

The Postcolonial Subject Divided  
between East and West:  
Kureishi's *The Black Album*  
as an Intertext of Rushdie's  
*The Satanic Verses*

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Hanif Kureishi has disavowed being influenced by Salman Rushdie as a novelist: "His writing is not like my writing in any way. We're quite different" (qtd. in Ashraf). Nevertheless, Kureishi's second novel, *The Black Album*, reveals several traces of his friend's monumental *The Satanic Verses*. Most obvious are the overt references to the controversy surrounding the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. *The Black Album* is set in the late 80s at the time of the *fatwa*, and Kureishi's characters argue about Rushdie's book, which, in one of the narrative's climaxes, is publicly burnt by a group of fundamentalist Muslim students at a nondescript college in the slums of northwest London. Moreover, *The Black Album* reinscribes some of the main themes of *The Satanic Verses*. Like Rushdie, Kureishi is concerned with the plight of the migrant denied a unitary identity because he is shunted back and forth between two cultures (each of which is itself internally divided and subdivided) and invited to adopt a variety of sometimes contradictory subject positions. Such a dilemma is painful, even potentially tragic, but Kureishi shows that it also contains possibilities for growth and creativity. What Rushdie has said of *The Satanic Verses* is also ultimately true of *The Black Album*: it "celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in

mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure" ("In Good Faith" 394).

In addition to analyzing some of the intertextual links between Kureishi's novel and *The Satanic Verses*, this essay will chart the process whereby the young protagonist of *The Black Album*, Shahid Hasan, comes to accept the fluid, mongrelized condition of both the self and society at large and to reject the purity of a dogmatic, totalizing religious faith; furthermore, the essay will examine the curious split between the narrative content of *The Black Album* (which could be labeled postcolonialist and postmodernist) and the narrative form (which, unlike that of *The Satanic Verses*, is linear, unself-conscious realism). Whereas Kureishi's screenplays (particularly *Sammy and Rosy Get Laid*) are formally fragmented, elliptical and, in places, surrealistic, in *The Black Album* he relies on a traditional set of narrative methods which, by their nature, presuppose a stability and coherence denied by contemporary culture, as Kureishi himself presents it. In a context in which Kureishi confounds existing definitions and categories of all kinds, the capacity of an undramatized narrator to convey an authoritative, objectively accurate, seamless representation of this turbulent, multiform new reality is never called into question.

Kureishi has written about his own crises of identity endured while he was growing up in England as the son of an English mother and Indian father, who emigrated to England before all of his relatives moved from Bombay to Karachi after the partition of India and Pakistan. Like Kureishi himself, Shahid Hasan, at the opening of the narrative, has formerly identified with the colonizing British since he has lived all his life in England as a British subject. Out of shame, Shahid has rejected the culture of his father. Kureishi has said that Enoch Powell's racist supporters had transformed the word "Pakistani" into an insult: "It was a word I didn't want to use about myself. I couldn't tolerate being myself" ("Rainbow Sign" 7). Shahid's reaction is even more extreme: he longs to join the racist British National Front. "I

began to turn into one of them,” he says. “I was becoming a monster” (*Black Album* 19). Saladin Chamcha of *The Satanic Verses*, also victimized as a school boy by English racism, copes similarly with feelings of alienation and self-hatred by identifying with his oppressors and repudiating his Indian heritage. “You’re not my people,” he says of Muhammed Sufyan and the other Indian immigrants who hide him in the Shaandaar Cafe after his metamorphosis into a horned, demonic creature. “I’ve spent half my life trying to get away from you” (253).

Both Rushdie and Kureishi show that this desired assimilation into a British society defined as exclusively white is untenable in every possible respect. The attempt to sever South Asian roots does not ensure that Shahid and Saladin will actually be accepted as English. Precisely because he is part of a visible minority that has been scapegoated, the option of joining his white oppressors is closed to Shahid. Although the older Saladin has achieved an apparently successful career as an actor and married an English woman with a pedigree, he is never really allowed to be more than a second-class citizen. The bestial, satanic figure he becomes in the police van after his return from Bombay to London is a magic realist objectification of the way he has been perceived by British racists all along, and the unlawful beating he receives gives the lie to his conception of English society as the epitome of civilization (157-164).

The attempts of Shahid and Saladin to eradicate their South Asian origins are no more palatable to many of their fellow immigrants than they are to their white antagonists. For Riaz Al-Hussain, the leader of the Muslim students in Shahid’s college, Shahid’s family have simply lost themselves in the process of developing a travel business and adopting Western values (15). Saladin is dismissed by London’s politically radical blacks as a “Brown Uncle Tom” (267). According to Rushdie, his character’s Anglicized surname, Chamcha (a shortened version of Chamchawala), in Urdu means “a person who sucks up to powerful people, a yes-man, a sycophant. The British Empire

would not have lasted a week without such collaborators among its colonized peoples” (qtd. in Aravamudan 14). Saladin’s own father denounces his rejection of his Indian heritage as devilish (47). Both Saladin and Shahid exist in an intolerable no-man’s-land well described by Kureishi, who, while visiting Pakistan, was informed by a guest at a party that “we are Pakistanis, but you, you will always be a Paki—emphasizing the slang derogatory name the English used against Pakistanis, and therefore the fact that I couldn’t rightfully lay claim to either place” (“Rainbow Sign” 12-13).

A double-bind of this sort is psychologically painful, as the behavior of both Saladin and Shahid indicates. The already-mentioned physical metamorphosis of Saladin is a sign of his unconscious self-loathing as well as of his demonization as an Asian by the English. As Srinivas Aravamudan notes, the “figure of the devil demonstrates a classic case of repression: the more [Saladin] runs away from his Indianness, the more he is confronted with it from all sides” (14).

Shahid’s response to this ironic dilemma differs from that of Saladin, who struggles obstinately but ineffectually to retain his self-constructed identity as an English gentleman. Shahid is tempted at college to go to the opposite extreme and embrace his religious heritage as a Pakistani. Rejected by his father (102), Islam attracts Shahid because it seems to constitute a solid, authoritative foundation for living in a postmodern world lacking in moral substance and spiritual direction. Thatcher’s enterprise capitalism, with its greed, cannot fill the void or provide a solution to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s “crisis of legitimation” (xxiv). Neither can Marxism, which *The Black Album* presents as a spent secular faith. Its destruction as a master narrative is expressed in the lament of the lecturer Brownlow, who has been disillusioned by the fall of Eastern Europe’s communist regimes: “What is there to teach? How can there be anything when there is no longer any knowledge to transmit?” (250). In contrast, Islam as a monistic faith has for its adherents the power to supply order,

stability, and a sense of community. Visiting a mosque, Shahid discovers that “[h]ere race and class barriers had been suspended. . . . Strangers spoke to one another. The atmosphere was uncompetitive, peaceful, meditative” (142).

The greatest attraction of Islam for Shahid is that it gives him, at least temporarily, a sense that his identity is coherent and unified. At peace with himself in the mosque, he commends himself for having “regain[ed] his purity” (142). Devoutness, singleness of purpose, and strong self-discipline are required to sustain this unadulterated condition. The cost is high in that pleasures must be relinquished, but, as Shahid’s friend Chad says, “‘Allah is beside us. What could be wrong with such an idea of pure living?’” (139). Although especially ill-suited to follow the strict regimen prescribed, Shahid, as a late adolescent, is desperate to counteract his habitual sense of being fragmented and adrift:

His own sense of 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 out to be on this day? How many warring selves were there within him? Which was his real, natural self? Was there such a thing? (157)

Chad is Shahid’s foil in having enacted in extreme form the transformation that Shahid attempts unsuccessfully. An orphan of Pakistani background adopted by English parents, Chad, out of a “sense of exclusion” from British society that “practically drove him mad” (117), has changed his name from Trevor Buss to Muhammad Shahabuddin Ali-Shah (soon shortened by his friends to Chad) and embraced Islam. In doing so, he believes that he has found his “real, natural self,” but the fanaticism with which he repudiates the pop culture and music that had sustained him previously makes the reader wonder whether he has discovered his authentic identity or committed a kind of suicide.

Riaz, who had been instrumental in Chad’s conversion, is set up in the novel as one of two sage-like figures vying for Shahid’s

allegiance. (The other is Shahid's professor Deedee Osgood, with whom, we are told, he had come to the college purposely to study [16].) The figure of Riaz provides an additional intertextual link to *The Satanic Verses*, for he parallels two of Rushdie's characters, the exiled Imam and the prophet Mahound (fictionalized versions of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini and the prophet Muhammad respectively). Riaz exhibits the same uncompromising severity that characterizes Rushdie's Imam, who is depicted in England before the overthrow of the Shah. For the Imam, "[e]xile is a soulless country. . . . In exile, all attempts to put down roots look like treason; they are admissions of defeat" (208). As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notices, the opposite number of the exiled Imam in *The Satanic Verses* is the metropolitan Chamcha, for whom English roots mean success, not failure (219-220). Like the Imam, Riaz never considers England his home or has anything but contempt for its culture. Like the Imam, too, Riaz is wholly ruthless in his dogmatic adherence to the letter of Islamic law, which he believes to be self-evident and beyond dispute. An enthusiastic supporter of the *fatwa* leveled against Salman Rushdie (180), Riaz, we are told, has even "reprimanded [his father] for praying in his armchair and not on his knees. He told his friends that if one's parents did wrong they should be thrown into the raging fire of hell" (119).

The relationship of Riaz and Shahid in *The Black Album* parallels that of Mahound and Salman the Persian in *The Satanic Verses*. Although Riaz would not consciously elevate himself to the level of the Prophet vouchsafed the revelation of Allah's purpose, he is, in fact, treated by his followers with the unswerving devotion due to a divinely inspired sage. He writes religious poetry, and Shahid acts as his secretary, just as Salman the Persian does for Mahound. Both scribes alter the received texts, demonstrating (in Bakhtin's terms) the impossibility of monologism and the inevitability of dialogism. Their motives differ, though. Underlying Salman's alterations is an anxious desire to test the authenticity of Mahound's pronouncements.

When Mahound does not notice the changes made to what he has dictated, Salman skeptically concludes that Mahound's claim that he is God's Messenger is bogus (367-368).

In contrast, Shahid's more radical revisions of Riaz's poems are inspired by a more positive wish to celebrate areas outside of Riaz's experience. Like Forster's *A Passage to India*, Kureishi's novel implies that organized religions unify life only by excluding aspects of it, and these Shahid is unwilling to sacrifice. Influenced by William Blake, he would certainly subscribe to that visionary's dictum that "less than All cannot satisfy Man" (97). Because "religion [cannot] admit the comic" (*Black Album* 161), Shahid contemplates leaving a pornographic magazine open in Riaz's room as a practical joke. And because orthodox Muslim teaching proscribes eroticism, Shahid explores it poetically in rewriting Riaz's sexually puritanical poetry. Like the lyrics of Prince—whose recording *The Black Album* supplies the title of Kureishi's novel—Shahid's writing is sexually explicit, reflecting his ongoing, uninhibited activities with his lover, Deedee Osgood. Shahid gives this apparent sinfulness a religious justification (245), however, not unlike the one offered by Browning's sexually vital monk Fra Lippo Lippi:

I always see the garden and God there  
A-making man's wife: and my lesson learned,  
The value and significance of flesh,  
I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards. (lines 266-269)

Like *The Black Album*, *The Satanic Verses* contests the boundaries between the sacred and the profane and affirms that revelation is an ongoing rather than a completed process, one that cannot be arrested at any given historical moment or made the sole property of any particular religion. Neither can mystical experience—while undeniably mysterious and powerful—be confidently equated with absolute truth. As Marlena Corcoran aptly states, at

a time when we have all but lost our faith in definitive origins, Rushdie writes us into a world of versions that is nevertheless not a trivial world, but a world suffused with the sacred. In its questioning of both the transmission of sacred text, and contemporary representations of writing, *The Satanic Verses* may well be the first postmodern Islamic novel. (158)

One element of postmodernist uncertainty has to do with the natures of God and Satan and the extent to which they are both manifested in Mahound's visions. In Rushdie's treatment of the relationship between Mahound and the archangel Gibreel, the novelist creates a further level of ambiguity in exploring the "extent to which the mystic's conscious personality informs and interacts with the mystical event" ("In Good Faith" 408). Although Mahound claims merely to transmit messages that come from God, the descriptions of the agonistic encounters between Mahound and the dreaming Gibreel Farishta suggest that Mahound imposes his will on the archangel (who is, ironically, afraid of the merely mortal prophet [108-109]) and to some degree actually dictates the content of his visions. Despite Rushdie's mention of the "conscious personality," though, Mahound is not simply a hypocrite or a charlatan. Rather than being volitional, his spiritual manipulation of Gibreel seems to occur at an unconscious level of desperate need.

Another way to explain the dynamics of Mahound's mystical experiences is to say simply that they depend upon the workings of his own imagination, which is not entirely under his conscious control. It functions within his own psyche but transcends it as well in encountering forces beyond himself. For Rushdie, both mysticism and the creation of literature are results of imaginative activity, and the goal of both is transcendence, "that flight of the human spirit outside the confines of its material, physical existence which all of us, secular or religious, experience on at least a few occasions" ("Is Nothing Sacred?" 421).

For Rushdie, too—and for Kureishi, as well—the narratives that emerge from religious and literary activity have no special authority, for the "rejection of totalized explanations is the

modern condition” (“Is Nothing Sacred?” 422). “The novel,” says Kureishi of *The Black Album*, “is concerned with stories, isn’t it? Just as Riaz, as it were, invents Islam to suit him, . . . Shahid is doing the same when he rewrites Riaz’s poems. . . . The point is that life is reinterpreted all the time as we live it” (qtd. in Kaleta 139). For both Rushdie and Kureishi’s Shahid, problems arise when zealots try to impose their own imaginative conceptions of reality on others as universally applicable master narratives:

The problem was, when he was with his friends 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. (143)

However justifiable their grievances and legitimate their defense of their religion, the dogmatic certainty of Shahid’s Muslim friends begets destructive actions, such as their ritual burning of *The Satanic Verses* on the college campus and their attempt to harm Deedee after she has called the police to stop the ceremony. Their intolerance parallels that of Mahound and his followers after their triumph in *The Satanic Verses*—and also that of the real-life enemies of Salman Rushdie.

It is Shahid’s insistence on the freedom of the imagination that finally causes the split between him and Riaz’s group. Shahid, a fledgling novelist in an environment hostile to his vocation, is forced at more than one point to defend his passion for literature against the jibes of philistine family members, for whom art is a distraction from the serious business of making money in Thatcher’s Britain, and devout friends, for whom fictions are a frivolous substitute for the only narrative that matters, the Qur’an. “These artist types are always poor—how will you look your relatives in the face?” (85) asks Shahid’s father, upon discovering that his son has been writing fiction,

and, after Shahid tells Chad that he has always loved stories, his friend asks sarcastically, “How old are you—eight? Aren’t there millions of serious things to be done?” (29). This conflict comes to a head in Shahid’s debate with Riaz over *The Satanic Verses* when, in response to Riaz’s charge that “all fiction is, by its very nature, a form of lying” (193), Shahid offers the ancient defense that literature not only entertains but instructs: “Surely literature helps us reflect on our nature.’ . . . ‘A free imagination . . . ranges over many natures. A free imagination, looking into itself, illuminates others” (194). Kenneth Kaleta is right to say that Kureishi is not so much defending a specific book here as affirming the importance of fiction in general (138). And, like Rushdie, Kureishi is also asserting the parity of sacred and secular forms of storytelling.

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. His self-fashioning is bound up with artistic exploration; when troubled about his identity, he writes. He is attempting to come to terms with his volatile family situation and with his ambiguous status as a Briton of Asian origins by writing what he self-deprecatingly refers to as a “typical first novel” (78). His imagination is also fired by popular culture, although he does recognize that great literature offers intellectual and emotional rewards that movies and rock music cannot match (145). At college, under the tutelage of Deedee Osgood, he writes an essay on Prince. “She and other postmodern types encouraged their students to study anything that took their interest, from Madonna’s hair to a history of the leather jacket” (34).

As a pop culture guru as well as his lover, Deedee comes to embody much of what animates Shahid’s creativity. She serves as a muse who inspires his erotic writing as well as a guide in his experimentation with ecstasy and other drugs, which are integral to the rave scene (just emerging at the time when the novel is set). Formed by the cultural and political ferment of the late

60s, Deedee advocates extreme experiences that violate bourgeois norms (a wall of her office flaunts a poster bearing the slogan “All limitations are prisons” [33]). Although she has become disillusioned by radical politics, which she has found mentally restricting rather than liberating (66), she is nevertheless a feminist of sorts. Her desire to explode gendered stereotypes informs her explorations, via sex and drugs, of altered states of consciousness. As Kaleta observes, sexual role reversal is central to her relationship with Shahid:

Not tied to either sex’s stereotypical role, they accept the eroticism involved in the wrestling for male and female power and lose the didacticism of gender politics. Unburdened, Deedee and Shahid become much more dynamic lovers. Sexual fantasy and political role reversal coexist. (124)

The sexual fantasy involves the same sort of gender-bending that Shahid admires in the persona of Prince, who is “half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho, too” (34).

What Deedee encourages in Shahid is a continuous reshaping of the self in erotic and artistic play. Kaleta notices that the emphasis in the novel on characters dressing up bears on this theme of the reinvention of identity (140). Kureishi told Kaleta that he deliberately wrote contrasting scenes in which Chad dresses Shahid in a salwar kamiz, the traditional Muslim costume, after Deedee puts women’s makeup on him, making him wonder “what it might be like to go out as a woman, and be looked at differently” (*Black Album* 127). Kureishi states that if “you’re a Muslim, you can’t play with your identity in that way” (qtd. in Kaleta 140), but, for Shahid, both dressing up as a Muslim and cross dressing as a woman are ludic experiments with identity. By the novel’s end, Shahid accepts the fluid, multiple nature of personal identity, opining that 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” (285). Having finally realized that his unitary conception of himself as an Englishman cannot encompass his entire identity, Rushdie’s *Saladin* reaches a similar, if less affirmatively expressed, conclusion near the end of *The Satanic Verses* as he flies from London to Bombay in order to reclaim his Indian heritage and to effect a reconciliation with his dying father:

O, the conflicting selves jostling and jogging within these bags of skin. No wonder we are unable to remain focused on anything for very long; no wonder we invent remote-control channel hopping devices. If we turned these instruments upon ourselves we’d discover more channels than a cable or satellite mogul ever dreamed of. (519)

Like Kureishi’s emphasis in *The Black Album* on multiplying the self by using fashion in the invention of personae, *Saladin*’s metaphor of channel hopping is more congruent with the postmodernist model of selfhood as a fragmentary succession of depthless images and roles than with the liberal humanist idea of the self as an essence that can be discovered and authentically embodied. As John Clement Ball says, for Kureishi’s young protagonists, who have fled to London from restrictively middle-class suburbs, the city becomes a liminal space for transformative theatrical display, “where value derives not from being but from seeming” (25). What Ball says of Kureishi’s London could also be said of Rushdie’s: it is a locale not only of political resistance and appropriation for marginalized groups that have migrated there from the former colonies but also of “performance, display, and artifice” (15). In Kureishi’s fiction and screenplays, states Ball, London

becomes a site compatible with some influential concepts of “postmodernity”: Baudrillard’s “simulacrum” as the replica of the vanishing real; Jameson’s “depthlessness” as an aesthetic consequence of late capitalist commodification; Harvey’s “time-space compression” as the annihilation of boundaries that technology and multinational capital can accomplish. (22)

Ball’s insight that for Kureishi London is a “postmodern space” (23) speaks to what seems to be lacking, for both Shahid

and Kureishi himself, in *The Black Album*'s resolution of its themes. In the end, Shahid chooses Deedee over Riaz, but the ephemerality and indefiniteness of what she stands for as a postmodernist seems to undercut the value of his choice. Kureishi, like Rushdie, celebrates the hybrid combinations of peoples and cultures that result from the postmodern erosion of boundaries and definitions, but both writers are cognizant, too, that what is sacrificed in such a fluid world is stability and enduring purpose. For example, although Kureishi has said that what he "liked about [Shahid and Deedee's] relationship was the provisionality of it" (qtd. in Kaleta 124), it lacks any *raison d'être* beyond the fleeting pleasures of the moment. At the novel's conclusion, Deedee and Shahid agree, in a sort of compact, to stay together "[u]ntil it stops being fun" (287). "That shouldn't take long," I scrawled in the margin of my copy of the novel. However necessary "fun" is, it is hardly the sole basis for a lasting partnership. In fact, *The Black Album*'s final setting, a train speeding away from London towards a seaside resort, well symbolizes the transitory character of their union, in addition to the dynamism remarked on by Kaleta (143). Kureishi's most recent novel, *Intimacy*—which makes readers privy to the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist-narrator during the last few hours before he abandons his wife and children—reveals the fatal weakness of such a relationship once the original fun has worn away. At bottom, Deedee is a hedonist, who, in response to Shahid's question of whether the goal of life is just pleasure, asks rhetorically, "What else is there?" (119). Shahid, clearly, is troubled by the apparent absence in their relationship of higher values, which he recognized in Islam, for all that religion proved untenable for him (251).

Moreover, Deedee's stance as a rebel opposed to mainstream British society is compromised by the ease with which her radical gestures are coopted by the commercial interests she ostensibly opposes. Ball's reference to Jameson's claim that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism (x) is

relevant here. Liberatory slogans such as the one displayed in Deedee's office at the college ("All limitations are prisons") are easily appropriated by corporations. Think of Nike's "Just Do It!" in this regard. Although Shahid sees the moral vacuity of his brother Chili's brand-name consumerism ("his suits were Boss, his underwear Calvin Klein, his actor Pacino" [47]), the supposedly more progressive, alternative way of life he adopts with Deedee nevertheless involves a good deal of rather aimless shopping.

Kureishi's love for "inner London," where "there is fluidity and possibilities are unlimited" ("Some Time with Stephen" 163), is not unambiguous, then, since it is apparently accompanied by a frustrated desire for solidity and significant purpose. This dissatisfaction perhaps led him to seek a compensatory stability in the aesthetic realm. Such a hypothesis would account for the conservative, rather old-fashioned novelistic form of *The Black Album*. As James Saynor states, Kureishi "seems more attuned to the 18th-century English picaresque and to the style of 20th-century raconteurs like Kingsley Amis than to any literary idiom closer to the international cutting edge. (Shahid likes *Midnight's Children*, but it gives him a pain in the head.)" (40).

One could buttress Saynor's claim by briefly specifying some of the rather obvious differences in narrative form between *The Black Album* and the more writerly *The Satanic Verses*. Epic in scope, Rushdie's novel moves fluidly amongst multiple narratives set in a variety of time frames, whereas *The Black Album* has a single plot and a very restricted focus on Shahid and the characters with whom he comes into contact during a relatively brief span of time. The magic realism of *The Satanic Verses*, which paradoxically has both a mythopoeic grandeur and a demystifying power, is in stark contrast to the less audacious, middle-of-the-road realism of *The Black Album*, which is, however, occasionally leavened with more fantastic comic incidents (such as the appearance of the eggplant believed by some Muslim characters

to contain a message from Allah) and with melodramatically heightened scenes (such as the violent encounter between Chili and Riaz's group, after they have invaded Deedee's house). Finally, despite the fact that Kureishi's protagonist is a budding author, his novel lacks the metafictional dimension supplied by the narrator's overt commentary in *The Satanic Verses*. As Marlena Corcoran shows (157-58), this fictional self-consciousness has the effect of applying to *The Satanic Verses* itself the questions about textual authority that are raised about sacred scripture within the narrative strand centered on Mahound. The absence from *The Black Album* of such fictional self-scrutiny regarding the authority of its own representations is a curious blind spot in an otherwise postmodernist novel.

Like *The Satanic Verses*, *The Black Album* is postmodernist in incorporating elements of mass culture, not only in the sense of immersing its protagonist in a London milieu of clubs, rock music, and designer clothes but also in deriving its tone and narrative shape from commercial movies and television (media for which Kureishi has written). The plot builds to a climax in which Chili, knife in hand, descends the stairs of Deedee's house, like nothing so much as the hero of a Hollywood blockbuster, to save her and Shahid from the depredations of Chad and his friends. Chili, whose subjectivity has been molded by gangster movies (63), even refers to himself as Robert De Niro as he prepares to do battle (278). The scene is written vibrantly, but its impact is blunted by the hackneyed nature of the confrontation. Although *The Black Album*'s narrative method seems less kinetically cinematic—and more traditionally novelistic in its use of an undramatized narrator—than Kaleta claims (142), he is right that Kureishi's treatment of Shahid's affair with Deedee draws on the movies:

Kureishi spins a love story that is blatantly romantic. It takes place in turbulent times and, in Hollywood fashion, the couple's passion, if temporary, dominates the issues of political and social upheaval all around them. . . . This complicated plot . . . satisfies the reader with an essential element of this contemporary romance—the solace of a Hollywood ending. (132)

These conventional ingredients make the narrative less interesting generically as a *kunstlerroman* than it might have been. Kureishi does not attempt stylistic and structural innovations of the sort, for example, that helped to make Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* a modernist classic in this genre. Kureishi's book may not be experimental, in the sense that Joyce's or Rushdie's works are, but *The Black Album* is exploratory as a novel of ideas. Kureishi makes readers feel the intensity of Shahid's struggle to make sense of the conflicting forces that play upon his mind and emotions. Characters who compete for his allegiance embody conflicting ideological positions, values, and goals, which Shahid must evaluate in relation to his own life. Freighting the characters with ideas has a tendency to flatten them schematically, but I disagree with Tom Shone that they are completely reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes (20). The young Muslim fundamentalists in Riaz's orbit, for example, are all distinct individuals, and it is important to note that they are all shown to be struggling, with all of the difficult problems of late adolescence, to maintain their faith. None is simply an allegorical vehicle used to express a monolithic, Muslim viewpoint. Nahem Yousaf argues convincingly that Kureishi does not represent Britons of Asian origin as a homogeneous group, but "rather he seeks to illustrate the diverse forms of membership in any community" (15). Drawing on Bakhtin, Yousaf claims that Kureishi's work exhibits a dialogic tendency (22). Although *The Black Album* clearly is critical of both Muslim dogmatism and Thatcherite selfishness, the book does not, in monologic fashion, completely repudiate either of these ideologies, both of which are shown to have real attractions (Kaleta 138). In fact, Kureishi

has said that "Islam is rather like Thatcherism. It's an intoxicating force to test yourself against" (qtd. in Eberstadt 120).

The *fatwa* and the banning of *The Satanic Verses* in some countries notwithstanding, Rushdie also dramatizes the power of Islam, as well as satirizing the origins and growth of that religion. My point in comparing and contrasting Rushdie's novel and Kureishi's has not been to suggest that *The Black Album* is inferior artistically to *The Satanic Verses*. What I do want to emphasize in closing is the creative potential that Kureishi exploited in using Rushdie's novel and the controversy surrounding it as a springboard for his own investigations and writing. "There were all these blokes who wanted to kill this friend of mine,' Kureishi has said, 'and I wanted to know why, so I went and found them'" (qtd. in Eberstadt 120). He was able to use the experience of meeting young Muslims in mosques and colleges (Ashraf), as well as his own understanding of Rushdie's novel, not only to come to terms in his own mind with the controversy but also to extend it by crafting, in the defense of fiction, a provocative fiction of his own.

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