

## Essentializing womanhood: Understanding Gender Dynamics in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*

Dr. Madhvi Nikam,  
Associate Professor,  
Department of English,  
Ramchand Kimatram Talreja College  
of Arts Science and Commerce,  
Ulhasnagar-421003.

&

Dr. Pandurang V. Barkale,  
Asst Professor  
Department of English  
SNDT College of Arts  
& SCB College of Commerce  
& Science for Women,  
Mumbai-400020.

**Abstract:** Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Black Album* (1995) refers to the complex constitutions of identity, aesthetic and political concerns. Kureishi deconstructs the binary discourse by subverting the traditional gender roles in his novel. In this novel the group of Riaz is often referred to as the Islamic brotherhood that ignores the presence of Tahira. The novel not only presents fundamentalism prevalent among Muslims, but it also counters the stereotypes about Muslim fundamentalism. The novel gives a distinct treatment to the issues of gender, sexuality and religious fundamentalism. Deedee Osgood is a principal female character in the novel around which many issues of postmodernity, sexuality, pornography, western liberalism are thrown open for speculation. Tahira, another female character in the novel, foregrounds her religious identity and backgrounds her gender identity

**Keywords:** Gender, sex, fundamentalism, postmodernity, sexuality, pornography, masculine, religion, fantasy, individualism.

### Article:

Hanif Kureishi, as British Pakistani novelist, focuses on the manifestations of desire and sexuality within the socio-cultural milieu in Britain. His novels open up a space in the cultural landscape which comprises the socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised section of population while interrogating the hegemonic discourses that lead to the formation of identities. In Kureishi's work, the reader is given insights into the formation of characters and the affective terms such as desire and sexuality. Kureishi's refers to the complex constitutions of identity, aesthetic and political concerns. Kureishi deconstructs the binary discourse by subverting the traditional gender roles in his novel *The Black Album* (1995). In this novel the group of Riaz is

often referred to as the Islamic brotherhood that ignores the presence of Tahira. The novel not only presents fundamentalism prevalent among Muslims, but it also counters the stereotypes about Muslim fundamentalism. Deedee Osgood, an estranged wife of Dr Brownlow, is a lecturer of Shahid whom she loves secretly. Her coercive benevolence suggests that liberalism can be fanatical in its denunciation of fundamentalism. Deedee, one of the main characters from the novel, fosters her individualism to its fullest. She leaves her home when she is 18, searches for a job, looks after her own education and ends up becoming a lecturer as Dr. Brownlow.

Tahira, a member of the group formed by Riaz, is equally fundamentalist and believes in the ideals of her religious ideals. She is very particular about her appearance. She instructs other members of the group including Chad to wear less tighter clothes and grow beards. She does find it difficult to wear hijab in England. When she goes somewhere wearing hijab, white people made fun of her. Tahira has no problem with the fundamentalist principles in Islam which take toll on the freedom and individualism of Muslim women because she herself is a Muslim fundamentalist. She treats white people's attempt to disturb Muslim women's observance of their religious practices in Britain as an encroachment onto their individual freedom. She exhorts Shahid to be more devoted towards their group. She is wise enough to sense the secret relationship between Shahid and Deedee Osgood. One day she even narrates the incident to Chad how she met a guy who tried to rip her scarf off, saying that this was England not Dubai (Kureishi105).

Kureishi brilliantly describes Shahid's attempt to take wash before his first illicit date with Deedee Osgood. The narrator says: "The drain of the communal shower was blocked. Water was pouring down the side of the building. Shahid had to wash in the cracked yellow sink in his room, first one foot, then the other, followed, awkwardly, by armpits, balls, cock" (Kureishi35). Kureishi's distinct description of male body parts underscores the necessarily divided dimension of one's masculine constitution, as implicit in the idea of differences between ethnically different body politics are done away with. Chad offers his abusive masculinity and finds that the socially irresponsible act of indulging literature is a primarily feminine characteristic. *The Black Album*, as a composed narrative, is characterized by two main ideological lines. Riaz and Deedee represent two extreme ends of religious ideologies. The former is the hardcore religious leader while the later deems to be a pornographic priestess, a woman who is committed to religious evangelism but has questionable character. Lured by Deedee, Shahid starts enjoying the playful cross-dressing. Deedee enjoys Shahid's feminine looks as opposed to extra masculine ways of Riaz. Deedee's influence is set to oppose the influence of Riaz, while Riaz's impact is aimed at dissuading Shahid from the influence of Deedee. Both of these characters, their ideologies and actions strangely accommodate the presence of their *Other*.

Islamicist group members assume an adamant position on gender matters which serves to be a kind of reaction against Christian evangelism epitomized by Deedee. Chad's characterisation is

important in terms of typifying a normative and repressive approach to the question of sexuality. This arch Islamic militant group continues to be an addict to pop music and Chad's inflexible masculinity covers up his fascination with sexual indeterminacy. The novel, *The Black Album* depicts Kureishi's search of identity through fragmented sense of belonging in the protagonists' Shahid's ambivalent sexual and political identity. The novel equates the character of Shahid with that of Prince and Deedee Osgood's character with that of Madonna. The novel also refers to Prince's CD titled as 'The Black Album' and to the Beatles' album The Beatles named the 'White Album'.

Rushdie's character Imam from *The Satanic Verses* believes that a destruction of an enemy is treated as a true form of love. Imam assumes that the young soldiers who were willing to kill or get killed for the sake of new religion were expressing pure love towards Islam. Repressed erotic feelings finds most violent outlet. Kureishi's *The Black Album* also has a similar character Riaz instigates his followers to act violently against 'the banned book' and anyone who tries to defend it. Riaz continues his "standard argument about the crimes committed by whites against blacks and Asians in the name of freedom"(Kureishi 22). Riaz's argument is closely connected with what Muslim fundamentalists detest. Riaz's fanatical fear and loathing of erotic feelings makes him reticent not only about sexuality but also in art: literature, music, style and so on. Riaz and his group dislike Shahid's sexual relationship with a white woman. They also dislike Shahid's excessive love for art and literature. Chad, Riaz's groupmate tells Shahid that "There's more to life than entertaining ourselves!"(Kureishi23). Chad finds himself unable to find a connection between art and life. It was because of Shahid's extra interest in pop culture; he happens to meet Deedee Osgood, his college teacher and ends up having sexual liaison with her.

Shahid and Deedee have common musical and cultural taste. Deedee flaunts the pictures of Prince, Madonna and Oscar Wilde on her desk. She eggs on Shahid to talk about Prince. Shahid believes that "Prince is half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho too. His work contains and extends the history of black American music, Little Richard, James Brown, Sly Stone, Hendrix"(Kureishi 24). Riaz and his groupmates abhor the western materialism and liberalism and find it anathematic to their religious practice. Shahid, on the contrary, dilligently accepts the modern values championed by the cultural icons of the western culture. Shahid and Deedee are all praises for the western cultural icons and hold them emblematic of the practice of explicit liberation politics. Their admiration for these cultural icons gives way for their love affair. Chad, a member of a Islamic brotherhood concludes that Shahid's adherence of the commitment to Islam is caused by his listening to excessive pop music especially the one by Prince and his love relationship with Deedee Osgood and his extravagant craze for Western popular culture. They try to convince Shahid to give up on Deedee to rid him of the western influence. Chad tells Shahid "Get clean! Gimme those Prince records" (25).

Prince and Madonna can be compared with Shahid and Deedee in terms of their performance and politicization of their sexuality. Shahid, like Prince, identifies himself as "half black and half

white ... feminine but macho too” (Kureishi26). He likes if Deedee makes-up his face. Deedee does this to the song of Madonna titled 'What are you looking at?' from her CD, *Vogue* (Kureishi27). The songs have sex and the fake pornography. Deedee, like Madonna, in words of the speaker, turns herself into pornography for the sake of Shahid. However, she manages to do so “without losing her soul” (28). It is a magnificent blend of the mimicry of pornography and she represents herself as pure representation of the same. Deedee and Madonna both imitate the patriarchal ideal of woman and thus make fun of the law of gender itself. The way Madonna has a large female followers in the male-dominated musical world, Deedee, also has a strong female following in male-dominated academic world. Deedee's followers like “dressing as she did and studying her as if she were Madonna”(Kureishi 31). As a true Madonna figure, Deedee represents herself as a male desire and performs sex as politics. Shahid deems Deedee to be street-smart woman who turns both educational and bedroom culture into exhilarating popular culture. Shahid, thus, finds his identity fragmented in its reflection in popular culture. Shahid and Deedee both celebrate pornography as part of pop culture. They consider it as a culture of simulation. Though pornography is circulated publicly, it is performed or received in private. Muslim fundamentalists treat pornography as pop culture and they denounce all pop culture as pornography. According to them anything related to pornography amounts to blasphemy. However, the novel explores the fragmented multiple identities that are the mixture of Islam fundamentalism and the Christian liberalism.

Shahid admiration and the overt inclination towards liberal politics championed by Deedee make Islamicists anxious about their own religion. Chad, one of the group member, says that “One of our girls was twisted against the truth by the post-modernists” (Kureishi32). They slander Deedee for “taking lovers among the Afro-Caribbean and Asian students.... The college knows she is having it away with two Rastamen. For political reasons she selects only black or Asian lovers now” (33). Deedee-the Madonna figure in the novel, unlike Islamicists, does not choose to perform modestly. Tahira, the member of Islamicist group, as she adjusts her scarf, says “our people have always been sexual objects for the whites. No wonder they hate our modesty”(34).

The Islamicists group in the novel also finds Deedee, an essentially white and repressive girl who uses her love and sympathy for the racially inferior people only to rule them further. Hooks uses the terms like ‘plantation mistress’ or ‘soul sister’ for Madonna. In context of the novel *The Black Album*, the Islamicists argue that though Madonna gives an impression to be a soul sister, she is actually a plantation mistress. Shahid gets attracted towards Deedee because of her knowledge and experience of “what his mother called 'wrong things,' pop music and drugs”(Kureishi38). Islamicists approach towards Deedee is same as the approach of Hooks towards Madonna. Hooks argues that Madonna holds male stars like Prince as a barometer against which she measures herself and hopes to transcend (39). However, it is Shahid who perceives Deedee as a strong, liberated, exciting woman, against which he tries to measure himself. The Islamicists call Deedee a ‘pornographic priestess’ (40). By using the word pornographic for her they implicitly expose their own masturbatory fantasies for her. When

Deedee offers herself as pornography to Shahid which is a simulation like Madonna's simulation of sex, it makes the Islamicists own private sex exciting and thrilling.

Kureishi, in his novel, represents this Islamic notion of the rejection of Western imperialism by denouncing the pop culture and postmodernity. Shahid has Islamic fundamentalism and the western liberalism at the same time in his mind. The notions of both the worlds co-exist in his mind, though both the worlds cannot commensurate and can barely converge. Both the ideologies have diametrically distinct social, cultural and political agendas. The novel appears to be ambivalent in its tone towards the tension between both the contending ideologies. Though Islamicist fundamentalists and the postmodern theorizing seek to challenge the imperialism, neither of the ideologies seem to negotiate the political differences in both the theoretical viewpoint. Chad questions the integrity of Deedee as he asks "Has she said why our beliefs are always inferior to hers and yet she lectures everyone about equality?" (41).

*The Black Album* is a blurring of the boundaries between the fact of the sexual liaison between Shahid and Deedee and the fiction of the pop culture. The sexual encounter between Shahid and Deedee is thoroughly political. In the context of gender-benders like Prince and the explicit iconography of Madonna, the novel explores power and pornography. The novel does not describe pornography as always already phallic power, but rather as a mode of playing with and subverting the phallic power. The novel shows the deadly violence in the fatwa and its violent repercussions as a part of legitimate violence. The novel also comments on the close association between attitudes to violence and attitudes to sex. The Islamicist group seeks to repress sexuality by suppressing the pop music.

Thus novel gives a distinct treatment to the issues of gender, sexuality and religious fundamentalism. Deedee Osgood is a principal female character in the novel around which many issues of postmodernity, sexuality, pornography, western liberalism are thrown open for speculation. Tahira, another female character in the novel, foregrounds her religious identity and backgrounds her gender identity. The character of Deedee is a fantastic blend of modern ideas, liberalism, commitment to the religion, postmodern excess. She gives equal importance to her individualism, gender identity and the religious identity.

## References:

Crowley, J. "Bell Hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation." *NEW COMMUNITY* 22 (1996): 546-546

Gilbert-More, B. "HanifKureishi: Contemporary World Writers." (2001).

Kureishi, Hanif. *The Black Album*. New York: Simon& Schuster Inc, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Buddha of suburbia*.Faber & Faber, 2009.

Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*.Random House, 2011.