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## Sacred Art

Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* juxtaposes liberalism and fundamentalism in a modern postcolonial novel. The novel deals with the repression and expression of knowledge, art, education, and sex. This very didactic novel focuses on the intense battle between morality and freedom of expression. This battle is perhaps best seen through the way Kureishi addresses the concepts of the sacred and the profane through the eyes of his protagonist, Shahid Hasan. Key characters Deedee Osgood and Riaz al-Husein showcase opposing views on religion, sex, race, class, politics, education, and gender. Young Shahid, who is still learning what he believes in, wants to explore his options and is caught in the middle between the extreme viewpoints of open minded liberal Deedee and closed minded, fundamentalist Riaz. Riaz and Deedee, examples of polar opposites of extremism force Shahid to discover that knowledge, art, and the open expression of intellectual pursuits, like his writing, are the things he holds most sacred in his life. In the end, the only profane thing for Shahid is that people would try to repress knowledge because of skewed fundamentalist beliefs.

Kureishi addresses both the repression and expression of knowledge, art, education, and sex through the characters of Riaz and Deedee. Ignorance, hatred, and repression of knowledge equal a closed mind to both Deedee and eventually Shahid.

This closed mind, no doubts about its mentality, seems to be considered a profane act. Frederick Holmes states, "For both Rushdie and Kureishi's *Shahid*, problems arise when zealots try to impose their own imaginative conceptions of reality on others as universally applicable master narratives" (304). This imposition of the master narrative by Riaz onto *Shahid*'s impressionable sense of the sacred and profane becomes a point that can be used to consider moral dilemmas, and Kureishi does this by showing what is considered sacred and profane in relation to literature, art, and knowledge acquisition in general. This leads to a discussion of the two extreme master narratives that *Shahid* is exposed to through the instruction of both Riaz and Deedee, and later to what *Shahid*'s position is regarding what makes something sacred or profane.

The typical fundamentalist argument might be that without religion there is no morality, but Deedee is a moral person who happens to express herself in ways that might be considered profane from a fundamental religious perspective like Riaz has. Riaz focuses on religion and belief as the largest parts of what constitutes the sacred, and therefore good morality. He is unable to express any doubts about his beliefs. He is confident that he knows all the right answers, and leaves no room for interpretation. For Riaz art is really just human interpretation, and is profane because it distracts from the divine. *Shahid* speaks about Riaz's unshakeable confidence in his own beliefs of what is morally correct when he informs his "pupils" of his sacred master narrative, "Riaz didn't use notes and he never hesitated. The momentum of his conviction made

him fluent, amusing, passionately coruscating. ...He never ran short of words or appeared uneasy. No subject could hold him” (91). Riaz has no room for doubts, he is absolutely confident that he knows the correct way to be. For Riaz the sacred also crosses over from religion, into political extremes like separatism, and even violent activism. Riaz sees profanity especially in the pursuit of knowledge with no religious or political goal behind it. He says to Shahid, “You see, all fiction is, by its very nature, a form of lying - a perversion of truth. Isn't the phrase 'telling stories' used when children tell lies? ... there are many fictions that expose a corrupt nature. These are created by authors ...” (194). Riaz leaves no room for interpretation of his theories. He is certain that art and writing in particular is simply lying and a way for people to profane the sacred. This seems at odds with Riaz, who is a writer himself, but he writes religious and politically themed material, so he makes the distinction between sacred art and profane art. Riaz is very monologic in his thinking, and this is what eventually leads Shahid to rebel against Riaz and his extreme views on art.

The literary freedom of white, upperclass, privileged, liberals like Deedee illustrates the vast differences between her and Riaz, and their extremist points of view. She was formerly very into politics and activism , but has decided to pursue another form of social extremism through her overt sexuality, and hedonistic pleasure seeking. She talks to Shahid about her husband saying, “That man is only interested in one thing, politics. For years I was involved, too. I couldn't admit to myself how much it restricted me. It all makes you feel guilty.” “What d'you like now?” [Shahid asks] “I'm

trying to find out. Other things. Culture. When I can, I do a lot of nothing. And I make stabs at pleasure” (66). Deedee’s response to her husband’s focus on politics shows that she has changed, and is now more focused on culture. She finds happiness and pleasure in intellectual and artistic pursuits, and even in pop culture. This statement reveals that Deedee is open minded to the sacredness of art both through its creation and through observation of other artists. For Deedee the profane equates to racism, violence, extremism, repression, hate, and exclusion, all things Riaz considers to be acceptable. She too is shaping and molding Shahid as she teaches him about the extremes of pleasure, sex, and full expressive artistic freedom. Deedee has strong beliefs, but is not limited by a lack of doubt like Riaz. She says she, like Shahid, is “trying to find out,” what she likes. Deedee expresses this ability to doubt, and explore new options through her acceptance of different experiences. She wants to experience life and not focus on what is right or wrong according to what others might agree is either sacred or profane. She shows with the quote above that she does not want to feel guilt because of political or religious concepts of morality. She takes the opposite side from Riaz and becomes a student and teacher of the sacred topics of sex, education, art, and knowledge.

Shahid also sees Deedee’s open minded viewpoint of what is considered intellectual advancement as somewhat extreme when he thinks, “Yet he was discomfited by the freedom of instruction Deedee offered. She and other postmodern types encouraged their students to study anything that took their interest ...Was it really

learning or only diversion dressed up in the latest words?' (35). Shahid shows his ability to doubt throughout the novel (unlike Riaz), he learns about these two very different opposite minded people, and expresses doubt about both of their positions on the sacred and profane. He is drawn to both of them, but in the beginning and middle of the novel has not yet decided which kind of person he most wants to associate with. He is drawn to the activism of Riaz, and his absolute belief that he knows what is right, and what is needed to improve the world condition. But, he is also drawn to Deedee's consideration of art and pop culture as liberating and not necessarily lacking in morality because others have different viewpoints on the subject. Shahid further doubts Deedee and her approach to learning with his inner reflections, "Were students in better colleges studying stuff to give them the advantage in life? Could this place be like those youth clubs that merely kept bad kids out of trouble? He didn't know. But he would get away at last, and read and write and find intelligent people to discuss with" (35). Shahid seeks answers, but he must gain experience in order to decide what he finds valuable about his intellectual experiences.

Shahid begins to doubt the absolutism of Riaz's moral convictions, and even his own beliefs as he leaves one of their meetings, "The problem was, when he was with his friends their story compelled him. But when he walked out, like someone leaving a cinema, he found the world to be more subtle and inexplicable" (143). Shahid has gone from absorbing knowledge and experience into the decision making phase of his development. He still has questions, but he knows what he feels, and he knows what

feels right to him. He is still having trouble making a decision and even begins to express doubts about himself, “He believed everything; he believed nothing. His own self increasingly confounded him. One day he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite” (157). This passage illustrates the intense struggle Shahid is currently involved in. He has two extremes, and he’s not sure if he believes in either one, or exactly where his beliefs fall on the scale of extremes.

Shahid Hasan discovers that knowledge, art, and the open expression of intellectual pursuits, like his writing, are the things he holds most sacred in his life. The only profane thing for Shahid is the inability to express doubt, and the repression of the gift of knowledge which is about challenging ideas, not simply accepting them because of fundamentalist beliefs. Shahid gives us his thoughts on knowledge, creating art, and the value of education, “He knew, too, that stories were made up by men and women; they could not be true or false, for they were exercises in that most magnificent but unreliable capacity, the imagination, which William Blake called ‘the divine body in every man.’ Yet his friends would admit not splinter of imagination into their body of belief, for that would poison all, rendering their conviction human, aesthetic, fallible” (143). Shahid cannot reconcile his feelings about the extreme views of Riaz and his other friends on art, knowledge, and books and by the end of the novel thinks of Riaz with disgust, “All the same, the thought of Riaz now made Shahid shudder in revulsion. What a dull and unctuous man he was; how limited and encased was his mind, how full of spite and acidity!” (252). Shahid sees the ultimate profanity in the destruction of knowledge, and

the attempt to stop people from participating in art of all forms. Books and knowledge are sacred to Shahid, and Riaz has profaned. Deedee also agrees with the profanity of violence and extremism to make a political or religious statement, “Deedee, hugging herself and trembling, asked an old man if he knew what had happened. He said it had been a petrol bomb. The shop had been attacked by fanatics, he reckoned. After all, the attempt hadn’t been to steal from the shop --what would anyone do with a load of books? --but to destroy it” (284). She is distraught at this violence over books.

Shahid has made his decision about what he finds sacred and what he considers profane. He can no longer align himself with Riaz’s type of extremism because he can see that Riaz is incapable of opening his mind to intellectual thought. Riaz cannot believe in things that are contrary to his religious beliefs, and has even crossed over into the territory of violent activism for his cause. While Deedee is still extreme, she represents freedom of thought, love, sex, and intellectual expansion. Shahid still falls somewhere in the middle, but has chosen Deedee’s form of liberalism as a more appealing experience for his own personal belief system to grow in.

These ideas of what constitutes the sacred and profane connect to larger arguments about postcolonial Britain, and also to the battle between fundamentalism and liberalism worldwide. Kureishi’s novel gives a prescient view of extremism and the formation of a young man’s ideas about what constitutes morality, and how he negotiates the complicated ideas that are dealt with in the discussion of the sacred and profane. This discussion is very important today. In his essay, “Kureishi Goes Back to

Black,” Lewis John writes, “ when you have Romanians being firebombed in Northern Ireland or hostages being beheaded in Iraq, this is still going on today. We have to have these discussions. I will be pleased if people are annoyed or stimulated by it. It's part of a debate about one of the most important things to happen to all of us.”

#### Sources Consulted

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