

# Prescient Parable: *The Black Album* by Hanif Kureishi

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## Introduction

When it was published in 1995, Hanif Kureishi's second novel, *The Black Album*, did not receive a positive critical response. In fact, the dominant reactions to the novel were confusion and disappointment. Kureishi had turned away from the topics and the style of writing he had become known for and he had started to pay attention to what were perceived at the time to be relatively unimportant, unrewarding themes: Islamic fundamentalism and political extremism.

The writer's earlier work had been widely praised for its witty and perceptive descriptions of multicultural London and for its depiction of life in the Pakistani community in particular. Kureishi had become well known as a playwright (*Tomorrow-Today* 1980, *The King and Me* 1980, *Outskirts* 1981,) as a writer of screenplays (*My Beautiful Laundrette* 1984, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* 1985, *London Kills Me* 1991) and as a novelist (*The Buddha of Suburbia* 1990.) In particular, he had been praised for his honest and open approach to the depiction of race and race relations in the U.K. and for what Stuart Hall in his article *New Ethnicities* called Kureishi's "refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized and always 'right-on.'" Hall also claimed in the same article that *My Beautiful Laundrette* was "one of the most riveting and important films produced by a black writer in recent years."<sup>ii</sup> Gayatri Spivak wrote about Kureishi's second film, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, in a similar vein, again praising Kureishi's rejection of the need to provide politically correct, positive images of black and Asian characters:

...the idea of portraying blacks or women or whatever the minority is in a new and positive light is, in the long run, deeply insulting.<sup>iii</sup>

Kureishi himself coined the term "cheering fictions" to describe the contemporary tendency to present in literature only "naively celebratory and compensatory counter-images"<sup>iv</sup> of minority ethnic cultures.

After Kureishi had received such lavish praise for his early work, it was surprising and disappointing for most commentators when he produced *The Black Album*. The novel was criticized for its content and political stance<sup>v</sup> and also for its artistic qualities.<sup>vi</sup> More than anything,

readers did not understand why Kureishi had chosen to focus on the theme of religious fundamentalism. An article from July 2009 in *The Times* quotes a recent interview with Kureishi:

My main memory is that people just didn't care about this story at the time... Most people in those days weren't interested in Muslim fundamentalism. It was rather like being interested in Scientology; it was some fringe, small-time, minor activity. It was only much later that it became at the centre of what we were living through and thinking about.<sup>vi</sup>

Later, of course, after its publication in 1995 and the initial lukewarm reception, the novel subsequently came to be seen as increasingly timely and relevant to current events. Indeed, when bombs exploded on the London underground and on a London bus on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005, killing fifty-six people, the work began to seem eerily prescient and a true indication of the current state of race relations in Britain.

In late 2008, Kureishi began work with Jatinder Verma, the artistic director of the Asian theatre cooperative, Tara Arts, to produce an adaptation of *The Black Album* for the stage. Their production opened in the National Theatre in London on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009. Initial reviews were not very good. The theatrical version was said to be too simplistic.<sup>vii</sup> However, if the fortunes of the play mimic those of the novel, this negative reception may change. The play went on tour around the U.K. from the end of October 2009.

This paper traces the history and background of *The Black Album*. It begins with a brief introduction to Kureishi's work in general and continues with a discussion of the 1995 novel and an exploration of the author's reasons for writing it. These are followed by an examination of the cultural and historical importance of the symbolic 1989 burning of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, by enraged Islamic groups, which is one of the main themes of *The Black Album*. It is argued that the burning functioned as a kind of watershed marking the beginning of a move towards Islamic fundamentalism in the U.K. One of Kureishi's main aims in this novel appears to be a depiction of this shift in attitude and its importance in U.K. race relations. Finally, the paper considers the 2009 theatrical production in the light of the social and cultural changes that have happened in the fourteen years since the novel was written.

### **Background and Early Work**

Hanif Kureishi was born in Bromley, Kent (a suburb of London) in 1954 to a white British mother and Pakistani father. His father had originally come to the U.K. from Bombay as a student before the Partition of India and creation of Pakistan in 1947. He subsequently took a job at the Pakistani embassy, where he stayed until retirement. As Muslims, the family in India relocated to Pakistan. Kureishi's father was an unpublished author. He continued to write

throughout his life, but never successfully.

Hanif Kureishi was the offspring of a mixed-race marriage at a time when this was unusual in the U.K., and he encountered racist hostility as a child and as an adolescent. In *The Rainbow Sign*, a 1986 essay that he wrote about his childhood, recalling the time when he was growing up, he says “every day since I was five years old, I was racially abused.”<sup>ix</sup> This abuse and hostility came not only from his peers, but also from representatives of authority such as teachers. This was a time when discussion of multiculturalism and anti-racism in education were unheard of and yet to be identified as desirable. Kureishi’s negative experiences in this regard led, initially, to a rejection of his Pakistani self. He identified with white boys and associated with skinheads, despite their overtly racist political beliefs. As he points out in *The Rainbow Sign*, however, these early events in his life also had a positive effect in that they later led to anger, self-analysis and creativity.<sup>x</sup>

Kureishi is noted for the autobiographical nature of much of his work. Certain themes occur and reoccur, such as the Pakistani father, the white mother, the racism and the rejection of the greys of suburbia in favour of metropolitan excitement.

His first major breakthrough was to be offered a job at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1970, when he was only eighteen years old. He had been encouraged by his father to send the script of a play he had written to the theatre. When Kureishi took this advice, the Royal Court gave him work as an usher. This brought him into the centre of London from the suburbs (and this ‘escape’ from suburban life became a major theme in his work) and it also brought him into contact with talented, influential and inspiring people. On his first day working at the theatre, for example, he recalls that he saw Samuel Beckett rehearsing.<sup>xi</sup>

The Royal Shakespeare Company premiered Kureishi’s first full-length play, *Outskirts*, at the Warehouse Theatre in 1981. For this, and for the play *Borderline*, which he wrote in the same year, he received the George Devine award, an annual award funded by the Royal Court for the season’s most promising new playwright. Subsequently, in 1982, he became Writer-in-Residence at the Royal Court (the theatre has a reputation for innovative productions and for encouraging talented newcomers to the theatre world, especially writers.)

Having established a fledgling reputation in London’s theatrical circles, Kureishi came to the attention of a wider audience when he wrote the screenplay for the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* in 1984. He received an Oscar nomination for the script and this ensured the film’s commercial success. It was directed by Stephen Frears (who went on to work with Kureishi on *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*) and introduced the actor Daniel Day-Lewis to the public in his first major role. This was the story of an inter-racial, gay love affair set in the bleak, grey surroundings of wintry South London. Margaret Thatcher was controlling the country and her

presence is felt from the beginning, with references to the unemployment that characterized her premiership. The film was widely praised. One enthusiastic critic quoted by Kenneth Kaleta claimed that the film was “made with economy and a notable sensitivity to the complexities of a multi-racial society shot through with colonial attitudes, the film combines comedy and fantasy to effect: pleasurable, provocative and disturbing, one of the highlights of the British film year.”<sup>xii</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette* is peopled by a frightening mix of racist skin-heads, Asian drug-dealers and corrupt business people. In addition to these, other characters include an alcoholic former journalist, a philandering entrepreneur, his long-term mistress and his wife, who is a practitioner of voodoo-style magic. The novel still manages to be funny and it perceptively illustrates the diversity and liveliness of London’s Pakistani community. It successfully caught the imagination of cinemagoers, although some critics at the time argued that Kureishi was playing into the hands of racist commentators by portraying such a mixture of bad and good, corrupt and honest, weak and strong Pakistani characters. As was noted above, at the time, black and Asian writers were under pressure to present positive images of their communities. Some criticism was even leveled at Kureishi’s uncritical depiction of homosexuality. In fact, when the film opened in London and New York, protesters from the Pakistani Action League gathered outside the cinemas, claiming that Pakistani homosexuals did not exist.<sup>xiii</sup> Overall, however, this film marked Kureishi’s breakthrough to a larger, and largely appreciative audience. After this time, Kureishi’s name was known and his work sought after.

*Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1985,) the second Kureishi movie, is again set in inner-city London. The film opens with a view of an urban wasteland and a voiceover of Margaret Thatcher’s speech at Conservative Party Central Office after her third election victory in 1987. She is saying, “Now we have to get on and do something about those inner cities.”<sup>xiv</sup> She was referring to the rioting that occurred in Brixton, an impoverished West Indian area, in 1981 and in other economically and socially depressed areas of the U.K. since that time. This film deals extensively with these urban clashes and one of the main impressions that it leaves is that London is a battleground: torn apart, aflame and disintegrating. It can be argued that in this film the main character is the city itself. The fighting (both on the screen and in reality) was largely in the form of street battles between the police and local youth. The participants were both white and black. The probable causes were unemployment, lack of opportunity for young people and poor police/community relations. With this rioting city as its background, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* also explores themes related to feminism and the rights of women, sexuality, corruption and political responsibility. It was not so commercially successful as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, but it was critically acclaimed.

The novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1991) remains Kureishi's most accessible work. This 'coming-of-age' novel was widely praised and it was later made into a successful BBC mini-series.<sup>xv</sup> The first-person narrative describes the growth and development of Karim Amir, an Anglo-Pakistani 17 year-old who wants more than anything to escape from the confines of suburban life and move to the centre of London, the big city. Karim describes himself on the first page of the novel in these words:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care - Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it.<sup>xvi</sup>

Thus in the opening paragraph it is clear that issues of identity and race - and confusion with regard to both - will be of importance here, and already there is the disparaging reference to the suburbs, for Kureishi the source of stagnation and discontent. However, it is also clear from this quotation that the novel has a lightness of touch and Kureishi successfully introduces the comic tone for which the novel is praised. The main social themes of the novel are racial tension, race relations and social class. However it still manages to be "so funny and so scabrous"<sup>xvii</sup> that it is generally held to be Kureishi's most successful work.

Kureishi's father died in 1991, and it has been suggested that this event caused his work to "change and darken."<sup>xviii</sup> Certainly, he was deeply influenced by his father's death and he subsequently (in 2004) published an extended memoir about his relationship with his father, which has been seen by some as the best work he has ever produced.<sup>xix</sup> However, another influence on him was the growing tide of Islamic fundamentalism, possibly initiated and certainly encouraged by the public burning of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1989, and it was this that led Kureishi to probe into the world of strict Islam to see what was happening to "his" religion. Ultimately, this line of investigation led to the publication of *The Black Album* in 1995.

Shortly after *The Black Album* was published, journalist Maya Jaggi interviewed Kureishi and asked him what his motivation for writing this novel had been. Kureishi replied that after his friend (Rushdie) had been targeted by fundamentalists, he began to take an interest in what these extremist Muslims were saying and doing.<sup>xx</sup> Despite his friendship with Rushdie, he says to Jaggi that he felt some sympathy for the fundamentalist cause.

I started going to the mosque in Whitechapel, hanging around with them. I won-

dered why normal blokes got to the point where they wanted to see an author killed. I tried to be fair. I really liked the kids - I still see them. I felt sympathetic; they seemed lost, and fundamentalism gave them a sense of place, of belonging. So many were unemployed, and had friends involved in drugs; religion kept them out of trouble.

In some ways *The Black Album* portrays fundamentalism as a means of fighting against the racism that is inherent in British society. Kureishi has said (of his depiction of the main character, Shahid,) that he wanted to create a character completely overwhelmed by an identity crisis. This echoes Kureishi's own experiences as a teenager, when, as was noted above, he mixed with racist skinheads and called himself white. Kureishi has recalled his own confused, self-destructive feelings when he was at school.

From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else. I read with understanding the story in a newspaper about a black boy who, when he noticed that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water.<sup>xxi</sup>

Kureishi also recalls in *The Rainbow Sign* his anger and alienation at being the target of racist comments by teachers.

At school, one teacher always spoke to me in a 'Peter Sellers'<sup>xxii</sup> Indian accent. Another refused to call me by my name, calling me Pakistani Pete instead. So I refused to call the teacher by his name and used his nickname instead. This led to trouble; arguments, detentions, escapes from school over hedges and, eventually, suspension. This played into my hands; this couldn't have been better.<sup>xxiii</sup>

It was this kind of confusion and self-hate, the result of living in a society that made it impossible for the child of immigrant parents to fit in or accept his own background and heritage, that Kureishi hoped to draw attention to in *The Black Album*.

In the period after *The Black Album*, Kureishi largely turned away from the topics of race relations and racism. Instead, he began to focus on a variety of issues, including sexual politics, aging and parenting. One notable exception to this tendency, however, was the short story, *My Son the Fanatic* (1997,) that was subsequently turned into a film of the same name (also in 1997.) This story is of particular relevance to a discussion of *The Black Album* as it was here that Kureishi first turned his attention to Islamic fundamentalism, albeit in the context of a father's relationship with his son, rather than on the larger stage of cultural and religious politics. The story tells of a Pakistani taxi driver in Bradford (in the North of England) who becomes estranged from his teenage son because of the son's insistence that the father should adopt a stricter religious life. This was the first time that Kureishi had identified and

written about this inter-generational conflict among British Muslims, between the parents who had come to the U.K. and who frequently relinquished their religious background, and the children of these parents, who searched for identity and meaning in their lives through their religion. In *My Son the Fanatic*, one of the dangers inherent in fanaticism, the danger that fanaticism itself will give rise to 'retaliatory fanaticism' in its victims, is stressed. These are the final lines of the story, describing the physical violence that Parvez (the father) eventually resorts to when he becomes so frustrated as a result of his son's behaviour:

Parvez kicked him over. Then he dragged the boy up by his shirt and hit him. The boy fell back. Parvez hit him again. The boy's face was bloody. Parvez was panting. He knew that the boy was unreachable, but he struck him nonetheless. The boy neither covered himself nor retaliated; there was no fear in his eyes. He only said, through his split lip: 'So who's the fanatic now?'<sup>xiv</sup>

Literary works produced by Kureishi during this period included the short story collections *Love in a Blue Time* (1997) and *Midnight All Day* (1999,) the novels, *Gabriel's Gift* (2001,) *The Body* (2003) and *Something to Tell You* (2008,) the screenplay, *My Son the Fanatic* (1997) - which was originally a short story in *Love in a Blue Time*- and the plays *Sleep With Me* (1999,) *The Mother* (2003) and *Venus* (2007.)

## The Novel

Susie Thomas says that Shahid, the protagonist of *The Black Album*, "is engaged in a desperate scramble for identity."<sup>xv</sup> His dilemma is more immediate, more urgently experienced and arguably closer to reality than the problems attributed to Karim Amir in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The reality exposed in *The Black Album* is much more demanding than the world of cultural performance that is described in the earlier novel. Karim Amir, in *The Buddha*, is largely free to express himself as an individual and this gives the novel a lighter touch. In *The Black Album*, however, it is the struggle of Shahid to adapt to the disparate demands of contrasting and ill-matched ideologies that is the focus. From this point of view, the novel gives a more realistic account of the kinds of choices many people have to make in life when they are caught between two cultures or in personal, ethical or cultural dilemmas. Shahid is pulled in two directions at the same time. He is tempted and ultimately won over by the lure of self-gratification and personal desire. However, *The Black Album* makes it clear that he is often, like many others, restricted in the fulfillment of personal desire by the requirements of politics or religion. The principal set of values that Shahid must come to terms with and incorporate into his understanding of the world are those expressed by radical Islam, while this form of Islam is in itself set against the ideas represented by Marxism-Leninism .

Shahid is a student at a third-rate polytechnic (tertiary level college) in London. The college is basically a holding ground for the underprivileged, for those who have not had the chance to get on in education, until they leave for a world of joblessness and state unemployment benefit (colloquially 'the dole'). Most of these students are from immigrant and/or disadvantaged backgrounds. One of Shahid's teachers at the college is Deedee Osgood, a charismatic woman with whom he has an affair. Osgood teaches her students to interpret the world they live in through the prism of contemporary culture and the history of racial and sexual politics. She inspires and excites Shahid, introducing him to ideas that he has never met before and offering sexual and sensual experiences that he has never had. However, Shahid also meets the persuasive and convincing Riaz, the leader of a militant Islamic group who lives in the same building as him. Riaz preaches that the West, with its decadent philosophies and its corruption is 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. The conflicting attractions of these two influences create the main tension in the novel. Deedee wants to turn Shahid away from the influence of the Muslims. She is more interested in the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and she has little time for the constraints of a strict religious life or belief. Riaz, on the other hand, demands that Shahid should focus on the insult that he feels Islam has received "from the author of *Midnight's Children*."<sup>xxvi</sup> (Salman Rushdie's name is never actually mentioned and neither is the title of *The Satanic Verses*.) Forming a backdrop to Shahid's struggle for his own destiny is the contemporary demise of the Left, represented in the novel by the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the parallel collapse of Deedee's former husband, the stuttering Marxist-Leninist, Brownlow. Ultimately, Shahid chooses to stay with Deedee "until it stops being fun."<sup>xxvii</sup> In other words, he chooses to live for the moment and for himself and rejects the exhortations of politics and religion. Shahid and Deedee, at the end of the novel, leave the restrictive atmosphere of London and flee to the South coast of England. However, we are not led to believe that this is their final destination. As Susie Thomas points out, "there are no certainties here."<sup>xxviii</sup>

#### "The Rushdie Affair"

Compared with Kureishi's earlier works, *The Black Album* has a much more specific historical context. In January 1989, in the northern English city of Bradford, around one thousand Muslim protesters set fire to a copy of *The Satanic Verses* outside a police station. This event was captured by the news media and spread around the world. It became symbolic of a seemingly new and potent Islamic rage and it signified a change in the way that the dialogue



between British society and certain sections of the Islamic community was to be conducted. It was not, of course, the first time that there had been conflict between Blacks and Asians on the one hand and authority figures, usually represented by the police, on the other. In fact, the earliest 'race riots' in the post-war era happened in the 1950s, most famously at London's Notting Hill Carnival in 1958 when there were violent clashes between the police and West Indians. Also, during the 1980s there were disturbances in areas throughout the U.K. In 1981 in Brixton, South London, 300 people were injured and later in the same year there was further rioting in Manchester and in the Toxteth area of Liverpool, where a man was killed. In 1985 in Birmingham, two people were killed and dozens of buildings were destroyed as a result of firebombing. However, these earlier conflicts were more often than not the result of clashes between the police and specific groups. They reflected issues that arose within specific communities, and stemmed largely from problems of law and order or political grievances. Kenan Malik points out that the Bradford book-burning and the fury that accompanied it "seemed to be driven not by questions of harassment or discrimination or poverty but by a sense of hurt that Rushdie's words had offended their deepest beliefs."<sup>xxix</sup>

In the period after the book burning, sections of the British Muslim community began to adopt a much more aggressive stance. They made it clear that they were no longer willing to accept the largely passive role that they had taken up until this point. In the 1970s, as Kureishi points out in *The Rainbow Sign*, Pakistanis were "a risible subject" in the U.K.<sup>xxx</sup> (and this was also true of people from Bangladesh and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Indians.) They were often portrayed as physically and emotionally weak. On television they were depicted as comic, incomprehensible characters and in many ways they were the butt of the nation's humour. Moreover, they seemed to accept this role. However, the book-burning marked a change in the way Pakistanis thought of themselves and others thought of Pakistanis. Younger representatives of the group, in particular, became much more vociferous 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 had been lacking before. When this sense of outrage was subsequently compounded and legitimized by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini and his *fatwa*, this led to an even stronger and more militant stance.

As suggested above, the aggrieved reaction was not confined to British Muslims. Images of the book burning were viewed throughout the Islamic world. Despite the fact that the publication of the book itself had excited little interest, it seemed that the Bradford incident and subsequent, further burnings created a wave of anger that continues to be felt today. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution against the Shah of Iran, declared a *fatwa*, a religious decree that called on all Moslems to seek the death of

Rushdie for writing his ‘blasphemous’ novel. This decree had to be taken seriously and it forced Rushdie into hiding for the next ten years. The *fatwa* also called for the deaths of anybody associated with the publication of the book if they knew of its ‘blasphemous’ contents. During this period, several other people connected with the novel lost their lives to Muslim extremists who claimed to be fulfilling the command of the *fatwa*. Igarashi Hitoshi, the Japanese translator, was stabbed and killed in Tokyo in 1991. The Italian translator, Ettore Capriolo was stabbed and seriously wounded, also in 1991. The Turkish translator, Aziz Nezin, was targeted in events that culminated in the Sivas massacre of 1993, in which 37 people died in a hotel fire. Malik points out that the *fatwa* had “transformed the controversy into a global conflict with historical repercussions.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

However, the earliest protests against the book happened in India in 1988, before the *fatwa* was even issued. The Jamaat-e-Islami, “a hard-line (Indian) Islamist group against whom Rushdie had taken aim in his previous novel, *Shame*”<sup>xxxiii</sup> demanded that the novel should be banned and they were successful in their campaign in India, largely because of the political strength of India’s 150 million Muslims. The Jamaat also had a lot of influence among Muslims in Britain, where they were funded by Saudi Arabia. Despite this, their attempts to encourage protest against the novel were met with little reaction in that country until the book-burning incident and the subsequent *fatwa*. Malik suggests that the primary reason for the ‘success’ of the book-burning (in the sense that it was noticed) was that the local Muslim community and its leaders were “politically astute and media-savvy.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> They made sure that the emotive image of a burning book was spread throughout the media. Muslims noticed, but there was still little reaction until the Ayatollah Khomeini issued his decree in February 1989 and the whole of the Muslim world (and everybody else) began to pay attention. Malik claims that perhaps the most important aftermath of the *fatwa* was that it extended the influence of the Khomeini regime in Iran into Europe.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Whereas the conflict between Islam and the West had traditionally been conducted in the Middle East, the *fatwa* brought this conflict into the European theatre. The crusade was now being fought in Western capitals as well.

### The Stage Production

Finally, we will turn to the 2009 stage production of *The Black Album*. On 10<sup>th</sup> August 2009, The National Theatre hosted a discussion about the theatrical production, chaired by Kenan Malik and with Hanif Kureishi and Jatinder Verma as guests. When asked why he felt that it was relevant to bring the play to the stage at this point, nearly fifteen years after the novel was published, Kureishi identified the major themes that he thought were being discussed in 1995 in British society, and that he felt were still central to discussion and still caused public contro-

versy in 2009. These major themes were: “liberalism, religion, free speech, censorship, relationship between communities, respect and minorities.”<sup>xxxv</sup> Kureishi said that he hoped that the play would help the public debate that exists around these themes to continue and progress. He also claimed that “one of the things that theatre can be very good at is in dealing with the contemporary.” As a result of this belief, he rewrote the novel for the stage in the hope that it would “throw some light on...(what) we’re still thinking about and going through today. Enough time had gone by for us to see it as a semi-historical piece...yet at the same time I thought that it might help us to explain some of the things that happened subsequently.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Kureishi also recalled the vitriolic attacks on the corruption of the West that he heard in London mosques shortly after the *fatwa* in 1989, claiming that he recognized such talk as ‘crazy’ but that at the same time he could see that it was a part of something new, a new anger that was based on a sense of insult and a sense of a newly structured and strengthened United Kingdom Islamic community. He also said that it seemed in retrospect this sense of community was not engendered so much by Rushdie’s book as by the *fatwa*. It might be argued that the intervention by Khomeini led directly to a new movement and a new sense of brotherhood among British Muslims that was subsequently channeled into protest and action. It is difficult to say whether the book-burning and/or the *fatwa* instigated the changes, or whether they were a sign of unrest that had been developing for a long time. It seems likely, however, that the book-burning, supported and made acceptable to Muslims through Khomeini’s edict, served as a catalyst to polarize and strengthen Muslim anger and Muslim resolve.

Jatinder Verma made the point that “one thing the Rushdie affair did was to validate a faith-based movement that was emerging.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> He claimed that the controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* created a situation (and that situation has lasted until today) in which British Asians were no longer considered to be simply Asian (or Pakistani, or Bangladeshi, or Indian.) Instead, they came to be thought of (and thought of themselves as) Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs. National identities were to a large extent replaced by religious identities. People became extremely sensitive to the particularities of faith cultures. As a result of this altered perspective Verma claimed that “we now define our society based on faith, so class and race have become passé almost...which is an extraordinary throwback in many ways.” Whereas before, membership of British society had been defined in terms of social class and national background, the tendency now, particularly for British people of Asian origin, is for faith to become central to the way society describes individuals and the way individuals describe themselves.

If we consider the influence that the Rushdie affair had (and continues to have) on commu-

nities in the U.K. that have roots and connections in the Indian sub-continent, the argument proposed by Kureishi and Verma is acceptable. Further discussion of this continuing influence will, hopefully, be the result of the stage version of *The Black Album*. However, it is questionable whether this new faith-based awareness and identification has been transferred to the non-Asian population of the U.K. In fact, it can be argued that the majority, white British populace has tended to become increasingly secular during the same period that the Muslim population has become more self-aware.

*The Black Album* on stage allows its audience to reconsider the events that surrounded the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and the subsequent *fatwa*. It encourages a reappraisal of these events after fourteen years in which a lot has happened. Initially, the novel *The Black Album* was received with little excitement and some overt criticism. The themes were thought to be uninteresting and disappointing, a reflection of minority interests and a disappointment from an author who had appeared to have so much to offer with his earlier work. With the strengthening and consolidation of Islamic fundamentalism both in the U.K. and around the world, and with the increased number of terrorist attacks, however, the themes treated in the novel have come to appear increasingly prescient and topical. The author's belief that the theatre can deal particularly well with such topical issues led him to rewrite the novel as a play and present it on the London stage. His decision to do so reflects the fact that the issues portrayed in the novel and the play remain relevant. It also demonstrates his contention that faith has become central to the British Asian way of life.

This paper will end with a quotation from a 2005 essay by Hanif Kureishi called *The Word and the Bomb*. The essay is the introductory piece in a collection of writings (also called *The Word and the Bomb*) that Kureishi put together "to reflect the evolution of my thinking about the conflict between Islam and Western liberalism over the past two decades."<sup>xxxviii</sup> He is discussing the reason why so many young people turned to fundamentalist Islam in the 15 years after 1989. He points out in the essay that many of the young Muslims he had spoken to told him that, although their attacks on *The Satanic Verses* and its author were ultimately unsuccessful in that they did not manage to suppress the book or execute Rushdie, they still felt empowered by their activities because, as a result, they could see how they could influence and change the world with their disapproval and energy. They became attracted to Islam because of the certainties that it could offer, the sense of power that it gave them and because of the way it gave them the chance to be both obedient and rebellious at the same time. Islam gave them the equivalent of a road map to guide them through their lives.

For young religious radicals, extreme Islam worked in many ways. It kept them out of trouble, for a start, and provided some pride. They weren't drinking, taking drugs

or getting into trouble like some of their white contemporaries. At the same time, they were able to be rebels. Being more fervent Muslims than their parents - and even condemning their parents - kept them within the Muslim fold, but enabled them to be transgressive at the same time.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Some younger Muslims, then, may see radical Islam as a viable path to follow, given their view of modern, secular, western life as immoral, corrupt and confused. It is easy to forget, however, that these extremists are very much a minority. Most older Muslims (and many younger ones also) are far more conservative and circumspect in their willingness to accept extremism. Many of these more conservative Muslims view extremism as dangerous. They worry that the result of increased extremism will be increased levels of anti-Muslim sentiment among the general population. As a result of extremism, British Muslims may find themselves in a similar position to African-Americans in the United States: permanent scapegoats of an aggressive mass media and intolerant public perceptions.

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<sup>i</sup> Stuart Hall (1988), p.274

<sup>ii</sup> Stuart Hall, op.cit., p.275

<sup>iii</sup> Gayatri Spivak (1989), p.86

<sup>iv</sup> Cited in Bart Moore-Gilbert (2001), p.45

<sup>v</sup> Ruvani Ranasinha (2002), Frederick M. Holmes (2001)

<sup>vi</sup> Tom Shone (1995)

<sup>vii</sup> Hanif Kureishi cited in John Lewis (2009)

<sup>viii</sup> For example: Michael Coveney in *The Independent*, Michael Billington in *The Guardian* and Fiona Mountford in *The Evening Standard*

<sup>ix</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1986), p. 19

<sup>x</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1986), p. 15

<sup>xi</sup> Cited in Aida Edemariam (2008)

<sup>xii</sup> Pam Cook (1985) cited in Kenneth Kaleta (1998), pp.40-41

<sup>xiii</sup> Hanif Kureishi in a public discussion at The National Theatre, London. 10th August 2009.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Sammie and Rosie Get Laid*

<sup>xv</sup> *The Buddha of Suburbia*, BBC Films

<sup>xvi</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1991), p.3

<sup>xvii</sup> Aida Edemariam (2008)

<sup>xviii</sup> Aida Edemariam ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> Hanif Kureishi (2004)

<sup>xx</sup> Maya Jaggi (1995)

<sup>xxi</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1986), p. 15

<sup>xxii</sup> Peter Sellers was a British comedian who was famous for portraying a comic Indian character with a pronounced accent.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1986), p.10

<sup>xxiv</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1997) reprinted in Hanif Kureishi (2005), p.74

<sup>xxv</sup> Susie Thomas (2005), p.101

- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1995), p.32
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1995), p.276
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Susie Thomas (2005), p.101
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Kenan Malik (2009)
- <sup>xxxx</sup> Hanif Kureishi (1986), p. 15
- <sup>xxxxi</sup> Kenan Malik (2009)
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Kenan Malik (2009)
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Kenan Malik (2009)
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Kenan Malik (2009)
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Hanif Kureishi in a public discussion at The National Theatre, London. 10th August 2009. Transcribed and abridged by this author.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Hanif Kureishi *ibid.*
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Jatinder Verma in a public discussion at The National Theatre, London. 10th August 2009. Transcribed by this author.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Hanif Kureishi (2005), p. 11
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Hanif Kureishi (2005), p. 8

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#### Video Materials

- My Beautiful Laundrette*, dir. Stephen Frears (1984)
- My Son the Fanatic* dir. Udayan Prasad (1993)
- Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, dir. Stephen Frears (1985)
- The Buddha of Suburbia*, dir. Roger Michell (BBC Films, 1993)

# Prescient Parable: *The Black Album* by Hanif Kureishi

Anthony Mills

This paper examines Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Black Album* and the play of the same name. The novel (1995) and the play (2009) both explore issues raised by the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the U.K. and internationally since the end of the 1980s. The history and background of the two works are traced in this paper. First there is a general introduction to Kureishi's work. This is followed by a discussion of the 1995 novel and the author's motivation for writing it. In particular, the cultural and historical importance of the burning of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 by Islamic groups and the subsequent *fatwa* or religious decree, issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini and calling for Rushdie's death are described and analyzed. The book burning and the subsequent *fatwa* appear to have acted as a kind of catalyst that marked a beginning of the move toward Islamic fundamentalism in the U.K. One of Kureishi's main aims in this novel appears to be a depiction and analysis of this shift in attitude and its importance in U.K. race relations. Finally, the paper considers the 2009 theatrical production of *The Black Album* in the light of social and cultural changes that have happened in the fourteen years since the novel was written.