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Clashing of Cultures and Search for Identity in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*

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Abstract:

The Black Album is a kind of bildungsroman. It shows the development of the character of Shahid Hasan. The novel depicts a conflict between Western capitalism, postmodernism, and Islamic fundamentalism. Islamic brothers like Riaz and Chad represent Islamic fundamentalism. They find the Western civilization as essentially vulgar and evil and opposed to the values of Islam. Deedee Osgood and others represent liberal values which take a stand against ban on books or book burning. Shahid is torn between the two viewpoints. He feels attraction for Deedee but is also fascinated by the simplicity and clarity of Riaz's point of view. In the end, however, he decides in favour of a kind of liberal viewpoint. The novel also touches the issue of race. Shahid's father had migrated to Britain and made it his home. He always showed distrust towards the prevalence of lawlessness and tyranny in Pakistan. The novel also builds its arguments through many inter-textual references to other writers and the work of musicians. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is an important text which *The Black Album* parodies at many places.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Race.

The Black Album treats issues relating to race and class through the depiction of life and career of Shahid Hasan, the principal character in the novel. Hanif Kureishi also takes up certain themes which are often discussed in postcolonial literature. The issues of home, homelessness, roots, nostalgia for home and in-betweenness are also taken up by the novelist. The novelist tries to present a conflict between two different world views. He also tries to probe the nature of Western capitalism and its attention to consumerism and liberalism. It is also Kureishi's concern in this novel to understand the nature of Islamic fundamentalism. The contrast between these two ideologies is presented through Shahid Hasan's exposure to both these world views. All through the novel there is a conflict in the mind of Shahid as to the relevance of postmodernism and Islamic fundamentalism.

Shahid has enrolled in a college which is not supposed to be one of the best colleges in England. This college has about sixty percent black and Asian students. Its library is not very good and there are hardly any sports facilities in the college. The college is better known for negative things. It was not unusual for students of the college to carry weapons. The dresses

worn by students also presented different cultures. The college hardly had any reputation in the academic field. The following paragraph aptly sums up the atmosphere in the college:

Its reputation was less in the academic area but more for gang rivalries, drugs, thieving and political violence. It was said that college reunions were held in Wandsworth Prison. (*The Black Album* 24)

The place where the college is located shows a part of London which is inhabited by all sorts of abnormal characters. In fact, Shahid realized how rough and mixed London could be upon seeing this place. The place was full of such characters. The following paragraph beautifully captures this aspect of London which is very different from the London of the rich people:

He wondered, too, whether a nearby asylum had been recently closed down, since day and night on the High Road, dozens of exhibitionists, gabblers and maniacs yelled into the air. One man with a shaved head stood all day in a doorway with his fists clenched, mumbling. Derelict young men – Shahid had at first presumed they were students – clutched beer cans like hand grenades; later, he'd see them crashed out in doorways, with fluids seeping from them, as if they'd been pissed on by dogs. There was a girl who spent the day collecting firewood from building sites and skips. (*The Black Album* 3)

Shahid Hasan also does not come from a family known for education. His father had migrated from Pakistan to England. His family business was in the form of a travel agency which was doing fine. His brother, a kind of dissipater, is the favourite of his father. However, from his early age Shahid shows interest in literature and poetry. He also published a story at a fairly young age. When his father takes him to his office he proves to be a useless person. He starts reading there different difficult writers. His father considers reading a waste of time. He is very proud of the fact that his family has produced lawyers and bankers. He believes that writers and poets are condemned to live a wretched life. However, Shahid enrolls in his college much against the wishes of his family members.

One important reason why Shahid likes this place is the presence of Deedee Osgood in the college. She is known to be a brilliant teacher. She appears to be a postmodernist. Her courses are liked by students. Her lectures are eagerly devoured by students. She practices cultural studies in her classroom. Habib says that “As well as broadening the conventional definition of literature, cultural criticism tends to ground the study of literature in a larger framework which can include the economic institutions of literary productions, the ideological context of prevailing beliefs, and broad political issues of class, race, and gender, and the operations of power. (Habib 173)” She teaches all these subjects in her class not really focusing attention on canonical literature. It may be recalled that cultural studies has shifted attention from highbrow literature to popular literature. For scholars of cultural studies any subject is welcome. She practices this method in her classrooms and Shahid loves her for that.

Early in the novel Shahid is exposed to two different viewpoints. His love in music is emphasized from the beginning of the narrative. He is especially fond of *Black Album* by Prince. In fact, it is because of his love of music and books that he feels that he has something in common with Deedee and others of her kind. Later, when the relationship develops between Shahid and Deedee they share their love of music and of books. Deedee obviously represents the Western point of view in her love of music and liberal arts.

The Islamic point of view is represented by Riaz and his followers. Shahid's meeting with him early in the novel exposes him to Islamists' perception of Western capitalism.

The meeting takes place in a very sudden manner. His neighbour who introduces himself as Riaz Al-Hussain asks him to accompany him. Together they go to one Indian restaurant. Shahid says that he is missing his food. Their food habits are the first sign of some common element between the two. Riaz understands it perfectly that Shahid must be missing his Indian food. It is revealed from his conversation that Riaz is originally from Lahore. In their conversation race is discussed very frankly. Shahid says that he was often a victim of race prejudice. His words can be quoted here:

'Everywhere I went I was the only dark-skinned person. How did this make people see me? I began to be sacred of going into certain places. I didn't know what they were thinking. I was convinced 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 I was confused and ... fucked-up. But I didn't know what I do.' (*The Black Album* 10)

The effect of race prejudice was such on Shahid that he wanted to become a racist. He developed a kind of hatred for dispossessed people. He often thought why can't he become a racist like everyone else? He thought that he could abuse Pakis, Negros and other foreigners. He tells Riaz that he even wanted to join British National Party, such was his eagerness to become a racist. Shahid's opinion is seconded by Chad, who says that it has been a century of racism. To quote his words:

'Listen. It been the longest, hardest century of racism in the history of everything. How can you not have picked up the vibe in this distorted way? There's a bit of Hitler in all white people – they've given that to you. It's all they ever done for us.' (*The Black Album* 12)

In fact, race is such an important part of Shahid's conversation that at another point in the novel it is described that he had written his first story about race. He had faced racism in his class. Strangely his mother was a racist of a different nature. She hated any talk of race or racism at home. The reason for her strange attitude towards race is described in the following terms:

More than anything she hated any talk of race or racism. Probably she had suffered some abuse and contempt. But 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 and defecated with fear before going to school, or when he returned with cuts, bruises and his big slashed with knives, she behaved as if so appalling an insult couldn't exits. And so she turned away from him. What she knew was too much for her. (*The Black Album* 73)

There are different discourses on racism in the novel. The most important attitude towards race is that of Riaz. He derives his inspiration from his religion. Apparently in his rejection of postmodernism he uses the discourse of Islam. Early in the novel in his meeting with Shahid it is clear that he is a leader with some following. The way Chad reveres him suggests his leadership qualities. He shows himself against postmodernism and its discourse on liberalism. Riaz has entrusted Shahid with typing his poems. He does not want this information to be revealed to anyone. In a way he has asked Shahid to share his secret which he will not reveal to anyone. Riaz believes that there are some restrictions on human action and a man just cannot do everything he likes doing. He is very critical of the concept of unlimited liberty which is considered an ideal in the Western world. His opinions are shared by all his followers. Chad believes that a writer does not have unlimited freedom. Shahid had come to the college to understand the meaning and purpose of the novel. He wanted to know about novel's place in society. He was fascinated by famous characters of fiction and loved stories but Chad dismisses all his idealism. He feels that only children can enjoy stories. He also believes that there is more to life than entertainment. In other words he rejects the Western ideal of hedonism. To quote his words:

'It is true, people in the West, they think they're so civilized an' educated an' superior, and ninety percent of them read stuff you wouldn't wipe your arse on.' (*The Black Album* 21)

Riaz's discourse on race and Western civilization is repeated by Chad and Tahira. Chad debunks Darwinian theory of evolution. He says that human beings have not descended from apes and interestingly Riaz gives very expressive titles to his talks. Titles like 'Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve' or 'Democracy is hypocrisy' are chosen by Riaz in the Mosque to give his lectures. He would talk about subjects as varied as the creation of the Universe, the worldwide oppression of Muslims, idea of nudity and even Urdu poetry. Riaz's group feels that with their distinct culture they cannot integrate in Britain. He says that we cannot lose our souls. There is also a fair bit of aggression in Riaz's talk. He thinks in terms of global Islam:

'We don't turn the other cheek. We will fight for our people who are being tortured in Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir! War has been declared against us. But we are armed.' (*The Black Album* 82)

In the company of Riaz, Shahid starts discovering aspects of his identity. Jonathan Culler argues that "A good deal of recent theory can be seen as an attempt to sort out the paradoxes that often inform the treatment of identity in literature. Literary works characteristically represent

individuals, so struggles about identity are struggles within the individual and group: characters struggle against or comply with social norms and expectations. (Culler 113)” Before meeting Riaz Shahid had no idea about Islam. He did not identify with the cause of Islam or Muslims. His upbringing was such as not to leave any room for understanding Islam. His father had brought up his sons in the best possible Western manner. He had seen to it that religion was not discussed at his home. He also trained his sons to use English manners on all possible occasions. He would teach them how to take bath, how to sit on the toilet seat and how to eat. All table manners would be taught to his sons by papa very diligently. That means until Shahid met Riaz he had no notion of Muslim identity, leave alone global Islamic identity. However, he is living at a time when the notion of identity cried out of every place. Everybody was conscious of his identity. This identity is sometimes viewed in racial terms and at other times in gendered terms:

These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew – brandishing whichever features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn’t be human. Shahid, too, wanted to belong to his people. But first he had to know them, their past and what they hoped for. Fortunately, Hat had been of great help. Several times he had interrupted his studies to visit Shahid’s room with books; sitting beside him, he had, for hours, explained parts of Islamic history, along with the essential beliefs. Then, clearing a space on the floor, he had demonstrated what to do. (*The Black Album* 92)

Taking his cue from Riaz, Chad also launches his scathing attack on Western civilization. He believes that in the West pleasure is the most fundamental principle of life. He also believes that pleasure knows no limit. One pleasure leads to another pleasure and ultimately man starts degenerating and turning into a beast. On the contrary, Chad believes, Islam has a spiritual conception of life:

‘We have journeyed beyond sensation, to a spiritual and controlled conception of life. We regard others on the basis of respect, not thinking what we can use them for. We work for others, which is what we doing right here now.’ (*The Black Album* 129)

It is not that Shahid believes hundred percent what Riaz and Chad try to impress upon him. Their words were convincing. They even compelled him. However, when he goes out of their circle, he found the world more complex, more subtle and much more difficult to understand. He also witnessed that different races in Britain were divided:

He had noticed, during the days that he’d walked around the area, that the races were divided. The black kids stuck with each other, the Pakistanis went to one another’s houses, the Bengalis knew each other from way back, and the whites too. Even if there were no hostility between groups – and there was plenty, if only implicit; his mother, for instance, liked to make derogatory remarks about blacks, saying they were lazy, while middle-class

whites she revered – there was little mixing. And would things change? Why should they? A few individuals would make the effort, but wasn't the world breaking up into political and religious tribes? The divisions were taken for granted, each to his own. But where did such divides lead to, if not to different kinds of civil war? (*The Black Album* 133-134)

It is not only that society is divided in different races, what is worrying is the kind of hatred that can be generated by the mutual dislike of different races. There is an incident in the novel when Chad and others are trying to protect the Bengali family and Chad goes out on the street. A woman spits on him calling him names. What is worrying is the kind of venom in her remarks. The same venom is there in the remarks of Zulma's friend Charles Jump, who considers all Muslims terrorist.

Chad and Riaz are skeptical of everything done by white people. Chad is not convinced that Deedee is not a racist. Her taking of different lovers is also viewed by Chad in racial terms. He believes that by taking an African or Asian lover every year she insults Asians and Africans. For her these are exotic items for display. It probably satisfies some inner urge for hatred against non-whites.

There is also the discourse of Zulma who is Chili's wife. She is surprised to learn that Shahid is hobnobbing with fundamentalists. She is also surprised to learn that Shahid has started going to Mosque. She says that Shahid had good upbringing and education so what explains his joining the fundamentalists. She also realizes that Muslims make a scene of themselves on television saying all sorts of things, creating a very bad impression about their religion. She will be considered an example of a brainwashed individual by Riaz and his group.

There is a very strong element of intertextuality in this novel. The novel draws upon many works of literature and music. It alludes to different works all through the narrative. It also parodies some other works. The very title of this novel *The Black Album* is taken from a very popular album by Prince. In fact, music is a very important motif in Hanif Kureishi's works. Shahid's relationship with Deedee starts with their common love for Western music. And it is music which the Muslim brothers hate. Before acquiring his new name, Chad was a great lover of music. However, after he changed, he thought that music is something evil. Deedee had a picture of Prince, Madonna and Oscar Wilde on her desk. She encourages Shahid to talk about Prince, who is described in the novel as half black and half white, half man and half woman. Chad feels that Shahid shows lack of proper commitment to Islam because of his indulgence in music.

There is also a little bit of intertextuality in the references to Prince and Madonna. Madonna has often appropriated black forms of music. Ironically, though she also announces her love for blacks. However, her appropriation of black forms is seen in the light of her identification with whites rather than blacks. In the same way Deedee uses black and Asian lovers. She is accused of perpetuating a subtle kind of racism. Like Madonna she also has a large following. Her lectures are eagerly awaited by students. She has a group of boys and girls following her all the time in her college. Bell hooks, a famous black-American feminist writer, in

her book titled *Black Looks: Race and Representation* talks about Madonna's appropriation of aspects of black popular culture. She is of the view that Madonna tries to dominate blacks and also white working class women. To quote her words, Madonna's effort "was not a display of feminist power, this was the same old phallic nonsense, with white pussy at the centre" (Bell hooks). The question arises whether Madonna is essentially a white goddess or a black sister. In the same way the question can be asked if Deedee is a black sister or a white goddess. Shahid sees a lot of good in Deedee. He is impressed by her innovative methods in the classroom. He is very fond of her extensive learning. He is also taken in by her interest in popular culture. However, Riaz and his group consider Deedee a kind of subversive presence. They consider her a tool of imperialists. They also consider her in racial terms. They believe that she cannot understand their point of view. Their opinion is further strengthened by Deedee's opposition to book burning. They are also not happy with the fact that Deedee brings that book (*The Satanic Verses*) in the classroom and invite students to discuss it. They believe that she is showing lack of concern to their sensibilities which were badly hurt by the offensive details in Rushdie's book. No wonder there is a strong opposition to her bringing Salman Rushdie's book to the classroom. A predominantly non-white class makes enough noise in the class and it becomes impossible for her to conduct the class. Deedee also decides to start a course on 'History of Censorships'. Obviously this attempt by Deedee is also considered a kind of provocation for the Islamic brothers.

The novel also indirectly refers to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. In fact, some critics have commented on the intertextual connection between *The Black Album* and *The Satanic Verses*. Adrian Jones in his article titled "Postcolonial Identity: *The Black Album* and *The Satanic Verses*" discusses some common motives in the two texts. Maria Degabriele also discusses the two works in her essay titled "Prince of Darkness Meets Priestess of Porn: Sexual and Political Identities in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*". *The Satanic Verses* is repeatedly alluded to by the Islamic brothers. Early in the novel Riaz says that this time this writer has gone too far. Without naming Salman Rushdie, Chad talks about the responsibility of a writer and how in this case the writer has not taken into account the sensibilities and feelings of millions of people. In fact, nowhere in the novel the writer is mentioned by the name but there is little doubt in the minds of reader that Salman Rushdie is being discussed with particular reference to *The Satanic Verses*. There is also a kind of parody of *The Satanic Verses* in the novel. K. Anthony Appiah believes that:

Mr. Kureishi handles the whole business of "The Satanic Verses" with a pantomime of tact: neither Mr. Rushdie nor the book is ever mentioned by name. Instead, as if in mimicry of the procedures of censorship, every reference is by indirection. (Appiah)

In his first meeting with Riaz, Shahid is given a handwritten manuscript of some verses written by Riaz. Riaz wants Shahid to computer type these verses. Riaz says that this is the work of the God himself. To which Shahid replies that it is with your name on the title page. Riaz wittily says that the mistakes are his. When Shahid transcribes these verses, at certain points he is tempted to change some of those verses. There was especially a time when Shahid was spending some intimate moments with Deedee Osgood. During this period he had certain feelings and emotions which he put into those verses. In other words he did not live up to the trust reposed in

him by Riaz. This episode parallels a certain episode in *The Satanic Verses* in which Salman, a character in the novel, writes the verses incorrectly. These verses were revealed to a character modelled on the Prophet of Islam. In other words the revelations were badly tampered by the Satan. It appears that Riaz is the prophet of the satanic verses. The changes that take place are made by Salman in *The Satanic Verses* and Shahid in *The Black Album*. The followers of Riaz react to these changes very aggressively. They are out to avenge the injustice done to Riaz. Chad is determined to punish Shahid. Shahid has to hide himself in Deedee's place to save his life. There his brother Chili had to help him.

Mikhail Bakhtin says that "One of the most ancient and widespread forms for representing the direct word of another is parody. (Bakhtin 112)" There is not only a parody of *The Satanic Verses* but also the entire controversy after the publication of this book is recreated in the novel. *The Black Album* raises the issues of individual freedom, responsibility of the artist, forms of protest and censorship. The Islamic brothers decide to protest Salman Rushdie's treatment of the Prophet and his family. They believe that the author of *The Satanic Verses* had turned the Prophet of Islam into a false prophet. They also believe that Rushdie had a malicious intent in presenting the wives of the Prophet in extremely negative light. Another thing that they found objectionable was the fact that the revelations were shown to be false. This means that the very basis of the holy book of Muslims is questionable. If there is an insult to the Prophet, his family and most importantly to their holy book, how can they not protest? It is well known that there was a fatwa against Salman Rushdie issued by Iran's supreme religious leader because of the negative representation of Islam and its prophet in the book.

The Black Album presents this entire controversy in fictional form. Riaz and his followers organize a procession in which they plan to burn a copy *The Satanic Verses*. For this, all Islamic brothers are given some responsibility. On this day most students are expected to assemble on the appointed place. They are not supposed to attend their classes on this day. Shahid is given the responsibility of arranging a pole on which the book will be tied and then burnt. Shahid procures this pole. Riaz is also supposed to address the gathering. Everything takes place according to a plan. When Deedee Osgood comes to know about this, she tries to argue out the matter with Riaz. She wants Riaz to enter into a dialogue with her. This does not happen. The book is burnt finally.

All this while, Shahid had extremely mixed feelings about book burning. He does not feel comfortable with the idea of book burning. He loves literature and believes that a writer uses his imagination to say anything. He also believes that Riaz and his group have a point but still book burning is not the solution. At this time he is torn between his attraction for liberty and his search for his roots. He is not able to decide easily. He does not know what to do. He loves Deedee Osgood but he also understands Riaz's point of view. He is very much present at the time of the book burning but he is aware of his discomfort at the very idea of book burning. He realizes that his community is not doing the right thing by burning this book. He feels that by doing this they make a spectacle of themselves.

However, when Shahid is in the company of Deedee Osgood and she questions him about his role in the procession, the fact that he got that pole, Shahid realizes that Deedee misses something about the Muslim brothers' point of view. He feels that Deedee tries to see everything

from the prospective of liberal democracy in which there is no proper room to understand the other point of view. He feels that Deedee shows a kind of implicit contempt towards the Muslim brothers. Christopher Butler says that “A great deal of postmodernist theory depends on the maintenance of a skeptical attitude: and here the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard’s contribution is essential. He argued in his *La condition postmoderne* (published in French in 1979, in English in 1984) that we now live in an era in which legitimizing ‘master narratives’ are in crisis and in decline. These narratives are contained in or implied by major philosophies, such as Kantianism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, which argue that history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate us, and that all knowledge has a secret unity. (Butler 13)” Deedee is acting here as a postmodernist. Here also Shahid is torn between two different view points.

Maria Degabriele makes the point that *The Black Album* presents Islamic rejection of pop culture and modernity because its basis is Western imperialism. She remarks:

Kureishi explores these problems, of the apparently irreconcilable differences between Islam and postmodernity, through Shahid’s dilemma. (Degabriele)

It is important in the context of the novel that Shahid ultimately does make a choice. He rejects the point of view of the Islamic brothers. He rather chooses a life of liberty. The end of the novel shows that he identifies with pop culture towards the end. His decision to look forward to a meeting with Deedee despite his differences with her is an indication of his choice. He wanted to make sense of his recent experiences. He also was puzzled by the fact that how could anyone confine himself to one breed? There must be different ways of existing in the world. He must exercise this choice. He decides in favour of undecidability. The ending of the novel points to this attitude of Shahid

He looked out of the window; the air outside seemed to be clearer. It wouldn’t be long before they were walking down to the sea. There was somewhere she fancied for lunch. He didn’t have to think about anything. They looked across at one another as if to say, what new adventure is this? (*The Black Album* 276)

It can be said that the novel discusses the question of identity, culture and history. It also raises the issue of diasporic and postcolonial identity. Shahid in his fascination for Riaz also displays features of diasporic identity. His constant shifting is a sign of his diasporic identity. As the famous book *The Empire Writes Back* argues “diasporic writing, in its crossing of borders, opens up the horizon of place. What does ‘home’ mean in the disrupted world of colonial space? How can ‘home’ become the transformative habitation of boundaries? ... The phenomenon of diaspora, with its exemplary model of dislocation and displacement begins the answer to this question. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 218)” The postcolonial identity faces many pressures in the present world. The novel discusses this issue from various perspectives. To quote Adrian Jones:

In the case of *The Black Album*, history and culture inherently build off each other, and readers must thus view it through the lens

of British imperial history and the effect history had on culture. *The Black Album* paints a picture of postcolonial people who are at least just as British as the British, yet they feel rejected, mocked, and loathed by themselves and society. They desperately want a home and an identity but none is to be found. The fact that Shahid refuses to accept the colonial mentality and all its accompanying restrictions, limitations, and binary opposition, draws Kureishi's vision for Britain's future. (Jones)

Hanif Kureishi's treatment of the issue of identity, of multiple forces acting on this identity, would remain the most important feature of this work. Identity, to Kureishi, does not exist in a pure and unmediated state. Steven H. Shane aptly comments on the notion of identity in this book:

Using pertinent elements of psychiatrist Roy Jay Lifton's concept of "The Protean Self" as a foundation, I argue that in exploring Shahid's sometimes ambivalent experimentation with various identities throughout the novel – cultural, sexual, gender, political, national, religious and personal – the novel shows that as we move further into the global culture of the twenty-first century, every individual can and must build an ever-changing self by appropriating bits and pieces from many different cultures. In the novel, we see that no culture – and no individual – belongs to any particular group or exists in any pure form in the modern world. According to Bart Moore-Gilbert, Kureishi chooses to use the romantic genre *Bildungsroman* – with some updating – because it "presents identity as a developmental, unstable and shifting process. (Shane)

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