



Religious and Ethnic Identity of Pakistani Muslim Immigrant in Kureishi's "The Black Album"

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ABSTRACT

Pakistani literature in English emerged evidently and globally recognized from last two decades. It's relatively difficult to decree the precise date of its origin: roughly it could be said that its origin goes back to colonial India and it has close association with British colonialism. Broadly it can be divided into two main eras' i.e Pre-Partition and Post-Partition Pakistani English literature. Pakistani literature thrived with the emergence of Pakistan but accomplished wider attention from 1980s.

This research paper aims to discuss the religious and ethnic identity of Pakistani-Muslim immigrants in England in context of the novel "The Black Album" by Hanif Kureishi (1995).

Kureishi himself belongs to Pakistani origin, born in London to a father who belonged to Pakistan. His mother was an English woman. Having Pakistani origin he selected the themes regarding multicultural, hybrid, religious and ethnic problems of Pakistani immigrants.

Keywords: immigrants, Identity, Racial discrimination, Racism, Ethnic, Religious.

Introduction

Religion is one of the most important sources of identity among other numerous sources of identity but religion is not the sole source of self-realization of identity on an individual level. The notions of 'self' and 'other' take their origination from religious identity. The religious affiliations determine the conceptual framework of 'other' and this framework constitute the significance of religious identity. Religion plays its most vital role to develop a strong sense of identity and unity among its followers. Sometimes this religious identity causes alienation of its followers from diverse groups of religious identities. Religious identity and its role in multicultural societies has become the debatable issue among western societies.

Concerning *The Black Album* by Kureishi, Chris Weedon conveys the idea that "It is a novel about second generation Pakistanis in London and engages with questions of identity through a radical contrast of lifestyles ranging from affluent westernized middle-class living, through Muslim fundamentalism to serious involvement in drug culture". Then, it can be accepted as one of the novels which raise the multicultural issues in Britain where second generation immigrants of diverse religions, cultures and nations try to maintain their lives in the face of the Western rage and racist attitudes toward them. Kureishi touches upon the potential problems which can emerge because of the British discriminatory political and social system in which these immigrants and their teenagers feel themselves in a state of danger and anxiety.

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Chris Allen (2005) claims that, the innovative racist philosophies target the same communities that were targeted earlier. These South Asian communities in Britain are under the threats of racial attacks due to their Muslim identity. In simple words, racism, and prejudice attitudes are retained due to some unavoidable circumstances and the immigrants' religious values are under attack. The British government has not attained anything to eliminate these prejudice and discriminatory policies that aim to suppress the immigrants and their rights.

As Shahid was born to a secular family, he has been taught very little about religion. When his father was asked about his religion, he replied, Yes, I have a belief. It's called working until my arse aches! (p. 92)

Shahid's experience for the search of identity was very bewildering and aching one. The reflections of racism can also be observed in Shahid's current life and in particular locations of London where the black members of the immigrant communities cannot pass through without fear and anxiety of being beaten and attacked by the white population. Shahid describes racial discrimination experiences that South Asian people are also 'Blacks' and he found himself the only dark skinned person everywhere. He was scared to visit certain place due to racial discrimination and hatred against Pakistani immigrants. Shahid had to face scornful and abhorrent looking. If white people try to be pleasant with him according to Shahid they were pretenders. He had become suspicious and was unable to go outside due to these racial attitudes. He was unable to do something to encounter this situation.

As he has Pakistani origin he had to face ethnic and racial discrimination. At different occasion he was physically abused at his schools and in the streets. By this experience Shahid made this conclusion that white people hate Muslim immigrants and particular Pakistanis. Through Shahid's character Kureishi, in fact, gives vent to his own feelings as Kaleta (1998) observes it by saying that Kureishi's mixed racial background always intensifies his response to racism (Kaleta, 1998).

Analyzing *The Black Album* Upstone (2008) asserts that the novel symbolically illustrates cultural dissimilarities and world strains. She discerns that the ethnic bigotry epitomized in *The Black Album* is the meticulous representation of British racism and its impending outcomes.

Racial Discrimination against Pakistani-Muslim Immigrants in context of "The Black Album"

The novel touches upon the racist approaches and violence that the immigrants try to endure throughout their lives in the British nation even from their childhood. Kureishi (1995) in *The Black Album*, narrates the childhood memories of Shahid that have to do with the British children's fierce manners against him in the following lines: "Even when Shahid vomited and defecated with fear before going to school, or when he returned with cuts, bruises and his bag slashed with knives, she behaved as if so appalling an insult couldn't exist.

Also, the novelist portrays the effects of the British people's racist insults on Shahid's subconscious which can be traced in his efforts to write stories as is mentioned in the novel:

The first effort he copied – he created a sandwich of flimsy carbon paper which resulted in two smeared reproductions – was called 'Paki Wog Fuck Off Hone'. It featured the six boys who comprised the back row of his class at school, who, one day when the teacher had left the room in despair, chanted at Shahid, 'Paki, Paki, Paki, Out, Out, Out!' He banged the scene into his machine as he relived it, recording the dismal fear and fury in a jagged, cunt-fuck-kill prose that expressed him, like a soul singer screaming into a microphone. (p.72)

Kureishi (1995) illuminates the economic reservations of British people; they consider immigrants the potential threats in terms of jobs, monetarily concerns, accommodation issues because the British people think that immigrants are using all those resources which belong to local resident of Britain. Kureishi sketches this insecurity of British people in the novel, when a British woman expresses her resentment hatred to Chad and Shahid in the following way:

"Paki! Paki! Paki!" she screamed. Her body had become an arched limb of hatred with a livid opening at the tip, spewing curses. 'You stolen our jobs! Taken our housing! Paki got everything! Give it back and go back home!'" (p.139).

Such kind of deleterious temperament and attitude leads racial conflicts and causes communal unrest among the segregated societies. Kymlicka (2010) elaborates this situation that abhorrence and vicious thinking depicted by the woman reflects the overall attitude of native people, considering that non-native people do not have any contribution for the country while they use the available resources and ultimately the next British generation will

have less resources. So, these enduring guests (immigrants) are not required in Britain, because there will be a deterioration of resources due the existence of immigrants. In the presence of immigrants the resources such as education, jobs, and residential resources will have to distribute between the British people and immigrants. Consequently, the benefits for the native people will decrease to alarming situation due to the immigrants.

Shahid the protagonist in 'The Black Album' was in dilemma for the assortment of his identity; he was feeling that here in England he has been living without a proper identity. As he has been facing racial discrimination by the white people for a long time, he too initiated discrimination against other ethnic minorities, with his country fellows, white people, and other immigrant minorities.

Kureishi's early literary writings illustrate some most vital themes e.g cultural hybridity, immigrant's sufferings, racism, sexuality, ethnicity and identity appropriation, etc. It seems that Kureisi has discussed his own experiences in the novel. He has elaborated ethnic discrimination, faced by himself by the white people.

Concept of Muslim Ummah and Identity Crises addressed in "The Black Album"

As the novel progresses Shahid comes to know about the fact that he has instable beliefs about his religion. A Muslim identity, as Jessica Jacobson clarifies, comprises 'obligation to religion' and 'firm affiliation to the identity by birth as a Muslim: and Shahid the protagonist discovers that he has deficiencies, both in his religion and true identity. Shahid was unable to comprehend his identity as a British citizen, as his other compatriots were satisfied with their foreign identity.

During his stay in England he felt that Muslims and immigrants from all over the world are always categorized as non-natives and discriminated, and well-educated individuals like him are responsible to raise the voice and fight for their countrymen, who are oppressed and abused in Britain.

According to Denny (1975) the Muslims belong to a distinctive community and this distinct identity raises the concept of Muslim ummah. He raises very important question related to the existence of Muslim ummah in this modern era; particular in the opinion of Muslim community in Britain. Riaz justifies his fundamentalism being a Muslim and he discusses the sufferings of Muslim from all over the world. During a discussion he says that we are not wretched Christians, we do not turn the other cheeks. We shall combat for our people who are being tortured in in Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir! War has been announced against the Muslims, and we are prepared.

The remarks of Riaz show the unity of Muslim Ummah. He makes the comparison between Muslims and Christians and claims that we are not like Christians who present their other cheek to have another slap. He says that we are Muslims and we will fight for our people who are in trouble in various Muslim countries. He asserts that war has been started against the Muslims and we are ready to fight. It reflects that fundamentalism has root causes, it doesn't arise suddenly. Riaz provides a strong base against this fundamentalism that his people in Muslim countries are being tortured by non-Muslims, so being the same ummah they have the right for the revenge.

In Qureishi's *The Black Album* religion has portrayed as a motivation and binding force between radicals and religious revolutionaries. The radical group in the novel lead by Riaz assimilates themselves with a distinctive Muslim community. They consider themselves the guardian of the whole Islamic community of the world. Several questions arise on the existence of Muslim ummah does it exist in the modern era.

Kureishi (1995) in his novel *The Black Album* depicts the combative approach and radical mindset of fundamentalist Muslim group, developing anti-western mindset and to prove the superiority of their religion over all the religions is epitomized in Riaz's proclamation and determination that we will fight for our people who are being tortured in Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir! Riaz asserts that war has been declared against us. (p. 82)

This kind of fundamentalism reflects the overall attitude of majority radical Muslims residing the West countries.

Racism and Pakistani Immigrants

Racism is a political doctrine, the basic motif behind racism is to strengthen the concept that race is the basic and foremost determinant of human characteristics. Hanif Kureishi also encompasses racism in his novel 'The Black Album'. He has reflected this phenomenon with two different perspectives external racism and internal racism. Racial discrimination between the native people and immigrants is an example of external racism. On the other hand internal racism prevails within a particular community for instance Pakistani immigrant community.

The people who are victimized of internal racism belong to a same nation, but according to their consideration they do not belong to a utopian community at national level, for their supposition of their superior race. The protagonist of the novel, Shahid is the victim of internal racism by his own countrymen and the follower of the same religion. At the end of the novel due to this internal racism he flees from radical Muslim group, gives up his religion and selects secularism instead of religious extremism and elopes with Deedee Osgood.

Conclusion

To sum up the discussion it is crystal clear that Pakistani-Muslim Immigrants are facing identity crises not only in England but throughout the Europe. They are treated as third world citizens. They are struggling for their identity as foreigners and residents of their respective countries. Racial discrimination is a serious threat to the identity of Pakistani immigrants. The situation has dramatically changed after the massacre of 9/11.

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