

Too Many Voices together: The Dialogic Voices in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*

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Abstract

Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin brought during the 1930s the concept of 'dialogism' which speaks about a novel being composed of multiple voices rather than a single monologic voice. This gives a multiplicity of tenor to the novel such that the dominating authorial voice is thoroughly dismantled. The same happens with famous British South Asian diasporic writer Hanif Kureishi who describes the multifaceted aspects of the diasporic individual's character. We find different kinds of characters showing different characteristic features and traits thereby foregrounding the dialogic nature of the novel. The present article is a venture along this direction.

Key Words: Bakhtin, dialogism, diaspora, multiculturalism, ethnicity

The mentioned novel in this chapter are studied in the light of the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony that dismantles the notion of a single dominant voice pervading throughout the text. It means that the text becomes a heterogeneous site of multiple voices and identities clashing with each other in the textual landscape of the novel. This also beautifully explains the fragmentation of the unified and coherent identity of the Diasporic subject in Britain and the emergence of multiple identities in them. We can notice with reference to these two novels how the Diasporic British Asian community in Britain becomes a subject to Britain's multiculturalism inflicted fragmentation and transformation of identity.

The novel, as has been mentioned beforehand, is a perfect exemplifier of the famous Bakhtinian concept of dialogism for Kureishi, while maintaining the typical spirit of dialogism, makes the novel a potential site where a number of conflicting identities clash, coalesce and intersperse in a way that the novel becomes a compendium of a multiplicity of ideologies. In this scenario, no single identity dominates the text; rather the text establishes that the identity is always fluid and is constantly in flux. This is particularly true of the diasporic identity in a diasporic scenario. The diasporic identity exudes a multiplicity of variances, rather than confining itself to a single monolithic framework of identity. In due course, the analysis of the two mentioned novels will reveal this.

Bakhtin, who was writing his critical works during the 1920s and 30s, had a prophetic prognostication that a dialogic form that the social spheres and their literary manifestations the novels were going to take in future times to come.

He first introduced the innovative and the then eclectic notion of dialogism in his 1929 critical treatise *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* which was afterwards reproduced in a revised form entitled *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* in 1963. He further extended and explained these concepts in his later essay "Discourse in the Novel" through detailed explanations of the inherently conflictual and slippery nature of language and discourse in novels. Because of this inherent slipperiness of language, no monolithic and authoritatively single voice can ever dominate the text. The novel thus becomes a manifestation of a variety of dialogic attributes including **heteroglossia**, **polyphony** etc. and these typical Bakhtinian characteristics are duly reflected in the diasporic writings of Qureishi.

The story is all about the existential dilemma of the main character Shahid Hasan, in the muddled diasporic space in Britain during Margaret Thatcher's rule as the Prime Minister of the nation. Hasan is a University-educated boy with his ancestral roots in Pakistan who finds himself haplessly caught in this situation. We find Hasan being frayed between two diametrically opposed methods of social adaptation. One of the two diametrically opposed models is jumping into the bandwagon of the Islamist fundamentalists and fight a 'jihad' in the pretext of positing oneself as Allah's messenger and the other is to take to an epicurean model of living, that is to resort to women, liquor and drugs as is advocated by his lady professor and beloved Deedee. But we have a third model of living also suggested by Chili—a model that is in fact a balanced combination of both.

The novel exudes the spirit of dialogism on various counts and though it is now a commonly established fact, after the Bakhtinian critical revelations, that every novel is a forum for a multiple, dialogic interplay, *The Black Album* perhaps demonstrates this trait better than many other novels. In the novel, we find voices carrying the venom of Islamist radicalism, voices opposing such extremist principles, voices taking a

middle path between the two, voices that take a liberal stand dismantling all artificial barriers of orthodoxy, voices that speak of one's own self and its freedom etc.

In the Bakhtinian scheme of things, in a dialogic paradigm, "the monolithic voice in the novel is constantly thwarted by other voices playing around as vicious rule breakers" in scenario where the father's [the author's or the main character's] voice is drowned in the grand noise created by all" (342). As per this view, if the extremist voice in Islam represents the voice of the father, then there are other voices around—both within the religion and outside it—who challenge its authority so that a perpetual tension between different voices or identities uphold the dialogic nature of the text. Inside Islamic community itself, we find a plethora of dissenting voices that question and defy its overarching, orthodox and patriarchal principles.

The Black Album – A Summary

In this novel, we are almost right at the outset introduced to the double-edged character of Shahid Hasan. Shahid's inadvertent move towards self-destruction is noticed when he meets and gets influenced by the some of the fundamentalist group members like Riaz and Chad. Shahid's coming into contact with these deviant religious characters happens when he shifts to London from his previous abode in Gloucester. But on the other hand, we also see Shahid coming in close proximity of and developing an affair with Prof. Deedee Osgood, who is a English literature professor and a staunch feminist who believes in an Epicurean life and does not hesitate in indulging in drug and sex.

Apart from Deedee, we also find Shahid being influenced by another Epicurean character in the novel, Chili. Chili is Shahid's brother who is mostly clad with gaudy apparels (he mostly wears designer clothes only) and is also later discovered to be a chronic drug abuser who is at large. So we find Shahid in a way swinging between two polarities of identity—one, his lately developed allegiance to the fundamentalist strain of Islam and two, his innate affinity with his ancestral roots and three, his modernist desire for liberation, particularly in terms of his sexual behaviour. So, the novel registers his incessant fight for identity: he is not sure whether he is a South-East-Asian or a British; he does not know whether he is an orthodox, religious rule-abiding Muslim or liberated English Epicurean indulging drug and sex.

We must also emphasize here that the diasporic individual's identity crisis cannot be seen in isolation from the socio-political and global events happening around the same time and the British nation's involvement in this imbroglio, in some way or other, directly or indirectly. The multifaceted identity of Shahid unfolds in the midst of heated socio-political events like the infamous IRA bombing at Victoria Station, the imposition of 'fatwa' by Iranian supreme religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini on Indo-English writer Salman Rushdie for his so-called derogatory remark on Islam and the Muslim community in one of his novels. In *The Black Album*, we have episodes like the expository burning of the book through simultaneous demonstrations led by fundamentalist Riaz in Manchester in 1989 in scenario where Prof. Deedee makes earnest efforts to stop it from happening. Such events intensify the communal climate towards a situation of hatred and utter disbelief in one another so far as religious harmony and coexistence is concerned.

The novel concludes with Shahid's complete relinquishment of the fundamentalist principles and his psycho-sexual reunion with Prof. Deedee with who he elopes into a hotel in the seashore cutting off all pre-existing ties with the radical Islamist group. Shahid's establishes his identity at the end with a vigorous assertion that he will create his own identity in a way that he likes and he will not allow his community or his religion or the British culture to dictate his identity-formation.

Religion in The Black Album

As is the case with many writers of British South Asian diaspora, religion constitutes, along with ethnicity and gender, the fundamental crux of many of Hanif Kureishi's writings. The novel discussed here unravels how religion is pivotally placed at the center of the intricate web of events that shape the identity of Shahid and many of his compatriot diasporic characters. Shahid was born into a Pakistani immigrant family which though were Muslims did not pay much attention to religion and instead, tried to establish their business in Britain. This is evidently noticeable from the statement of Shahid's father who, when interrogated about his religious identity, quite interestingly comments: "Of course, I do have faith in Islam. But I am more focussed on my work for that will bring me my bread and butter" (BA 92).

Kureishi, in his seminal essay "The Carnival of Culture," brings out the fascinating irony that exists in the difference of perception towards religion between different generations of immigrants. Quite ironically, the first generation of immigrants are found to be less inclined towards religious orthodoxy compared to their posteriors for the former were more interested in establishing themselves in an alien country and space. It's only after they have firmly stabilized their positions in Britain, the later generations are more inclined towards religion under the influence of the Islamic fundamentalist waves arising from many socio-political disturbances in the global firmament that engross the whole community. For the first generation immigrants, religion is a fairly insignificant affair which in fact surprises and enrages their children who find it difficult to come to terms with "their parents' strange predilections for a subservient assimilation with England" (Qureishi 67).

Shahid's epic ordeal with his identity formation in the British cultural landscape is an excruciating experience for him. In various spheres of the British society including colleges, railway stations and hospitals Shahid has been confronted with multiple racial abuses which include abuse at both psychological and physical levels. But these racial abuses have a counterproductive effect on Shahid's character for which he is gravitated towards his own religion with a newly developed fanaticism inside him. This negative transformation in him creates sacred and sanctified image of his own religion before him in a scenario where he is disgusted with the "unforeseen abhorrence of the British people towards Muslims" (BA 10).

Such a conflictual scenario has also incited in him lots of doubts and apprehensions regarding his position in country which is "the only abode that has known so far" (Qureishi BA 78). Shahid's realisation is so intense and anti-British that at some point, he confesses that he had even started, under the heavy British influence of racism, humiliating people belonging to the other communities including his own Muslim community. The British culture, at this point in time, looks to him the root cause of all wrong attitudes that are harboured in people towards the other immigrant communities. The dialogic nature of the text, which is mentioned at the very beginning as a theoretical paradigm for the analysis of the texts in this chapter, is established through the multiple variances happening within Shahid's very own self. There are different dialogic voices or forces clashing with each other within his very self for which he takes to multiple directions of thinking in terms of his allegiance and adherence to any cultural pattern. Some time he clings to the modern, libertine and to an extent licentious British way of life; some time he leans back to his own religion and there will be a time (of course, later on) where he will create or himself a fiercely independent persona that decides things only for itself without being influenced by any religion or culture. The novel thus flaunts, through the very portrayal of Shahid's character, its own inherent dialogism that in a way also forms the crux of a diasporic individual's character.

Finally Shahid relinquishes the path of radicalism and joins the liberal group. His stunning de-radicalization, through may look astounding and bewildering in the first place, actually opens up new dimensions and paradigms for the reformulation of the diasporic identity of the individuals. It displays a tremendous moment of self-realization on the part of the radicalized individuals who now understand that radicalization is in no way a panacea for their existential dilemma. At the same time, as has been consistently argued in this article, it establishes the dialogic nature of the novel which is the basis of its foundation. By writing this excellent novel, Kureishi opens up a new dimension to the portrayal of the diasporic individual's character.

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