

The Search For Identity in The Black Album

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Introduction

In the *Oxford American Dictionary of Current English* the word identity is defined as; "the quality or condition of being a specific person or thing." A person's identity used to be something that one was born into as a matter of course. This is not true anymore in today's global and multicultural world where people move around, and are influenced by others through the media.

Identity is something that is formed through the experiences and influences that happen to us as individuals throughout life. The evolution of identity can develop in different stages, come to a halt and stop or start progressing again, it all depends on circumstances in life and people around us.

How a person's identity is formed is something that is both interesting and fascinating. It seems to be partly a matter of situations that cannot be controlled, and also a matter of the choices that people make in their lives. Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* takes place in today's Britain. His main character Shahid is, in his search for his true self and identity, torn between his fanatical friends, a multicultural interracial love affair and the historical baggage of postcolonial Britain.

This essay consists of the following chapters; Chapter one serves as a background to the socio- and political developments in Britain during the last century; Chapter two deals with how different generations and persons deal with the subject of identity in the society in which they live; Chapter three examines the connection between identity and love, and the fourth and final Chapter discusses religious identity and the conflict between Shahid's writing ambitions and religion.

1. Postcolonial Britain

The author and professor of German politics, David Childs writes in his book: *Britain Since 1939: progress and decline*, about the development in the British colonies in the twentieth century and about immigration to Britain from its former colonies. "Post-war immigration to Britain, from its colonies, started to grow in the early 1950's as news of the British prosperity spread and the country faced a shortage of labour."¹ Pakistan became independent in 1947, as well as India. It was then no longer possible to use "Indian" to describe all the peoples of the Indian sub-continent and the term "Asian" subsequently became current.

Eurasians or Anglo-Indians formed the first wave of post-war Asian immigrants. They were of mixed race (European and Indian) and had formed an administrative class between the rulers and the ruled. This group of people were Christians, had European names etc. and identified strongly with the British. They were pro integration to a very high degree.

The author Ian McAuley writes in his guide book; *Guide to Ethnic London* about how; "Hundreds of thousands of Asians settled in Britain in the 1950's and 1960's."² They came from many parts of the Indian sub-continent but the majority came from Punjab and Sylhet. During the 1950's large numbers of immigrants came from the Indian sub-continent. Martin Pugh, professor of History at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, points to the fact that; "As Commonwealth citizens these immigrants enjoyed the right of entry into Britain under the 1948 Nationality Act."³ In the 1950's unmarried males dominated those who came to Britain but in the 1960's more and more dependants joined them. Pugh states further that; "It was not long before a

¹ David Childs, *Britain Since 1939: progress and decline*. (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1995) 63.

² Ian McAuley, *Guide to Ethnic London*. (IMMEL, 1993) 26.

³ Martin Pugh, *State and Society: a social and political listing of Britain, 1870-1997*. (London: Arnold, 1994) 308.

number of extremist organizations began to exploit feelings of hostility towards the new black- and brown skinned immigrants.”⁴ Politicians against immigration such as MP Sir Cyril Osborne campaigned against immigration on the grounds that the newcomers were diseased and criminal. Pugh indicates that; “Such politicians helped to legislate the resentment towards immigrants felt by less well off English people.”⁵ The result was a number of violent clashes between members of the two communities, in 1958, in the Notting Hill area of London and in Nottingham. Hanif Kureishi describes in his book; *Dreaming and Scheming*, what the life of Pakistanis was like at that time:

In the mid-1960s, Pakistanis were a risible subject in England, derided on television and exploited by politicians.

They had the worst jobs, they were uncomfortable in England, some of them had difficulties with the language. They were despised and out of place.⁶

Asian immigrants also came from East Africa where Indians had settled during British rule. When these countries became independent friction with the native black population made it hard for the Indians to stay. A large exodus of Asians from Kenya in 1968 and from Uganda in 1972 took place.

In 1962 the Commonwealth Immigration act of 1962 was introduced for fear of the extent to which Commonwealth immigrants were coming to Britain. Under this act immigrants were divided into three categories; A those who had been offered definite jobs B; those who had certain specific skills which were in short supply and C those who did not qualify under the other two categories. The third category was dropped in 1994. The 1962 act was extended in 1968 to stop Asians living in former British colonies from entering the UK. Unless they had substantial personal connections,

⁴ Martin Pugh 308.

⁵ Pugh 308.

defined by birthplace or grandparents, they were not allowed to come to Britain. On the other hand the government in Britain placed two Race Relation Acts on the statute book, the first in 1965. It became illegal for any person to practice discrimination on the grounds of; colour, race, ethnic or national origin, against a person seeking access to facilities or services at restaurants, cafes, pubs, theatres, cinemas, dance halls and all other places of public entertainment or recreation. In 1968 the law was extended to employment and housing. The aim was to appease the immigrants. In 1962 the immigrants made up about 3.2 percent of the population of greater London.

According to Childs, "Racial discrimination and immigration continued to be an issue throughout the 1970's."⁷ The Home Secretary, Jenkins, granted an amnesty to illegal immigrants who had entered the country before 1 January 1973. This measure was designed to remove the threat of blackmail and exploitation from this group. Furthermore; "Jenkins also gave Commonwealth or foreign husbands of British women the same right of entry as wives of British men (Race Relations Act 1976)."⁸ The immigration act of 1977 meant that permits, replacing the former employment vouchers, enabled the holder to remain in Britain initially for one year only, with no automatic right to bring their dependants. The act created a new category of immigrants; partials, those who had close ties to Britain, by birth for instance, and who could come without restrictions. The Act strengthened the law to prevent illegal immigration and introduced a scheme of financial assistance for immigrants seeking voluntary repatriation.

In 1985 there were just over a million people of Asian origin in Britain and 53 million whites. The British Act of 1981 was meant to clarify and restrict citizenship to

⁶ Hanif Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2002) 25.

⁷ Childs 187.

those with close ties with the UK. Childs points out the fact that; “Those seeking naturalization would have to meet a language standard, and foreigners marrying British citizens would have to wait three years before they could gain naturalization.”⁹

The minorities felt that the new restriction discriminated against them.

By the 1970’s and 1980’s large proportions of the Indian community had been born in Britain. The idea of repatriating such people was not feasible. The younger generation grew up speaking with English accents and was much better integrated into the broader community, through their education, than their parents had been. Many were highly successful businessmen and a few had even entered the parliament. But prejudice was slow to disappear. Pugh underlines the fact that; “In some districts of London Indian and Pakistani families suffered violent attacks upon their persons and on their homes.”¹⁰ In 1994 there were about 1,450,000 people of Asian origin in Britain. About 525,000 of them live in London.

On the 20th April 1968 Enoch Powell, the spokesperson of the shadow cabinet, made a widely publicized speech on immigration and race relations. Childs suggests that; “He wanted to stop the inflow of immigrants and promote the maximum outflow, with generous grants and assistance”¹¹. Powell’s speech struck a popular cord and he did get hundreds of letters of support. A group of two hundred Dockers and meat porters marched to Westminster to congratulate him. Powell was later sacked and accused of being a racist, something which he himself denied being. Kureishi indicates, in *Dreaming and Scheming*, that:

Powell allowed himself to become a figurehead for racists. He helped create racism in Britain and was directly responsible not only for the

⁸ Childs 187.

⁹ Childs 225.

¹⁰ Pugh 309.

¹¹ Childs 149.

atmosphere of fear and hatred, but through his influence, for individual acts of racism against Pakistanis¹²

During the general election campaign of 1979 the National Front Party booked a room in South Hall Town Hall, South Hall being the area where a large number of Asians live. The members of the community began to protest about the use of council premises by a party, which openly espouses racist policies, but the council refused to ban the meeting. It all ended with clashes between the police and the Asian protesters. The police were accused of being brutal and for using indiscriminate batoning.

In 1976 Singh Chaggar was stabbed to death by a gang of white youths in connection with an all-night vigil over Blair Peach's body, who had been so seriously wounded that he later died of his injuries during the South Hall incident. The judge at the trial declared that there was no racist motive.

In July 1981 rioting occurred in South Hall when a skinhead band played a concert at the Hambrough Tavern, a pitched battle broke out between Asian youths and skinheads and when the police intervened the battle continued between the police and the Asian youths.

¹² Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*. 28.

2. Identity and Society

Dr. Kenneth Kaleta, who teaches film history at the Rowan University (USA), demonstrates in his book *Hanif Kureishi Postcolonial Storyteller* that; “As our world has expanded into a global society, so, ironically, the search for identity and individualism by every group or member of this society has become more pressing.”¹³ In Kureishi’s book *The Black Album*¹⁴, Shahid and his brother Chili grew up in a middleclass neighbourhood. Their father always wanted and strived for progress and new material things such as exchanging old furniture for new and frequently redecorating the house. He was a successful businessman who had established himself in society, but even though he had adapted to his new home country, his personal life suggested something totally different. Hanif Kureishi’s father dreamt about becoming a writer, but Asian people were not meant to come to England to indulge themselves in dreams of creating a life and a livelihood as artists. Instead their main focus had to be to create a life for themselves that had been impossible in Pakistan. He worked hard all his life and then died of a heart attack. He had embraced western values and the British lifestyle but he was still never fully accepted as a full member of the British society.

Shahid and his brother Chili have a very different view regarding the life that their father lived and the experiences he encountered in Britain as an immigrant of Pakistani origin. Chili’s focus is on the conflict of generations and the strive for economic status that their father fought for, while according to Kaleta, Shahid’s memories are centred on philosophy and honour. Shahid questions the life that his father and many among his generation chose to live. He wants something different for himself, a new way different from that of his parents, where he can find his own

¹³ Kenneth C. Kaleta, *Hanif Kureishi Postcolonial Storyteller*. (Austin. University of Texas Press, 1998) 245.

¹⁴ Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1995.

identity. The main purpose for the generation, to which Hanif Kureishi's Pakistani father belonged, was to make money in England and to be able to send a lot of that money back home to Pakistan. But the relatives left behind in the old native country did not have the full picture of what life was like in England. Kureishi describes the fact as; "They knew nothing about the cold and the rain and the abuse and homesickness."¹⁵

Society is an important factor when it comes to how we form our identity. "The word Pakistani had been made into an insult. It was a word I didn't want used about myself. I couldn't tolerate being myself."¹⁶ These are the exact words that Kureishi uses to describe his own experiences regarding his dual background in having a Pakistani father and an English mother while living in England. Kureishi talks in his text *Dreaming and Scheming* about how he and his friends, who had similar backgrounds, were always reminded that they were second generation immigrants and the fact that people did not think that they belonged in Britain. The same can be said about the characters in the *The Black album*. They try to create a place for themselves in British society, each in their own way, but the difficulties are a reality. Kureishi says that, when describing his own childhood experience; "we were Britain's children without a home"¹⁷ He also describes how his lack of identity has two perspectives. He is neither British nor Pakistani, which becomes obvious while visiting his relatives in Pakistan. They had their view on the issue of identity and belonging based on the fact that Kureishi was a mix of east and west. "We are Pakistanis but you will always be a Paki"¹⁸ they told him, underlining the fact of not belonging and of not being accepted for who he is.

¹⁵ Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*. 3.

¹⁶ Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*. 28.

¹⁷ Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*. 70.

¹⁸ Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming*. 34.

In *The Black album*, after his father's death, Shahid feels as though he has to break away from the family and make a new start in the city, away from the suburb. "The city would feel like his; he wouldn't be excluded; there had to be ways in which he could belong."¹⁹ Shahid reflects on his duality, which he experiences with Deedee his lover, on the one hand, and Riaz, his fundamentalist friend, on the other. These two sides are opposites; they are the representatives of England on the one hand and of traditional religious values and lifestyle on the other.

Shahid has lived a rather sheltered life of comfort and it is an eye-opener for him to meet Riaz, Chad and his friends and to get involved in the work they do to fight racism. Hat, Shahid's flatmate, hands him two mugs of tea and tells him to get them to Riaz who is giving legal advice to Asians. He then turns to Shahid; "Then you understand something about how nice your little England is."²⁰ Shahid feels that he has got many different selves within him and that he cannot incorporate them all but has to make choices. "Which was his real, natural self?"²¹ The author Salman Rushdie defines the identity among Asians as "our identity at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools."²²

Shahid tries to find a place in society where he fits in and feels purpose and belonging. Contemporary literature critic, Bruce King, describes Shahid's dilemma as follows; "Throughout the narrative Shahid oscillates between the two sets of values offered to him by his black friends and his white lover."²³ He looks for something to make him choose sides and to get onto a path in life that could make things simple.

¹⁹ *The Back Album*. 16.

²⁰ *The Black Album*. 36.

²¹ *The Black Album*. 147.

²² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands (essays and criticism 1981- 1998)*, (London: Granata Books, 1992) 15.

²³ Bruce King, Literature Resource Centre: <http://galenet.galegroup.com>

He finds himself experiencing a dilemma, a search for his place in society and his own true identity, which many young persons with similar background are facing. Kaleta points to the fact that; "Shahid is the student who must question his teacher, the younger brother who must assert his identity, the son who must go his own way."²⁴ Shahid is experimenting, in a way taking things to the extreme, even considering joining the National front, and to becoming a racist. Shahid even takes it to the extreme to which he is disgusted and put off by the looks of his own people; "I wouldn't touch brown flesh, except with a branding iron. I hated all foreign bastards."²⁵ He has a feeling that he is missing something in life. "I kept thinking there was something I lacked."²⁶ Consequently, Shahid first aspires to believe in religion. He gets involved with Muslim fundamentalists such as Riaz and Chad. But he is never fully committed. There is for instance a conflict between his writing ambitions and religion, which manifests itself in the argument that Shahid, has with Chad about having to give up music for the sake of religion. According to Adrian Jones, Shahid undergoes a transition from his Pakistani ancestry to his desired identity as a Briton. He explores different areas such as; religion, race and culture to find his place. The fact remains that he experiences a transformation; a development, a growth of himself as a person and at the end of the book he is more experienced and mature. But he has also realized by then and put aside, for the time being, the search for a label of what he is or what he should be called.

Furthermore, according to Kenneth C. Kaleta, Kureishi's characters redefine British national identity, in the context of an evolving world identity. Kureishi points out the fact that there was a lack of role models with an Asian background, which

²⁴ Kaleta 137.

²⁵ Kureishi, *Black Album*. 11.

²⁶ Kureishi, *Black Album*. 10.

made the process of finding, and forming a young person's identity even harder than it normally is:

We had no life guides or role models among politicians, military types or religious figures, or even film stars for that matter, as our parents did.If coming from the wrong class restricts your sense of what you can be, then none of us thought we'd become doctors, lawyers, scientists, politicians. We were scheduled to be clerks, civil servants, insurance managers and travel agents.²⁷

This is the situation that Shahid is facing, which restricts his career choices in life and creates the framework into which he is supposed to fit. However Shahid has his dream of becoming a writer, a choice of career that does not correspond with the traditional identity/stereotype that he is given by English society. The same goes for the drug dealer Strapper with his artistic ambitions. They want to form their own lives, make their choices with the basis in their own self and not to conform to the stereotype. Shahid is not a great revolutionary; he is simply looking at and trying out his options. The use of stereotypes is an effective way of simplifying society and of holding back the progress of the individual. According to Salman Rushdie, this is how stereotypes work:

The point about stereotypes is that, in spite of their banality, in spite of their seemingly wrongness, they work. They have effects. They are at work in Britain today. And they are hard to combat, because nobody readily admits to being influenced by them.²⁸

According to Holmes; "By the novel's end Shahid accepts the fluid, multiple nature of personal identity, ...there was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily?"²⁹

²⁷ Kaleta 109.

²⁸ Rushdie 146.

²⁹ Holmes 306.

Chili, Shahid's brother has a more aggressive approach to finding his place and identity in society and his role within the generation to which he belongs. He experiments with criminality, using drugs and is more extrovert and outgoing as a person. He sends out the signals that he is not going to let anyone keep him down because of his background or skin colour. Chili has adopted Western values regarding consumerism. He wears Ray-Bans, he only drinks black coffee and Jack Daniels, wears Boss suits, Calvin Klein underwear and has Al Pacino as his role model. He hangs around places where it is possible to find drug dealers, teenage Italian girls, bent English solicitors and French croupiers with gigolo looks. He is ambitious; his goal is to first establish himself as a businessman in England and then to move on to the United States of America. "At the age of twenty Chili married their cousin Zulma and moved away, in the Western fashion, to a flat in Brighton."³⁰ After the death of Shahid's and Chili's father, Chili is altogether able to indulge himself in the lifestyle of his choice. Previously, he had worked in the family business only to please their father and to get paid. Chili resents the tradition, he does not want to inherit the lifestyle of his parents' generation or take over what they have started:

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.³¹

Chili has developed a more mature relationship with his brother since the death of their father. Before, when they were younger, he used to treat his younger brother badly, considering him to have more brains than is good for him and with a mind

³⁰ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 40.

³¹ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 201.

too much into books. The two brothers mature and become more adult through their life experiences, which is manifested by the fact that Chili comes to Shahid's rescue when his fundamentalist, former friends are attacking him.

3. Sexual identity

Shahid meets Deedee, a young cultural studies lecturer, when he starts college. She is a white liberal and the two of them discuss black history and contemporary culture, take drugs and attend raves.³² The two soon become an item. "Thinking of her was like listening to his favourite music; she was a tune he liked to play."³³ Shahid and his teacher Deedee get involved in a passionate yet experimental love affair. They are breaking with conventions, crossing racial and religious boundaries. Deedee is formally married; she is also the teacher while Shahid is the student. "Shahid finds Deedee his dream lover – knowing, inventive, and erotic; and, likewise, Deedee finds Shahid her dream lover – devoted, innocent, and prolific."³⁴ She is a contrast, to and the opposite of, Shahid's fundamentalist friends. Shahid is torn between his devotion to Deedee and his fundamentalist friends. Deedee makes him aware of how this situation affects him. "But you're in a funny mood. When you've been with your friends your mouth curls down."³⁵ Deedee is worried that he might get hurt while engaging in his new acquaintances' activities. "Shahid finds himself agreeing with his friends when he is with them, but at other times the world seems more complex to him."³⁶ Shahid is forced by his friends to choose between them and Deedee, something that to him seems unnecessary and stereotypical. "There had to be

³² <http://galenet.galegroup.com>

³³ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 130.

³⁴ Kaleta 124.

³⁵ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 152.

³⁶ <http://galenet.galegroup.com>

innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity.”³⁷

At one point Shahid even considers breaking up with Deedee and devoting himself fully to his fundamentalist friends as he finds the relationship with Deedee and what his friends represent incompatible. She is someone who makes him contemplate his choices in life and his identity. The two worlds that they live their lives in are very much separated between white English people and English Asians. That is made apparent to Shahid when he goes to places with Deedee. “People came and went, but he was the only person there with dark skin. That would be the fact in most places he went with Deedee.”³⁸ Kaleta states that Shahid plays an important part in Deedee’s new life as well;” For Deedee Shahid becomes a way to break loose from the past.”³⁹ He continues; “She had felt trapped in the expectations of career, politics and a desire for independence. The two exemplify today’s mutable urban lifestyle.”⁴⁰ Shahid and Deedee experiment with their sexuality as well as their relationship. It is as though they want to make sure that they have explored all the outer boundaries for their love. According to Holmes; “What Deedee encourages in Shahid is a continuous reshaping of the self in erotic and artistic play.”⁴¹ At one point, these explorations of their sexual identity, makes Shahid experiment with his female side by cross-dressing:

For now she refused him a mirror, but he liked the feel of his new female face. He could be demurred, flirtatious, teasing, a star; a burden went, a certain responsibility had been removed. He didn’t have to take the lead. He even wondered what it might be like to go out as a woman, and be looked at differently.⁴²

³⁷ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 274.

³⁸ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 122.

³⁹ Kaleta 116,117.

⁴⁰ Kaleta 134.

⁴¹ Holmes 306.

⁴² Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 117.

Kaleta means that; “In Shahid’s cross-dressing, both he and Deedee have seen the male — his and hers — as well as the female — hers and his. In this erotic blur, the dynamics of sexual power have been clearly exposed.”⁴³

When Shahid is asked by Riaz to convert his handwritten manuscript to print he cannot help but make a few changes to it. These alterations turn out to be much influenced by his present relationship with Deedee: according to Holmes...”Shahid’s writing is sexually explicit, reflecting his ongoing, uninhibited activities with his lover, Deedee Osgood.”⁴⁴ These modifications are not acceptable to Riaz or the others, as they do not agree with Islam, which causes a split. In the end his sexual identity that he has formed together with Deedee is more important to him than his friends. He does not know where they are going but still it seems to him to be the right path to take. “He didn’t know what would become of any of them; but for himself he’d be with her. He’d take what she offered; he’d give her what he could. He had never relied on anyone before.”⁴⁵ Kaleta states 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 him to embrace the present.”⁴⁶ Shahid chooses to live in the present and to enjoy what is now. “‘Until it stops being fun,’ she said. ‘Until then,’ he said.”⁴⁷

Chili’s sexual identity is the opposite of Shahid’s. Considered the more masculine of the two he has always flaunted it. Chili used to compete with his father about the status of being the most macho of the two; later he became just a customer of sensational sexual adventures, bringing home stories of his sexual escapades until

⁴³ Kaleta 132.

⁴⁴ Holmes 302.

⁴⁵ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 275.

⁴⁶ Kaleta 146.

he married Zulma. Kaleta suggests that; “He is a savvy, urbane womanizer.”⁴⁸ He used to go out with his father on explicit sexual adventures, pleasures to which Shahid was never invited and there could be a competition of who would be the first to have sex with a woman in uniform. To Chili, love and sex are a competition and a matter of superficial values and exterior. “Chili’s relentless passion had always been for clothes, girls, cars, girls and the money that bought them.”⁴⁹

When Chili finds out about his brother’s love affair he sees it from his perspective; “Ah-ha. Class pussy. How old is she?”⁵⁰ As the older brother and the more experienced one he is soon to give Shahid some advice on the go. The competition between the brothers has quietened down after the death of their father. “People know within two minutes if they want to fuck someone. Within an hour they know if they want to be with them. You want her — then take her.”⁵¹ For Chili things are easy and straightforward. He has always been in competition with his clever little brother, competing to be their father’s favourite, something that Chili seems to have achieved since their ways of expressing their sexual desires seem to agree. According to Kaleta; “Chili’s plight as an assimilated dreamer is quite clear. He sold himself out to live on Easy Street.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 276.

⁴⁸ Kaleta 136.

⁴⁹ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 41.

⁵⁰ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 40.

⁵¹ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 45.

4. Religious Identity and Shahid's Identity as a Writer

“At home Papa liked to say, when asked about his faith, “Yes, I have a belief. It's called working until my arse aches!”⁵³ Shahid is concerned about his lack of religious identity and commitment. He simply wants to “belong to his people.”⁵⁴ This becomes obvious when he makes friends with Riaz and Chad. Shahid starts to scrutinize his religious identity or lack of one. He is somewhat envious of his friends for whom belief appears natural and simply as a matter of course. He sees himself as a failure when it comes to religion and compares himself to his more dedicated friends who effortlessly embrace religion and all that goes with it.

Holmes means that; “The greatest attraction of Islam for Shahid is that it gives him, at least for the time being, a sense that his identity is coherent and unified.”⁵⁵ Kaleta states that this puts Shahid at a dilemma; “Shahid must determine whether he sides with the traditions of his forefathers or whether he should progress from the English cultural assimilation of his father.”⁵⁶ Furthermore; “The novel openly questions religion in its depiction of conflict between eastern religious tradition and western progressive philosophy.”⁵⁷ Shahid feels torn between what he has with Deedee and a religious commitment. Holmes suggest that; “Shahid is tempted at college to go to the opposite extreme and embrace his religious heritage as a Pakistani.”⁵⁸

He finds that most people around him take sides and make a stand for a political or religious cause. “Shahid is made to question how genuine, consistent, comforting,

⁵² Kaleta 143.

⁵³ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 92.

⁵⁴ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 92.

⁵⁵ Holmes 300.

⁵⁶ Kaleta 137.

⁵⁷ Kaleta 139.

⁵⁸ Holmes 299.

and defensible any belief is, whether it is the belief in love, in family, in religion, or in art.”⁵⁹

When Shahid is with his friends their chosen path in life seem appealing to him but at the same time he finds it difficult to fully adopt their religious faith. The question then remains; “Where did he belong?”⁶⁰ “He believed everything; he believed nothing.”⁶¹ Shahid feels strongly about the fact that he sees it necessary for himself to be committed to something in life, because the one thing that he is certain about is that he must be “a disciplined person and not waste his life”.⁶² Shahid tries to discuss his need for structure and order in his life with his friend Hat, in order to substantiate what to chose for himself and somewhat justify his future lifestyle. Hat is pleased but at the same time he points out to Shahid that; “Good. But our religion isn’t something you can test out, like trying out a suit to see if it fit! You got to buy the whole outfit!”⁶³

Shahid started to write in a room at the back of his father’s travel agency at the age of fifteen. He then wrote about the kind of racial abuse that he was subject to. When his mother finds the manuscript she makes her best to discourage him from becoming a writer,” Who would want to read this? People don’t want this hate in their lives”.⁶⁴ Shahid’s experience of literature, and the impression that it can make on a person, is something that he himself aspires to achieve.

According to Holmes; “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

⁵⁹ Kaleta 138.

⁶⁰ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 134.

⁶¹ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 147.

⁶² Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 147.

⁶³ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 235.

⁶⁴ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 73.

identity as an adult.”⁶⁵ For Chad, Shahid’s friend, fiction is something for children, simply a way of passing time and nothing else. To Shahid it is something totally different; “Literature is more than entertainment.”⁶⁶ It is a way to express his identity, life situation and to capture other people’s interest and emotions.

Shahid is then asked by his new friend Riaz to “convert” his poetry or “Goods work” as he himself calls it, to print. Shahid’s identity as a writer does not go too well with his aspiring religious identity, something that would have been required to be successful while transcribing the religious poems. Kaleta points to the fact that; “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 erections.”⁶⁷

Shahid’s lifestyle, writing ambitions and artistic freedom makes his association to his religious friends come to a point where it is untenable. According to Holmes; “It is Shahid’s insistence on the freedom of the imagination that finally causes the split between him and Riaz’s group.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Holmes 305.

⁶⁶ Kureishi, *The Black Album*. 21.

⁶⁷ Kaleta 139.

⁶⁸ Holmes 304.

Conclusion

This essay has dealt with a young man's search for his identity in a multicultural society, that is Britain, today. Chapter one developed and discussed postcolonial history and the background to, and reasons why, the British society looks the way it does today. Chapter two dealt with and discussed how a person's identity is shaped by the society in which he/she lives. Chapter three developed and discussed sexual identity by comparing Shahid's sexual excursions, the conflict between sexual broad-mindedness and religion and Chili's sexual identity. Chapter four dealt with and discussed religious identity and Shahid's identity as a writer.

A person's identity is something that comes into place when confronted with other people, their identity and lifestyle in a society. Some people never question their identity, which they have been given or shaped into by family, culture and tradition. For them it is a matter of course. But for Shahid identity is not something that can be taken for granted as a matter of culture, tradition and history. This might be the result of his background, as second-generation immigrant, still affected by a postcolonial heritage, which places him somewhat in the dilemma of who he is and who to become. The *Black Album* is an account for his search for what is right for him. Shahid is torn between the many options of identity that modern society has to offer and he feels that he has to choose either to go with the traditions that come with the strict religious lifestyle, adopt the English lifestyle or try and form his own path, whatever that is, in search for his true self.

In the *Black Album* Kureishi is successful describing Shahid's rocky road to finding himself. It is a very complex matter for everyone and something that affects us all, but it is even more so for a person with Shahid's background and social, cultural situation. The author deals with this fact in a convincing way, since there are no easy

options, no right or wrong choices to make, for the main character. The different individuals in the book compose a good range of convincing life-sized characters that one could easily meet in real life.

The author describes in great detail the complexity of the love affair that Shahid has with his teacher Deedee. The love and sexual exploration between the two is overshadowed by the expectations of social heritage, society and religion. Kureishi illustrates this fact in the book by making Shahid question what he is doing, his involvement with Deedee, his emotions and sexual self. Kureishi has made religion something that runs all through the book connecting, as well as placing everything, in its shade. It affects all the characters in one way or the other as they are all made to make a stand about it. The writer tries to place Shahid in the middle of two extremes, one the one hand his brother who embraces everything western and on the other hand his fundamentalist friends. Kureishi is successful in doing so, since there is a hopeful and progressive tone in the book that somehow tells the reader that Shahid is on to something that can become a success and an alternative route for him and others to follow.

The author does not serve the reader with an easy solution to how identity is found, but more a true reflection of life itself, and that is what the book is all about. It is simply and convincingly a realistic account of a person's search for identity in today's multicultural Britain and all the complexity that comes with it. But that does not make the subject exclusively British in any way, quite the contrary; Kureishi is so successful and convincing that it can easily be adopted to most countries in Europe today.

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