Pitfalls of Multiculturalism: The Dichotomy between Eastern Spiritualism and Western Liberalism in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*

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Abstract – Multiculturalism, although initially viewed as a progressive discourse, have recently attracted the attention of many cultural theorists and academic commentators who tend to see it as conservative and following a reactionary dialectics. Political multiculturalism is often directed to subvert the monistic essentialities of nationality, for instance, the notion of Britishness or Indianness which persists through strict cultural homology of shared experiences. Multiculturalists, in this context, emphasised internal differentiation and shifting positionalities evolving new definition of national belonging deconstructing their constructivist ideologies. The present paper seeks to address the issue of how being entangled between fundamentalism and liberalism, between the Western culture and Indian ways of living, Shahid, the protagonist of the novel, The Black Album, finds himself in between the contradicting polarities of uncertainties that accentuate the search for his true identity.

Keywords – Belonging, Fundamentalism, Identity, Liberalism, Multiculturalism

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INTRODUCTION

Human nature has an innate tendency towards diversity and each culture has a singular, inexplicable, ineradicable identification which embodies a distinct vision of life. The influence of culture colours the individual's way of thinking and it is a human need to belong to some familiar culture. All cultures are equal and they nourish and sustain certain human capacities cultivating different virtues and temperaments. Diversity adds richness and variety making the world aesthetically more livable as well as stimulates creativity, curiosity and deferential imagination. Each culture in this world of diversity is equally important because they mean much to their fellow members and is conducive to their needs. Cultural diversity is an inseparable phenomenon of human life which suggests that cultures were not the results of geographical contextualization reducible to temporal progressive entities in a linear historicity but the products of imagination in the playful c uriousness of inventing new relationship.

The meaning of culture is undergoing historic transformation due to globalization, information systems, consumerism etc. in which multiculturalism has problematized itself with its conscious creation of cultural identities within multicultural models that acknowledge the new elements connected with its emergence. The idea of the preservation of immigrant minorities is based on the opinion that cultures are discrete, stable, homogenous and impervious to external forces and that there is no conflictual pattern to be found within cultures and thus they are to be given opportunities to define themselves which seem to be behaviourally shaped by them. Multiculturalism in its most innocent and non-reflective form is said to underlie the following assumptions identified by Feuchtwangon his essay "Racism: Territoriality and Ethnocentricity":

The premise of sorting populations by ethnic origins according to presumed cultural essence is that a culture is a community of deep-seated values. For values one may also read social rules and meanings, or customs and traditions. But what makes cultural origin a category of population is the additional assumption that a culture is a community of original identity, to which individuals belong by birth. By the common sense of being and belonging which sets the tone of this cultural recognition, all those born into a community absorb and ineradicably sediment within themselves its customary ways of thinking, feeling and being. Even if they do not so identify themselves, they one nevertheless properly identified with that community, whatever subsequent layers of other cultures they may have absorbed to cover over the original sediment. (4)

Multiculturalism as a concept both at personal and national level has received considerable critique since it was applied in the public sphere in the

1970s. In this political context the new immigrants and ethnic mobility have further problematized the ambit of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in its philosophical enterprise can be safely summarized as "abandoning the myths of homogenous and monocultural nation states" and "recognizing rights to cultural maintenance and community formation, and linking th ese to social equality and protection from discrimination" (Castles 12). In every institutional field it seeks to introduce the multicultural model of representation. It is a demographic description of diverse kinds of population inhabiting a particular locality, a set of specific public policies advocating a reconstruction of institutional specificities, a mode of streamlining cultural expression. Multicultural societies are subject to the increasing complex process of economic and cultural globalization. It is impossible, therefore, to maintain a self-contained and isolated form of society. Contemporary societies tending multicultural configuration have emerged against the backdrop of the traditional ideal of homogenising nation states. In the pre-modern societies, cultural communities were viewed as the representative of collective rights and left free to inaugurate their customs and practices. The modern state, however, is grounded on a very different idea of social unity. "It generally recognized only the individuals and the bearers of rights and sought to create a homogeneous legal space made up of uniform political units subject to the same body of laws and institutions" (Parekh, *The Future*8-9).

Multiculturalism at this critical juncture has been passionately defended, defined, redefined and criticized. Those who subscribe to the views of multiculturalism support equality in civil rights, emphasise its positive value which becomes a claim for a tolerant society based on social harmony. However, criticism has been showered on those multicultural advocates who with some political and societal practices seek to eroticize 'otherness' in principle (Grillo44). Such policies are identified derogatively as 'tokenism'. Turner at this point distinguishes between two kinds of multiculturalism-difference multiculturalism and critical multiculturalism. According to Turner difference multiculturalism with its political policy making is a reductionist celebration of diversity (Grillo45) whereas the challenges evolved out of critical multiculturalism can serve as a vigorous claim for a vital and "democratic common culture" (408). Other critics opine that multiculturalism is based on a divisive concept of creating faction among the inhabitants intimately favouring one community over another which promotes conflictual patterns of competition. They observe that it creates ethnic differences essentialising their defining qualities and limits the individual's right for self-expression. Multiculturalism, therefore, is identified as a form of political correctness that stands in opposition to the earlier liberal model of cultural representation. W. Kymlicka terms multiculturalism as confusing because it proceeds on to drawing on the ambiguity between 'multinationalism' and 'polyethnicity' which relates to the fact of coexistent self-governing societies as political units and the issues of migration (107). It

needs a re-evaluation since the claims of minority rights of indigenous people are necessarily be different from those of the immigrants.

Factors such as globalization, mass migrations, displacements and information revolutions etc. have disrupted the stable collective entities and identities which are organized territorially by the politics of the nation state. Subverting the exclusionary essentialities of cultural presentation it entails thatit is not only the politically motivated multiculturalism that seems problematic but the notion of a unified self turns out to be an utterly unrealistic theme:

If we feel we have a unified identity . . . it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves . . . The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily. (qtd. in Modood 380)

Pluralism in cultural representation thus is an inevitable reality, an inescapable feature of cultural communities that "can neither be wished out of existence nor suppressed without an unacceptable degree of coercion, and often not even then" (Parekh *Rethinking Multiculturalism* 196). Isaiah Berlin makes a distinction between the pluralistic and relativist ideals of cultural presentations by saying that relativism delimits out mental faculty to make value judgment while a pluralistic approach stirs this capacity and enables an imaginative empathy for the supposed 'other':

Members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand . . . the value, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space. They may find these value unacceptable, but if they open their minds sufficiently they can grasp how one might be full human being, with whom one could communicate, at the same time live in the light of values widely different from one's own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life, by the realization of which men could be fulfilled.(10)

As depicted in Hanif Kureishi's novel, *The Black Album*, Shahid, the protagonist of the novel, and his brother Chilli grow up in a middle class family in the country side of Kent. They have nourished different world views with them. Chilli's concern is primarily focussed on the conflictual pattern of generational representation, while Shahid's engagements are centred mainly on liberalism and literature. The title of the novel indicates an association with the lost album of the American musician Prince, the release of which was banned in 1987 and was only illegally available to the public. Shahid is a big fan of Prince and wants to emulate him. The title of the novel evokes an opposition to censorship and seeks to

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celebrate racial difference and cultural hybridity. Deedee Osgood makes an explicit reference to the musician Prince: "he's half-black and half-white, half-man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho, too." (25). Thus, the title of the novel itself introduces the theme of hybridity into the novel. Inspite of the development of a cosmopolitan culture in Britain with its multicultural presentment, Shahid has to confront the stigma of racism which activates a sense at urgency in him to belong:

Everywhere I went I was the only dark-skinned person. How did this make people to see me? I began to be scared 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 . . . . I didn't know what to do. (19)

After his father's death Shahid moves to London where he gets admittance in a university in London and meets Riaz, a Muslim student and his next-door neighbour. He never compromises with his circumstances and aims to consolidate his identity in a multicultural society like London. His ideas keep oscillating between liberalism and fundamentalism. He criticizes Deedee when the later calls Riaz an extremist by saying: "Some people have anger and passionate beliefs. Without that nothing could get done, do you have anger and passionate beliefs?" (110) Shahid is troubled by such a remark and linking this with racism he replies: "The thing is, Deedee, clever white people like you are too cynical. You see everything and rip everything to shreds but you never take any action. Why would you want to change anything when you already have everything your way? We are the victim here!" (110). Deedee being an experienced person inspires Shahid to inculcate liberalism in his attitude rather than the radical fundamentalism as professed by his friends.

Shahid can also be described as a restless youth who "wants a new start with new people in a new place" (16). Although he is dissatisfied with the education system in the school where "books are stuck down the throats like biscuits" (74), he is attracted by the pleasure and intellection which arts and literature would provide because "he wants to be challenged intellectually and in every other way" (5). Also his father's life style proves to be very influential and leaves an indelible mark in his individuality. His father doesn't embrace the traditional life of an immigrant Muslim as expected by others but becomes an assimilated citizen of Britain who rather "hated anything 'old-fashioned, unless it charmed tourists. He wanted to tear down the old; he liked progress" (39). He has no sympathy for Shahid's literacy pursuits which he thinks lead but to poverty. Shahid, however, still feels deeply rooted to his own culture and at a crucial moment of his emotional development admits "that papa was wrong and fined his own direction, whatever that is" (76). Chilli, his brother serves as a

living antithesis to his father. He is neither professional nor hardworking like his father and can safely be described as the 'playboy of the Western world' whose "relentless passion has always been for clothes, girls, cars, girls and the money that bought them" (41). He has an aggressive approach towards finding his own place in the society and engages himself with criminality, drugs and becomes more extroverted and outgoing than his younger brother Shahid. He his ambitious and fashionable hanging around places to find drug dealers, Italian girls, French croupiers and wears Boss suits, Calvin Klein with Al Pacino as his role model. Establishing himself as a successful businessperson in England he intends to move to USA. Chilli rejects the tradition and religious duties of his father's generation and doesn't like to inherit them which are for him old -fashioned and humourless: "You see them, our people, the Pakis, in their dirty shops, surly, humourless, their fat sons and ugly daughters watching you, taking the money. . . . The new Jews, everyone hates them. In a few years the kids will kick their parents in their teeth. Sitting in some crummy shop, it won't be enough for them'" (201).

It is evident from Chilli's speech that he wants to follow a Westernized life style strictly different from the old ways of living a religious life as a devoted Muslim.

It is, however, surprising to note that despite being brought up in such an open culture, Shahid as a young man should indulge in religious fundamentalism. It can be interpreted as the result of constantly being afflicted with the threat of racism and discriminatory humiliation for being the racial 'other'. Emrys Jones, with this regard, opines that the "threatening situation in which immigrants find themselves has had the effect of strengthening their communal identity. In London, as in many other cities, this tension has led to open conflict on numerous occasions, which in turn, has highlighted the existence of racial prejudice" (188). The novel is set in the chaotic ambience of religious agitation on the part of immigrant Muslim in the multicultural Britain disrupted with multiple tensions of racial, cultural and religious differences. It was a period of great cultural unrest when Thatcher's policies were being questioned and criticized as being potentially opposed to a truly multicultural Britain. The assimilationist pattern of multiculturality could no more hold any relevance for a densely hybridised society like Britain and helped formation of cultural and racial stereotypes as McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism* has observed: "Oriental peoples often appeared in Western representations as examples of various invidious racial stereotypes" (44).

British political philosopher Bhikhu Parekh believes that the sense of belonging among individuals of a multicultural society like Britain cannot be developed as basing on a particular ethnicity or a shared culture

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as it is too complex for a shared commitment to the political community (*Rethinking Multiculturalism* 342). The ideals of a political community should not contradict the individual's commitment to its continuing existence and lived experience of belonging and wellbeing. In a multicultural society the members may markedly differ in interests and "might criticize the prevailing forms of government, institutions policies, values, ethos and dominant self-understanding in the strongest possible terms, but these should not arouse or provoke charges of disloyalty so long as their basic commitment to dialogue is not in doubt" (Parekh *Rethinking Multiculturalism* 342). The contradiction of multiculturality is obvious when a "wider society" seeks to define its "common good" in a demeaning and "exclusive manner", patronizes some and dismisses others neglecting the individual ethos (Parekh *Rethinking Multiculturalism*342). Regarding the dismissed and the neglected, Parekh writes that "Although such individuals are free in principle to participate in its collective life, they often stay away or ghettoize themselves for fear of rejection and ridicule or out of deep sense of alienation" (*Rethinking Multiculturalism* 342). The "cultural liberty" enjoyed by the cultural or ethnic groups as put by Amartya Sen "focuses on our freedom either to preserve or to change priorities" whereas "valuing cultural conservation" provides "support for the continuation of traditional life styles by new immigrants in the West" which compr ise the prime problematics of multiculturalism (113). Multiculturalism based on cultural conservation is focused upon the essentialist theory of authenticity which views culture as holistic realities, monolithic in forms. It suffers from the drawback of depoliticising the differences by celebrating cultural diversity rather than emphasising the transformative struggle against domination or racism which seems to be content with contradiction rather than evoking real desire for the elimination of differences.

Multiculturalism with its policy of 'cultural conservation' is severely criticized in Britain after a group of Muslim population in Britain protested against Rushdie's allegedly blasphemous seminal novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 and burnt copies of the book in public. In his book from *Fatwa to Jihad* Kenan Malik argues that:

The celebration of difference, respect for pluralism, avowal of identity policies – these have come to be regarded as the hallmarks of a progressive, anti-racist outlook and as the foundation stones of modern liberal democracies. Yet there is a much darker side to multiculturalism, as the Rushdie affair demonstrated. Multiculturalism has helped foster a more tribal nation and, within Muslim communities, has undermined progressive trends while strengthening the hand of conservative religious leaders. While it did not create militant Islam, it helped . . . create for it a space within British Muslim communities that had not existed before. (4)

With regard to the novel *The Black Album*, Chris Weedon observes that "It is a novel about second generation Pakistani in London and engages with questions of identity through a radical contrast of life - style ranging from affluent westernized middle class living, through Muslim fundamentalism to serious involvement in drug culture" (142). Apart from these, the novel raises the issue of multiculturalism where the second generation immigrants in Britain confront the Western rage and racist reference against them. Kureishi deals which the issue of racism and the resulting chaos that emerges from this continued discrimination against these immigrants and ethnic communities. Experiencing constant and prolonged racial discrimination, they develop strong solidarity and brotherhood to resist the racist and physical attack from the British people through their fundamentalist ideals as a weapon to fight against racism.

After joining the college, the protagonist of the novel finds himself divided between two affiliative positions – his love for liberalism and the urge to be integrated with the Riaz group supporting fundamentalism as a kind of shield to resist racial humiliation. He starts a love affair with his college teacher Deedee Osgood who believes that "all limitations are prisons" (25) and at the same time joins the fundamentalist group headed by Riaz. The novel describes Shahid's escape from his Thatcherite family members through his literary pursuits which is eventually influenced and shaped by his consciousness of racism and his study of colonial literature. He desires to become a writer to address the matters like racism and national belonging in his writing. Liberalists in the novel like Deedee Osgood and her former husband Dr. Andrew Brownlow further act as catalysts to accentuate Shahid's inculcation of an liberal and progressive attitude towards life. Shahid's conflictual evolvement of the dualistic dichotomy between Islam and the liberal outlook of the Western culture finds a parallel in Kureishi's own struggle of a similar pattern of in-between positionality which makes Ruvani Ranasinha remark: "Kureishi avers that notions of Asian and British that cannot be defined separately. His protagonists live the potentials and experience, the pitfalls of mixing and mestigge, emphasising the precarious ambivalent nature of all cultural translation. His work parodies the idea of homogeneous, distinct, racially distinct communities" (13). Though Kureishi was born and bred in an Islamic family he has little knowledge about Islam before he takes to writing but later becomes attentive to contemporary issues and finally in the novel *The Black Album* he takes up problems such as Muslim fundamentalism versus progressive liberalism in London. Mohammad Siddiqui informatively remarks:

Going beyond a vague and clichéd east-west encounter –a recurring theme in British and American fiction especially in the works of writers like E. M. Foster and Pearl S. Buck – Kureishi specially takes up the issue of Muslim fundamentalism in what turns out to be a pseudo progressive multicultural London. Writing in

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postcolonial context, Kureishi is obviously aware of the issues of racial prejudice and lack of communication between the looked down upon Pakis and the complacent English. (111)

Shahid is forever confused about his loyalty and affiliation. Deedee who represents the world of Englishness is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for him with her liberal outlook, and strong sense of freedom and imagination, and at the same time he feels himself drawn towards the undercurrents of fundamentalism exhibited by the Riaz group for the thinks, at times, that it's only by reviving his strong sense for Islam through which he can re-establish his sense of belonging:

The problem was, when he was with his friend their story compelled him. But when he walked out, like someone leaving a cinema, he found the world to be more subtle and inexplicable. He knew, too, that stories were made up by men and women; they could not be true or false, for they were exercises in that most magnificent but unreliable capacity, the imagination, which William Blake called 'the divine body in every man.' Yet his friends would admit no splinter of imagination into their body of belief, for that would poison all, rendering their conviction human, aesthetic, fallible. (133)

Shahid's liberal views of art and literature come into clash with the discourse of Islamic fundamentalism which Shahid later wants to profess being influenced by the Riaz group of friends. Shahid internally divides himself into two halves – one part must go with Deedee with her pleasure-seeking principles which would lead him to become a real Britisher and the other must feed on the spirit of Islamic fundamentalism to give him a real taste of Islamic identity. Kureishi, in the following passage beautifully sums up Shahid's ambivalent condition of in-betweenness:

The silence of his room felt unnatural and oppressive. It seemed like days since he'd been alone. Who would be solitary if they could avoid it? He had been resisting his own company, running from himself. He wasn't mere bodedom 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. He believed everything; he believed nothing. His own self increasingly confounded him. One day he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite. Other times provisional states would alternate from hour to hour; sometimes all crashed into chaos. He would wake up with this feeling: who would he turn to be on this day? How many worrying selves were there within him? Which was his real, natural self? Was there such a thing? How would he know it when he saw it? Would it have a guarantee attached to it? (147)

Regarding Shahid's dilemma R. S. Godlasky states that "Hanif Kureishi's characters are never quite sure who they are. Caught between the often conflicting cultures of Britain and Asia, they seem to suffer the problem of that many second-generation British Asians face – they lack a definite identity" (2).The continued encounter with racist aggression in the dominant white society makes Shahid feel turning out to be a racist himself. He begins to reflect upon his own position in the society racially and nationally which he thinks to be the outcome of the way the white have treated the minorities for centuries: "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" (12). Shahid, like Chad starts thinking that they must stand united against this oppression by consolidating the ethos of Muslim fundamentalism to challenge the assumptions of the Western world. Kureishi emphasizes this connection of the *The Black Album* with "white racism, separatism and Muslim militancy" (Ranasinha 82). Kureishi thus observes: "Muslim fundamentalism has always seemed to me to be profoundly wrong, unnecessarily restrictive and frequently cruel. But there are reasons for its revival that are comprehensible . . . . It is constraining, limiting, degrading, to be a victim in your own country. If you feel excluded it might be tempting to exclude other. (qtd. in Ranasinha 83)

Brownlow in his aggressive anti-religious stance seems to create a dichotomy between the Eastern spiritualism and the Western liberalism associating the conception of God with "oriental despotism" (Curtis 67) and grossly overlooks the fact that the values of liberalism itself is derived from the principles of Christianity. His inability to respect other's point of view and branding religion as mere superstition demonstrate his failure to contribute to the course of a multicultural society as he claims in the novel helping the Riaz group. Kureishi is conscious of this fact and makes Riaz square Brownlow's assumptions balancing it with his fundamentalist counterarguments:

But you are a little arrogant... Your liberal belief belong to a minority who live in northern Europe. Yet you think moral superiority over the rest of mankind is a fact. You want to dominate others with your particular morality, which has – as you also well know – gone hand-in-hand with fascist imperialism…. This is why we have to guard against the hypocritical and smug intellectual atmosphere of western civilization.(98-99)

Shahid is not constraint by the formulaic patterns of restraint imposed by the society or religion upon individual, and out of curiosity he seeks to explore his sexual self in all its multicoloured hues. Kaleta contends that "Shahid wants to believe in something; he is searching for something to believe in. Pledging his love to Deedee on a train carrying them away from the seething streets of London, Shahid chooses at that time to believe in love. That choice compels

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him to embrace the present" (143). Shahid chooses to enjoy the present life with Deedee "until it stops being fun" neglecting the call of the Riaz group which will again put him into dreadful uncertainties (276). It is this influence of the sexual self which makes him alter the content of Riaz's manuscript which he is asked to type, according to his own sexual fancies. According to Holmes, "Shahid's writing is sexually explicit, reflecting his ungoing, uninhibited activities with his lover Deedee Osgood" (302). He wants to live and realize his hybridized self through literature and art and "it is through exercising his imagination as a budding artist rather than practising his faith as a Muslim that Shahid ultimately seeks to find his identity as an adult" (Holmes 305). Shahid struggles to become an artist and views literature as a means to overcome the contradictions and uncertainties of life. Poetry infuses beauty into life and makes it worth - living. It is this ideal which leads Shahid to transmute the political content of Riaz's writings into wonderful poetry. Kaleta suggests: "When Shahid transforms Riaz's writing into poetry rather than transcribing his political tract, he turns the fundamental political observations into poems so lush that he gets erection" (139).

This then explains Shahid's responsibility, his commitment towards the society in the way he distances himself from his fundamentalist friends and embrace a liberal, imaginative outlook towards life. He can't be too religious, devoid of doubts like Riaz. He must choose a self out of the several options available to him that thrives on uncertainties rather than be reduced to any definite dogma which may fit into the prescriptive framework chalked out by any society, culture or religion. This is the reason which is why Shahid when asked to type the "original manuscript" (233) that has been given to him "in good faith"(234), cannot but dilutes the religious fervour of the draft by secular, deceptively sexual content:

He had begun typing Riaz's work in good faith, but there were certain words, then phrases and verses, he couldn't bring himself to transcribe. Once he'd begun not-transcribing, He'd got carried away. He'd been enjoying himself with Deedee; It seemed natural to express the puzzle of the wonder.

Shahid said, 'It was a celebration'.

'Of what yaar?'

'Passion.' (234)

CONCLUSION

Shahid in *The Black Album* thus represent the idea of an in-between space which symbolizes social encounters and cultural permutation and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, *The Location* 4). Shahid finds himself in an ambivalent position of perpetual permeability which allows him to experiment with their fluid, relational, shifting selves without being content with an essentialist, homogeneous model of belonging and identification. Kureishi with his 'narrative of the self' thus explores the multiple modalities of cultural configuration which is formed, reformed and transformed continuously in the fleeting multiplicities of variable existentialities.

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