

Writing Gender: Literary Identity Politics in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*
Tamás Juhász

When in need of self-definition, gender may describe or validate itself through resort to either a given text or a particular attitude to the very notion of textuality. It may, especially in Western, late modern cultures, see itself as an effect of language that is open, mutable and full of potential for irony and subversion. It may also, especially in traditional, religious or authoritarian cultures, model itself on statements, rules and stories that coagulate into a kind of grand narrative in that their assumedly fixed meanings allow but little deviation or ambiguity and shape other, less relevant stories and utterances powerfully. As a close variant on this, gender may also discard the need for any explicit definition exactly through its refusal of certain types of – especially literary, admittedly fabricated or fictional – texts, suggesting that its general constitution is so solid and unambiguous that it is just beyond, and therefore unaffected by, the suspect instabilities of language.

Readers of Hanif Kureishi's fiction may often observe that it is especially the challenge of asserting and defining (if only indirectly) masculinity that polarises the above stances and attitudes. Thus, the author's first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) begins by presenting the eponymous character practicing a yoga headstand, wherein his 'balls and prick fell forward in his pants',¹ and wherein – to underline the original cultural constructedness of the patriarchy that the displaced genitals still emblematises – the yoga-loving father's request is for a book to consult. Correspondingly, a plethora of books and scripts accommodate his and his narrator-son's respective searches for maturity and self-realisation, but not everybody is a curious, experimenting reader in the novel. Their family friend Anwar causes major sexual-marital complications through his confidence in arranging his daughter's marriage against her will. He alternates between merely rendering a literalist reading of Muslim traditions, and assuming that evident sexual matters just do not need any kind of articulation, any sort of 'reading'. In terms of plotting and characterisation, the tension between father and daughter is supplemented by various narrative associations between, respectively, Anwar's narrow-minded pursuit of only one single possibility and his apparent literary-linguistic non-refinement ('Words weren't his natural medium'²), and the compulsively reading daughter's resistance to paternal absolutism and all the possible worlds that she recognises in fiction, philosophy and history (or, for that matter, the liberationist work of Kate Millett). That in the arranged marriage that nevertheless takes place the husband is another person addicted to reading – who happens to accidentally kill his father-in-law on his way home from the Paperback Exchange – serves as yet another confirmation of Kureishi's interest in gender as modelled on scripts whose status varies greatly, from the monolithic and the unequivocal to the fictional, mixed and subversive.

This authorial interest is sustained in a variety of narratives after *The Buddha*: unfaithful sexual partner Jay in *Intimacy* is a scenarist, teenage boy Gabriel in *Gabriel's Gift* is described as simultaneously growing into adulthood and the

¹ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 4.

² Kureishi, *Buddha* 79.

professional positions of a screenwriter again, and in such collections of short stories as *Love in a Blue Time* (1997), *Midnight All Day* (2000) and *The Body and Seven Stories* (2002) problematic, weak and divorce-oriented men almost all cultivate one or another form of writing. Nevertheless, no other text by Kureishi seems to explore the scripted-textual aspect of masculinity with as much complexity and poignancy as *The Black Album*, the author's second novel, from 1995. In it, a divided cultural scene unfolds where numerous phallogocentric assumptions are still in place, but often in inverted, increasingly unfamiliar forms, not as obvious tools of patriarchal self-validation but rather as matters of either choice, interrogation or cultural relativity.

Thus, *The Black Album* opens with a scene simultaneously anticipating the acquired, culturally constructed dimension of emerging male identity as well as the relevance of language in this process. Like Karim in *The Buddha*, Shahid Hasan starts his story via contact with a man older than himself, one whose presence and influence are (since the protagonist and Riaz Al-Hussain are next-door neighbours in a North London dormitory) quite literally unavoidable. That the fellow student will soon adopt quasi-paternal traits of a rather regimental sort is subtly indicated by the circumstances of their first encounter. Shahid meets the other man after re-appearing from the communal hall toilet and, realising their status as neighbors, he recalls and regrets the 'uninhabited noises' he had made in his room under the assumption that the other, completely silent room was unoccupied.³ Thus, brief hints at socially strongly regulated anal and other bodily functions – possibly including, in the category of uninhabited 'noises', oral, privately uttered sounds of any kind – quickly position the central character on that chart of 'perversions' that Freud, in the conclusion of his *Three Essays*, identifies as the phase preceding any subsequently developed, standard genital heterosexuality.⁴ That these emphatically bodily noises are countered by the language of social control is metaphorised by the 'bookwormy' older man's briefcase, as it connotes containment, writing and conformity (2).⁵ Because much of the conflict in the ensuing plot is generated by the indignation that Riaz and his disciples feel over Shahid's sexual conduct, the imagery of this first encounter signals that the novel will, to a decisive degree, concern itself with the linguistically graspable brakes and checks that the achievement of normative body use and masculinity requires. Not by artistic accident, Riaz studies law.

In addition to the general message that adult sexuality is inevitably subject to some form of social control, the location and the early events establish that the actual form and content of this control – to be exercised in a Western, late twentieth-century metropolitan area – is far from being an evident communal matter. Almost all characters are either college students or employees but, as in *The Buddha*, the idea of a general *Bildung* is shown to be vague, even emptied out: the supposedly unifying college (nearly a university, disseminating universal knowledge) is an off-centre,

³ Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 1. Further references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Standard Edition, vol. 7 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953) 231.

⁵ From a psychoanalytic and a biographical critical perspective, it is noteworthy that Kureishi, who wrote *The Black Album* relatively soon after the death of his father, connects, in an interview, not only the questions of fatherlessness, directionlessness and what he calls 'dissident sexuality', but also the threat of not being able to write at all. Amativa Kumar, 'A Bang and a Whimper: A Conversation with Hanif Kureishi', *Transition* 10.4 (2001) 126.

third-rate institution in an unsafe location. On its territory, the co-presence of ‘Africans, Irish people, Pakistanis and even a group of English students’ (1) indexes a cultural setting whose heterogeneity will evolve into political violence, and where the actual form of this aggression – repeated bomb explosions – bestows, retrospectively, additional meaning on the motif of pressure in the blocked showers. Consider the description of Shahid’s unexpectedly impeded attempt to wash himself before his first, illicit date with Deedee: ‘The drain of the communal shower was blocked. Water was pouring down the side of the building. Shahid had to wash in the cracked yellow sink in his room, first one foot, then the other, followed, awkwardly, by armpits, balls, cock’ (35). Kureishi’s increasingly discontinuous syntax and his cataloguing of distinctly male body parts underline the necessarily divided, to-be-pieced-together dimension of one’s masculine constitution in relation to exactly that site where – as implicit in the idea, and also name, of a shared, ‘communal’ bathroom – differences between ethnically different body politics are eliminated, and some basic consensus about the appropriate use of the male body is thought to be in place. The marginal – new in London, new at college, new in adulthood – protagonist would willingly turn to shared resources, but instead of connecting, he can only remain in disunity.

Literature is one of the means by which Shahid hopes to bridge the gap between himself and others because, he explains, he has ‘fear of being with people who had knowledge [of books] which might exclude him’. In fact, a hoped-for discussion of ‘the meaning and purpose of the novel [and] its place in society’ (20) is the very reason why he decided to come to college. But when such an explicit dialogue takes place for the first time, Shahid finds that his literary sensibilities fulfill a segregating, rather than integrating function. A hostile Chad offers depreciatory comments about reading as elitist and merely entertaining, distinguishes unimportant stories from important ‘real things’ and, typically of his abusive masculinity, finds that the socially irresponsible act of indulging literature is a primarily feminine characteristic: ‘And you reading stories like some old grandma’ (21). Although Chad will soon stop posing any intellectual challenge to Shahid, this early clash anticipates key conceptual differences between Shahid and Riaz, the more serious contender in the field of the philosophy of language. These include the relationship between the real and the fictional, as well as the issue of the social and the gendered relevance of literature. In addition, this opening talk with the young radical raises questions not only about certain ideas but also about the nature, and adequacy, of turning these notions into rigid binaries. Opposites such as real and unreal, man and woman, or communally useful or irrelevant are for Chad absolute and non-negotiable, but both his and his superior’s representations in *The Black Album* reveal this rigidity to be untenable.

Indeed, the Islamic group leader Riaz’s initial appearances in the story is permeated by narrative details suggesting, on the one hand, desire for an ordered reality with no inappropriate crossings across borders and, on the other, the illusory nature of such possibilities of demarcation. Like Shahid’s, Riaz’s room is filled with books, but the silence, the ‘associated scholarship, study and thirst for knowledge’ that soon turns out to supplement the man’s oppressively patriarchal gender attitudes is ironically disrupted already during the main character’s first visit when ‘male squeals . . . [from] gay men’ (14) can be overheard from upstairs. Riaz does not ‘share’ the amusement that this audio experience momentarily provides for Shahid,

because not mixing, not sharing is just the essence of his ideological program. Anti-Western, misogynist and homophobic in public, the spiritual leader is also noted for his basic detachment from the small-scale troubles of daily existence ('tak[ing] no interest in the life around him' [3]), his limited concern with the challenge of empathy and dialogism (his reply to Shahid's complaint that he has 'so many questions' is the imperative 'Dismiss them!' [175]), his clear sense of focus ('The meaning of his life was his creed' [173]), and his active, non-domestic, overridingly public orientation ('He appeared more comfortable addressing a crowd than being with one person' [81]). Like many who are conventionally considered 'real men', he has transposed much of his personality onto the outside, and from this vantage point of counselling, petitioning and holding public speeches, he guides others. This, as Shahid's case shows, includes those confused about their gender, but the infiltration of sexually disruptive sounds into the realm of unerring, unchanging and non-negotiable (written) truth reveals, ironically, these books of wisdom in a condition of slippage, playfulness and contamination.

Before I turn to examples of actual texts as sexualised subject matters in the novel, it should be noted that *The Black Album* as a composed narrative itself is informed by unexpected intersections of the story's two chief ideological lines. Although the doctrinal difference between Riaz and his opponent Deedee is stark and apparently irreducible, the structural positioning of these figures of guidance generates the impression of some subtle bond, even shared identity, between them. Thus, whereas one set of convictions emanates from a religious leader, another comes from a 'pornographic priestess' (228), as the woman is once mockingly called. Where one offers formal academic teaching (but in an unorthodoxly informal, non-standard style), the other provides private counselling and intuitive legal advice (but in a nearly institutional, surprisingly organised and efficient manner). While one's political starting point is the racial-economic exploitation of the non-Western population, the other sees, and experiences, education- and gender-related inequalities around her. In creating these poles of energies and influences, Kureishi may have established an antagonism that is rigid and 'schematic'⁶ in itself, but he does so within a narrative design where the two guide figures' values, attributes or mere presences mingle and overlap meaningfully.

Indeed, beyond these situational analogies, yet further motifs dispel the impression of being limited to two separate worlds that are 'so incommensurate that they cannot converge'.⁷ Thus, when lured into some playful cross-dressing by Deedee, Shahid enjoys his 'new female face' and wonders 'what it might be like to go out as a woman, and be looked at differently' (117–18), which may activate, in the reader's mind, memories of how Riaz himself was, unknowingly, duped into a kind of cross-dressing after the disappearance of his clothes from a laundry. As Chad explains when this occurs, his superior needs any available clothing, otherwise he will 'go up and down the street naked' (22), exposing spots of vulnerability, similar to Shahid's own, effeminate 'walking up and down' on an imaginary catwalk (118). This analogy is available for the perceptive reader only, but immediately after the actual cross-

⁶ Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi* (Plymouth: Northcote House, with the British Council, 2002) 86.

⁷ Maria Degabriele, 'Prince of Darkness Meets Priestess of Porn: Sexual and Political Identities in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*', *Intersections: Gender, History, and Culture in the Asian Context* 2 (1999), paragraph 4.

dressing episode, Shahid himself recognises that the older man is an uninvited yet powerful part of his current erotic experience with Deedee – if only through suddenly remembering the condemnatory comment that ‘God would burn homosexuals for ever in hell, scorching their flesh in a furnace before replacing their skin as new’ (119). As in the earlier examples, Deedee’s influence may oppose Riaz’s, or Riaz’s impact may counter Deedee’s, yet the narrative tendency is that their actions will strangely accommodate the presence of their Other. Culminating in the episode where Riaz’s intrusion is actually into Deedee’s home – where the up-to-that point spatially and temporally separate ideological differences coagulate into the synchronicity of a physical conflict – the two guide figures exert their influence on the protagonist in curiously converging ways.

Housing strange attractions and parallelisms on the level of repetition and textuality, the story’s tendency to collapse key binaries manifests itself through psychological-behavioural characterisation as well. One can sense, for example, that the Islamicist group members’ adamant position on gender matters is, in fact, a kind of counter reaction to the various fissures, inconsistencies and instabilities that the devotees perceive inside this domain – and especially if they carry such issues themselves. In their turning away from Western impurities, the religious militants postulate homogeneous cultural fields, yet they repeatedly confront the fact that these seemingly pure and coherent territories too are ‘internally divided and subdivided’.⁸ Chad’s characterisation is a particularly relevant case in point. Typifying, with special forcefulness, a normative and repressive approach to the question of sexuality, his presence in the novel borders on the comic in its numerous, and apparent, inconsistencies. Though Chad disseminates his life story as one of religious conversion, telling signs reveal that the former Trevor Buss is still under the spell of Western, secular temptations. His figure may be defined by the phallic-disciplinary machete with which he equips himself, but in one of Kureishi’s meaningful juxtapositions, it is also in the possession of the weapon that he accidentally hears the song ‘Try a Little Tenderness’ that – reminding him of what he is no longer – makes his eyes wet, his body paralysed (89). Brief, earlier hints make it clear that this arch Islamic militant continues to be a pop music addict, that his inflexible masculinity conceals fascination with examples of sexual indeterminacy (‘Chad tore himself from Prince’, [19]), that sexual transgression is, to all intents and purposes, not that far from his purity-coveting mind (prior to his religious turn, Chad used to be ‘running a couple of girls’ [144]). This undesirable dimension of himself he now ‘denie[s]’ (126), and to fill the resulting gap, he engages in a flurry of activities to present an acceptable version of his self. He assumes new clothes, a new language and even a new name, and vividly exemplifies the concept of performance as a ‘struggle for identity’, a ‘process of externalisation’, an effort to say “‘I am” . . . precisely in the face of others who are saying that “‘you are not””.⁹

So if Shahid can, on account of his conflicting loyalties, be called a ‘double-agent’ (234) with some accuracy, Chad deserves the phrase even more. And neither is

⁸ Frederick Holmes, ‘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 (2001) 296.

⁹ Kwesi Owusu, ‘The Question of Performance’ in *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London: Routledge, 1999) x.

alone in this split condition. Chad's secretive interest in Prince (and, through this emblem of provoking bisexuality, in the dangerously feminine) is reflective of that compound of denials, shows and dissociations that make up so much of Riaz's male identity, too. Like his henchman, who tears himself from the childish and the effeminate (which through a curious looping back nevertheless permeate his being), the head of the group begins his spiritual career after leaving his father and mother and declaring that 'if one's parents did wrong they should be thrown into the raging fire of hell' (109). Having thus been (self-)expelled from an unmanly place of origin, he chooses to inhabit another sphere of identity by embracing what appear to be the fundamentals and origins of Muslim civilisation, but which are, in contemporary Britain, symptomatic of alienation and of global capitalist technologies and lifestyles.¹⁰ He chooses to assume this ideology in the manner one puts on new garments, and like Ishiguro's famous butler, comes always to be wearing the clothes of some other.

Through the motif of unwitting appropriation, the owner of Riaz's actual shirts is Shahid's brother Chili, which bears a significance beyond the comedy of an unlikely match. As was the case with Riaz's narrative relatedness to Deedee, Kureishi suggests that despite their sharp ideological differences, the Muslim militant and the older brother wear identical clothes because they perform maleness in similar manners – at least in relation to Shahid, their common charge, their real and metaphorical 'brother'. Both men are one-dimensionally public figures: Riaz's already noted fear of intimacy is paralleled by Chili's loss of his wife and daughter, and by his premarital history as someone who 'didn't have friends', only 'pals, mates, and those he called "personal" friends, who were, usually, criminals. He gave his girlfriends too much grief and respect to be able to speak to them' (42). In their capacity as figures of the world, they both act as 'reality guides' towards fatherless, clueless Shahid (42), and offer particular instruction on matters of gender and sexuality. Even though Riaz usually does this only indirectly – through his disciples or in the form of public speaking – the normative rigidity of his views corresponds to Chili's elder-brotherly, routine violence towards Shahid. Both guide figures attempt to blend Shahid into their own image of 'real' (that is, abusive) masculinity, but they fail to notice that this image, this display of signs and words, in fact belongs to some ever elusive other: Riaz wears Chili's clothes, Chili wears Calvin Klein's, and both keep rephrasing, with varying degrees of originality, words and ideas attributed to Mohammed and the brothers' dead father respectively (Chili declares, in one of his borrowed pieces, that their 'Papa would be pleased to see' a more mature, more manly Shahid [42]). Like one's language and wardrobe, Riaz's and Chili's manhood is a composite of select, shared, historically specific pieces on show, underlining Judith Butler's contention that 'the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself'.¹¹

¹⁰ In his essay 'The Rainbow Sign', Kureishi finds fundamentalism a 'symptom of extreme alienation'; in the conversation 'A Bang and a Whimper', he points out that this phenomenon 'was the invention of a brand new tradition. There hadn't been such a thing before'. Hanif Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections of Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 31; Kumar 127.

¹¹ Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' in *The Critical Tradition. Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007) 1713.

A central irony, and a major generator of plot in the novel, is that while some characters – especially Shahid – are aware of the cultural constructedness of their gender, others – especially Riaz – do not recognise this dimension of their identity, and posit certain invariables through channels that exemplify culture and its incessantly varying aspects in themselves. As suggested, literature becomes the most important such media.

In addition to the various repetitions and analogies that have been shown to reinforce the idea that social realities (including gender relations) are shaped, or in fact established, by language and narration, three episodes in *The Black Album* treat the concept of human sexual identity as a scripted-textual construct in particular depth. They include Riaz's characterisation as a writer, his literary cooperation with Shahid, and the comic story of what many decipher as a Muslim holy text inside an aubergine.

Thus, in a quick sequel to the issue of the Islamic leader's clothing, Kureishi has the man engage in composing poetry as another act of self-assertion. The quiet and secrecy in which Riaz works on his verses first reduces him, as noted before, to the point of invisibility for neighbour Shahid but, as certain details later demonstrate, the writing process is in fact a coveted route from the private to the public and the political. The mere circumstances of composition are indicative of this orientation: Chad is usually present in the sheltered room where his superior writes; Riaz requests Shahid's help in typing his text; the very physical transmission of the file from author to typist involves, unnecessarily, two more mediators, and a press is sought to disseminate the work. The seemingly shy poet goes far in his show of humbleness, nevertheless, he assumes that his manuscript 'will change the world a little' (68).

This provokes, of course, Kureishi's irony, yet from the perspective of sexual politics in the novel, there is more to this pretentiousness. The subject matter of the poems, their author explains, is childhood in Pakistan, and they are to be read as 'songs of memory, adolescence and twilight' (68). Like his teenage-faced confidante Chad, Riaz appears then not only (like all adults) to be much defined by his childhood, but to ponder specifically on that turning point of adolescence which – as signalled by the further words 'memory and 'twilight' – raises, indirectly, the question of what should vanish and what should be retained from childhood for the emergence of appropriate adult male identity. No further contents-related details are provided, but in addition to the interest in transitions and differences that is implicit in this teenage imagery, various comments on the text indicate that – as in most other situations in the religious group's life – the poet's chief authorial concern is not so much with the exploration or analysis of a given experience, but instead with the guarding of certain boundaries. Thus, Shahid realises that while Riaz himself addresses the issue of sexuality, the general tone is one of moral distancing and condemnation – the poems read 'like a reproach' (147). Later, Hat offers a brief critical summing up of this dimension of the text. He admits that they as devotees are also subject to sexual impulses – as the young Muslim puts it, 'God g[a]ve us our dooh-dahs' – but still, one should not 'put them into print', should not mix them with 'religious words' (243). In his effort to decide what goes with what, he too describes gender, inadvertently, not as words craven in rock, but as a text that is negotiated and edited.

Yet, similar to other examples of purposefully selecting from – and therefore

highlighting or concealing – one’s identity components, such acts of demarcation are likely to reveal secret pleasures precisely in their opposite, in adulterating what is thought to be pure and distinct. Riaz’s literary project of treating village life as he experienced it in the Pakistan of his childhood can indeed be construed (in harmony with the poet’s professed intention) as a nostalgic celebration of lost religious purity, but it can just as well be taken as a nostalgic (if clandestine) celebration of childhood with its still forming, not yet finalised sexual identity. Because Kureishi presents neither the poem itself nor Riaz’s mindset during the course of composition, this is admittedly speculative. However, the novelist does provide a subtle detail that can possibly exemplify delight in a strange kind of textual cross-dressing (and evoke, thereby, delight of the erotic type). Surprisingly for a man so conscious of differences, boundaries and hierarchies, Riaz’s composition turns out to be a prose poem, the result of crossed genres. So while on the level of content, the Islamic leader may put sexuality in its proper, lawful place, on the level of literary-generic categories he happily violates the law of distinctions, what Derrida calls ‘la loi du genre’ and what the French theorist often emphasises is one of the key connections between the concepts of genre and gender.¹² In addition, and to Shahid’s surprise, the poem is strangely devoid of verbs: he ‘could see that Riaz liked adjectives but figured the verbs would be in there somewhere’ (68). Because in his non-literary capacity the author’s communication is so much defined by an avoidance of intimacy and by an orientation towards action and publicity, this unexpected lyricism further feminises him,¹³ placing him outside what Frank Chin and his co-editors (in their controversial attempt to appropriate and masculinise Asian-American writing) describe as the ‘style of manhood’, without which ‘language’ one is ‘no longer a man’.¹⁴

Riaz’s implied lack of artistic talent achieves its real significance in the context of the wisdom and the leadership that is associated with his figure. His failure to write well could remain a private weakness would the proud author not declare, after feeble protestations of modesty, that God has in fact spoken through these lines (68). This is the point where, in Chad’s adequate comment, the poetically ‘creative’ fundamentalist leader is also ‘dangerous’ and ‘radical’ (69). Like many public figures, Riaz decodes, interprets and explains issues of political, religious or other relevance, but he does so without the talent and subtlety that responsible public language use requires. He can afford to relinquish quality writing because *logos* guarantees the ultimate adequacy of his composition. For this reason, Riaz’s attitude to textuality is evocative of the King’s (or God’s or the father’s) stance on writing that Derrida details in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’: ‘The value of writing . . . has of course been spelled out to the King, but it is the King who will give it its value . . . God the king does not

¹² ‘La question du genre littéraire n’est pas une question formelle: elle traverse de part en part le motif de la loi en général, de la génération, au sens naturel et symbolique, de la naissance, au sens naturel et symbolique, de la différence de génération, de la différence sexuelle entre le genre masculin et le genre féminin . . . d’une identité et d’une différence entre le féminin et le masculin.’ Jacques Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986) 257.

¹³ This, of course, is not to say that lyric poetry is necessarily feminine while verb-packed narratives are necessarily masculine in themselves. As stated, poetry in *The Black Album* becomes feminised only by comparison to the quintessentially male cultural standards that Riaz cultivates at all other points in the novel.

¹⁴ Frank Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983) xlvii–xlviii.

know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence.¹⁵ With the paternal and even royal connotations of his name and communal position, Riaz – this father of logos and symbolic king of the faithful – is curiously untouched by the flatness of his prose poetry, because in fact, ‘he has no need to write. He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices’.¹⁶ But whether through writing or speech, Riaz’s concerns include (as his poetic subject matter exemplifies), the questions of gender and sexuality, and as a result, the incompetent but ambitious, public-oriented man of letters unerringly ‘writes’ – pre-scribes, in fact – appropriate sexual conduct for others.¹⁷

Shahid counters this gesture by writing too, and thereby splintering and multiplying what is one and undivided for his opponent. His position too is in close parallel with Derrida’s account in that quite literally, he acts as a ‘scribe from [the King’s] secretarial staff [who] then adds the supplement of a *transcription*’.¹⁸ Entrusted only with typing, the student cannot resist substantially, and erotically, rewriting Riaz’s text, but he neither destroys nor falsifies the original document (it ‘hasn’t been touched’ [233]). Instead, he creates his own, separate version that continues, nevertheless, to exist – in the manner of any parody or purposeful imitation – in a subversive relationship with its original. Unlike his boss, he possesses a literary gift, the Derridean *pharmakon* of good writing (as if aware of the French philosopher’s intended semantic interplay between recipe, drug and poison, Shahid compares literature to heroine in his conversation with Chad [21]). His transcription becomes comic repetition or duplication, intensifying the general tension between the monolithic and the pluralistic as figured in the novel, and specifically challenging the very idea of rigidly demarcated gender positions. This process becomes meaningful in the context of the story as a whole. In merely ‘playing with words’ (235), Shahid is reenacting his emphatically playful relationship with Deedee (and, through the woman’s encouragement, with the very idea of sexuality). In opening up the closed channels of meaning, he demonstrates the inevitable destabilisation, irony and dissemination that any repetitive engagement with language entails.¹⁹

Such repetition is achieved through the redeployment of linguistic, sexual and other types of motifs, imageries and situations. For example, Shahid’s short story is said to be titled ‘The Prayer-Mat’ when he is talking to Riaz, but when he is with Deedee, the same text is entitled ‘The Prayer-Mat of the Flesh’. Similarly, when the most extended discussion about the function of literature takes place with the entire Islamic group present, Riaz’s pontification is cut short by the unexpected and unsettling appearance of Zulma, Shahid’s sister-in-law. Her very intrusion effects a symbolic rift in Riaz’s homogenising, categorical talk: a combined figure of strategic smartness, confidence and clichéd conventionalism, the young wife dodges any convenient identity tag, features as a specimen of implacable hybridity, and gladdens,

¹⁵Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004) 81.

¹⁶Derrida, *Dissemination*, 81.

¹⁷Judith Butler describes ‘the postulation of a true gender ... as a regulatory fiction’ (*Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [New York: Routledge, 1999] 180).

¹⁸Derrida, *Dissemination*, 81. Italics added.

¹⁹Again, Derrida can be quoted here: ‘Toutes ces « anomalies » perturbantes sont engendrées, c’est leur loi commune, le sort ou le ressort qu’elles partagent, par de la répétition. On pourrait dire par de la citation ou par du ré-cit pourvu que l’usage restreint de ces deux mots ne vienne pas précisant nous rappeler à l’ordre du genre strict’. *Parages* 254.

in spite of their earlier hostility, the ideologically reprimanded Shahid. Whatever her talent, Zulma (prospective entrepreneur in the journalism business) is another originator of texts which, she explains at a later point, may be printed on shiny pages yet atypically represent serious engagement with a variety of feminist issues. In short, the narrative portrayal of multiple forms of writing as well as diverse writing characters destabilises the unbending, unitarian language ideology that governs the fundamentalist perspective on both gender and literature.

In addition to explicit references to subversive writing, reading and speaking, semiotic complications about an assumedly holy aubergine emphasise the open, fabricated-performative dimension of masculinity. The vegetable is announced by a devout local couple to be a divine message because it reveals, in Chad's paraphrase, 'holy words [inscribed] into the mossy flesh' (171). A religious dignitary confirms the miracle, crowds gather to witness the event, and Muslim activists, including Riaz, embark on political lobbying to have the aubergine displayed in the Town Hall. As in earlier examples, conflict arises between those who find the meaning of the sign unambiguous, those who hesitate, and those who see no sign at all. This contrast shows itself at the very first mention of the vegetable. Well-informed Chad tells the group members about the miracle, and it is the relatively open-minded, less dogmatic Hat who first shows comic confusion about the sign and its referent. On the basis of what he first hears, he believes the discussion is about a banana, and when he is told it is an eggplant, he does not know what the word means. Chad is irritated because in his view, 'No one can [have] doubt . . . now' (169). Yet his own summary of the revelation is loaded with such metaphoricity that it only puts further question marks after the possible meaning of the message. Thus, instead of mentioning holy writing immediately, he describes the vegetable as an arrow ('we have been given a miraculous sign . . . An arrow' [170]), and adds, in a curious return to the question of literacy (the dialogue takes place in the immediate wake of the discussion on Salman Rushdie and the Iranian *fatwah*) that the plant is in fact an 'arrow pointing straight at the author' (170). Characteristically, when Hat asks what type of arrow the miraculous vegetable carries, Chad's angry response ('How many bloody type of arrows are there? [170]) encapsulates the purist, reductive interpretive stance in which words and sentences denote things clearly and exclusively, even if their immersion in the metaphoric is apparent. The arising figurative density (the aubergine is a sign, is an arrow, is a weapon) or referential uncertainty is intensified by the fact that the perceived writing inside the vegetable is never exactly decoded for the reader. For these reasons, the eggplant motif comes to function less in relation to some divine intention or referent than in connection to other writings, other readings. Later, when Shahid finds the plant among Brownlow's things, the 'shriveled object [is] perched on a novel' (241), thus maintaining, even in its isolated decay, ties with textuality and fictionality.

The chief narrative link is, of course, not between a vegetable and writing, but between sexuality and writing and language in general. The aubergine – serving as a common denominator – only enables the novelist to underline the arbitrary aspect of investing signification into the human body, as well as into any object, any sign. Deedee's and Shahid's sexual jokes bring home this point with particular poignancy. After the phallic connotations of the eggplant as an arrow are established, the woman instructs her lover in these words: 'Give me your aubergine ... Stick it in my earth and

let me bless it with my holy waters'. Shahid then obediently 'place[s] his eggplant inside' her (212), but the overt analogy is not limited to a rigid, longish object and a male member. Instead, language becomes an integral part of this constellation. Through the idea of repeatability (the couple draws such a parallel more than once), through the featuring of oral sex, and through several references to the story of the celebrated aubergine itself outside their erotic contacts, Kureishi highlights, as part of a consistent narrative design, the capacity of language to inscribe diverse meanings into what otherwise seems to be purely bodily or physical. After the eggplant is equated with a text, it is equated with the male organs, to create, in a sort of looping back on itself, yet another equation between the male body and the narratives that shape and condition our perceptions of the male gender. Ultimately, the aubergine motif signals – in a comically condensed, exaggerated form – the mutable, culturally varying and in a Barthesian sense necessarily 'writable' tissue of contemporary, Western masculinity.

Any attempt to unduly privilege only one reading of such texts of gender is, according to Kureishi's narrator, a case of misreading. It is also a dangerous one. In a climactic episode, a report about a failed terrorist coup – perpetrated by Riaz's group – against a bookstore selling Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* reveals the Islamic agenda of ignoring alternative or coexistent meanings to be not only repressive but also self-destructive. That a bomb explodes into, of all characters', Chad's face exemplifies numerous earlier conceptual points about the connections that Kureishi has posited, up to this point, between language and sexuality. Most obviously, the accident is a consequence of the fundamentalist group's decision to cleanse and repress undesirable textual signification, all that 'change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining'²⁰ that Rushdie celebrates in his novel. But at the same time, the events also highlight the extent to which individual human identity is defined by one's unique relationship to language and narratives. So while Berthold Schoene appropriately relates the event to Chad's general inauthenticity,²¹ one should also notice the parallel between the character's eroding facial individuality and the attempted erosion of a particular, individual literary articulation to be found in Rushdie. Literature has been seen as the "'face" of [a] race',²² moreover, both the human face and literature have been conventionally associated with the idea of truth and truthfulness. Therefore Chad – who looks, as noted in the novel, comically young for his rigid, authoritarian politics – comes to be hit precisely in the spot that may potentially reveal similar subversive rifts and inconsistencies. Because his very purificatory program entails the elimination of subtle, personal differences, his gruesome accident is a logical culmination of his ambitions. He carries out this agenda of homogenisation too perfectly, and finds himself, as a terrible result, deprived of both his face and that unique individuality that this body part, in the manner of all human faces, has shown before. Finally, his injury is climactic and meaningful because the human face – in general and in *The Black*

²⁰ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981–91* (London: Granta Books, 1991) 394.

²¹ Berthold Schoene, 'Herald of Hybridity: The Emancipation of Difference in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1.1 (1998) 109–128.

²² Deborah E. McDowell, 'Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin', in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 59.

Album – is a site and a result of gendering. By his own absolutist standards, Chad's face is an inappropriate reflection of his hegemonic masculinity in that it carries, as pointed out critically by the young militant's own peers, no beard (this failure is all the more noteworthy after the reader learns that the equally smooth-faced Hat, who is the most tolerant and broad-minded member of the same group, looks like a 'young woman' [31]). The group's stereotypically abusive masculine attack is then carried out by one whose own sexual identity is unsettled and uncertain, and because its target is a book whose controversial satire is to a great extent sexual, the failure of the coup reflects the conjoined failure to accept the rich variability of gendered as well as textual meanings.

To conclude, the novelist's project has been shown to demonstrate that while similar processes of mixing constitute both patriarchal Islamic and liberal Western masculine identities, the two associated philosophies differ especially strongly in their pursuance of an essentialist and, respectively, constructivist attitude towards gender. Kureishi uses the *leitmotif* of literature and literary interpretation to expose and explore this contrast. Though his characters include, importantly, competent, even quite original female readers-writers, the author's chief interest is invested with the masculine dynamic of creating and legitimating identity and power through particular attitudes towards the field of the textual (as the author notes in his introduction to his film script *My Son the Fanatic*, it is 'always men' who, in worshipping the 'idea of Purity', establish a 'new authority'²³). In condemning the extremism that arises from Riaz's ideological premises, Kureishi equates good reading with constructivism in gender matters and essentialism with bad reading. Ultimately, he is interested in the phenomenon of insistence on a kind of literary-sexual competence without the education and sensitivity that such knowledge requires. In contrast to the awareness that one inhabits a changing, heterogeneous culture, Riaz's group promotes a God-willed, unified and unchanging view on both gender and the nature of literary interpretation: moreover, it feels called upon to enforce this idea. In their creed, the grand narrative governing gender, to borrow from Butler once again, is and should be indeed 'regulatory'. Yet through their own losses and disappointments, they too must experience that these narratives have only limited validity, that they are only elements among the infinite number of other discourses, other possibilities for telling the story of self and community. As Kureishi will put it a few years later, 'There are many ways of being a good man'.²⁴

²³ Hanif Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) x.

²⁴ Kureishi, *My Son the Fanatic*, 120.