
Confronting British Racism in a Muslim Diasporic Setting: Critiquing Shahid's Quest for Identity in Hanif Kureishi's '*The Black Album*'

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Abstract

The present article discusses a critical phase in Muslim diasporic condition in England during the 1980s as represented in Hanif Kureishi's fiction *The Black Album* when the continuous rise of racist slurs and a simultaneous process of the suppression of the dissenters under the Thatcherite regime created a sense of detachment among the Muslim immigrants with their host country. Under such circumstances, many Muslims came together to form groups based on their religion since it provided them with a sense of security in a land that suddenly seemed to have turned its back upon them and their cause. An ever-growing feeling of deprivation led them often to follow strict guidelines of religious fundamentalism, and the new generations of Muslims started retorting back, relying more upon an identity of their own based on religio-cultural ethnicity than that of a liberal one that they hitherto mainly had taken resort to. This is a period of geopolitical upheaval since it witnessed the development of both Islamic fundamentalism and Islamophobia worldwide. Kureishi's fiction is an exciting depiction of

diasporic Muslims confronting these stages of development and their search for identity.

Keywords: racism, immigrants, fundamentalism, liberalism, Islam.

Introduction

Racism is not easy to define since it brings multiple other mutually inconclusive factors for a connotative idea of it. As Ali Rattansi puts it,

[...]even the briefest inquiry into the meaning of the term 'racism' throws up several perplexing questions and various cognate terms – ethnocentrism; nation, nationalism, and xenophobia; hostility to 'outsiders' and 'strangers,' and so forth – which require clarification. (6)

However, even after acknowledging various possible dimensions to its definition, if we have to come to a basic general understanding of the term, it can be said that "racism" is a way of looking

at the human population grossly based on racial differences where the binary of superior/inferior is inevitable. Though there is not and cannot be any concrete logic behind such divisions proving one race's superiority, white Europeans invented several branches of scientific observations like anthropometry and craniometry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to justify their superiority over the non-whites. As described in *Racism (Oxford Readers)*, following Wilson, racism thus can be defined as an ideology of racial domination based on (i) beliefs that a designated racial group is culturally inferior and (ii) the use of such beliefs to prescribe the racial group's treatment in society, as well as to explain its social position(4). In England, the history of racism is closely linked to the racial discrimination directed toward the citizens of its colonies during the period of colonial expansion and after the Second World War when many of those colonized people settled in Great Britain. During the 1960s and 70s, many Pakistani Muslims immigrated to England, drawing an anti-immigration stance from several groups of British people. Perhaps a fear of being overpowered by this sudden surge of Pakistanis in their land or perhaps an age-old sense of superiority over these once-colonized communities has led to a kind of racist attitude towards them by the whites. It is then that the Pakistanis and other South Asians came to be attacked by racist slurs such

as "Paki". During Margaret Thatcher's premiership in Britain, such attacks, often accompanied by physical assaults and other forms of torture against Pakistani immigrants, became quite common in England. It happened because of her own racist bias toward the diasporic Pakistanis, evident in her several election campaigns and speeches. Jenny Bourne refers to the following speech by Thatcher delivered as a part of a 1978 TV interview on immigration exposing her racist ideology:

If we went on as we are, then by the end of the century, there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. The British character has done so much for democracy, law, and so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people will react and be somewhat hostile to those coming in.

Under such circumstances, Hanif Kureishi's fiction *The Black Album* begins to unfold. The novel is set in the year 1989 when a fatwa was issued against Salman Rushdie for his allegedly blasphemous representation of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, in *The Satanic Verses*, and it reaches its culmination with the burning of this book by a fundamentalist Muslim students group. The protagonist of the novel, Shahid Hasan, who is throughout represented as torn between fundamentalist and liberal outlook of

the world view, failed to relate himself with this group and gradually detached himself from them. However, it is interesting that Shahid was initially drawn towards their ideologies, which were chiefly based on Islamic fundamentalism.

From the very onset of the novel, London is projected as a gloomy, bleak city with no prospect of hope anywhere, neither for its people nor for the people who once started migrating to it for a better standard of living or some other political reasons. Shahid Hasan recently moved to London from a British suburban town for his studies after being motivated by a young teacher, Deedee Osgood. He got admission to a college otherwise of no good repute. As the narrator says, "[I]ts reputation was less in academic area but more for gang rivalries, drugs, political violence. It was said that college reunions were held in Wandsworth Prison" (24). However, what is more significant here is what precedes this particular description of the college, where the narrator informs the readers that "[I]t was sixty percent black and Asian, with an ineffective library and no sports facilities" (24). The association of a low-profile college with sixty percent black and Asian students first and then with all sorts of crimes and lawlessness is indicative of the Government's apathy towards the actual and proper development of the immigrants living in England. Not only this college but also its surroundings have been

described by the narrator as a place of utter chaos and disorder. This place does not conform to these migrants' pre-conceived perception of London as a dreamland of prosperity and fulfillment. On his very first day in the city, Shahid's experience of London life is worth mentioning here:

He wondered, too, whether a nearby asylum had been recently closed down, since day and night on the High Road, dozens of exhibitions, gabblers, and maniacs yelled into the air. One man with a shaved head stood all day in a doorway with fists clenched, mumbling. Derelict young men--- Shahid had at first presumed they were students--- clutched beer cans like hand grenades; later, he would see them crashed out in doorways, with fluids seeping from them as if dogs had pissed on them. (3)

This setup is necessary for Kureishi to accentuate the gap between the dream and the reality— what the migrants once dreamt of and what they ultimately realized. However, before coming to this particular place, Shahid seemed to have never confronted such abysmal realities of migrant life. In this depressing setting where plenty of people were from Pakistan or other third-world countries, the issue of racism was not uncommon. It was not anything new to Shahid either. It was an all-pervading blemish in Britain and

had already poisoned the existence of Shahid to such an extent that to fight racist slurs and subsequent social ostracism in a white majority society; he often resorted to a sort of “reactionary nativism” in his days before getting admitted to the college. As Patrick Colm Hogan puts it, the term refers to “the general inversion of colonial and racist hierarchies such that members of the oppressed group affirm their racial and cultural authority in precisely the manner of the colonizers.” He further identifies it as a “reactionary tendency” to respond to “the physical and mental brutality of the oppressors, which it denies but does not overcome.” Shahid’s acting like a racist thus can be mainly linked to this “reactionary tendency” as a defense mechanism against British racism. In his first meeting with Riaz and Chad, Shahid called up how he had been previously treated in a dehumanizing way because of his brown complexion and Asian identity. While recollecting this inglorious part of his life, he also acknowledged how he had gradually started to believe that it was he who lacked something, occasioning his social ostracization everywhere:

Everywhere I went, I was the only dark-skinned person. I began to be scared of going into certain places. I was convinced they were full of sneering and disgust. Moreover, if they were pleasant, I imagined they were

hypocrites. I became paranoid.
(10)

The hatred that he had received from the whites in England for his being “other” eventually transmuted into a kind of hatred for his people. To counter this everyday trauma and humiliation associated with racial discrimination, he started acting like a racist himself. He grew such an irresistible aversion to other migrants in his mind that even the thought of sleeping with any Asian girl made him sick. A “white” racist self surreptitiously encroached upon his true self, and he started denying his existence as a Pakistani Muslim. However, this sense of detachment from his people was not internally satisfying. He felt himself turning into a “monster” gradually for acting like a racist, yet he could not help acting like one since it was only by this means that he felt he could face the racist torments:

I argued... why can't I 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 can't I swagger around pissing on others for being inferior? I began to turn into one of them.
(11)

It is at this juncture that he arrived at a place where contrary to his reactionary nativist attitudes instead

dominated a pride for being “other” and where his acting like a racist was not only disapproved of but also chastised by one of his newly met associates, Chad as a “vessel” of the poison of European racism and a “distorted” outcome (11).

Shahid’s family members were quite negligent about following any strict Islamic rituals as part of their lifestyle and were never bothered about their ethnic origin. Instead, they considered themselves an intrinsic part of Britain. Quite succinctly, the narrator describes the governing philosophy in Shahid's family when he says, “[T]heir parents had come to England to make an affluent and stable life in a country not run by tyrants” (53). So there is a significant gap between the world where Shahid had grown up and where he eventually turned up after getting admission to the college. The setting of this new world was of dissatisfaction, the struggle for equal rights for the migrants, and the fight for the religious authority of the Muslims. This was entirely a different world for Shahid, and this world had so much impact upon him that he, on the very first meeting with fundamentalist Riaz and Chad, came to realize how he so far had cheated himself by trying to act as a racist. Such a sense of self-deception gradually pushed him towards finding a close affinity with his newly met friends who were firm and rigid in

maintaining hard-line religious faith. This was something like rediscovering his self and retracing his Muslim identity in their association:

However, Shahid feared his ignorance would place him in no man's land. These days, everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, black, or Jew---brandishing whichever features they could claim, they would not be human. Shahid, too, wanted to belong to his people. (92)

Shahid’s involvement with this reactionary Muslim student group, nonetheless, was not without occasional moments of doubts relating to the acceptability of their motives and intentions. A series of discussions and conversations with his friends concerning Muslims’ need to be bound strictly under strong religious ideology surely motivated him at specific points to follow solid religious lines. However, at the same time, he could not simply abide by some irrational approaches made by Riaz. Here, Riaz has been portrayed as a shrewd fundamentalist who tries to incite his followers on substantial religious grounds, however foolish and unscientific it might sometimes appear to a rational mind. Though Shahid became a part of this group initially under the influence of Riaz, his engagement with them was more based on an assurance of camaraderie among his people. So he earnestly approved of

their decision to stand by a Muslim family when some British racists brutally attacked it. This heinous crime was an eye-opener for him since he could have never imagined before to what extent psychological traumas such attacks might induce upon the victims:

The family had been harried--- stared at, spat on, called 'Paki scum'--- for months, and finally attacked. The husband had been smashed over the head with a bottle and taken to hospital. At all hours, the bell had been rung, and the culprits said they would return to slaughter the children. (90)

Shahid came from a family that would always undermine and overlook the thought that they might ever fall prey to British racism. Even there is one reference to Shahid's mother here where she has been described as trying to evade internally disturbing questions concerning racist attack:

Probably, she had suffered some abuse and contempt. However, her father had been a doctor; everyone--- politicians, generals, journalists, police chiefs--- came to their house in Karachi. The idea that anyone might treat her with disrespect was insupportable. Even when Shahid vomited with fear before going to school, or when he returned with bruises and his bag slashed with knives, she

behaved as if so appalling an insult could not exist. (73)

So, contrary to his family's willy-nilly approach towards racism, this group's rather determined and dauntless confrontation with the same pulled Shahid more towards them.

When Shahid saw Riaz fighting for the cause of his people's suffering, he felt a kind of awe mixed with affection for Riaz. However, the same Shahid could not simply bow his head before Riaz's propaganda when the group tried to sensationalize the aubergine episode, suppressing all their logical power of thinking, thus eventually leading to his gradual disillusionment of them. However, Shahid's final dissociation from the group did not occur until the group's open war against Salman Rushdie after being instigated by Ayatollah Khomeini's infamous fatwa against the author. Shahid could not, in any form, come to terms with these extremists when they decided to burn Rushdie's book on a college campus. They even started considering Osgood, their enemy, for espousing liberal views regarding Rushdie's book and calling the police on the campus to restrain them from destroying the sanity of liberal views. They not only questioned her liberal intention by calling it "unbelievable hypocrisy" but also censured her personal life unethically and started calling her nasty names (228). They even planned an ambush on her apartment to teach her a lesson for going against them.

Thus, the group, eager to uphold the virtue of human camaraderie, suddenly turned to attacking people who did not conform to their doctrines. This apparent discrepancy of ideologies in this group put the last knell in the coffin of Shahid's belief in them. Towards the end, Dr. Brownlow, who had been so far an empathizer with Riaz's group, made a significant comment concerning his disillusionment with this group:

'The thing is, this religion--- the superstitions, cults, forms of worship, prayers--- some are beautiful, some interesting, all have their purposes. However, who would have imagined they would survive rationalism? However, when you thought God was dead and buried, you realize he was merely awaiting resurrection! Every fucker's discovering some God inside them now. And who am I to challenge this?'(243)

His concerns regarding this group echoed that of Shahid, too. Shahid found himself helpless before their ever-growing religious rigidity and radical approaches to life, sometimes even at the cost of rationalism. On the other hand, both Osgood and Chilli's principle of living life to the fullest, along with a kind of liberal outlook on the world, always pulled him towards quite the opposite direction. All these functioned as catalysts in giving him a final shape that is neither racist nor fundamental. He gained This life from

his encounter with both the strict and austere aspects of religion and the life of a liberalist who can weigh a situation rationally. His ultimate realization can be said to have attested to this culmination of self that he finally arrived at in the process of searching for his true identity:

How could anyone confine themselves to one system? Why should they feel they had to? There was no fixed self; surely our several selves mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. Following his curiosity, he would spread himself out in his work and love. (274)

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