realizing that there is no one right identity, as identities are fluid and constantly changing. It also discusses about the South Asian immigrants specifically the Pakistanis in Britain, their attempt in the assimilation process, and as rejection experiences of racism, poverty and exclusion in the society. The result of such discrimination caused rootlessness, inferiority complex and the confused state of self. It also talks about the rise of religious fanaticism as a movement against the discrimination by the Britons towards the immigrants and their struggle to unify in a community to get recognition. It also talks about the specific characters associated with the process in the novel.

Keywords: Identity, Racism, Assimilation, Adaption and Adoption, Discrimination, Separatists, Fundamentalism, Self-discovery, Self-empowerment, Self-exploration, In-betweenness, Hybridity, Hybrid-self.

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care - Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it.
(*The Buddha of Suburbia*¹)

Karim Amir, the protagonist of Hanif Kureishi's well celebrated novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*² (1990) best exemplifies the situation of the second generation Pakistani immigrants of the 1980s Britain. Similar to Karim Amir is Shahid Hasan (*The Black Album*)³, a restless young man who craves for an escape from the confines of the suburban life and desires for a new start with new people in new place, far away from the tensions of assimilation and racism. Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1995) basically deals with the problem of 'identity' of mass and individuals in a completely new setup wherein these characters undergo an eternal state of indecisiveness whether to accept the culture of that place, community and society (Assimilate) or to reject those and retain their own value systems. Shahid Hasan, the protagonist of the novel is a metonym for the alienated youth from the migrated Pakistani population of Britain in the 1980s. He is a clock pendulum between the inner working of a young mind, forged into the furnace of Thatcherism and his traditional lineage to Asian Heritage. He is a divide between ideology and practical life, British thinking, Capitalism, fall of Socialism and Communism, in the social theatre of war of Postmodernism, Liberalism and Fundamentalism. He "wants to be challenged intellectually and in every other way" (*The Black Album*, p. 5).

The Initial Dilemma

Shahid lives with his inferiority complex, the harsh reality of the "pre-ordained truth"⁴: "I kept on thinking there was something I lacked" (*The Black Album*, p. 10). He craves for recognition in the society, a common cause of mental quest among the minorities in Britain. Every time he questions why he is so different or if it was necessary for him to be committed to something in life to achieve his identity:

... why I can't be a racist like everyone else? Why do I have to miss out on that privilege? Why is it only me who has to be good? Why I can't swagger around pissing on others of being inferior?

(*The Black Album*, p. 11)

Shahid's self-questioning reminds one of Amartya Sen and Mike Williams' concept of identity, that human beings are capable of creating their own truth or subjective truth, but at the same time they experience a state of in-betweenness, a dilemma to live as they are or should they be living to what is claimed to be preordained truth.⁵ Shahid fits in there as the true picture of the argument. Shahid, at the beginning of the novel failed to get an answer to such questions, tried to find recognition in the society by attempting to adopt the racist attitude of the British "I wanted to be a racist" (*The Black Album*, p. 10), "I began to turn into one of them" (Shahid, *The Black Album*, p. 11), a self contradictory nature which was invaded by expressions like:

... killing – nigger fantasies ... of going around abusing Pakis, niggers, Chinks, Irish, any foreign scum. I slagged them under my breath whenever I saw them. I wanted to kick them up the arse. The thought of sleeping with Asian girls made me sick. I'm being very honest now.

(*The Black Album*, p. 11)

Shahid's dilemmatic state further provokes him to join the British National Front and to get involved in their activities (racism against immigrants). Shahid even takes things to that intense to which he is sickened and put off by the looks of his own people:

'Even when they [members' immigrant community] came to me, I couldn't bear it. I thought, you know, wink at an Asian girl and she'll want to marry you up. I wouldn't touch brown flesh, except with a branding iron. I hated all foreign bastards.

(*The Black Album*, p. 11)

Racism and Britain

Shahid was brought up in a liberal environment and was taught to admire the Western cultures, but the surprise comes when we see him getting involved in a strict religious group on his arrival in London. Like the second generation immigrants, Shahid's shift is a common feature which is consequential of the external pressures of the adopted land. Although groomed as a middle-class Englishman, Shahid faces humiliation throughout his life of not being a White. He is constantly reminded of his ethnicity since his childhood. To quote him:

... in that part of the country, more of a freak than I did normally. I had been kicked around and chased a lot, you know. It made me terrifyingly sensitive. I kept on thinking there was something I lacked.

(*The Black Album*, p. 10)

Everywhere I went, I was the only dark-skinned person. How did this make people see me? I began to be scared of going into certain places. I didn't know what they were thinking. I was convinced that they were full of sneering and disgust and hatred. And if they were pleasant I imagined they were hypocrites. I became paranoid. I couldn't go out. I knew was confused and ... fucked up. But I didn't know what to do

(*The Black Album*, p. 10)

Shahid's disillusionment can be well understood in the light of the views of Keith Hoggart and Emrys Jones work on the life of immigrants. In their book, *London: A New Metropolitan Geography*,⁴ they aver that the immigrants are looked upon as "competitors for scarce resources," in a tensed and threatening situation in which:

... immigrants find themselves has had the effect of strengthening their communal identity. In London as in many other British cities, this tension has led to open conflict on numerous occasions, which in turn, has highlighted the existence of racial prejudice.⁶

Hoggart's statement becomes more evident from the following lines in the novel:

Paki! Paki! Paki! She screamed. Her body had become as arched limb of hatred with a livid opening at the tip, spewing curses. 'You stolen our jobs! Taken our housing! Paki got everything! Give it back and go back home!'

(*The Black Album*, p. 139)

The State of In-betweenness

The process of doing away with the confusion and realizing that there is no one right identity is not easy nor natural for South Asian immigrants, as they have had faced decades of blatant and indirect racism, poverty, exclusion and assimilation on behalf of native Britons. The first-generation British Asians, the nostalgia for their homeland, making adjustment and identity formation are even more problematic and painful. They are likely to feel caught between two worlds. In-betweenness is a constant feeling of dislocation and identity confusion, a feeling that characterises first generation immigrants the most. As for the second generation, however, a less strong bond with the home country and culture and the natural acceptance of the new world around them tends to result in another condition of cultural existence: hybridity.

John Hartley defines this milieu as the experience of Diaspora-consciousness; in his words: "The psychological and cultural experiences of diaspora can be one of hybridity, exile, nostalgia, selective adaption or cultural inventions,"⁷; in Shahid's case it is of thoughts. The phenomenon of diaspora necessarily involves a "structure of location followed by dislocation and relocation."⁸ Distancing from one's home-land and settling elsewhere on a long term basis does mean dislocation which brings a sense of loss and nostalgia. This is followed by a bid for relocation in an alien milieu through negotiation and adjustment and yet there is no guarantee that the outcomes will be a happy one where hybridity or in-betweenness being necessary adjuncts in the process.

Hybridity which refers to the creation of mixed cultural forms and subjectivities as a result of colonization rejects single, unified and pure identity and upholds multiple "in-between subjectivities."⁹ This vestige of the colonial theory is translated for post colonial, globalized world as "conceptualizing an international culture based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription of articulation of cultural hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is [...] that in between space- that carries the burden of meaning of cultures." Thus, the contemporary culture and cultural identity rests in the in-between space. The stress of in-betweenness becomes all the more acute in the case of Pakistani diaspora as the emotional bonds at the level of family kinship, religion and culture are quite strong there. This very characteristic has been brashly put forth by Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands*: "sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools"¹⁰ (p. 15). In Shahid's case though detachment from his birth land is not of much concern but the indifference among the family members, the loose bond among family kinship and his limited scope to the freedom of expression in his London life (fundamentalism) stirred him to get a new stand. He feels un-homed, an unconscious psychological ongoing of his mind which highlights that he is man who is at the mercy of social and political forces and his own personal weakness, "... I was confused and ... fucked-up. But I didn't know what to do" (*The Black Album*, p. 10).

Family Relation as a Cause of Low Self-esteem

Shahid's personal relation with his family members, especially with his father and brother is also an important reason for his confused personality. While he was in a process of finding an answer to the questions of rejection by the British, his family members put another paranoid to criticize him further. Though being rejected most of the time, his father wants him to admire and adopt the west more and asks him to "... emulate Chili" (*The Black Album*, p. 52) as a role model. His father and Chili, both find Shahid "a bookish effeminate," an unproductive person: "Shahid's studiousness was not only unproductive but an affliction for the family" (*The Black Album*, p. 41). He was considered as a "eunuch fool" (*The Black Album*, p. 52) for not being physically intimate with a girl on a date, instead reading poems of Shelley. His father felt dejected for Shahid's love for Arts and Literature:

Can't you stick to your studies? My nephews are ... and doctors. Ahamed has gone into the hat trade and built a sauna in his house! These artist types are always poor – how will you look relatives in the face.

(*The Black Album*, p. 75)

His father felt that they should keep trying to assimilate in the British culture rather questioning it because it could bring further disgrace. And therefore, at his deathbed, while removing his oxygen mask, his father drags Chili closer and whispers to him "don't let the boy go down" (*The Black Album*, p. 41).

Chili added another torment in Shahid's life. Likewise his father he also considered Shahid as "... womanish ... you were always such a cry-baby" (*The Black Album*, p. 42). Papa's favoritism of Chili led Shahid to think at one point: "Chili was the last person Shahid wanted to be like" (*The Black Album*, p. 51). Shahid's own rationality and his zest for cause and reason had led him into conflict to get a new stand for him. His father's and brother's life, their way of thinking, Shahid finds fault in it of not having any permanent stand. For reasons, Shahid adored his father as he remembers, "... copying the authoritative way Papa walked" (*The Black Album*, p. 76), but Shahid admits that "Papa was wrong and find his own direction, whatever that was" (*The Black Album*, p. 76). Though they (Papa and Chili) have adopted their culture (Western), they will never be accepted in the same stand. Therefore after his father's death he distanced him from his family and came to London in search for the answer of the question: "why they had come to England" (*The Black Album*, p. 7).

Shahid's relationship with his family members was a dissatisfactory one. In his home, he remained as a second class citizen, time and again bossed by his family members. Despite the family's modernity, Shahid is still an heir to the culture in which "the discipline of the father tied the child to tradition, to a particular definition of the past; authority in this situation remained largely dogmatic assertion."¹¹ His dilemma is his tension between his natural human desire to be accepted and respected by others, and submission to externally imposed rules as a necessary condition. It is important here to note that all his family members strictly follow the Western way of life and still have no acceptance in that country and that is the identified problem for Shahid; as to become one of them, all were losing what he or she is, but still there was no acceptance:

... were like new brides who've just crossed the threshold. We have to watch ourselves, otherwise we will wake up one day to find we have made a calamitous marriage.

(*The Black Album*, p. 54)

Experiencing Rejection

Despite being in Britain for such a long period, Shahid is never warmly accepted. This “rejection” leaves him in a dilemmatic state and he questions his own existence (identity quest). Shahid’s psychological war and his state of in-betweenness is the outcome of the clash between his ethical ties and his struggle to settle down in the new land. This state of in-betweenness was something very common for the second generation migrants in British London in the 1980s. Shahid’s father’s migration to London, his admiration, adaption and adoption of British way of life was well tutored in them. But Shahid doubts the benefits of learning those English ways:

Papa took his boy personally to shops, ensuring that both he and they had the finest clothes ... He taught his boys such courtesies, and how to shake hands firmly while saying ‘How do you do?’ He wanted people to say how smart his sons were. But had they Benefited?

(Shahid, *The Black Album* p. 53)

Moreover his father’s too much indulgence in the English lifestyle and food habits generates a kind of intense disbelief in Shahid towards the adopted culture. It also lands him into a state of confusion, whether to follow one’s own culture or to succumb to the foreign culture. Shahid’s existence as a non-European in Europe, and the dominating nature of Western culture ultimately twists his personality, of a man without any anchor in his life: “I became paranoid. I couldn’t go out ... I was confused ... fucked up...I didn’t know what to do” (*The Black Album*, p. 10).

Locating the Self: Quest for Identity

Shahid tries to find a place in the society where he can fit in and feel the purpose of his belonging. Shahid’s transition from his Pakistani ancestry to his desire to be accepted as a Briton makes him explore areas such as religion, race, culture and traditions, Fundamentalism, Marxism and Liberalism.

Towards Fundamentalism

Shahid is vulnerable, a nominal Muslim. His search to make things simple in life leads him in the company of the bulging radical Islamic group led by Riaz. Shahid’s temporary submission to the group has a deeper ground of meaning. Riaz quickly recognizes that Shahid is “searching for something” (*The Black Album*, p. 5) and every moment of his [your] soul cry[ing] for belonging (*The Black Album*, p. 10), common happening among the people joining to the cult. At the beginning the group did not seem to be radical, instead it was more related to humanitarian cause and to follow the religion. Deikman, in his book *Them and Us: Cult Thinking and the Terrorist Threat*,¹² asserts that most social group of this kind “share characteristics of family groups with members who occupy dominant (parent) and subordinate (child) roles.” Riaz’s group was the substitute for his dissatisfactory family relationship. Shahid felt that Riaz, Chad, Hat and Tahira are like him:

Riaz and Hat and Chad are the first people he’s met who are alike him, he doesn’t have to explain anything. Chad trust him, Hat has called him brother. He is closer to the gang than he is to his own family.

(*The Black Album*, p. 57)

Fatwa, Book Burning Issue and Shahid's Separate Stand

Gradually Shahid starts to discover the true nature of this group. Though Riaz's fundamentalist aggressiveness: "we're not blasted Christians ... We don't turn the other cheek. We will fight for our people" (*The Black Album*, p. 82) makes Shahid to identify himself with Riaz for a little while and feels "a physical pride in their cause" (*The Black Album*, p. 83), but Riaz's militant methods of burning the book and attacking him [Shahid] and Deede leads him in disillusionment: "how he would reclaim himself. This destruction of a book, a book which was a question - had embedded an attitude to life which he had to consider" (*The Black Album*, p. 227). The Muslim students became more and more destructive. The ritual burning of an unnamed controversial novel (presumably *The Satanic Verses*, 1988) was the final blow that gave him courage to part with his Muslim friends. Rushdie's depiction of the Prophet Muhammad SAW (PBUH) as a fallible and inconsistent leader provoked outrage and book burning protest in Britain as well as in many parts of the world. In 1990 the Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for Rushdie's death. Shahid differs from his fellow Muslim friends precisely because he is inclined to view the debate over the disputed novel in racial context rather than in a purely religious one. On the issue of Rushdie's controversial book, Shahid tries to minimize the writer's alleged guilt as a fault finder of Islam, reminding Chad and Farhat that "this man ... hasn't spat on us or refused us a job. He never called you Paki scam, did he?" (*The Black Album*, p. 218)

Kureishi as an observant of the phenomenon, understands the motives behind this religious rebellion and sympathizes with the Muslim impulses to reject the excess of the West, but through Shahid shows that; "Muslim fanaticism is also corrupted by racial antipathy."¹³ Through Shahid, Kureishi tries to remind his fellow non-white Britons that what we need is the racial solidarity and the ability to overcome the cheap sentiments of religious intolerance.

From Resignation to Hedonism: Seeking Identity the Liberal Way

Shahid's exposure to what actually called the liberal ideas or liberalism is through his teacher Deede Osgood. She is a young Cultural Studies lecturer in Shahid's college. She is a white liberal ... discusses black history and contemporary culture, takes drug and attends raves. She is a post modern woman who believes in individuality and freedom of expression and encourages her students "to study anything that took their interest, from Madonna's hair to a history of leather jacket" (*The Black Album*, p. 26), "she always stimulates them to think" (*The Black Album*, p. 135). She happened to be a former sex-worker (only to support herself in her days in studies), a lower-middle class student and presently the wife of Dr. Andrew Brownlow and his colleague. She hates politics and his [Brownlow's] obsession with politics: "it all makes you feel guilty" (*The Black Album*, p. 55). She takes drug as ecstasy of life and asks Shahid to share it with her. She also exposes him (Shahid) to the party-liking, drug-addict rave culture of 1980s London:

Deede celebrated her discovery of a perfect venue for a house party by quoting Coleridge: A savage place! As holy as enchanted/ As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted/ By woman waiting for her demon lover ... drugged-out kids ... lying on the floor, not moving ... as if they'd been massacred!

(*The Black Album*, pp. 58-63)

Observing Deedee's addiction with drug and the preceding incidents, Buchanan remarks: "it makes the point that drug are a way to bring aesthetic bliss and Dionysian level of literary sophistication."¹⁴ Kaleta in his book *Hanif Kureishi; A Post-colonial Storyteller*,¹⁵ rightly remarks that "the sensationalism of his story telling continues in this novel, which includes such incendiary incidents as a 'rave' (street jargon for a gigantic all-night, drug-using, dancing party at an abandoned or large commercial site)."¹⁶ Anthony Mills in his essay "Prescient Parable: *The Black Album* by Hanif Kureishi" remarks: "Osgood teaches her students to interpret the world they live in through the prism of contemporary culture and history of racial and sexual politics. She inspires and excites Shahid, introducing him to ideas that he has never met before and offering sexual and sensual experiences that he has never had."¹⁷

Shahid gets involved with Deedee in a passionate and experimental love affair, breaking and crossing the conventions and religious boundaries. She has a strong personality and believes that life is an assimilation of individual experiences and "all limitations are prisons" (*The Black Album*, p. 25). Deedee wants to turn Shahid away from the influences of the Muslim fundamentalist group. She is more interested in the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and she has little time for constrains of strict religious beliefs. She makes Shahid aware how company and situation affects him: "but you're in a funny mood. When you've been with your friends your mouth curls down" (*The Black Album*, p. 152). She is fiercely resolute in her opposition to Islamic student's attempts to burn Rushdie's novel. According to Buchanan: "Deedee's strong conviction, as well as her willingness to use violence when necessary, links her to Jamila in *Buddha of Suburbia*."¹⁸

Deedee is a woman of strong intellectual understanding of politics and political games in the society. Therefore in the romantic relation with her student Shahid, she has chosen happiness and pleasure over politics. Together, as a couple they live out a role reversal fantasy in their relationship. Kureishi as a storyteller here has manipulated the power dynamics between the traditional stereotyped gender roles of male and female: "Shahid reduced first to a powerless little boy and then to a sex object and becomes free to move from resignation to hedonism. Deedee first demands mastery and later chooses conspiracy."¹⁸ Kureishi allowed his characters in self-experimentation, understanding of each other, making mistakes, hurt each other and to get hurt in relation. According to Kaleta, Kureishi explains, courageous acceptance of love's provisionality that underlies Shahid's and Deedees' affair.¹⁹ At the end of the novel the characters return to their traditional stereotype gender role of man in power and woman at his mercy. About their relationship what Kureishi thinks is –

[Power] shifts here and there ... as it does in all good relationships. What I liked about their relationship was the provisionality of it. Brownlow's Marxism of Raiz's Islam is quite severe strict religions, aren't they? Deedee's given all that up. Near the last line of the book she says – 'As long it's fun, which is provisional, she can only say who I am going to be, what I am going to feel, what I am going to be today, now. Then I am having somebody else.' Shahid agrees they can be fluid that way, as it were" ... it makes their relationship a good one.

(*Hanif Kureishi*, p. 124)²⁰

Shahid's relation with Deedee cannot offer him the various aspects of his quest: intellectual, racial and religious, rather her drug addiction and interest in pop-culture was quite

problematic in Shahid's life, but what she could offer him was that she showed him a way where he is able to live with himself. According to Holmes (Professor of English at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario): "what Deedee encourages in Shahid is a continuous reshaping of the self in erotic and artistic play."²¹

The Black Album, more precisely is Shahid's journey from an immature teen [from Pakistani immigrant community] towards a mature and decisive man. Throughout the novel, he remained as a wavering person who "believed everything ... [or] ...believed nothing" (*The Black Album*, p. 147). He is confounded by his own self-negotiating questions which land him nowhere: "one day he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite ... provisional states would alternate from hour to hour" (*The Black Album*, p. 147). He is a constant juggle between two tropes pulled in complete opposite directions, the clique of radical Islamic fundamentalism, led by Riaz and company, and on the other, the hedonistic pursuit of life engrossed in love, sex, drug and rave by his liberal minded teacher and lover Deedee. Presumably Shahid tries to associate things in his life to get back a prominent and equal claim in the society, wanting "... a new start with new people in a new place. The city would feel like his; he wouldn't be excluded: there had to be ways in which he could belong" (Kureishi, *The Black Album*, p. 16), but the lack of his central authority and boldness in his self "... crashed ... [him]... into chaos" (*The Black Album*, p. 147). The meaning of life, offered by his religious friends and their efforts to combat racism is an attractive feeling to Shahid. He cannot leave his friends as they are his people, fighting for a just cause but again at the same time he is anxious about his "lack of faith" (*The Black Album*, p. 96) in it. Uncertainty follows him everywhere and at one point he even resolves to leave Deedee with whom he is deeply in love: "... would leave Deedee before more feeling was released" (*The Black Album*, p. 132). He remains enthusiastic and confident and devoted to the cause (fundamentalist) as long as he is with his friends, however, when alone, he cannot help feeling like someone leaving cinema, he finds the world to be "more subtle and inexplicable" (*The Black Album*, p. 133) or fear in missing the charm of the sensationalism of love, sex and fantasies of eroticism. His indecisiveness and experimentation in his journey to find himself, makes him an escapist, a man carried away by thoughts rather than taking part in the action with appropriate judgments. Though the novel ends abruptly, in an undecided future of the couple, with hopes of "... new adventures ... [in their relationship] ... until it stops being fun ... Until then" (*The Black Album*, p.276), Shahid is able to overcome his uneasy internal struggle and finally his choice of uncertainty as a price for freedom shows his maturation as well. His identity struggle comes to a conclusion with the realization that at the end it depends on the individual what he wants to be and that becomes his/her identity, all a play of mind. Accepting the modern plurality as a major feature of the society, Kureishi, through his character renounces "identity" is not limited to certain parameters.

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