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THE RUSHDIE AFFAIR – POLITICS, CULTURE AND ETHNICITY IN HANIF KUREISHI'S *THE BLACK ALBUM*

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to show how politics, culture and ethnicity interweave in the context of the Rushdie Affair in both the real-life dimension of the historical events taking place in the late 1980s, as well as the literary dimension of the novel by Hanif Kureishi entitled *The Black Album*. The paper briefly outlines the Rushdie Affair as it unfolded in the British public sphere with particular emphasis placed on the process of consolidation of the Muslim identity among the representatives of different ethnic groups in Great Britain in the political and cultural context of the event which is deemed to be defining from the point of view of British Muslims. The author of the paper presents the profile of Hanif Kureishi, to indicate why he is ideally positioned to look critically at both sides of the conflict. The paper analyses the novel itself insofar as it examines the implications of the Rushdie Affair depicted in *The Black Album*, the reactions of the second-generation immigrants of Pakistani descent in the face of the controversy, the influence this event exerted on the process of their searching for identity as well as their integration into British society. Two opposing identity options taken up by the protagonists of *The Black Album* are analysed by the author of the paper.

Key words: identity, diaspora, ethnicity, boundary, hybridity

The aim of this paper is to explore the mutual dependencies between culture, politics and ethnicity in the context of the so-called Rushdie Affair which took place in the late 1980s in Great Britain. This paper constitutes an attempt at analysing the aforementioned mutual dependencies with regard to the real-life events which dominated the public sphere in Great Britain more than twenty years ago, but first and foremost to examine how politics, culture and ethnicity interweave in the novel by Hanif Kureishi entitled *The Black Album*, how in the wake of the Rushdie Affair and especially the fatwa proclaimed by Ayatollah Khomeini requiring Rushdie's execution, the author of the novel reflected the events in a broad social, political and psychological perspective, giving a comprehensive insight into the implications of the Rushdie controversy for the representatives of the second-generation immigrants of Pakistani descent. In the first part of the paper, I would like to focus on the real-life events, and briefly outline the Rushdie Affair as it unfolded in the British public sphere. Since the aim of the paper is to explore the socio-political statement made by Hanif Kureishi in the form of the novel entitled *The Black Album* in the wake of the real-life controversy, in the second part I am going to present the profile of the author, to indicate why he is the best suited to give a fictional account of the events in a broad social, political and psychological perspective, why he is ideally positioned to look critically at both sides of the conflict: the dominant host culture and the culture of the British Asian Muslim diaspora. I will also touch upon Kureishi's motivation for writing the novel. And finally, I will move on to the novel itself. My purpose is to examine the impact of the Rushdie Affair, the implications the author depicted in the novel, the reactions of the second-generation immigrants of Pakistani descent in the face of the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, the influence this event exerted on the process of their search for identity and their desperate need of belonging as well as their integration into British society. I intend to analyse two opposing identity options taken up by the protagonists of *The Black Album*.

The Rushdie affair started with the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie which sparked off strong protests among Muslim communities in the UK. The book was first available for sale in September 1988. Many members of the multi-ethnic British Muslim community regarded it blasphemous. In the book, Rushdie described the birth of a religion that could be associated with Islam. He altered and portrayed in a satirical manner traditional accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's life. The Prophet became a false prophet as in *The Satanic Verses* he was renamed Mahound which is the mocking name that 19th century Christian missionaries used in the medieval religious plays for a satanic version of Muhammad.¹ In this way, as the outraged representatives of the Muslim community claimed, Rushdie challenged the authority of the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, they claimed that Rushdie presented The Prophet as a political strategist who is ready to resort to chicanery to achieve his political goals. In the

¹ Cf. R.N. Ostling, 'Why Believers Are Outraged', *Time*, 24 June 2001, at <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,151314,00.html>>, 8 July 2013.

passages which deal with the famous eponymous Satanic Verses which translated from Arabic read as follows *these are exalted females whose intercession is to be desired* Mahound is tempted by Gibreel to cut a deal with the enemies of his newly-established faith and tolerate the worship of three of their goddesses, Lat, Manat, and Uzza, who were popular deities in pre-Islamic Arabia alongside one God. According to Richard N. Ostling, the story of the goddesses is regarded as particularly offensive by Muslims as *it was a standard argument hurled against Islam by the 19th century Christian missionaries*.² Moreover, according to Rushdie's critics, he questioned the textual impurity of the Qur'an which for Muslims is the word of God. Another character from the novel called Salman the Scribe who was responsible for noting down the word of God as recited by Mahound, changed things by adding his own words contaminating the holy scripture of Islam with human discourse. Thus Rushdie purportedly questioned the divine provenance of the Qur'an, which is a belief at the heart of Islam. Muslims found another fragment of the novel, an episode in a brothel where prostitutes bear the names of Muhammad's wives, particularly offensive, as prophet's spouses are regarded by Muslims as "mothers of all believers" and are endowed with great reverence.³ There were violent demonstrations against the book in the world's major Islamic enclaves. In India and Pakistan, tens of thousands of protesters gathered. Governments in 45 Islamic countries banned the book.⁴ In Great Britain 20 Muslim organizations which shared the opinion that the novel is a sacrilege convened to form the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) in October 1988 *in order to mobilize public opinion and coordinate actions against the Satanic Verses [...]* *Several hundred thousand Muslims signed the petition protesting against the publication and calling on the publisher Viking Penguin for the book's withdrawal*.⁵ However, the appeal did not bring any results. Then the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs decided to take legal steps and, relying on the existing blasphemy law, demanded the court to issue an order to withdraw the book. In December, the attorney-general ruled that the blasphemy law applicable in Great Britain guarantees protection against blasphemy only to the Church of England or more generally to Christianity.⁶ Muslims started to press for a change in the blasphemy law to embrace Islam. In January 1989, in the northern English city of Bradford, which had a large Muslim community, around one thousand Muslim protesters set alight a copy of *The Satanic Verses* outside the City Hall. As James Procter refers to this event, *it came to represent the most dramatic reception of a fictional text ever witnessed*.⁷ Mass demonstrations took place in January and February during which representatives of the multi-

² Ibid.

³ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴ Cf. J. Procter, 'New Ethnicities, the Novel, and the Burdens of Representation' in J.F. English (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, Malden–Oxford 2006, p. 101.

⁵ 'Defining Events: The Rushdie Affair – 1988-91', Salaam, at <http://www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthemonth/september03_index.php?l=1>, 24 March 2013.

⁶ R. Włoch, *Polityka integracji muzułmanów we Francji i Wielkiej Brytanii*, Warszawa 2011, p. 221.

⁷ J. Procter, 'New Ethnicities...', p. 101..

-ethnic British Muslim community burned copies of *The Satanic Verses*. Muslim community across Britain was mobilised. On 14 February, the religious and political leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, issued a decree calling on all zealous Muslims to execute the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses* and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, because the book *had been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur'an*⁸ and insults the Muslim sanctities. He also stressed that *anyone who is himself killed in this path will be deemed a martyr*.⁹ Rushdie had to go into hiding for the next ten years, and the decree led Muslim extremists who claimed to be fulfilling the command of the fatwa to stabbing and killing Igarashi Hitoshi, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*, and stabbing and seriously wounding the Italian translator Ettore Capriolo. Several other people connected with the novel fell victim to the executors of Khomeini's death sentence.

It is worth stressing how the author himself reacted to the controversy his novel had aroused. *Nowadays, however, a powerful tribe of clerics has taken over Islam. These are the contemporary Thought Police. They have turned Muhammad into a perfect being, his life into a perfect life, his revelation into the unambiguous, clear event it originally was not. Powerful taboos have been erected. One may not discuss Muhammad as if he were human, with human virtues and weaknesses. One may not discuss the growth of Islam as a historical phenomenon, as an ideology born out of its time. These are the taboos against which The Satanic Verses has transgressed [...]. It is for this breach of taboo that the novel is being anathematized, fulminated against, and set alight.*¹⁰ The reaction of the British authorities to the demands of withdrawing the book and to the fatwa issued by Khomeini was very sharp. The government treated the demands put forward by protesting Muslims as resistance to integration into the host society and lack of loyalty on the part of ethnic minorities.¹¹ The authorities reinforced their hard-line stance by breaking diplomatic relations with Iran. In July, John Patten, minister of state at the Home Office responsible for Race Relations, in an open letter to the Head of the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs Iqbal Sacrani and to other influential British Muslims published in *The Times*, stressed how important it is for British Muslims to integrate into the host society. *Putting down roots in a new community does not mean severing the old. No one would expect or indeed want British Muslims, or any other group, to lay aside their faith, traditions or heritage. But the new roots must be put down and must go deep, too.*¹² Patten stressed in the letter that it is necessary for British Muslims to know the English language, but also to acquire the knowledge of institutions, history and traditions. The minorities should accept the "core values" that constitute the British culture which centre around liberalism and freedom of expression. He explained that the government's

⁸ B. Lewis, *Islam in History. Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East*, Chicago 2001, p. 361.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ S. Rushdie, 'The Book Burning', *The New York Review of Books*, 2 March 1989, at <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1989/mar/02/the-book-burning>>, 24 March 2013.

¹¹ Cf. R. Włoch, *Polityka...*, p. 221.

¹² 'Defining Events: The Rushdie Affair..'

decision not to ban and withdraw *The Satanic Verses* was dictated by the respect for liberal principles. *The same freedom which has enabled Muslims to meet, march and protest against the book, also preserves any author's right to freedom of expression for so long as no law is broken. To rule otherwise would be to chip away at the fundamental freedom on which our democracy is built.*¹³

Although the petitions, protests and legal action taken by Muslim communities turned out to be of no avail, the book burning marked a change in the way Pakistanis thought of themselves and were regarded by the host society. It gave the voiceless a voice and they began to demand respect and equality. *It was as if the book-burning gave British Muslims a sense of self-worth and unity that they had been lacking before.*¹⁴ They marked their presence in the public sphere. As Inayat Bunglawa, the spokesperson for the Muslim Council of Britain describes [the Rushdie Affair] *was a seminal moment in British Muslim history. It brought Muslims together. Before that they had been identified as ethnic communities but The Satanic Verses brought them together and helped develop a British Muslim identity.*¹⁵ The Rushdie Affair released out of the bottle the genie of the collective Muslim identity which could not be put back.¹⁶ As Paul Weller comments on the controversy around *The Satanic Verses* in his book entitled *A Mirror for Our Times. "The Rushdie Affair" and the Future of Multiculturalism*, *it both marked and gave further impetus to the rise of individual and community self-identification on the basis of religion alongside, and sometimes in place of, ethnic, national and social-class factors.*¹⁷

Having briefly outlined the real-life events which dominated the public sphere in Great Britain more than twenty years ago, and before analysing the fictional account of the historical events and especially their implications in a broad socio-political perspective in Hanif Kureishi's novel, I find it indispensable to focus on the author himself. Hanif Kureishi was born of mixed-race parents in Bromley, Kent, which is a suburb of London. His father, coming from a Muslim family in India, had immigrated to the UK from Bombay as a student. After the Partition of India and creation of Pakistan in 1947 the rest of the family of Kureishi's father moved from Bombay to Karachi and thus it could be said that Hanif is of Pakistani descent. His mother was a white British citizen. He is a playwright, a writer of screenplays, a novelist and a film director. The topics which have always been important for him encompass identity, race, race relations in the UK and racism, especially towards the representatives of the Pakistani community. Kureishi may be deemed a "diaspora writer" because he meets the criteria set forth by Robin Cohen in his book *Global Diaspora. An Introduction* and cited by John McLe-

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ A. Mills, 'Prescient Parable: *The Black Album* by Hanif Kureishi', *The Kyoritsu Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 27 (2010), p. 35, at <https://kyoritsu.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_uri&item_id=2262&file_id=18&file_no=1>, 24 March 2013.

¹⁵ A. Anthony, 'How One Book Ignited a Culture War', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2009, at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jan/11/salman-rushdie-satanic-verses>>, 24 March 2013.

¹⁶ 'Defining Events: The Rushdie Affair...'

¹⁷ P. Weller, *A Mirror for Our Times. "The Rushdie Affair" and the Future of Multiculturalism*, London 2009, p. 1.

od in *Beginning Postcolonialism*. He adheres to a diasporic community of Pakistanis, which is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of similar background.¹⁸ In the case of Kureishi, this inescapable link which he demonstrates refers to *the past migration history* of his father. Since Kureishi is a British-born subject of ethnic origin, he belongs to a generation which, as Sara Upstone puts it, *must negotiate feelings of racial or religious rejection against their own inherent sense of British citizenship as a birthright*.¹⁹ Kureishi is a member of the diaspora which has been excluded from feeling they belong to *the new country*. In his autobiographical essay *The Rainbow Sign*, he reckons that *at least once every day since I was five years old I had been racially abused*.²⁰ Not only his peers abused him at that time, but also the representatives of authority such as teachers. According to Kureishi, Enoch Powell, famous for his "Rivers of Blood" speech,²¹ *helped create racism in Britain and was directly responsible not only for the atmosphere of fear and hatred, but through his influence, for individual acts of violence against Pakistanis*.²² In the late 1960s the word "Pakistani" had been made into an insult. Kureishi blames the representatives of the host culture for formulating and disseminating misconceptions about the immigrants from Pakistan as well as for mistreating them, *The British were doing the assimilating: they assimilated Pakistanis to their world view. They saw them as dirty, ignorant and less than human – worthy of abuse and violence*.²³ Kureishi fell victim to these misconceptions and mistreatment. His negative experience of racism drove him to such despair that he rejected his Pakistani self. As he recalls, *I found it almost impossible to answer questions about where I came from. [Pakistani] was a word I didn't want used about myself. I couldn't tolerate being myself*.²⁴ Towards the end of the essay, Kureishi admits that *my country* [by which he means England] *isn't a notion that comes easily. I have never wanted to identify with England*.²⁵ But after returning from a stay in Pakistan where he visited his Pakistani family he concludes that it was *in the land of his*

¹⁸ Cf J. McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester 2000, p. 207 (*Beginnings*).

¹⁹ S. Upstone, *British Asian Fiction. Twenty-First-Century Voices*, Manchester 2010, p. 7.

²⁰ H. Kureishi, 'The Rainbow Sign' in idem, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, London 1986, p. 12.

²¹ "Rivers of Blood" speech was delivered to a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham on April 20 1968. Enoch Powell was a representative of the Conservative Party who decided to use the "race card" to generate political capital. Powell took advantage of the prevailing anti-immigration sentiment of the general public and at the same time enhanced and invigorated this popular racism. He urged the ruling party to repatriate settled immigrants and to revoke the anti-discrimination legislation which was enacted in the form of race relations acts of 1965 and 1968. In his famous anti-immigration speech of 1968, Powell referred to a very expressive image of "rivers of blood" foreseen to be a dramatic result of fundamental incompatibilities between culturally distinct immigrants and the English people. According to Powell, *immigrants were a fifth column who with a supporting hand from the Race Relations legislation would soon gain the upper hand over the white man* – A. Geddes, *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*, London 2003, p. 38 (*Sage Politics Texts*).

²² H. Kureishi, 'The Rainbow Sign', p. 12.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

ancestors where he found out how much he had in common with people there, but at the same time how British he was. The alienation he experienced both in British society and in the country of his ethnic origin made him *negotiate identities in the wake of difficult relationships to both distant ancestral homeland and a very present yet contested Britain*.²⁶ However, this process of negotiating identities does not necessarily have to result in frustration, social nonconformity and double exclusion. It may lead to the emergence of a new, positive quality. As Sara Upstown points out, such *negotiation of complex cultural positionings means a fusion of different influences celebrated as a powerful new identity, rather than as detrimental to a stable sense of self*.²⁷ Such fusion may reflect *a new way of being British, after all this time* described by Kureishi in the final part of his essay, which for Kenneth Kaleta constitutes *a call to recognize a dynamic society unhindered by dated gender, racial, and national stereotypes*.²⁸ The white British have to learn that being British isn't what it was as it is now more complex and involves new elements.

Kureishi belongs to the group of British-born Asian authors who do not reject their ethnicity, but at the same time dismiss *the burden of representation* which Stuart Hall analysed in his seminal essay entitled 'New Ethnicities' published in 1989. Hall refers back to the times when the black experience was marginalized in British culture as a result of *a set of quite specific political and cultural practices which regulated, governed and "normalized" the representational and discursive spaces of English society*.²⁹ In those times a cultural politics emerged, which was supposed to *challenge, resist and, where possible, to transform the dominant regimes of representation*.³⁰ The two principal objectives of the politics were: the access to the rights to representation by black artists and the contestation of the marginality and stereotypical representations by the use of *a "positive" black imagery*.³¹ Therefore, there was a burden placed on black artists to be representative of the whole black community and to present the black experience only in a favourable light. Kureishi does not want to assume that burden. He objects to the expectation that writers of ethnic origin should be representative of the whole community they belong to. Moreover, Kureishi refuses to create "cheering fictions" as he calls them. He is far from embellishing his portrayal of other members of his ethnicity. As Bart Moore-Gilber asserts, *Kureishi has always been dismissive of such demands for "positive images" of ethnicity*.³² In 'New Ethnicities' Stuart Hall cites Kureishi's critique of *the writer as public relations officer, as hired liar. If there is to be a serious attempt to understand Britain today, with its mix of races and colours, its hysteria and despair, then, writing about it*

²⁶ S. Upstone, *British Asian Fiction...*, p. 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ K.C. Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi. Postcolonial Storyteller*, Austin 1998, p. 5.

²⁹ S. Hall, 'New Ethnicities' in D. Morley, K.-H. Chen (eds.) *Stuart Hall. Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London 1996, pp. 441-442 (*Comedia*).

³⁰ Ibid., p. 442.

³¹ Ibid.

³² B. Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, Manchester 2001, p. 45 (*Contemporary World Writers*).

*has to be complex. It can't apologise or idealize. It can't sentimentalize and it can't represent only one group as having a monopoly on virtue.*³³

In his whole literary and artistic output, which encompasses novels, short stories, plays and films, Kureishi has been open, honest and critical of the Pakistani and generally British Asian community. As he emphasises in an interview with another British Asian writer and journalist Sukhdev Sandhu, *It seems to me to be very important that we're critical of our communities. Things aren't all Bombay Dreams, and all that vulgarity. The worst thing to me about multiculturalism is that we're always celebrating each other's religions and communities. That seems to me to be very banal and patronising.*³⁴ Kureishi's unique social and cultural circumstances encourage particular perspectives. According to Kaleta, Kureishi observes multicultural British society and the relations between various groups which make up that society from *the distinct vantage point of his cultural hybridity.*³⁵ It enables him to keep a distance and to be more objective. In addition, thanks to his particular cultural perspective Kureishi has a better insight into both the English host culture and the culture of the British Asian diaspora. This makes him *ideally positioned to look critically at both the white and non-white sides in order to criticise and advocate both positions.*³⁶

In the early 1990s, Kureishi became very interested in the growing radicalism of young Muslims in London and in Bradford who renounced all the freedoms which he had valued so much and taken advantage of. One thing which could have contributed to the radicalization of young Asian Muslims was the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie and the strong protests it arose among Muslim communities in the UK.

The Black Album is a socially engaged novel written in support of Salman Rushdie when he was persecuted for the *Satanic Verses*. Kureishi asserted in an interview with a journalist from *The Guardian* Maya Jaggi, which was conducted soon after the publication of his novel, that he considered Rushdie a friend and a mentor. He was among the first to express his objection to Ayatollah Khomeini's death threat. The Rushdie Affair spurred Kureishi to research fundamentalism. He had never taken any interest in Islam before. Being of a *Muslim background, but not in the religious sense*³⁷ he started going to the mosque in Whitechapel, hanging around with strict adherents of Islam. He was trying to understand them, their reasons for emphasizing and manifesting their religious identity. As he admitted in the interview with Maya Jaggi, *I felt sympathetic; they seemed lost, and fundamentalism gave them a sense of*

³³ S. Hall, 'New Ethnicities,' p. 449.

³⁴ S. Sandhu, 'Life Lines,' *The Telegraph*, 28 August 2004, at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3622928/Life-lines.html>>, 24 March 2013.

³⁵ K. Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi...*, p. 4.

³⁶ F. Jussawalla, 'Homegrown Terrorism: The Bildungsroman of Hanif Kureishi, the Author and His Characters' in N. Murphy, W.-Ch. Sim (eds.), *British Asian Fiction. Framing the Contemporary*, Amherst 2008, p. 56.

³⁷ M. Jaggi, 'A Buddy from Suburbia,' *The Guardian*, 1 March 1995, at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/1995/mar/01/fiction.reviews>>, 24 March 2013.

place, of belonging. So many were unemployed, and had friends involved in drugs; religion kept them out of trouble.³⁸

At this point, let me move on to analysing the impact of the Rushdie Affair the author depicted in *The Black Album*, the reactions of the second-generation immigrants of Pakistani descent in the face of the controversy, the influence this event exerted on the process of their search for identity and their desperate need of belonging. The representatives of the second-generation immigrants in *The Black Album* share the experience of *diasporic existence*. They are British-born subjects of ethnic origin, referred to as British Asians or BrAsians. They are members of the diaspora which has been excluded from feeling they belong to “the new country”. As Shahid describes this social exclusion in the novel, *We’re 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!*³⁹ This is what S. Sayyid calls a *sense of ironic citizenship*. In the Introduction to *A Postcolonial People. South Asians in Britain* he claims that *BrAsians experience persistent and deep-seated scepticism about the dominant mythology of Britishness. They have recurring doubts about their inclusion within the conversation of the nation as interlocutors and peers.*⁴⁰ S. Sayyid is even more radical in his diagnosis of the social status of British Asians as he writes about *racially induced segregation and subordination* they are subject to which *raises doubts about the inclusive claims made about membership of British society.*⁴¹ According to S. Sayyid, *BrAsians (like other ex-colonial ethnically marked people) are often reminded that to be in Britain but not a part of Britain is not the same as being British.*⁴² And on the other hand their emotional bond to the remote country of origin of their parents – Pakistan, the land of their ancestors, if any, is very weak. The alienation they experience both with regard to British society and to the country of their ethnic origin made them “negotiate identities” in the same way as Kureishi himself had to, and perhaps still has to do. Whereas for the people who live within established communities with shared beliefs and perspectives the issue of identity may not be bothersome at all, for others, particularly those who live in fragmented communities or belong to minority or marginalised groups it may be a question that pursues them all their lives. Especially immigrants who have to face the cracked nature of displaced consciousness and diasporic existence need identity.

What helps the representatives of the second-generation immigrants in *The Black Album* overcome the alienation and satisfy the need of belonging is the identity they decide to assume which is the Pakistani ethnic identity with Islam as its significant constituent. At this point, I would like to quote the conception of identity formulated by Samuel Huntington and described in his book entitled *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*. According to Huntington, identity is the feeling

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ H. Kureishi, *The Black Album*, London 1995, p. 209.

⁴⁰ N. Ali, V. S. Kalra, S. Sayyid (eds.), *A Postcolonial People. South Asians in Britain*, London 2006, p. 8.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

of a “self” of one’s own, of the “us”, it is the *self-consciousness of difference*, awareness of one’s possession of *specific* qualities perceived through comparison. Inherited, constructed or determined by the situation, identity is a product of the interaction of individual with others; it forms the actual behaviour of people; it is a system of notions, feelings, and strategies for maintaining affiliation.⁴³ Let me apply the aforementioned conception of identity formulated by Samuel Huntington to the second-generation immigrants who are the protagonists of Kureishi’s novel. Their *consciousness of difference* is very strong and the *specific* qualities they possess, their distinctive features so to say, are their strong religious belief and the traditional values they believe in and adhere to. It is worth stressing that these values ensue from and are inextricably linked to their religion. For the second-generation of settlers, those *born of ethnic parents denizens of Britain*⁴⁴ who were feeling rootless and sidelined, this kind of strong identity can offer a sense of direction, a sense of values, a sense of priorities. Coined by Joan Riley, the condition of “the unbelonging” made them search for a validation in British society. And Islam provides them with the validation they were searching for – strong identity that flies in the face of mainstream society, which is particularly starkly manifested in the context of the Rushdie Affair. It is essential to emphasise that the Rushdie Affair, which is reflected in Kureishi’s novel, is a seminal and defining moment for the protagonists of *The Black Album* in the same way as it was for the real-life Muslim immigrant communities in Great Britain in the late 1980s. The author entangles his protagonists in the controversy and makes them a party in the clash between the dominant British host society cherishing the liberal freedom of speech and the holders of strong religious beliefs from Muslim immigrant communities. Those zealous adherents of Islam considered *The Satanic Verses* blasphemous and demanded a ban on the novel and prosecution against the author, and expressed their outrage in demonstrations and book burning. For the second-generation Muslim immigrants of Pakistani descent who are portrayed in the *The Black Album*, in the same way as it was for the real-life Muslim community in Great Britain, The Rushdie Affair is a “catalyst” [...] *for the issues of believing and belonging; of religion, art and values in contention; of legal rights and constraints; and of political representation and participation in a plural society.*⁴⁵ The mobilisation of the second-generation Muslim British Asians in the face of the Rushdie Affair depicted in the novel correlates with their growing fundamentalism and radicalisation. Kureishi showed their becoming more united, strengthened and ready to defy racist abuse. They form a “protection racket” to defend Asian families in the East End bullied by racists. Self-assured militant young Muslims are ready to respond to racist attacks with violence. They are no longer meek and submissive. The sense of collective Muslim identity has strengthened them. Islam is their powerful shield against racism, a remedy for social exclusion.

⁴³ Cf. S.P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, New York 2004, pp. 39-48.

⁴⁴ F. Jussawalla, ‘Homegrown Terrorism...’, p. 57.

⁴⁵ P. Weller, *A Mirror for Our Times...*, p. 1.

At this point, I would like to analyse in detail the impact of the Rushdie Affair on the process of identity construction or identity assumption and assertion of two selected protagonists of *The Black Album* – the representatives of the second-generation Muslim immigrants of Pakistani descent described above. One of the characters I have selected for a detailed analysis is the main protagonist of the novel – Shahid. He has had similar experience of racism as Kureishi himself. He is even more radical in his reactions than Kureishi. At some time in his past, Shahid's self-hate was so strong that it pushed him to renounce his Pakistani self, which resembles the author's rejection of this vital part of his identity. However, in the case of Shahid the desperation is even further-reaching as it drove him to a point where he wanted to become a racist and join the British National Party. Shahid has experienced the condition of "unbelonging", he was feeling rootless, sidelined and alienated. This is what pushed him to ethnic and religious affiliations. He feared that his insufficient knowledge of his ethnic group and his religion would exacerbate his alienation. *Shahid was afraid his ignorance would place him in no man's land.*⁴⁶ In the novel, Kureishi pointed to a trend which was popular in the late 1980s towards manifesting one's affiliation to a particular social group which can provide a sort of validation in society. *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.*⁴⁷ That is why Shahid affiliates a group of young fundamental Muslims of Pakistani descent led by Riaz. Riaz constitutes a striking example of separatist ethnic identity. Boundary maintenance is important for this type of identity. In the area of ethnic studies the concept of a socially constructed boundary is usually associated with the work of Fredrik Barth. In the concept of defining and maintaining a boundary, the characteristic of self-ascription is particularly important.⁴⁸ For the sake of defining a boundary between a given ethnic group and a different group, actors choose the cultural differentiae they themselves regard significant. To manifest ethnic dichotomies they can choose from two kinds of orders. The first encompasses *overt signals and signs – the diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity* e. g. dress or language, and the second order involves *basic value orientations: the standards of morality and excellence by which performance is judged.*⁴⁹ Boundaries are the criteria defined by the representatives of the ethnic group for determining membership and ways for signalling membership and exclusion. It is worth stressing that according to Barth, continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders is a prerequisite for preserving the ethnic group since *when defined as an ascriptive and exclusive group, the nature of continuity of ethnic units is clear: it depends on the maintenance of*

⁴⁶ H. Kureishi, *The Black Album...*, p. 92.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cf. F. Barth, 'Introduction' in idem (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference. [Results of a Symposium Held at the University of Bergen, 23rd to 26th February 1967]*, Boston 1969, p. 13 (*Little, Brown Series in Anthropology*).

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

a boundary.⁵⁰ Especially in situations of social contact between persons of different cultures ethnic groups only persist as significant units if they imply marked difference in behaviour, i.e. persisting cultural differences.⁵¹ The defining of a boundary between the ethnic group of Riaz and his adherents and the representatives of the dominant British culture which is based on the second order mentioned above is depicted in *The Black Album*. One of the novel protagonists named Chad, from the group of second-generation Pakistani settlers, adhering to their spiritual leader Riaz quotes what Riaz has said about the Western, liberal, egoistic and hedonistic style of living, *Pleasure and self-absorption isn't everything [...] It's a bottomless basket. [...] one pleasure – unless there are strong limits – can only lead to another. And the greater the physical pleasure, the less respect for the other person and for oneself. Until we become beasts. [...] Inside they [the representatives of the western culture] are filthy and bankrupt.* And again following the teachings of Riaz, Chad asserts that *We people have made ourselves different [...] 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.*⁵² So this idea of pure living, which is a very important aspect of Islam, is what Riaz and his adherents emphasise in defining the boundaries between their ethnic group and the settlement society. In the talks which Riaz gives in the mosque and which attract many young second-generation settlers from a Muslim background, "local cockney Asians" as Kureishi calls them, he shows that *he must have tested the atmosphere of this time without drinking it in as he entitled his talks "Rave to the Grave", "Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve", "Islam; A Blast from the Past or a Force for the Future?" and "democracy is a Hypocrisy".*⁵³ In the talks, he emphasises a bright boundary between the Pakistani diaspora from a Muslim background and the settlement society. Riaz perceives his settlement country as *dar-al-harb* (the house or the adobe of war). He blames the West, with its decadent philosophies and its corruption, for destroying the purity of Islam, and Islamic youth in particular. He insists that the western world is sinking into a morass of evil and that it is the duty of all Muslims to resist this and follow the teachings of the Koran. He and the group of his adherents, but, in his opinion, the whole Muslim community in Great Britain as well does not want to accept the "core values" that constitute the British culture which centre around liberalism and freedom of expression, which according to John Patten, minister of state at the Home Office responsible for Race Relations, the minorities living in Great Britain are obliged to accept, which he expressed in an open letter published in *The Times* addressed to the Head of the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs and to other influential British Muslims. This is what Riaz says to Brownlow – a typical representative of white British left-wing intelligentsia, an atheist and rationalist, *Your liberal beliefs 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*

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵² H. Kureishi, *The Black Album*..., pp. 128-129.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 80.

*with your particular morality, which has – as you also well know – gone hand-in-hand with fascist imperialism. That is why we have to guard against the hypocritical and smug intellectual atmosphere of Western civilisation.*⁵⁴ Riaz uses his strong identity to entrench himself in society, which he perceives as hostile. *This will never be my home* is the answer he provides to the question about how he feels living in Great Britain. In the face of the Rushdie Affair, Riaz and his group's separatist ethnic identity, which highlights their strong religious belief and the traditional values ensuing from their religion they adhere to, is reinforced. In their protests and book burning they enter the public sphere, they initiate the social contact to manifest their cultural differences, to show that they *persist as a significant unit* in confrontation with the imposing dominant group, to highlight the dichotomization which entails *limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgement of value and performance.*⁵⁵ The second-generation Muslim immigrants of Pakistani descent who are the protagonists of Kureishi's novel do not want to follow the strong recommendation expressed by Patten in the aforementioned letter about *the new roots which must be put down and must go deep* concerning British Muslims' integration into the host society. As Chad says in the novel, *And we think we want to integrate here! But we must not assimilate, that way we lose our souls. We are proud and we are obedient. What is wrong with that? It's not who must change, but the world! [...] It's hell-fire for disbelievers...*⁵⁶

To make Shahid's quest for identity more challenging, on the opposite pole from Riaz and his group of young fundamental Muslims Kureishi puts Deedee Osgood, Shahid's college tutor, who represents Western liberalism emphasising individual freedom to pursue any principles and values and any lifestyle as one pleases. Shahid has an affair with his teacher who tries to convince him to break off his relations with Riaz and relinquish his pursuit of religious identity, which she finds very restrictive and limiting. Thus Shahid is torn between these two strong opposing influences.

The book-burning organised by Riaz and his group of militant young Muslims is the pivotal event in *The Black Album*. This experience, along with the fatwa, is very traumatic for Shahid. With his great respect and love for literature he cannot find in himself any conviction to get engaged in denouncing Rushdie and his novel and to support the death sentence issued against the author. After having many tormenting thoughts about the dilemma he is faced with, whether to stick to the strong identity based on religious faith, which is categorised largely as absolute and uncompromising, or whether to pursue the route of Western liberalism mapped out by Deedee Osgood, he comes to the conclusion that the first option is too limiting for him as it would make him reject and condemn certain values and freedoms he cherishes. Finally, he decides not to follow the path of fundamentalism and opt for the fusion of different influences celebrated as a powerful new identity which Kureishi himself has chosen in the process of negotiating identities. He accepts '*the fluid, mongrelized condition of both the self and*

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

⁵⁵ F. Barth, 'Introduction', p. 15.

⁵⁶ H. Kureishi, *The Black Album...*, p. 81.

*society at large and rejects the purity of a dogmatic, totalizing religious faith.*⁵⁷ He decides to engage in the relationship with Deedee Osgud *until it stops being fun: He had to find some sense in his recent experiences; he wanted to know and understand. How could anyone confine themselves to one system or creed? Why should they feel they had to? 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.*⁵⁸

According to Sara Upstone, Shahid's new identity fits perfectly within the postcolonial definition of hybridity applied by John McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism* as *hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves, like orderly pathways built from crazy-paving. Instead, they remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription.*⁵⁹ Kureishi, like Rushdie, in this final choice made by the main protagonist of *The Black Album*, celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, [...] songs.⁶⁰

Shahid apparently blurs the boundary which Riaz so starkly defines. He crosses the bright boundary without losing his ethnic affiliation and embodies the possibility of multiple memberships associated with blurred boundaries.

I hope I have managed to indicate how politics, culture and ethnicity interweave in the context of the Rushdie Affair in both the real-life dimension of the historical events taking place in the late 1980s, and the literary dimension of the novel by Hanif Kureishi entitled *The Black Album*. I was trying to prove that the Rushdie Affair, which is reflected in Kureishi's novel, is a seminal and defining moment for the protagonists of *The Black Album* in the same way as it was for the real-life Muslim immigrant communities in Great Britain in the late 1980s. It was of particular interest for me to explore the influence the Rushdie Affair exerted on the process of searching for identity of the second-generation Muslim immigrants of Pakistani descent portrayed by Hanif Kureishi, as well as their integration into British society. The mobilisation of the second-generation Muslim British Asians in the face of the Rushdie Affair depicted in the novel correlates with their growing fundamentalism and radicalisation. Riaz and his group's separatist ethnic identity, which highlights their strong religious belief and the traditional values ensuing from their religion they adhere to, is reinforced. In their protests and book burning they enter the public sphere, they initiate the social contact to manifest their cultural differences, to show that they "persist as a significant unit" in confrontation with the imposing dominant group, to highlight the dichotomiza-

⁵⁷ F.M. Holmes, 'The Postcolonial Subject Divided between East and West: Kureishi's *The Black Album* as an Intertext of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*', *Papers on Language & Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2001), p. 297.

⁵⁸ H. Kureishi, *The Black Album*..., p. 274.

⁵⁹ As quoted in S. Upstone, 'A Question of Black or White: Returning to Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*', *Postcolonial Text*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2008), p. 10.

⁶⁰ S. Rushdie, 'In Good Faith' in idem, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, New York 1991, p. 394.

tion and their objection to accept the “core values” that constitute the British culture which centre around liberalism and freedom of expression. However, on the opposite pole Kureishi places Shahid with his hybrid identity. It is worth stressing that Kureishi seems to valorise the identity option Shahid finally takes up at the end of his journey – his quest for identity. In this way, the novel by Kureishi could be read as direct social engagement. In the final choice made by Shahid, Kureishi seems to be *stressing the value of the concept of plurality and cultural hybridity against systems of fundamentalist thought*.⁶¹ It is better for pluralist society if the boundaries between different ethnic groups are not so starkly defined, if there is potential for boundary-crossing identities and for boundary blurring.

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⁶¹ S. Upstone, ‘A Question of Black or White...’, p. 8.

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