Hanif Kureishi: Fundamentalism and Multiculturalism

Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1995)[1] has, with good reason, been described as 'in many ways a novel of ideas'.[2] After his carnivalesque debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990),[3] in his follow-up Kureishi is concerned with staging debates around religion, free speech, and cultural identity. Kureishi's fiction often takes on what might be called 'big' themes: his characters grapple, for instance, with monogamy and parental responsibility in *Intimacy* (1998),[4] with coming of age in *Gabriel's Gift* (2001),[5] with the arrival of old age in 'The Body' (2002),[6] with guilt in *Something to Tell You* (2008),[7] with the value of literary work in *The Last Word* (2014),[8] and with revenge and impending death in *The Nothing* (2017).[9] His dramatic works, too, often address similarly weighty topics (Kureishi was a playwright long before he became a novelist, and continues to write for the stage and screen). His work is renowned for its frequently comedic tone but typically takes very serious subjects. I have argued elsewhere[10] that, while the notion of Kureishi as an ethnic 'representative' must be resisted, debates about multiculturalism are nevertheless central to his work. However, perhaps with the exception of short story 'My Son the Fanatic' (1994),[11] which Kureishi subsequently adapted as a film (1997),[12] none of his other works, fictional or dramatic, uses characters to stage debates in quite the manner of *The Black Album*. Certainly, none of his other novels would align with the term 'novel of ideas' so clearly. It is perhaps no surprise that, more than a decade after its publication, Kureishi chose to adapt *The Black Album* as a play (2009).[13] In addition

[1] Kureishi, Hanif (1995). *The Black Album*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996. Subsequently referred to in-text as *TBA*.
[2] Chambers, Claire (2019). *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*, London: Palgrave, p. 56.
[3] Kureishi, Hanif (1990). *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London: Faber and Faber.
[4] Kureishi, Hanif (1998). *Intimacy*, London: Faber and Faber.
[5] Kureishi, Hanif (2001). *Gabriel's Gift*, London: Faber and Faber.
[6] Kureishi, Hanif (2002). 'The Body', in Kureishi, Hanif, *The Body and Seven Stories*, London: Faber and Faber, 2003, pp. 1–126.
[7] Kureishi, Hanif (2008). *Something to Tell You*, London: Faber and Faber.
[8] Kureishi, Hanif (2014). *The Last Word*, London: Faber and Faber.
[9] Kureishi, Hanif (2017). *The Nothing*, London: Faber and Faber.
[10] Perfect, Michael (2014). *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 27–51.
[11] Kureishi, Hanif (1994). 'My Son the Fanatic', in Kureishi, Hanif, *The Word and the Bomb*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 61–74.
[12] *My Son the Fanatic* (1997). Dir. Udayan Prasad. BBC Films.
[13] Kureishi, Hanif (2009). *The Black Album: Adapted for the Stage*, London: Faber and Faber.

to retrospectively being deemed prescient by the events of 9/11 and 7/7, the form of the novel – which makes extensive use of character–character dialogue – makes it well-suited to the stage. If multiculturalism is a key theme in Kureishi's oeuvre, *The Black Album* is the novel of ideas in which he explores it. Notably, while *The Black Album* reflects on and stages numerous debates, in the three decades since its publication it has itself been the subject of a great deal of debate. This is a testimony to the novel's complexity and its enduring significance. As Kenan Malik has noted, in a piece written less than a month after the awful, debilitating accident that Kureishi suffered in Rome in late 2022, 'there is a subtlety to Kureishi's fiction that is often missing from the wider social discourse about Islamism and jihadism.'[14] It is to be hoped that he will recover fully from his injuries, and be able to continue writing.

Set in London in 1989, *The Black Album* engages with the fall of the Berlin Wall, with terrorist attacks on urban centres, and, most prominently, with the Rushdie Affair. Registering the demise of Communism as a serious alternative to capitalism, it charts the increasing importance of the role that Islam (sometimes in its fundamentalist guise) plays as the secular West's 'other', and explores the social conditions under which a critique of liberal secularism can morph into a dogmatic and violent fundamentalism. Claire Chambers notes that Kureishi produced the novel at the 'halfway point' of a decade 'bookended by the Rushdie affair and 9/11', and deems it 'impressive and prescient' in this sense.[15] In the wake of the horrific knife attack on Rushdie on a stage in New York in August 2022, the significance of Kureishi's novel about young men who want to 'kill' Rushdie 'stone dead' simply 'for writing a book' (*TBA*, p. 172) has once again been brought into sharp relief.

As in many classic novels of ideas, *The Black Album* features a protagonist who must choose between conflicting bodies of ideas represented in the narrative by certain other characters. Young British Asian student Shahid Hasan faces a choice between a hedonistic brand of secular liberalism seemingly embodied by Deedee Osgood, his cultural studies teacher and lover, and the radical Islam that is introduced to him (and personified in the novel) by fellow student Riaz Al-Hussain. Other characters also function as representatives of particular bodies of ideas and/or

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[14] Malik, Kenan. 'Hanif Kureishi helped liberate British Asians from their imposed identities'. *The Observer*, 22 January 2023. Web.

[15] Chambers, *Making Sense*, pp. 41–2.

communities. For instance, Deedee's husband Andrew Brownlow is 'a Marxist-Communist-Leninist type' (*TBA*, p. 32) whose personal and political identities are so closely aligned that he develops a speech impediment that worsens as Communist states in Eastern Europe collapse. In contrast, Shahid's elder brother Chili is 'an arch-Thatcherite' (*TBA*, p. 87) who self-identifies as 'someone of initiative and will' and even as a 'predator' (*TBA*, p. 51). Strapper, a young drug dealer who is befriended by Shahid, serves, as Sara Upstone puts it, as a 'representative' of a 'marginalised and desperate white underclass youth'.[16] The ironically-named local Labour politician George Rugman Rudder embodies a branch of the political left that has gone so ideologically astray (or, indeed, become so rudderless) that it is willing, in its own immediate self-interest, to pander to the dangerous fundamentalism represented by Riaz. The use of character–character dialogue between these various representatives is extensive; the novel abounds in debates over (for example) politics, religion, literature, and free speech.

However, worldviews such as Brownlow's Communism, Chili's individualism, and Rugman Rudder's corrupt political opportunism are not granted much serious consideration by Kureishi's protagonist, nor indeed by his novel. When Brownlow eventually speaks, he does so in a voice that betrays an extremely privileged background, and which thus belies his politics: 'Poor Andrew spoke from the very thing he hated. On the day of the revolution his first job would be to tear out his own tongue' (*TBA*, p. 93). When Brownlow attempts to engage Riaz over questions of inequality, faith, reason, and civilisation Shahid finds him distinctly underwhelming: 'Here was someone who'd been granted breeding, privilege, education; his ancestors had circumnavigated the globe and ruled it. Shahid expected something more from all that had made him' (*TBA*, p. 95). Readers are perhaps intended to sympathise with Brownlow's call, in the same debate, for 'thinking without preconceptions and prejudices' (*TBA*, p. 98) and for 'steely questions. Without flinching. Questions and ideas' (*TBA*, p. 99). Yet even at this moment Brownlow reveals his superciliousness by getting Shahid's name wrong, calling him 'Tariq' (ibid.), and he remains unable to convince anyone of his views. At the end of the novel Brownlow is portrayed as ideologically bankrupt and as contemptible. He tells

[16] Upstone, Sara (2008). 'A Question of Black or White: Returning to Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*', *Postcolonial Text* 4:1, p. 9.

Shahid: ‘everything I believed has turned into shit’, and – his speech impediment starting to return – he condemns the working class whose cause he has supposedly championed as ‘a bunch of fucking greedy, myopic c-cunts’ (*TBA*, p. 243). Brownlow no longer holds his own longstanding ideas in earnest, and the novel does not really deem them worthy of serious treatment. The ideas embodied by Chili are also given short shrift. In his brash, callous prime he is ‘the last person Shahid wanted to be like’ (*TBA*, p. 51). Later, when Chili has begun to self-destruct, Shahid thinks of his brother’s worldview as an ‘idea’ that is so childish as to be moving: ‘Chili’s greed, and the idea that the accumulation of everything he wanted would make him feel better, now seemed more touching than bad’ (*TBA*, p. 146). After Chili goes missing Shahid and Strapper find him living in squalor, hiding from violent creditors in a ‘semi-derelict house’, his condition so bad that Shahid thinks of it as representing their father’s ‘dream’ having ‘been shipwrecked’ (*TBA*, p. 199). Baffled at ‘how Chili could have brought these disasters on himself’, Shahid considers his brother ‘a lesson in how not to live’ (*TBA*, p. 249). Chili does eventually save Shahid, Deedee, and Strapper from the Islamists – he ‘pitch[es] Riaz into the front garden’ of Deedee’s house (*TBA*, p. 269), where they have arrived to attack them – yet the implication seems to be that Chili is redeemable despite his worldview rather than because of it. Like Brownlow’s Communism, Chili’s Thatcherism is not deemed worthy of serious treatment. Rugman Rudder only appears towards the end of the novel, and his shady politicking is portrayed in an unambiguously pejorative way. Although Strapper is treated with some sympathy, he seems to stand for a particular body of people rather than of ideas.

While *The Black Album* abounds in characters who serve as representatives, then, very few of them embody worldviews that are treated seriously. Rather, the dilemma facing Shahid, and on which the entire novel hinges, is the choice between the supposed binary opposites of Deedee’s liberalism and Riaz’s fundamentalism. Shahid is acutely aware of this dilemma, too: midway through the novel the third-person limited narrative voice, which is focalised by Shahid throughout, tells us that ‘the questions he dreaded were those that interrogated him about what he had got into with Riaz on one side, and Deedee on the other’ (*TBA*, p. 147). When Deedee admonishes Riaz and his acolytes as they prepare to burn a copy of *The Satanic Verses*, Shahid finds that he ‘wanted to appear neutral but knew that wasn’t possible’

(*TBA*, p. 225). *The Black Album* is, thus, very much a dialectically poised novel of ideas.

Chambers argues that *The Black Album* is ultimately 'uneven'[17] because the ideas presented in it 'are not explored with equal attention'; in particular, Kureishi admonishes Islamism but 'levels only a few criticisms at the liberal left'.[18] Chambers states that '*The Black Album* is limited as a novel of ideas', and speculates that this 'probably stems from its context: not just Kureishi's personal loyalty to Rushdie, […] but also because it was written before the tsunami of Islamophobia unleashed by 9/11.'[19] Rephrased in accordance with terminology used in the present volume, then, Chambers' problem with *The Black Album* is that its 'unevenness' prevents it from being a serious novel of ideas. According to this view, while the novel certainly orchestrates a dialectical conflict between two sets of ideas that are held in earnest by particular characters, the beliefs held by one side of that conflict are not treated with sufficient seriousness by the novelist. Thus, *The Black Album* is, in this account, an asymmetric novel of ideas, rigged from the start in favour of Deedee's liberalism.

Other critics have put forward similar critiques of *The Black Album*. Ruvani Ranasinha, for instance, suggests that while the novel 'appears prescient in view of the scrutiny of [British Muslims] in the context of 9/11, global warfare, and 7/7', its portrait of Muslims is 'monolithic' and 'circumscribed within narrow polarities.'[20] For Ranasinha, much as for Chambers, unfortunately *The Black Album* finds Kureishi 'crudely and uncritically reflect[ing] and embody[ing] rather than question[ing] predominant fears, prejudices, and perceptions of practicing British Muslims as "fundamentalists"'.[21] The novel's Muslim characters are 'caricatures [that] further objectify this already objectified group'.[22] The 'conflict between fundamentalism and a form of liberal individualism that is bound up with sensual gratification' is 'personified somewhat schematically' by Riaz and Deedee respectively, and the 'juxtapositions' between the two are 'insistent' and 'overdone'.[23] Ultimately, for

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[17] Chambers, *Making Sense*, p. 42.
[18] Ibid., p. 56.
[19] Ibid., p. 57.
[20] Ranasinha, Ruvani (2007). *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Translation*, Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 239.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 240.

Ranasinha, 'in this novel the "debate" is so weighted against the Islamists, [sic] that Shahid's liberal individualism and decision to leave the "paranoid" Islamic group is unequivocally presented as enlightened self-interest'.[24] This account of *The Black Album* as 'weighted' against its Muslim characters is notably similar to Chambers' description of it as 'uneven'. Moreover, for Ranasinha the 'polarity between radical orthodox Islam and detached liberal individualism' on which the novel hinges is not only unfairly weighted but also, crucially, 'invent[ed]'.[25] Similarly, for Mark Stein, 'Deedee's secular individualism and Riaz's fanaticism' are 'two opposing forces' between which Shahid is 'placed neatly', yet 'the extremity of the[se] two poles casts doubt on the sincerity of Kureishi's attempts to understand the nature of "fundamentalism"'.[26] Somewhat ironically for a novel that ostensibly mocks didacticism, *The Black Album* employs, Stein suggests, such a 'strict dichotomous structure' that it is 'reminiscent of a morality play', and this 'underscores' its 'didactic nature'.[27] There is, Stein argues, 'a glibness, a flippancy to *The Black Album* which makes it a funny text but one that cannot be taken entirely seriously'; accordingly, the novel 'seems to hover on the line that divides the weighty from the ephemeral'.[28] Again here we encounter the view that *The Black Album* is (merely) an asymmetric novel of ideas rather than a serious novel of ideas because it fails to take seriously its Muslim characters and their views. In all of these accounts Kureishi's second novel is, ultimately, a missed opportunity.

Kureishi certainly portrays Riaz and, by extension, the fundamentalism that he embodies, very pejoratively. For instance, Shahid recalls Riaz stating that 'God would burn homosexuals for ever in hell, scorching their flesh in a furnace before replacing their skin as new, and repeating this throughout eternity' (*TBA*, p. 119). Here Shahid seems as shocked by Riaz's delivery as his claim: 'Riaz's hatred had been so cool, so certain' (ibid.). When Shahid asks Riaz 'Would you kill a man for writing a book?' – a question that clearly pertains to Rushdie – Riaz responds: 'Stone dead. That is the least I would do to him' (*TBA*, p. 172). Perhaps surprisingly for someone so keen to inflict violence upon an author, Riaz actually writes creatively

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[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., p. 241.
[26] Stein, Mark (2004). *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*, Columbus: Ohio State UP, p. 124.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

himself; he has handwritten a book of poetry that he asks Shahid to turn into a typescript. In a nod to the titular episode of *The Satanic Verses*, the very novel against which Riaz's group is protesting, Shahid makes unauthorised changes to Riaz's text, incorporating sexual content into its 'religious words' (*TBA*, p. 234) and thus compromising its supposed purity. Riaz, who is 'so proud' of his text, and who wanted to 'show his friends' and perhaps also 'make a little money from it' (*TBA*, p. 233), is horrified. His motivation for writing is obviously mere self-importance, and his work is not only hackneyed but hateful. At one point Chad reads aloud lines from it about 'pure beauty in [the speaker's] hands', 'the shadow of the sword' being 'fragrant', and a 'bitch woman' whose 'captivating tongue told a fairytale' (*TBA*, pp. 70–71). The implication seems to be that this apparently deceitful woman is about to fall victim to the 'pure beauty' of the sword. Riaz's homophobia, his misogyny, his intolerance, and his cold enthusiasm for violence against those deemed to have offended him are thus made very clear. In the novel's numerous debates he proves to be an eloquent and astute interlocutor, but also ideologically intransigent and utterly dismissive of views that do not align with his. Shahid comes to realise that it is Riaz's 'single-mindedness' that makes him both 'powerful' and 'pitiful' (*TBA*, pp. 173–4). Perhaps most alarmingly of all, apparently Riaz is not actually the most radical fundamentalist on the scene: Chad informs Shahid that 'many important people in the community wouldn't like [Riaz] being creative' because creativity is 'too frivolous, too merry for them' (*TBA*, p. 69).

Riaz's worldview is, then, portrayed as unambiguously hateful. However, *The Black Album* does not only deplore but also satirises the fundamentalism that he represents. Most significantly, the novel mocks Riaz and his group for believing that God has spoken to them via an aubergine. When Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa is pronounced calling for Rushdie's death, Shahid learns that 'Riaz had informed Chad they were rejoicing in the Ayatollah's action, and Chad had passed this on to the group' (*TBA*, p. 169). That 'the group' is here 'informed' as to its own collective view suggests that, like Khomeini himself following the Iranian Revolution, Riaz has succeeded in building a cult of personality around himself. Chad then tells Shahid that, in addition to Khomeini's fatwa, there has 'been a further confirmation against [Rushdie]' (*TBA*, p. 169). While Chad is initially reticent about this, it transpires that 'a devout local couple had cut open an aubergine and discovered that God had

inscribed holy words into the mossy flesh' (*TBA*, p. 171). The group believe this 'miraculous sign' to be 'an arrow pointing straight at the author [Rushdie]', and they rush off to 'the aubergine exhibition' (*TBA*, pp. 170–1). Kureishi uses the aubergine as a comic device to mock the group's beliefs and to highlight the corruption of Rugman Rudder, who publicly affirms the miracle so as to win the support of local Muslims. Susan Alice Fischer suggests that Rugman Rudder is actually the main target of the satire here; that 'while the devout are obviously being sent up, Kureishi saves his most caustically clever commentary for the Labour council leader'.[29] Apparently the episode with the aubergine is 'based on a real event in Leicester five years before the novel was published'.[30] Nevertheless, as numerous critics have noted, it sees Kureishi taking some rather easy potshots at religious worldviews. For all that it enraged a great many Muslims, *The Satanic Verses* grants serious treatment to the topic of the miraculous. Numerous apparent miracles occur in Rushdie's magical realist novel, and typically, no authorial confirmation is offered as to whether they 'really' occurred or not. In contrast, with its holy aubergine, Kureishi's novel is dismissive towards miracles and those who believe in them.

Numerous critics have identified a passage of *The Black Album* in which Shahid visits a mosque as representing a missed opportunity for Kureishi to incorporate non-fundamentalist Muslims (who, need we be reminded, make up the vast majority of Muslims both in the UK and worldwide) into his novel. As Chambers puts it, this mosque 'briefly emerges as a cosmopolitan, transnational space', and yet the novel then 'seemingly forget[s] the Muslim congregation's multiplicity'.[31] Much as 'Shahid tr[ies] Islamism on for size,' she argues, 'Kureishi dabbles with Islam and Islamism in this novel, but seems ultimately perplexed and beats a retreat into his comfortable space of "sex and secularity"'.[32] While the notion that *The Black Album* merely 'dabbles' with Islamism is questionable, that it does so with Islam seems more convincing. As Ranasinha argues, the ideological 'polarity' of the novel 'ignores the wide range of different forms of Islam that are not extreme or aggressive.'[33]

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[29] Fischer, Susan Alice (2015). 'Hanif Kureishi's "better philosophy": From *The Black Album* and *My Son the Fanatic* to *The Word and the Bomb*', in *Hanif Kureishi: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Fischer, Susan Alice, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 69–84, pp. 82–83.
[30] Chambers, *Making Sense*, p. 52.
[31] Ibid., p. 57.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers*, p. 241.

Aside from the brief mosque scene, another passage that offers a fleeting glimpse of non-fundamentalist forms of Islam occurs late in the novel, when Hat – another of Riaz's acolytes – apologises for taking part in an attempted attack on Shahid. Hat acknowledges the hypocrisy of 'condemn[ing] another person' when he has 'done wrong things' himself (*TBA*, p. 271), and asks Shahid for forgiveness. The two disagree about whether human or divine activity is 'more interesting' (*TBA*, p. 272), yet they do so cordially and – unlike Riaz – without simply dismissing the other's view. However, as Dave Gunning notes, Hat offers 'some sense of the genuine offence that Rushdie's novel may have caused British Muslims, and a reaction that is not necessarily bloodthirsty', but nonetheless 'remains [...] a marginal figure in the book.'[34] Ultimately, the novel has little to say about religious worldviews that are not fundamentalist, with Kureishi making a takedown of Islamism his clear priority.

The highly critical account of fundamentalist Islam that we encounter in *The Black Album* is consistent with arguments made in Kureishi's non-fiction writing. His 2001 essay 'Sex and Secularity' was written less than two months after 9/11, and was subsequently included in the 2005 volume *The Word and the Bomb*, which also features an extract from *The Black Album*. In this essay, Kureishi describes Islamic fundamentalism as 'a mixture of slogans and resentment' which resembles racism:

> Like the racist, the fundamentalist works only with fantasy. [...] The fundamentalist's idea of the West, like the racist's idea of his victim, is immune to argument or contact with reality. [...] If the black person has been demonised by the white, in turn the white is now being demonised by the militant Muslim.[35]

Parallels between the racist and the fundamentalist are implied in *The Black Album*, too. When a racist white woman spits at Chad and Shahid and shouts 'Paki! Paki! Paki!' at them, her abuse has an unintended effect: 'her saliva blew back and spun through her daughter's hair' (*TBA*, p. 139). In a more violent echo of this scene, and again with the wind playing a crucial role, we learn in the final chapter that Riaz's group have petrol bombed a bookshop (presumably one that stocks *The Satanic Verses*), and that 'a strong wind' meant that 'the second one blew up in [Chad's]

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[34] Gunning, Dave (2010). *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature*, Liverpool: Liverpool UP, p. 79.
[35] Kureishi, Hanif (2005), *The Word and the Bomb*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 87.

face' (*TBA*, p. 273). His injuries are so extensive, apparently, that a witness to the attack does not expect him to survive (ibid.). The racist and the fundamentalist, then, are both portrayed as bringing upon themselves the very damage they mean to inflict. Moreover, the novel suggests that it is Chad's extensive personal experience of racism that has made him susceptible to Riaz's (similarly nasty) fundamentalism. Apparently Chad's white adopted mother 'was racist' (*TBA*, p. 106), and he subsequently 'tried [joining] the Labour Party' but 'it was too racist' (*TBA*, p. 108). For other characters, too, experiences of racism have clearly made them more susceptible to fundamentalism. When he meets Riaz for the first time Shahid confesses that experiencing racism made him want 'to be a racist' (*TBA*, p. 10), which is a clear precursor to his involvement with Riaz's group. The novel thus portrays racism as both a cause and an equivalent of fundamentalism.

Kureishi's 2001 essay goes on to state that racism and fundamentalism are both 'diminishers of life' which 'reduc[e] others to abstractions'.[36] Following Chambers, Ranasinha, and Stein, we might argue that in *The Black Album* Islamists are themselves 'reduced to abstractions' and 'demonised' and that, accordingly, Kureishi's novel falls into the very trap being articulated by his essay. An alternative view is offered by Upstone, who contends that 'as a whole, [the novel] challenges this stereotypical presentation of Islam with a complex and insightful portrayal', and that 'what *The Black Album* suggests, in fact, is that Kureishi understands this fundamentalism very well.'[37] She refers to the novel as both 'a warning of the possibility of events such as July 7th' and 'a manifesto for their prevention'.[38] Even for Upstone, however, the novel is characterised by a highly ironic 'didacticism' because it presents 'the multiple and unstable' as 'a necessary absolute'.[39] Presumably Kureishi would consider his novel neither reductive nor didactic, and it is notable that in the same passage of his 2001 essay he makes a case for the good of fiction in all of this:

> These disassociations [people 'reducing others to abstractions'] are eternal human strategies and they are banal. What a fiction writer can do is show the historical forms they take at different times: how they are lived out day by day

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[36] Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, p. 87.
[37] Upstone, 'A Question of Black or White', p. 13.
[38] Ibid., p.16.
[39] Ibid., p. 5.

> by particular individuals. And if we cannot prevent individuals believing whatever they like about others – putting their fantasies into them – we can at least prevent these prejudices becoming institutionalised or an accepted part of the culture.[40]

While Kureishi does not use the term here, this passage reads like an argument for, specifically, the novel of ideas: for using fictional 'individuals' to explore and critique the ideas people have about the world, themselves, and each other at particular historical moments. In *The Black Album* – which, it is worth repeating, was published in 1995 and is set in 1989 – particular characters and the bodies of ideas they embody do seem to be associated with particular sub-periods of late-twentieth-century history. The 'Marxist-Communist-Leninist' (*TBA*, p. 32) thinking represented by the thwarted, speech-impeded, cuckolded Brownlow is portrayed as belonging to the past; the callous Thatcherism represented by Chili is portrayed as dominant but as having started to self-destruct; and crucially, the bigoted, violent fundamentalism represented by Riaz is portrayed as emergent. In accordance with Kureishi's beliefs about 'what a fiction writer can do', the novel is concerned with trying to 'prevent' what it takes to be the 'prejudices' of Riaz and his followers from becoming 'an accepted part of the culture'. This is not to say that *The Black Album* treats these different ideologies as equivalents – it does not. Rather, it portrays Communism and Thatcherism as *failed* bodies of ideas but suggests that, in contrast, Islamism is a *pseudo-idea*, and must be exposed as such. Again, Kureishi's non-fiction proves instructive here. In this passage from his 2005 essay 'The Carnival of Culture' – written just three weeks after the 7/7 attacks, and again included in *The Word and the Bomb* – Kureishi discusses the nature of ideas and staunchly critiques Islamism:

> Wittgenstein compared ideas to tools, which you can use for different ends. Some open the world up. The idea that you can do everything with one tool is ridiculous. Without adequate intellectual tools and the ability to think freely, too many Muslims are incapable of establishing a critical culture which goes beyond a stifling Islamic paradigm.[41]

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[40] Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, p. 87.
[41] Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, p. 99.

Kureishi's unreferenced claim here is actually erroneous: in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein compares words, not ideas, to tools (more specifically, he compares the functions of words to the functions of tools).[42] Regardless, in Kureishi's formulation, tools serve as a good metaphor for ideas because having access to and familiarity with a wide range of them makes one much better equipped to achieve 'different ends', whether it be putting up bookshelves or determining how to live well. Notably, however, in this passage about ideas a kind of 'meta-idea' emerges. With terminological slippage that needs careful unpacking, Kureishi refers to the notion that 'you can do everything with one [idea]' as, itself, an 'idea', and a 'ridiculous' one at that. We are seemingly very close here to Lyotard's account of the metanarratives towards which postmodernism is characteristically incredulous; of totalising notions which attempt to account for human experience in its entirety.[43] For Kureishi, Islamism clearly constitutes this kind of 'ridiculous' metanarrative. Not so much an 'intellectual tool' as an attempt to curtail intellectual tools, in this account it is a pseudo-idea rather than an 'idea' per se. Moreover, at the end of this essay Kureishi defines 'an effective multi-culturalism' as a 'robust and committed *exchange of ideas*'.[44] Albeit in a somewhat dismissive tone, he suggests that religious worldviews *can* be part of this multiculturalism: that although they 'may be illusions' which 'betray infantile wishes in their desire for certainty', religions are nevertheless 'important and profound illusions' which 'will *modify* as they come into contact with *other ideas*'.[45] So 'religions' are 'ideas' here, and even if Kureishi does not particularly like them, he does envisage them as having a legitimate role within the vibrant multiculturalism he is championing. In contrast, *fundamentalist* Islam – and, presumably, fundamentalism of any hue – cannot, he alleges, have any part in this ongoing multicultural 'exchange' because, by definition, it comprehensively rejects all other ideas and refuses to be modified.

[42] Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Anscombe, G. E. M., 1958, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 6–7.
[43] Lyotard, Jean-Francois (1979). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Bennington, Geoff and Massumi, Brian, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984.
[44] Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, p. 100 (my emphasis).
[45] Ibid.

In 'Why Should We Do What God Says?', an essay written to mark thirty years since the fatwa against Rushdie, and included in the 2019 collection *What Happened?*, Kureishi again likens ideas to tools:

> After the fatwa, in the early 1990s, when I began to research the novel which became *The Black Album*, I noticed that the young Muslims I met were not interested in Rushdie or literature at all; and we barely discussed free speech. Even worse, I realised, no one had thought to interest them in Britain, […] and *the fascinating counter-cultural churn of ideas: feminism, patriarchy, sexuality, class*. […] Those whom we once called "fundamentalists" had become Islamists, and they didn't require *tools to think with* because they knew already what they wanted. […] And what they were involved in seemed more like a cult than a religion. They had submitted to God, so they said, and were keen to have others submit to them. They'd moved beyond the usual rules of sociability, and weren't people you could debate or engage with. They would sneer, harangue and intimidate. That, apparently, was their policy. It wouldn't be difficult for them to colonise and impose *their ideas* on a heterogeneous and vulnerable community.'[46]

Again, there is notable slippage here in Kureishi's use of the term 'ideas'. He expresses excitement over 'counter-cultural […] ideas' such as 'feminism, patriarchy, sexuality, and class' which, as in his earlier essay, here constitute intellectual 'tools', and which can interact with each other (or, to mix metaphors, be 'churn[ed]') in 'fascinating' ways. Yet he also uses the term to refer to something very different, and which he finds deeply alarming: dogmatic beliefs that can be 'impose[d]' onto the 'vulnerable' by a 'cult' of bigots. Thus 'ideas' signifies two very different kinds of thing in this passage; indeed, this must be the case since Kureishi refers to Islamists' 'ideas' but also claims that they have no interest in 'tools to think with'. Effectively, Kureishi is arguing that the ideas held, and allegedly imposed onto others, by Islamists are not *really* 'ideas' at all. As in his 2005 essay – and, I suggest, as in *The Black Album* itself – here Kureishi very much treats fundamentalist Islam as a pseudo-idea. It must, he thinks, be recognised and treated as an existential threat to,

[46] Kureishi, Hanif (2019). *What Happened? Stories and Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 140 (my emphasis).

rather than a function of, the healthy multiculturalism that he believes is constituted by the ongoing exchange and intermingling of 'ideas' proper.

This view goes some way to explaining the novel's portrayal of Riaz and his followers. When Brownlow tells Riaz that 'ideas' are 'the enemy of religion' he receives the following retort: '"So much the worse for the ideas," Riaz said, with a snort' (*TBA*, p. 99). The disdain for new ways of thinking is clear. Riaz has no use for 'intellectual tools', Kureishi suggests, because he has committed himself so completely to a pseudo-idea that is incompatible with them. Somewhat similarly, Riaz's writing of poetry is portrayed as a kind of 'pseudo-creativity' that can be distinguished from Shahid's 'creativity proper'. The latter's passion for exploring himself and the world through the reading and writing of texts is repeatedly emphasised; apparently, at the age of just fifteen Shahid was already writing in 'prose that expressed him, like a soul singer screaming into a microphone' (*TBA*, p. 72). Despite the disapproval of his family, and despite its rewards being neither 'instant' nor 'unalloyed', Shahid continues to write creatively because it is 'a compulsion' and because of his conviction that literature enables the 'discovering [of] new emotions and new possibilities' (*TBA*, p. 74). Riaz, in contrast, believes that 'all fiction is, by its very nature, a form of lying – a perversion of truth', and that most supposedly 'great authors' are merely 'appealing to what is filthy in us' (*TBA*, p. 182). He writes poetry himself merely to impress others and to impose his dogmatic views upon them. As such, *The Black Album* proposes a distinction between pseudo-creativity and genuine creativity and, likewise, between pseudo-ideas and ideas proper. Its narrative trajectory is primarily driven by Shahid's progression towards the eventual realisation that Riaz's ideas are just as bogus as his poetry.

And yet: what bodies of ideas, exactly, are treated as 'ideas' proper – as 'tools to think with'[47] – in *The Black Album*? Where are all the ideas that 'open the world up'?[48] As we have seen, the Communism, Thatcherism, and corrupt leftism embodied respectively by Brownlow, Chili, and Rugman Rudder are all given short shrift. While Kureishi might not portray them as pseudo-ideas in the manner that he does Riaz's Islamism, neither does he portray them in anything like a positive light. To extend Kureishi's own metaphor, if these ideas perhaps once constituted 'tools to

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[47] Kureishi, *What Happened?*, p. 140.
[48] Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, p. 99.

think with', they now seem to be thoroughly broken tools. For a novel so ostensibly invested in defending the value of a kind of ideas on whose exchange healthy societies apparently rely, *The Black Album* seems to feature strikingly few of them.

The position taken by most critics has been that the novel takes seriously a body of ideas represented by Deedee. Certainly, she is portrayed as favourable to Riaz. Shahid repeatedly finds that Riaz is 'immune to argument';[49] by its very nature, his fundamentalism refuses to countenance or be modified by other (better) ideas. In contrast, Deedee and Shahid argue 'passionately but without acrimony', with – crucially – 'both modifying their views' as they do so (*TBA*, p. 135). Thus, debate – the exchange of ideas which Kureishi believes is foundational to multiculturalism – is futile with Riaz but productive with Deedee. There are occasions, too, on which Deedee seems to speak for the novel itself. For instance, when she asks Shahid the rhetorical question 'What sort of people burn books and read aubergines?' (*TBA*, p. 210), she is clearly articulating Kureishi's own sentiments. It is Deedee who tells Riaz to 'try reading' a novel before burning it (*TBA*, p. 224), and who celebrates the racial and sexual hybridity embodied by the popular musician Prince (*TBA*, p. 25), from whose bootleg 1987 studio album the novel takes its title. Given that *The Black Album* is a dialectically poised novel of ideas whose protagonist must choose between just two competing influences, readers are seemingly intended to conclude that Shahid ultimately makes the 'right' choice. As Ranasinha, Chambers, and Stein all suggest, then, *The Black Album* is undoubtedly an asymmetric novel of ideas: there is nothing like parity between the opposing worldviews which it sets up in binary opposition to each other. We might even, perhaps, be tempted to read Deedee as a chorus character.

Yet what body of ideas does Deedee supposedly represent? And if she is a chorus character, why does Kureishi place many views that clearly echo his own in Shahid's mouth rather than hers? It is, for example, Shahid rather than Deedee who argues that 'literature is more than entertainment' (*TBA*, p. 21), who asserts that stories can 'tell us about ourselves' and 'disturb us' in valuable ways (*TBA*, p. 183), and who suggests that 'love' might be one answer to the rhetorical question 'what else is there?' (*TBA*, p. 244). Ironically, despite 'winning' against Riaz and his

[49] Kureishi, *The Word and the Bomb*, p. 87.

acolytes in the sense that Shahid leaves them and stays (for the time being) with her, Deedee seems to embody ideological defeat. She has, she makes clear, given up on most of the ideas in which she was previously heavily invested. Of her husband's political commitments, she states: 'For years I was involved too. I couldn't admit to myself how much it restricted me' (*TBA*, p. 55). When Shahid asks her what she 'like[s] now', she replies: 'I'm trying to find out. Other things. Culture. When I can, I do a lot of nothing. And I make stabs at pleasure. Yes' (ibid.). She subsequently describes to him her revelatory experience of discovering, and becoming active in, both second-wave feminism and 'the Party' during the 1970s (*TBA*, pp. 114–15). Now, however, at the end of the 1980s, she finds herself disillusioned and dispirited. Although she finds it 'painful to admit', she tells Shahid that 'the price [of political activism] might have been too high' (*TBA*, p. 116). She then nostalgically describes a moment of profound political optimism that now belongs irrevocably to the past:

> There was a period, in the mid-seventies, when we imagined history was moving our way. Gays, blacks, women, were asserting and organizing themselves. Less than ten years later, after the Falklands, CND and the miners' strike, even I could see the movement was in a contrary direction. Thatcher had concentrated the struggle. But she'd worn everyone down. Where did we go from here? (ibid.)

When Shahid presses her for an answer to her own question, she replies: 'Who knows? […] It's been hard enough admitting to defeat and then to uncertainty. Now I don't even want to be certain any more' (ibid.). While her broadly liberal views make it tempting to read Deedee as an embodiment of political liberalism, then, this is questionable. She has abandoned her 'avowed commitment to liberal principles',[50] and so cannot really represent 'liberalism as a body of thought and[/or] as a lived political commitment'.[51] In this discussion with Shahid she does not merely express 'a pessimism or bleakness of attitude that derives from awareness of all those forces and conditions that threaten the realization of liberal ambitions'[52] but, crucially, uncertainty about the ambitions themselves. She now attests to just three 'particular certainties': that 'there existed only the present, tonight belonged to them, and she

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[50] Anderson, Amanda (2016). *Bleak Liberalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 14.
[51] Ibid., p. 20.
[52] Ibid., p. 22.

liked him' (*TBA*, p. 116). A few pages earlier, to Shahid's question 'Is life just for pleasure, then?' she replies 'What else is there?' (*TBA*, p. 109). This is, verbatim (albeit in relation to politics rather than pleasure), the same defeatist rhetorical question that Brownlow subsequently poses to Shahid (*TBA*, p. 244). Like her estranged husband, Deedee seems unable to answer it in any meaningful way. Indeed, she holds almost no ideas in earnest; on the contrary, she seems to represent *exhaustion* with ideas. Her abdication of 'certainties' and her affirmation of the value of 'pleasure' (*TBA*, p. 55) certainly place her in opposition to Riaz and his followers, who, conversely, instruct Shahid to dismiss all doubts (*TBA*, p. 175) and to renounce earthly pleasures (*TBA*, p. 128). She functions in the novel not just as an adversary to fundamentalism but as its direct antithesis. However, whether she represents a viable alternative to it is moot.

If Deedee embodies any particular perspective or worldview then it is probably that of postmodernism. Her renunciation of certainties (or, for Lyotard, 'metanarratives'), her endorsement of ephemerality, and her fondness for consuming and teaching 'popular' as opposed to 'high' culture would all align with this. Her abandonment of activism in favour of hedonism might also fit such a reading; perhaps she is one of those postmodernists who, as Barry Lewis states of postmodernist authors, 'simply gave up the struggle and delighted in delirium.'[53] Arguably, then, *The Black Album* pits postmodernism against fundamentalism and hands victory to the former. As such, it is unsurprising that some critics have concluded that the novel's 'narrative content' could itself 'be labeled […] postmodernist'.[54] Yet while Deedee's worldview is undoubtedly portrayed as preferable to Riaz's, this is not to say that the former is being championed. As Gunning notes, the novel makes clear that 'there is ultimately little content to Deedee's philosophy, which is paralleled in the limited intellectual content of the version of cultural studies she teaches'.[55] Even Shahid comes to feel frustrated by these limitations: having previously 'looked forward to her lectures more than to anyone else's' (*TBA*, p. 24), he eventually becomes irritated at her insistence on

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[53] Lewis, Barry (2001). 'Postmodernism and Literature (or: Word Salad Days, 1960-90)', in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Sim, Stuart, London: Routledge, pp. 121–33, p. 133.
[54] Holmes, Frederick M. (2001). 'The Postcolonial Subject Divided between East and West: Kureishi's *The Black Album* as an Intertext of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*', *Papers on Language and Literature* 37:3, 296–313, p. 297.
[55] Gunning, *Race and Antiracism*, p. 79.

‘play[ing] Madonna or George Clinton in class, or offer[ing] a lecture on the history of funk as if it were somehow more “him” than *Fathers and Sons*’ (*TBA*, p. 135). Citing Bart Moore-Gilbert, Gunning suggests that Deedee’s ‘version of liberal values is consistently made problematic’ in the novel,[56] and argues that Shahid’s decision to leave Riaz’s group and pursue a relationship with Deedee ‘until it stops being fun’ (*TBA*, p. 276) is similarly problematised:

> It does not ultimately seem a decision based on his detailed consideration of the ideological options open to him, but rather a gut reaction against an act of such open aggression [burning *The Satanic Verses*]. […] The profound problems with the life represented by Deedee do not seem dispelled, but Shahid is forced into the choice to align himself with her. […] As when he is unable confidently to defend the literary imagination, he is incapable of asserting his own decisions and overwhelmed by more powerful personalities.[57]

Indeed, it would be a mistake to conflate Shahid’s decision to renounce Riaz’s fundamentalism with his decision to remain (for the time being, at least) in a relationship with Deedee. For one thing, the former is portrayed as final, whereas the contingency of the latter is made clear. Moreover, the novel obviously endorses the former decision, whereas its position on the latter is far more ambiguous. If Deedee represents a postmodernist worldview, then the novel seems to have serious reservations about that worldview. She is ultimately portrayed as distinctly lacking in ideas; to appropriate her own words against her, Deedee not only *does* but, ideologically, largely *is* ‘a lot of nothing’ (*TBA*, p. 55). This brings us to a key paradox of *The Black Album*: it implores readers to treat ideas seriously, and yet there is very little serious treatment of particular ideas to be found in the novel. It orchestrates a dialectical conflict between two opposing forces, is at pains to expose the worldview held in earnest by one side as a pseudo-idea, and yet portrays the other, ‘winning’ side as holding virtually no ideas in earnest. The novel yearns for and yet cannot articulate the vibrant exchange of ideas on which Kureishi believes effective multiculturalism to be premised. At the risk of stumbling into the kind of terminological slippage which this chapter has identified in some of Kureishi’s non-

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[56] Gunning, *Race and Antiracism*, p. 80.
[57] Gunning, *Race and Antiracism*, p. 81.

fiction, *The Black Album* is far more invested in *the idea* of ideas than in any particular body of them.

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