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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BETWEEN THE POSSIBLE AND IMPOSSIBLE: 'IDENTITY' IN AMIN MAALOUF'S *ON IDENTITY* AND HANIF KUREISHI'S *THE BLACK ALBUM*

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ABSTRACT

This essay initiates a conversation between Maalouf's text 'On Identity' and Hanif Kureishi's novel The Black Album. regarding their contrasting views of identity.

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INTRODUCTION

In the non-fiction book *On Identity*, Amin Maaloufdiscusses identity at length, arguing for an identity which is free of bigotry, intolerance and prejudice, and that does not turn its subjects into killers (18). Maalouf's primary premise is that different identities can be homogenised ina single identity. However, in the novel *The Black Album*, Hanif Kureishi—through the protagonist's conflicts—demonstrates the impossibility of suchapremise. This essay will attempt to initiate a conversation between the twotexts regarding their contrasting views of identity, which Maalouf explicitly discusses in his text and Kureishi implicitly embeds in his novel. The aim of this essay is to determine the possibility (or the impossibility) of homogenising—and claiming—two inherently opposing identities.

***On Identity* begins as follows:** "How many times, since I left Lebanon in1976 to live in France, have people asked me, with the best intentions in the world, whether I felt 'more French' or 'more Lebanese'"? And I always give them the same answer: 'Both!'" (3). This statement presents a challenging paradox: How can one be both Lebanese and French at the same time? The claim of having both identities (not nationalities) would have been rather unacceptable in, for instance, 1920, when France occupied Lebanon on the basis of the San Remo Conference (HCPP).

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Maalouf, then, would have had to perform simultaneously the roles of the coloniser and the colonised, the abuser and the abused; in other words, he would have had to rebel, and suppress himself. In the present day, however, one might ask which history the author acknowledges as his own: the history of the oppressor or the history of the oppressed. While Maalouf argues for the possibility of an identity that encompasses both the roles of the coloniser and the colonised, in *The Black Album*, on the other hand, Kureishi presents the impossibility of claiming opposing identities. The protagonist, Shahid, finds himself poised between the extreme worlds of the sacred and the secular, embodied in his relationship with his Islamist friends and his atheist girlfriend, Deedee, respectively. While Maalouf claims that giving allegiance to both theFrench and the Lebaneseisessential for his individuality and uniqueness (3), Shahid's attempt to claim his two identities, by contrast, leads to an inner conflict and loss of self:

His own self increasingly confounded him. One day he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite. Other times provisional states would alternate from hour to hour; sometimes all crashed into chaos. He would wake up with this feeling: who would he turn out to be on this day? How many warring selves were there within him? Which was his real, natural self? (Kureishi 147). The statement powerfully suggests that Shahid exhibits symptoms of anidentity conflict, "which arises when a person has defined him or herself in terms of multiple commitments, and these make conflicting

demands on the person" (Baumeister 696). An example of the conflicting demands upon Shahid is that the same night that he makes plans with Deedee, Riaz asks him to join the group to defend a Muslim Bengali family fromracists (Kureishi 82). To fulfil both sides of his identity, Shahid often has to lie and conceal his actions. For example, when Chad asks him why he is dressed up, Shahid lies and tells him, it is "a student thing" (37)—when, in fact, heis planning to meet Deedee. Another example is when "Shahid nod[s] and smile[s] at [his friends] as casually as he could, but [is] afraid to speak for fear they would detect alcohol" (163). Maalouf's text admitsthat "every individual is a meeting ground for many different allegiances, and sometimes these loyalties conflict with one another and confront the person who harbours them with difficult choices" (5). This statement puts forward an important proposition: a moment comes when there is a"difficult choice" to make, where an individual is compelled to choose one identity over another;in other words,Maaloufbecomes more"French"or more"Lebanese".Such "difficult choice"moments that Maalouf acknowledges are the very moments that prove the *impossibility* of having multiple identities with conflicting interests. In other words, an individual cannot possibly be both "Lebanese" and "French" simultaneously. This moment of a difficult choice that Maalouf indicatesappears in Kureishi's text when Deedee addresses Shahid: "[b]ut it's me or the enchanted eggplant. […] Which of us d'you want?" (210).In this case, the eggplant stands for the sacred and the religious world of which Shahid isa part.

Maalouf's text allows components of identity to be mixed, assembled and arranged, that is, be homogenised (14). In fact, Maalouf presents himself as an example of having multiple allegiances, namely, French and Lebanese. However, when Shahid attempts to combine his two allegiances, the results are catastrophic. The first attempt to combine the two worlds is when Riaz, the leader of the fundamentalist group, offers Shahid a sheaf of papers—a manuscript of Riaz's poems, "The Martyr's Imagination"—to convert it to print (67). As Shahid begins typing, "his typing fingers, sensing Deedee's body beneath them, danced on the keys too euphorically for the subject matter" (76). And he starts to make changes to the religious poems, distorting them into erotic expressions which he justifies as follows: "I was playing—playing with words and ideas" (235). Shahid's language moves from one world to the other, blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. This *integration* in Shahid's language leads to the *separation* between him and his Islamist friends and his exile from the religious world of which he wants to be a part. This playing with "words"—or rather, playing with "worlds"—re-occurs when Shahid begins to write an erotic story for Deedee entitled "The Prayer-mat of the Flesh" (143), linking the act of prayer with the act of sex, likeningthe movements of the Islamic prayer to the movement of the body during sexual intercourse. Moreover, Shahid tells Riaz that the title of his story is "The Prayer-mat" (174), in an attempt to break the unusual link and re-separate the two worlds. This integration between affiliations—while theoretically adopted by Maalouf's text—appears destructive in Kureishi's. Furthermore, Shahid's attempts to combine both identities are met by both sides with contempt. While Maalouf argues that an individual should be able to claim all allegiances he wishes to pledge without being regarded as "a traitor or renegade" (4), in Kureishi's novel, however, such a duality of affiliation is naturally met with rejection and disdain. Deedee, for instance, comments on Shahid's relationship with her as follows: "Would they [your friends] say you are a hypocrite? […] Isn't that what you are, technically?" (160). Hat, a member ofthe fundamentalist group, on the other hand, describes him as "a double-agent" (234). Chad, another member, calls him "the spy, the infidel" (265). Thus, although he attempts to claim both, Shahid is rejected by both identities. Shahid suffers as a result of his attempt to claim both identities, and his inner peace is, thus, lost. In the mosque, where he attempts to regain his purity, "He still felt uncomfortable; he couldn't relax even in these cool rooms he felt more tranquil than anywhere, his mind was working, justifying and excoriating" (132). In another example, while Deedee applies make-up on his face,"It troubled him; he felt he were losing himself" (117), andwhen he first wears the white cotton salwar kamiz that Chad brought him, he feels "a little strange" (131). Due to his insistence on inhabiting both worlds, Shahid's mind and soul are torn.

In Kureishi's novel, the impossibility of belonging to both the sacred and the secular is demonstrated in the paradoxical line, "He believed everything; he believed nothing" (147). For Shahid to belong to both worlds, he would have to adhere to and renounce his belief, say "[y]es and no" (132) simultaneously. The blurring of the borders separating the sacred from the secular in Shahid's mind results in the blurring of all the binary opposites that constitute human logic: "[Shahid] couldn't begin to tell the sane from the mad, wrong from right, good from bad" (220). Such an impossible situationfaces a dead-end, where Shahid has to learn the art of escaping the self: "He had been resisting his own company, running from himself. It wasn't mere boredom he feared; 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" (147). His desire to escape is also demonstrated in his experience with drugs. This desire to escape the self, according to escape theory, is the essential motive behind suicide attempts. Summarised by Chatard and Selimbegovic, Baumeister proposes a six-stage cycle of escaping the self which ultimately leads to suicidal thoughts and the possibility of committing suicide:

The initial step is a major disappointment or failure that is due to events falling severely short of expectations or standards[…]. The second stage involves self-blame: Responsibility for failure is attributed to the self. The following steps successively involve high self-awareness, negative feelings and affect, a state of cognitive deconstruction, and finally several consequences of cognitive deconstruction that may increase the appeal of suicide, such as a lack of inhibitions, rejection of meaning, and irrationality. Shahid can be placed in the middle stages of the six-stage cycle. Due to the different self-escaping techniques which he employs, the possibility that Shahid may commitsuicideremains high throughout the novel. A strong allusion topotential suicideoccurs when Chad recounts a story about a girl who—to live a liberal life—left her conservative parents, but ended up committing suicide. The story largely alludesto Shahid's story. When Shahid asks about this girl, Chad replies, "That is what happens when somebody doesn't know who they are" (229). It is quite probable that Chad concocts this story and presents it as true in order to indirectly deliver a moral or religious message to Shahid. This storytelling technique inIslamic preaching—which flourished during the Umayyad Caliphate in the mosques as a popular activity after the five prayers (Al-Jabri 68–69)—exists todayas a form of preaching in the Islamic rhetoric, especially

associated with Salafism, an extremist Islamic school of thought which is known for spawning fund amentalists, such as Chad and his comrades. Not only does Shahid mentally escape reality; he also *physically* escapes when he encounters a difficult situation: "He figured it would be easier to get out, out of this whole thing, whatever it was, and disappear into the city" (58). In another example, where Shahid does not wish to confront his group about what he did to Riaz's manuscript, upon glancing at Chad on the street, he "ran as fast as he could, but kept falling into a stumbling walk" (237). Beyond its physicality, the action of stumbling suggests that Shahid keepsfailing in his attempts to inhabit both worlds. By extension, attempting to live inboth worlds simultaneously is also *physically* impossible. For instance, onthe same night that Shahid plans to meet Deedee, he ends up spending the night on the floor with his group. Moreover, when "Shahid was about to pick up the phone in the hall and ring Deedee [,] […] Riaz announced it was prayer time" (91). The two worlds always seem to create conflicting situations, where Shahid finds himself in a mental and physical conflict.

One of the few points which both texts share is the unusual desire for possession which identity can arouse inits subjects. Poised between the two worlds, Shahid, in certain moments, can be viewed as an *object* over which both worlds are fighting to possess. When Shahid's group starts beating him, "Deedee ran out. 'Leave him!' With his big arm Chad barred her away. 'He belongs to us. Let us take him, bitch, and there'll be no trouble for you!'" (266). This desire for possession is expressed more blatantly in the following line: "Chad assumed that Shahid was their possession; they wanted to own him entirely" (128). Similarly, Maalouf briefly comments on this desire as follows: "Those who belong to the same community as we do are 'ours'" (26). Therefore, Shahid's conflicting situation arises from the fact that two identities want to possess him, and he, in return, wantsto possess both identities. Maalouf argues for its complexity and rejects the simplicity of identity: "I no more believe in simplistic solutions than I do in simplistic identities" (24). He claims that each identity is complex due to its multiple allegiances and affiliations. Maalouf's primary argument, thus, corresponds to the concept of*social identity complexity*, introduced by Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B. Brewer in an article under the same name. They propose that the concept reflects the overlapping of different groups with which an individual is simultaneously affiliated. However, Roccas and Brewer explain the methods needed to resolve the conflicts that arise when an individual is compelled to adopt opposing identities. One of the methods suggested is compartmentalisation, "in which the individual consciously activates different cultural identities in different contexts or social settings". In light of this method, Maalouf's French and Lebanese identities are alternately activated and deactivated, depending on the context or the situation in which the author exists. For instance, in an interview with the Arabic language France 24 TV channel which is devoted to the topic of the Arab Spring, Maalouf speaks in fluent Arabic. He states, "The Arab spring is what we have been waiting for since we were children." Further, he declares, "We were in a coma, and we woke up". He also states, "We are capable of disposing the weapon". During the interview, Maalouf excessively uses the pronoun "we", or *Nahn* in Arabic, to speak on behalf of the Arab nation and stress his affiliation withit. Therefore, and according to the previous method, his French identity is *deactivated* and never emergesduring the interview. Turning to his text, Maalouf remarkably denies the *possibility* of such a method on the first page: "Identity can't be compartmentalised"(3). Employing the same method of compartmentalisationin Kureishi's novel, Shahid's situation can be understood as hisconstant shiftbetween the two identities of the sacred and the secular, depending on the situation in which he finds himself. Shahid, for instance, manages to cross-dress and besexually active at night (117) and wear the white cotton salwar kamiz and pray in the mosque the next day (131). This method, however, proves futile in Shahid's case because of the inherently discriminative nature that both identities share—making any method of adaptation intolerable. Shahid's constant anxiety that his double life will be exposed demonstrates this intolerability. For instance, "Chad was […] running his eyes over him [,] Shahid prayed that Deedee had scrubbed all the Molton Brown eyeshadow and Auburn Moon lipstick from his face" (128). This paranoia about being exposed generates an unpleasant feeling of self-consciousness, whereby the individual is "conscious of [himself], to prone or regard [himself] as an object of observation by others; embarrassed or stagy because of failure to forget[himself] in society"("Self-conscious").

A close examination revealsinconsistencies in the uses of the word identity in Maalouf's text;in particular, the words identity and personality are used interchangeably. For instance, the textillustrates the different allegiances that an individual is likely to have: "to a religious tradition, to a nationality—sometimes two; to a profession, an institution, […]a neighbourhood, a clan, a professional team or one connected with sport, a group of friends, a union, a company, a parish, a community of people with the same passion, the same sexual preferences" (10).In this instance, these allegiances are described as "components of personality" (10) rather than components of identity (4), as they are described earlier in the text. Another example of interchangeability appears in the following illustration of identity and its allegiances: "Take the case of an Italian homosexual in the days of fascism. I imagine that for the man himself that particular aspect of his personality had up till then been important" (12–13). A third instance of this interchangeability occurs in the lines that are intended to analyse the development of identity: "those innumerable differences, major and minor, that define every personality and shape each individual's behaviour" (22). The fourth interchangeable moment occurs in the statement, "It is extremely dangerous to try to break the maternal cord connecting a man to his own language. When it is ruptured or seriously damaged his whole personality may suffer" (110). The interchangeability between the words identity and personality is an alarming sign of undecidability, to use Jacques Derrida's terminology (Limited Inc 115), which the text exhibits towards its own vocabulary. Additional evidence of the lack of distinction between these two words canbe sensed in the statement, "Identity is not given once and for all: it is built up and changes throughout a person's lifetime" (20), which corresponds to *personality development* in psychology (Hjelle and Ziegler 11).

Furthermore, there are instancesin Maalouf's text where references to both identity and personality are made in the same sentence: "[N]ot all human beings are the same, but […] each is different. No doubt a Serb is different from a Croat, but every Serb is different from every other Serb, and every Croat is different from every other Croat" (18). While the first half of the statement implies the distinction between identities (Serb opposed to Croat), the second half, on the other hand, denotes

differences in personality (Serb opposedto Serb). Another reference to both words in the same statement occurs in the following lines: "How can their personalities fail to be damaged? How can they not feel their identities are threatened?" (62). Such interchangeability could be a source of unconscious anxiety in the text. Sensing its own anxiety,the text appears to state, "People are not interchangeable" (18), when in fact two psychoanalytical processes could have formulated such a statement: the first is displacement, a process where one image—or word—can symbolise another (Rycroft 39). In this case, the word "people" displaces the word "words". The second process is negation, "by which a perception or thought is admitted to consciousness in a negative form" (Rycroft 108). Therefore, the assertion that "people are not interchangeable" (18) becomes a quasi-confession that the "words are interchangeable" in the text. The missing distinction in Maalouf's text is the one between the personal on the one hand and the cultural—national, ethnic and religious—on the other. In other words, the necessary distinction between the particular and the universal (Sarup 19) is not made in the text: the particular being the individual experience and choices of living in which the individual is the centre, nurturing the sense of individuality of the subject, andthe universal being "the social aspect of man's existence" (Sarup 19) which establishes a sense of collectiveness, empowering the "We" and marginalising the "I".

This indistinctiveness leads to the instability of meaning not only concerning the words identity and personality, but also expandsto include other key words in the text, such as "affiliations" and "allegiances", which can equally refer to a sport team and a religious tradition (10). Due to its inner paradoxes, Maalouf's text reaches an *aporia*, a state of complete puzzlement and doubt, a "dead-end" (Makaryk), and "not knowing where to go" (Derrida, *Aporias* 12). Kureishi's novel, however, appears to respect the boundaries of meaning between the words identity and personality. To demonstrate, while Shahid suffers from an identity conflict and not knowing where he belongs, his personality nevertheless remains steady throughout the novel. He retains his interests and personal tastes in literature and music, for example, although his identity is highly unpredictable. While, for instance, he tries hard to win his comrades' admiration, it does not stop him from firmly addressing Chad as follows: "I am not living without music" (79). Moreover, his unstable identitydoes not affect his memories of his father and family in Pakistan. Another example of such a distinction can be found in Hat. Although, as a member of the fundamentalist group, he participates in the break-in at Deedee's house and witnesses the beating of Shahid by his comrades, he comes later to apologise to Shahid (271) in an individual act that cannot be engendered by his identity.Hence, there is a clear separation between personality and identity in the novel, which Maalouf's text doesnot seem to enjoy.

Although Maalouf acknowledges the ambiguity of the concept of identity, he does not restrict the word to alleviate its ambiguity: "A life spent writing has taught me to be wary of words. Those that seem the clearest are often the most treacherous. 'Identity' is one of those false friends. We all think we know what the word means and go on trusting it, even when it's slyly starting to say the opposite"(9). In the statement, the text projects its own incapability of understanding identity onto other texts. By doing so, the text undergoes a process of projection, whereby repressed inner tendencies and impulses are attributed to others (Alexander 114). Maalouf proposesa definition of identity that stretches the concept to its maximum capacity: "My identity is what prevents me from being identical to anybody else"(10). Such an unrestricted definition of identity is, thus, the primary source of the unstable meaning in the text. Unexpectedly, however, the following comment immediately follows this definition: "Defined in this way the word identity reflects a fairly precise idea" (10). Claiming to be "fairly precise" in the exact moment of complete imprecision could be interpreted as a state of negation "in which an unpleasant perception is announced by assertion of its negative" (Rycroft 33). Kureishi's novel, on the other hand—although itperforms the word identity instead of defining it—restricts the use of the word, primarily referring to two types of identities: the fundamentalist and the liberal. Nevertheless, a definition of identityin Kureishi's text canbe elicited from the following statement: "These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew — brandishing whichever features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn't be human. Shahid too wanted to belong to his people" (92). Identity is basically defined in the statement as the need to belong, to be part of a larger whole, which fundamentally contradicts Maalouf's definition of identity as a means to distinguish oneself from everybody else (10). A systematic pattern to hold responsible for the inconsistencies that atomise the logic of Maalouf's textstarts to unfold: *The lack of a clear definition to restrict the use of the key concept in the text—identity—leads to a maze of uncertainty of meaning that runs throughout the entire text and causes all its contradictory symptoms*. A special case of this uncertainty persistently re-appears in the shape of the interchangeability between the words identity and personality. Consequently, other key words become infected with the same uncertainty, such as "affiliations" and "allegiances"—rendering *every use* of them in the text another asserted ambiguity and a possible contradiction (see Table 1). Based on the figures presented, there are at least 251 potential paradoxes in the text.

Table 1. Times of Repetition of Key Words in *On Identity*

Key Word	Times of Repetition
Identity(ies)*	154
Allegiance/s	51
Affiliation/s	46
Total	251

The instability of its key words indicates that the text's infrastructure, and thus the construction of meaning, is always susceptible to collapse. Furthermore, it is notable that even texts that quote or refer to Maalouf's text *On Identity* can be contaminated by the same uncertainty. For instance, in his book *The Psychology of Social and Cultural Diversity*, Richard J. Crisp refers to Maalouf's text *In the Name of Identity* (the same text published under a different title) as follows: "[A]s Amin Maalouf points out in his book *In The Name Of Identity*(1996/2003), it is not group identity per se that has such negative consequences for intergroup behaviour, but rather the focus on a *singular* identity that reduces the complexity of individual attachments and affiliations to a single, central, us-them distinction" (11). Hence, the use of the word identity transfers the uncertainty in Maalouf's text to Crisp's statement—and consequently his argument—presenting the possibility of a conflation between the words identity and personality.

Maalouf's text, stripped of its organic unity, is unprotected against radical interpretations. While undecidability contaminates the body of the text, starting with its title, *On Identity* (which now refers to *no identity* in particular), it also allows space for another necessary operation. The word identity in the title—and everywhere else in the text—ought to be placed *sous rapture*, or under erasure (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 67): *On* Identity. The crossing of the word—or the effect of the erasure—is a philosophical device introduced by Martin Heidegger and adopted by Derrida, where "the word is not denied, but its doubtable operation is emphasised" (Collins 135). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains, "Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible" (xv). Consequently, the final and most complex paradox arises: the impossibility of a stable meaning of the word identity renders it tautological, yet the absence of it renders the text impossible. Impossibility, uncertainty and undecidability, to which the text is condemned, *can be read to illustrate traits of identity*. In other words, by fragmenting the text, the text *performs* the fragmentation of identity. By its paradoxes, conflicts and contradictions, the text *mimics* the nature of identity. The text, therefore, can be viewed in terms of *performativity* in Derrida's sense (*Limited Inc* 13):it acts—rather than argues—and it shows—rather than says. Furthermore, *the text says the opposite of what it performs*: It speaks of unity, homogeneity and coherence while performing contradictions, paradoxes and heterogeneity. The text stages a play of *parody*. It is with this reading that one can begin to gain a new aesthetic appreciation of Maalouf's text, perceiving it as an actor in the middle of his routine, to be judged not by the credibility of his words, but the persuasiveness of his performance. In this reading, Maalouf's text resembles Kureishi's novel; they both *perform* the fragmentation of identity and show the impossibility of having two opposing identities. Kureishi's novel straightforwardly presents this impossibility through Shahid's inner and outer struggles between the sacred and the secular, and the fundamentalist and the liberal. Maalouf's text, on the other hand, performs this impossibility through the contradictions and uncertainties of the definition and uses of the word identity. Although they seem to have opposite contentions, the two texts nevertheless deliver the same result: the impossibility of homogenising identities with conflicting interests. To put it differently, Maalouf cannot be French and Lebanese at the same time in the same way that Shahid cannot be a fundamentalist and a liberal at the same time. Although the "moment of choice" canbe deferred, postponed and equivocated, it will nonetheless eventually come. Shahid ultimately chooses to travel with Deedee; in other words, he chooses the liberal identity over the fundamentalist identity. Likewise, Maalouf will reach, if he has not already reached, a moment where choosing one allegiance at the expense of betraying another seems painful but inevitable.

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