

# FINDING THE MIDDLE PATH: ASSIMILATION, IDENTITY AND ISLAM IN HANIF KUREISHI'S THE BLACK ALBUM

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF HUMAN SCIENCES
IN ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES

KULLIYYAH OF ISLAMIC REVEALED KNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN SCIENCES INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

JULY 2002

"As to these, they love The fleeting life, And put behind them A Day that will be hard."

Al-Qur'an 72:27

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## **ABSTRACT**

The novel The Black Album by the Anglo-Pakistani writer Hanif Kureishi is an exploration of the Muslim community in Britain and the society they live in, written in the wake of the controversy about Salman Rushdie's novel The Satanic Verses. The struggle of Kureishi's protagonist, Shahid, to define his identity mirrors the dilemma of many young Muslims living in non-Muslim societies. This study examines the extent to which the novel is an expression of the author's own dual personality as an Anglo-Pakistani with regard to the characters, themes and writing style. It also examines what is 'Islamic' about the novel. Kureishi's works have mostly been studied in the light of postcolonial theory, but this study employs a combination of critical approaches. Islamic principles are used in evaluating the Islamic elements in the novel. This study is a content or textual analysis of the *The Black Album* focusing on the writer's representation of the experience of cultural hybridity and the dilemma of reconciling opposing cultural and religious influences, using material from published interviews with the author as well as reviews, articles and critical studies. Clearly, globalization is a continued influence on society and so the answer to Shahid's dilemma is no longer as simple as identifying his ethnic origins. Kureishi is not satisfied with stereotypical portrayals of Muslims, and he does offer some insights as to why Muslims often make themselves misunderstood. There are a number of 'Islamic' elements in the novel, such as exposing the pitfalls of self-indulgence and extolling certain virtues valued in Islam. It also shows that the novel includes the theme of exile which is a part of the Islamic literary tradition. Finally, the novel strives to present a sympathetic picture of Muslims and Islam.

## **ABSTRACT (ARABIC)**

تعتبر رواية "الألبوم الأسود" لصاحبها الكاتب الباكستاني الأنجلوساكسوني المعروف باسم خنيف قرشي مسحاً واستقصاءاً لواقع الجالية المسلمة في بريطانيا. لقد تم إنهاء فصول هذه الرواية في أعقاب الجدل الفكري الصاحب الذي أثاره صدور رواية سلمان رشدي "آيات شيطانية" يصوّر "الألبوم الأسود" نضال مستميت للبطل الروائي (شهيد)) الذي يعكس التحديات المريرة التي يواجهها النشئ المسلم في المجتمعات غير الإسلامية.

تتناول هذه الدراسة تحليل الطبيعة المزدوجة لشخصية المؤلف (باكستاني-بريطاني) وتأثيراتها على اختيار عنوان الموضوع وأسلوب الكتابة الروائية. كما تقوم هذه الدراسة بإبراز ومعاينة الجانب الإسلامي من الرواية. إن معظم مؤلفات قرشي تم دراستها في ضوء "نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار" والتي توظف توليفة خاصة من المقاربات التحليلية النقدية. هذا ويرجع في تقييم العناصر ذات المغزى الإسلامي في الرواية إلى الأصول الشرعية الإسلامية المعروفة.

تأتي هذه الدراسة كتحليل نصي لفصول رواية " الألبوم الأسود" التي تنقل نظرة المؤلف في تقديم تجربة التهجين الثقافي وما ينجر عنها من محاولة يائسة للتقريب بين توجهات ثقافية ودينية متناقضة وذلك من خلال ما لمسناه من بعض الحوارات المسجلة مع المؤلف وكذلك المقالات والمجلات والبحوث النقدية التي تنصب في هذا المضمار. حقا إن العولمة لها آثار وارتدادات ممتدة انعكست في واقع البطل الروائي "شهيد" التي لم تعد نضالاته مجرد صراع لإثبات هويته العرقية والقومية. لقد أبدى المؤلف نوعا من الاشمئزاز تجاه صورة المسلمين اليوم، ليقوم بالمقابل بتقديم بعض التفسيرات حول مسؤولية المسلمين في جعل من حولهم يخطئون فهمهم. لقد حوت هذه الرواية على عدد من الإشارات لقيم ومزايا إسلامية حميدة. كذلك فإن رواية "الألبوم الأسود" تتناول موضوع "اللجوء" باعتباره تقليدا معروفاً في الأدبيات الإسلامية. وأحيرا تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم وجها مشرفاً للإسلام والمسلمين عامة.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Literary Studies.

Syr Rhaz hi Syed Nasir Raza Kazmi

Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Literary Studies.

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Mohamad @ Md. Som Sujimon Dean, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed

Knowledge and Human Sciences

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references and a bibliography is appended.

Tanja Jonid

Signature au Janis

Date.....

#### INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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Finding the Middle Path: Assimilation, Identity and Islam in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* 

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To Ashraf, for understanding that it mattered

and

to Ameena, for believing in me.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Alhamdulillah, with the Grace and Guidance of Allah, I have been able to complete this thesis. Thanks be to Allah for giving me the strength to do it.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Syed Nasir Raza Kazmi, for his advice, support and boundless patience in overseeing this thesis. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, for her continued support and words of encouragement. Of course, I would also like to thank Dr. Umar Abdurrahman for his kindness and praise.

My thanks go out to Dr. Nur Nina Zuhra, without whom this thesis would never have been written. You have been an inspiration and a source of encouragement throughout. Also, to Dr. Nuraihan Mat Daud for not letting me give up. Not to forget all my lecturers, IIUM staff, family and friends who have supported me along the way: particularly my lecturers Dr. Jalal Uddin Khan and Prof. Dr. Abdul Wahid Lu'lua; Sis. Edah Baharom of the English Department, whom I know I inconvenienced more than once during the course of my study, and Sis. Salmah Ahmad, the Assistant Director of the Centre of Postgraduate Studies, for being everready to help; my husband, Ashraf Abdul Razak, for suffering in silence, my sistersin-law Azrina and Azura Abdul Razak, my parents-in-law Assoc. Prof. Abdul Razak bin Ismail and Mdm. Fatimah Harun; my classmate Ravinder Kaur; and Ameena Siddiqi, surely the best friend anyone could have. Last but not least Wei-Meng and Bianca Chee, and Marina Kurtén, who sent me material that I would not otherwise have been able to obtain. I owe much to all of you. For those I have not mentioned by name, you know who you are and I am glad you were there for me.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

#### INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background of the Study

Characters who have to deal with multiple cultures as a result of a mixed ethnic background are as yet under-represented in literature and as such, there has not been much study in this field. Critics studying Hanif Kureishi's work rarely understand this part of the author's identity and, when dealing with the subject of religion in Kureishi's novel *The Black Album*, focus instead on the representation of what they call 'Islamic fundamentalism'.

Muslims have often complained of being misrepresented in the Western media as fanatics and terrorists. 'Muslimphobia is at the heart of contemporary British and European cultural racism' (Modood 1997, quoted in Jacobson 1998:77). Non-practising Muslims have done further damage to this image of Islam by voicing their opinion that Islam is not a religion suitable for a modern lifestyle, in other words, for living in a non-Muslim community. However, practising Muslims living in non-Muslim countries in which the 'mainstream' community may not be entirely familiar with Islam and its teachings often insist that it is possible to practise Islam in any social environment. This view, of course, requires a good knowledge of the religion on their part and some religious education or upbringing.

The protagonist in Hanif Kureishi's The Black Album represents the voice of the born

Muslim who has little religious knowledge and upbringing, living in a society in which almost opposing values may force him to choose an identity for himself in order to 'fit in'. In the novel, which is set in London in 1989, Shahid Hasan is a young college student, a born Muslim who, because of his secular family background, has little knowledge about Islam. He not only has to come to terms with what it means to be a Muslim but also has to forge an identity for himself by reconciling both his Muslim and Western identities. In his search for an identity, Shahid befriends some young Muslim students, only to realise later that they form a kind of vigilante group protecting British Muslims from violent attacks. At the same time, he falls in love with his lecturer, a former hippie who appeals to his taste for all things considered modern and fun, namely pop music, parties and drugs. Later in the novel, Shahid has gained a better understanding of Islam but realises that his friends' brand of religion is not the path that he wants to choose for himself. It is the act of the burning of copies of The Satanic Verses which causes Shahid to become disillusioned with the preachings of his friend Riaz. At the end of the novel, Shahid tentatively chooses a hedonistic lifestyle, but the reader is reminded that this is only a temporary choice.

#### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Kureishi first intended only to write an article or essay exploring why Muslims were deeply offended by the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* (Ashraf 1996: n.p). It was only later that he planned to write a short story on the subject (Kaleta 1998:121) and then two novellas (Kaleta 148), which in the end became the novel *The Black Album*. According to Jacobson, '[t]he scale of the offence caused by Rushdie's book is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for non-Muslims to

comprehend' (1998: 38). She says that what is termed the 'Rushdie Affair' saw '[M]any of these young people [Pakistani Muslims in Britain]...articulating a self-conscious identity as 'Muslim' for the first time (even if in most cases this was not accompanied by increasing levels of religious practice)' (39). It is precisely this with which Shahid, Kureishi's protagonist, is faced, and the novel is an exploration of such feelings within him as well as an expression of Kureishi's own dual personality as an Anglo-Pakistani who neither grew up in the Christian-English nor in the Muslim-Pakistani tradition (Kaleta 18). Since, according to Jacobson, among the younger generation of Muslims in Britain, '[n]ew forms of identity are ... being created, and the more traditionalist conceptions of ethnic identity held by parents and also long-standing notions of 'Britishness' are being challenged and reshaped' (81), the novel may be seen as an expression of the voices of the many young Muslims living in non-Muslim societies who have to deal with similar issues.

Hall says that 'our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are' (1989: 227). Being of mixed ethnic background would give the author a constant feeling of displacement. 'Displacement involves the invention of new forms of subjectiveness, of pleasures, of intensities, of relationships, which also implies the continuous renewal of a critical work that looks carefully and intensively at the very system of values to which one refers in fabricating the tools of resistance' (Minh-Ha 1991: 216-217). This study examines the extent to which Kureishi's characters, themes and writing style reflect the need to rebel against generally accepted norms in order to define his own identity and set himself apart from the established traditions of English story-telling.

## 1.3 Significance of the Study

In English-language fiction, Muslim society is often portrayed as patriarchal, oppressive, backward and degenerate. Even Muslim authors seem to appeal only to non-Muslim/Western audiences if they follow in this trend and portray Muslim society in such a way. The portrayal of Muslims in Britain in Kureishi's *The Black Album*, too, seems mainly to have been of interest to those critics/reviewers who see Kureishi as agreeing with their own point of view with regard to Islam. Incidentally, Kureishi's book has been seen by some Muslims as favourable to Islam, as he has even been commended by them for 'unveiling the wickedness of the West' (Ashraf n.p.).

This study aims to provide an analysis of Kureishi's portrayal of Islam and the Muslim community in Britain, by taking into account that Kureishi, is not a critic of religion, but of religious extremism. Kaleta, especially, seems to impose much of his own bias into interpreting Kureishi's writing when he says that '[t]he novel openly questions religion...' (1998: 139). It is therefore necessary to analyse the writer's work from a Muslim point of view.

### 1.4 Research Questions

Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* has been selected because he is an author from a hybrid ethnic background who has to deal not only with a clash of ethnicities, but also of religions. Furthermore, *The Black Album* is currently the only one of his novels which deals primarily with this dilemma. Therefore, this study focuses on these questions:

- 1) To what extent does the writer's consciousness of his own cultural and religious background influence his themes and style?
- 2) What are the realities that surround Muslim writers in a (largely) non-Muslim society and how do they deal with these in producing works of fiction?
- 3) How do authorial perceptions and impressions get incorporated/ transmuted into the world of fiction?
- 4) To what extent does Shahid's quest for identity and acceptance represent the quest of all Muslims born and brought up in a non-Muslim society?
- 5) To what extent is Shahid a Muslim and how far is *The Black Album* 'Islamic'?

#### 1.5 Literature review

Hanif Kureishi published his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, in 1990. *The Black Album*, his second novel, was published in 1995. After a collection of short stories, *Love in a Blue Time* (published in 1997), he published a short novel, *Intimacy* (1998), continuing the theme of several short stories published in *Love in a Blue Time*. Another collection of short stories, *Midnight All Day*, followed in 1999. His latest novel is *Gabriel's Gift*.

Although Kureishi has been publishing prose fiction for over 10 years, studies of Kureishi still focus mainly on his films and screenplays. This is because Kureishi appears to be of greater interest to those studying popular culture and film. The first

critical biography on Kureishi is that by Kenneth C. Kaleta published in 1998 as *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller*. It is a study of Kureishi's works that covers his artistic development up to the film *My Son the Fanatic* (1997). Kaleta deals mainly with Kureishi's films although one chapter each is dedicated to analysing *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *The Black Album* and the short stories published in the collection titled *Love in a Blue Time*. Within one single chapter, Kaleta's analysis of The *Black Album* looks at the various drafts of the novel to examine the changes in Kureishi's style as the novel takes shape while dealing briefly with gender portrayal, characterisation, relationships, the theme of costuming, the conflict between western and religious lifestyles, and the role of references to pop music in the novel. Within this brief analysis, however, Kaleta proclaims that '[t]he novel openly questions religion in its depiction of conflict between eastern religious tradition and western progressive philosophy' (139).

Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook (1993), edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson, is a good source for biographical material on Hanif Kureishi. The short chapter written by Alpana Sharma Knippling not only provides information about Kureishi's family and educational background, it also gives a brief description of Kureishi's career until the publication of The Buddha of Suburbia. Furthermore, Knippling gives an overview of Kureishi's major works and themes. Since Kureishi's second novel had not yet been published at the time, the theme of religion and extremism is not included, although his concern with the 'immigrant experience' is already an issue in the works mentioned in this sourcebook. Thus, Knippling writes '[Kureishi's] writing may best be described as consisting of a particular tracing of the imbrications of race, sex, class, and politics ... with an

occasional deflating, comic-satirical, and ultimately subversive stroke.' (162).

An early review of *The Black Album* in *The Guardian* by Maya Jaggi (1995) inevitably draws comparisons between this and Kureishi's first novel. Both protagonists, she says, share a 'quizzical cultural "inbetweenness". Jaggi's review, which includes snippets of an interview or interviews with Kureishi personally, quotes the author as explaining that he named the book after the Beatles' and Joan Didion's 'white albums'. Jaggi states that Kureishi approaches what she terms 'fundamentalists' sympathetically, but she does point out that Kureishi's novel does not challenge the popular view of Muslims as 'fanatics and book-burners'. She also makes the point that the novel should not be seen as 'an insider's view of the "Asian Muslim" community'.

The review of *The Black Album* by James Saynor in the journal *New Statesman and Society* (1995), to which Hanif Kureishi also contributes from time to time, calls the protagonist of the novel 'an insolent cynic...partly in thrall to hardline Islam'. Saynor rightly observes that '[t]en years on from 1979' the 'young British Asians' depicted in the novel 'are no longer as keen on assimilation into white British society'. However, Saynor accuses Kureishi 'of evasion and conservatism' and says that the author 'is more of mirror than a lamp'. However, he does give Kureishi credit for his comic style.

Deborah Shapiro's review of *The Black Album* provides an overview of the novel, its plot, characters and some of its themes. She compares it briefly to Kureishi's films *My* 

Beautiful Laundrette and Sammie and Rosie get Laid, coming to the conclusion that the novel 'can be seen as an evolution' as Kureishi breaks away from the attacks on Thatcherism evident in the two earlier works mentioned. Shapiro also briefly looks at the setting of the novel in the light of his previous work. However, the major flaw in Shapiro's review is that she is under the impression that Shahid, like Karim Amir in The Buddha of Suburbia, is an Anglo-Pakistani.

In his paper entitled 'England, the Immigrant Experience, and *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* by Hanif Kureishi' (1996), Aurgha Mahmud deals a little more closely with Islam and the Muslim community as encountered in the novel. It compares the two novels, discussing how these two works depict the second-generation immigrant experience in Britain, particularly the experiences of immigrants of South Asian descent, between 1980 and 1990. This is the main focus of the paper. He further discusses the effects of discrimination and upward mobility on the identity of the immigrants, as they assimilate into British society. Mahmud examines the trend of returning to the Islamic faith among second-generation immigrants as depicted in *The Black Album* and states that

Kureishi developes [sic] the idea of religion as an integral part of politics and as a requirement for liberation, equality and racial unity. He underlines the importance of faith in the second generation immigrant as a 'tag' that makes the human, and shows how far it goes to unite 'brothers and sisters' together in harmonised respect and trust towards Allah, and a sense of belonging.

According to Mahmud, Shahid is uncertain in his view of religion and rejects the view of religion embraced by Riaz and his other friends who he feels 'seek faith because it is popular to do so' (Mahmud n.p.). Mahmud further compares the protagonist of *The Black Album* to Karim, the protagonist of *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Adrian Jones, in his 1999 paper titled 'Post-Colonial Identity: *The Black Album* and *The Satanic Verses*', claims that '*The Black Album* paints a picture of postcolonial people who are at least just as British as the British, yet they feel rejected, mocked and loathed by themselves and society'. According to him, they are desperate to find 'a home and an identity', but cannot find one. Shahid's refusal to accept the restrictive 'colonial mentality' is, according to Jones, 'Kureishi's vision for Britain's future'. Jones sees the novel as depicting the crumbling of the 'rigid colonial structure'. He sees Shahid's part in transcribing Riaz's work as taking on the role of the character of Salman in *The Satanic Verses* and Shahid's changing of Riaz's text as 'his desire to break the molds'. Jones concludes that *The Black Album* rejects 'the old conservative views' and favours instead a 'new postcolonial view of a world without limits' as pursued by Shahid, but ignores the fact that Kureishi, at the end of the novel, alludes to Shahid's choice in following the hedonistic lifestyle of Deedee as being a temporary one, lasting only '[u]ntil it stops being fun' (*The Black Album*' 1995: 230).

Bronwyn T. Williams' 'A State of Perpetual Wandering: Diaspora and Black British Writers' (1999), looks briefly at Caryl Phillips's Crossing the River, Sunetra Gupta's The Glassblower's Breath and Hanif Kureishi's The Black Album and includes quotes from interviews with the authors by Williams. Williams points out that Kureishi differs from earlier immigrant authors because he considers himself British. Unlike earlier authors, these second-generation authors are neither immigrants nor are they accepted as members of the dominant culture. However, Williams questions whether this identification as just 'British' sufficiently describes Kureishi's experience, and argues that the term 'Black British' is more suitable to the multicultural experience of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In subsequent references, the title of this novel will be abbreviated to TBA.

these authors. Williams claims that examining Black British writers may offer 'more supple and generous paradigms through which to consider the conflict and creativity emerging from transnational contact zones of our contemporary world'. As for Kureishi's novel, Williams points out that the struggle to define his own identity separates Shahid from the generation of his father, just as Kureishi's claiming to be British separates him from other immigrant authors. Like Shahid, Kureishi knows no other country to identify with than Britain. Williams says that 'as Shahid grapples with positioning himself in a postmodern and postcolonial Britain, so the Britain he. inhabits is a shifting stage itself'. Here, Williams uses a quote from Kureishi's novel which identifies the scene as that which Shahid witnesses in the mosque in London, where people of diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds meet. Williams identifies this solely as a part of multicultural London, ignoring the obvious, that the diversity of the ethnicities of worshippers in the mosque also represents the diversity of ethnicities among Muslims. In asserting that '[t]here is not a simple definable culture that can be identified within this mix', Williams, as a non-Muslim, fails to see that it is Islam that binds these worshippers together, and that the common cultural reference here is the Muslim culture.

One of the central issues Shahid faces in the novel is that of the burning of Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*. This real-life incident, dubbed the 'Rushdie Affair' affected the attitudes of Muslims in Britain tremendously. Jessica Jacobson's case study titled *Islam in Transition: Religion and Identity among British Pakistani Youth* (1998) aids in putting the effects of the incident on Hanif Kureishi and, through him, on his protagonist Shahid, into perspective. Jacobson's field-work study conducted in the London Borough of Waltham involved 33 young second-generation

British Pakistanis in the London Borough of Waltham forest whom she interviewed at length. Just as it inspired Hanif Kureishi to begin researching what later became The Black Album, the solidarity among British Muslims fostered by the 'Rushdie Affair' inspired Jacobson to research why Islam remains 'a particularly significant source of identity' (3) among young British Pakistani Muslims, and, in the case of the 'Rushdie Affair', even among those young Muslims who do not consider themselves particularly religious. Jacobson recognises that these young people, because they are children of immigrants, find it difficult to define British identity with regard to themselves, and concludes that Islamic teachings provide them with a constancy not found in other aspects of their lives (153-154). The similarity of the situation in this study to that surrounding both the author and the protagonist of The Black Album is significant. The actual study should be taken into consideration in order to understand the influences on Kureishi's thoughts on the subject. Incidentally, the author recognises Kureishi as an Anglo-Pakistani writer who 'explores the diversity and dynamism of Asian identities in Britain' (99).

Graciela Moreira Slepoy, in her paper entitled 'The Legitimising of His/Her-stories in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*', examines Kureishi's first novel. She observes that even in this novel, Kureishi's characters grapple with their identities as immigrants or as 'half-breeds'. Karim, she argues, is attractive because he is exotic to the English, and he has to keep up this image to continue having a place in that society, although it is a place he does not desire. However, the paper focuses mainly on the personal narratives of the characters, and in her conclusion, Slepoy states that most of the characters in the novel 'strive at having their personal narratives legitimised by London'.

Maria Degabriele focuses on the 'sexual and cultural ambivalence' that is so central to The Black Album in her article 'Prince of Darkness Meets Priestess of Porn: Sexual and Political Identities in Hanif Kureishi's The Black Album'. Incidentally, Degabriele sets out with the impression that Kureishi's novel is a parody of Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses. She argues that the changing of Riaz's poetry by Shahid as he transcribes them 'parodies the revelation of the sacred Koranic verses to the Prophet'. She identifies that Shahid's quest is to find 'an identity that can simultaneously embrace Islam and popular western culture'. According to her, in *The Black Album*, pop music is 'one of the 'defining locations' of postmodernity' and she compares the action in the novel-namely violence by the Muslim students—with the murders committed in reaction to the Beatles' 'White Album' by Charles Manson and his 'family'. Degabriele states that Kureishi, criticises 'repression...in the name of any single, narrow, exclusionary practice' but 'defend[s] religious practices that enhance positive social values'. It is her conclusion that the culture Shahid chooses for himself at the end of the novel is that of 'pop culture, where fragmentation, change [and] undecidability are the norm'.

Marina Kurtén has presented two papers which examine *The Black Album*, one entitled 'Negotiating Identities: A Postnegritude Reading of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* and Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black'* (2000) and the other 'Expressions of "Culture" in British Migrant Literatures' (2001). In 'Negotiating Identities', Kurtén focuses on the protagonists of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *The Black Album* and *Some Kind of Black*. She asserts that '[a] Postnegritude mixing of cultures is often evident in Kureishi's and Adebayo's work, where the characters... incorporate features from different spheres of society in their identity, transcending social borders of "ethnicity" and "race". Kurtén looks at the

difference in the societal background of the three novels—which are set in different decades—and sees this as a reason for the 'development in the consciousness of identity' over the periods represented in the novels. She notes the resurgence of Islam in the Muslim community in the 1980s, and its presence in the 1990s, as shown in *The Black Album* and *Some Kind of Black*. Kurtén acknowledges that Shahid's struggle to define his identity is partly due to his Muslim heritage, since '[a] large part of the Pakistanis...see practising Islam as being an inherent part of their heritage'. Shahid, according to her, finds the Islamic practices of his friends 'too strict' whereas Deedee's lifestyle is spiritually inadequate. She comes to the conclusion that when Shahid 'realises that [one identity] does not have to exclude the other, he is free to discover his own true self'. In conclusion, she finds that immigrants may choose to combine varied influences to become a part of their identity, or else succumb to the stress of trying to choose between the different identities available to them.

In 'Expressions of 'Culture' in British Migrant Literature', Kurtén again focuses on *The Black Album* and Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black* but includes Atima Srivastava's *Looking for Maya* instead of Kureishi's first novel. Kurtén looks at how cultural features are an expression of 'tribal affiliations'. She outlines three main strategies of acculturation among immigrants, 'submissive', 'assimilative' and 'segregating'. According to her, the 'submissive' strategy for acculturation is employed by the older generation who accept the superiority of British culture without question. Kurtén finds that the protagonists of the three novels, Shahid, Dele and Mira, employ the 'assimilative' strategy as they are 'comfortable with dressing in Western clothes, ...eat Western food, and ... listen to Western music' but still feel some affinity to the culture of their parents and ancestors. The third, 'segregating' strategy, is the one employed by