

The Black Album: Towards Becoming a Diasporic ‘Hybrid Self’

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Abstract:

Hanif Kureishi, a novelist born of a Pakistani father and English mother deals with the issues of home and belonging, ethnicity, identity crisis, immigration and racism. As a writer born of mixed race, he struggles through the complexities of belonging to two cultures and ideologies. His novels focus on the intricacies of living abroad especially the Pakistani immigrants living in England. *The Black Album* (1995) through a third person narrative exhibits the same concerns of Otherness and racial discrimination faced by Shahid, a student in London whose Pakistani parents live in England. Shahid, becoming a ‘hybrid self’ is caught between the issues of belonging and identity crisis. The paper will try to explore how the narrative oscillates between Shahid’s love relationship with a British college lecturer, Deedee Osgood and his enigmatic association with his Pakistani fundamentalist friend, Riaz who is fighting against racism and discrimination faced by Asians in England.

Key words: Hybridity, diaspora, identity crisis, racism, immigrant student, Other

The Black Album, a transcultural hybrid novel

In the fields of diaspora and cultural studies, phrases like hybridity, heterogeneity, transcultural novel, cultural mixing have become popularized and essential terms because of the fact that migration

is becoming very common and rapid, “the representative modern experience!” and as a consequence “more and more people now recognize themselves in the narratives of displacement” (Hall qtd. in Moslund 12). The same kind of observation is made by Iain Chambers; “The migrant’s sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a non- integrated present, is perhaps the most fitting metaphor of this (post)modern condition” (27). The concept of hybridity has become an important aspect of global culture and diaspora. It is an essential feature in the narratives of migration, travel and displacement. The discourse surrounding hybridity gives rise to creation of numerous complex and multiple identities which are constantly changing and metamorphosed. Sten Pultz Moslund in his book, *Migration Literature and Hybridity* (2010) considers hybridity akin to heterogeneity in the sense that both result in identity crisis of a diasporic individual. It is characterized by doubleness, conflation of two positions together while also maintaining the schism between the two. So hybridity incorporates both the complexities of a two-fold self and also the intricacies of being separate selves at the same time.

Hybridity according to Pultz tends to blur the lines of ‘cultural purity’. It is more of ‘becoming’ than ‘being’, in the sense that becoming is a process, “an unlimited heterogeneity” and arises out of difference whereas being is a static, unchanging, fixed entity that does not change (43). The immigrants find themselves caught up in a space between their original places and the places they live in, and are always busy carving out a place for themselves which Homi Bhabha calls as a “third space”(*The Location of Culture*, 5). Hanif Kureishi’s protagonists are of mixed race background having a “British Asian” identity much like his own mixed identity, putting them into the complexities of in-between position of living in London and having a bond of affection with Pakistan. *The Black Album* is a ‘transcultural hybrid novel’ which Pultz asserts has a migrant author and central character who possess a double vision, a ‘special migrant vision’ (19). The transcultural hybrid novel favours the cultural diversity and cultural mixing and is involved in a process for new identity

formation i.e a hybrid identity. This hybrid identity is synonymous to heterogeneity and opposes the notions of 'sameness' a 'cultural purity', "the world is seen through the perspective of migrant narrators who define themselves as hybrids between several cultures and express a desire to hybridise the Western host cultures they arrive in." (92)

The hybrid identity acquired by Shahid Hassan, the protagonist of the novel indicates the equivocal attitudes towards his religion, his fundamentalist friends, and his parental belonging to South Asia. Shahid, born of Pakistani parents is a British citizen and a college student finds England his home but the persistent discrimination and humiliation pull him back towards his Pakistani friend Riaz and his group. He falls in love with a British College lecturer, Deedee Osgood and later joins Pakistani fundamentalist friend, Riaz and others who are political activists fighting against racism and discrimination faced by Asians in England. The narrative oscillates between Shahid's love relationship with Deedee and his ambiguous association with his fundamentalist friends. "He believed everything; he believed nothing... One day he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite... He would wake up with this feeling ... How many warring selves were there within him? Which was his real, natural self? (147). He is not able to decide whether to support his activist friends who fight for the discrimination against South Asians in England or be devoted to Deedee who enlightens him with history and post colonial studies. He is unable to decide his nationality and belonging and gets entangled into the web of identity crisis.

Othering: Towards becoming a hybrid self

The racist attitude of English people push Shahid towards asserting his Pakistaniness and he joins Riaz and his group. Kureishi shows how the discriminatory acts against Pakistani youth in England push them towards the violence and religious fundamentalism who consider it their duty to show their religious allegiances. Shahid's parents are the immigrants in England who have embraced

foreign values and lifestyle, still continue to be treated as ‘Others’, “we are third-class citizens, even lower than the white working class. Racist violence is getting worse! Papa thought it would stop, that we’d be accepted here as English. We haven’t been! We’re not equal! It’s gonna be like America. However far we go, we’ll always be underneath!” (209). Nina Rowe in her analysis of case of alienated muslim population in the West explains the concept of Other and how the ideology of Othering works and writes that “the process of identifying and characterizing opponents is never complete, never fixed leaving open the door for counteractions” (133). She says, this process works both ways developing awareness of ‘self’ in both —the native members of the society and the immigrant minority community as well.

The Other is the one who does not belong to the norms and beliefs of the host society and differs from the rest in their behaviour, attitude and life style, “There is a general tendency to consider Others to be absolutely and essentially different. This idea of difference enables hierarchical and stereotypical thinking, which is why the effect of Othering resembles racism” (Benedixsen 110). Othering leads one towards harbouring the stereotypical notions about the rest and developing a racist attitude towards the minority communities. This process of Othering in turn shapes their new identities, the hybrid selves. Shahid, besides being a British citizen is not able to find the place in London where he could belong. He “wanted 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” (16). He tries to resist the discrimination and hostility towards South Asian muslims in England and wishes to become a racist himself at some point, while ironically identifying himself with his place of birth, thus engaging into a struggle that is two-fold. His encounters with bullying and racism as a school kid develop a desire of writing in him which he thinks can bring a change in the stereotypical society of England. “Even when Shahid vomited and defecated with fear before going to school, or when he returned with cuts, bruises and his bag slashed with knives, she behaved as if so appalling an insult

couldn't exist. And so she turned away from him. What she knew was too much for her." (73). Shahid's mother does not want to talk about racism or his son to think about it. His parents try to cope up in London in order to maintain their high reputation among their relatives back in Pakistan and to show them that they are able to fit in, least interested in giving their sons, Shahid and Chilli a religious knowledge and teaching. The teachings he gets from Riaz collide with what Deedee accomplishes which make him anxious about his lack of religious beliefs; "It wasn't mere boredom he feared; the questions he dreaded were those that interrogated him about what he had got into with Riaz on one side, and Deedee on the other." (147)

The novel shows how Shahid and his Pakistani friends suffer verbal and physical abuses at various places; "Paki! Paki! Paki! She screamed. Her body had become an 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!" (139). At such instances, he becomes aware of the inherent contempt and bitterness inside the English people for him and other Pakistanis, he would feel the need to support Riaz's cause (130). This state of being a part of a society and also being distant from it due to its policies of hatred towards the immigrants is termed as "double consciousness" by W. E. B Dubois in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), much similar to what Sten Pultz would term as "hybrid consciousness" (92). Dubois asserts that the immigrants especially the young students become sensitive and conscious of their position as 'Other' in the host society:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (11).

They try to understand their inconsistent state, in Sten Pultz' words the 'hybrid uncertainty' and thus try to find ways to tackle with it. It becomes a constant struggle on their part to find a place for them where they could belong and call it home. While asking Riaz, "And where are you from?", Riaz replies, "Lahore. Originally." Shahid being sensitive about where he belonged, so for him, the word, 'Originally' was something grave and intimate and said, "That 'originally' is a quite big thing" (6). Shahid's first encounter as being seen as an Outsider was when he entered a Piccadilly bar where a man charged too much for a bottle of water giving him a punch when he left. "He had never felt more invisible; somehow this wasn't the real London" (5).

Conclusion

He finally has the realization that he is not the supporter of violence that his friends engage themselves in but of change and follows his ambition of becoming a writer. He had learnt a lot from his experiences and his mind- all curious and eager was ready to write and create meaning from those recent encounters he had. "There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity" (274). In the journey of search for his real self and identity, he arrives at the feeling that "there's nothing more fashionable than outsiders"(175) and accepts the complexity and multiplicity that his hybrid self entails.

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