

Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" and the Illusion of 'Pure' Identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes on a critical literary approach to Hanif Kureishi's short story "My Son the Fanatic." Through close analysis, the text reveals the intricate concept of hybridity and identity in a neocolonial setting. Identities are shaped and founded on a false notion of "purity." The text presents the tensions facing immigrants and their attempt to formulate and maintain an identity that falls between complete assimilation and the rejection of one's own culture. To find and maintain that balance is the complex burden of hybridity. The characters must find a sense of belonging, and it is increasingly difficult to do so in a society infested with racial ideologies. The findings of this paper reflect how problems arise when the West is placed above the East, and this ideology is indoctrinated and internalized by the postcolonial self.

Hanif Kureishi's short story "My Son the Fanatic" invites the reader to examine the adversities of hybridity as well as the multitude of meanings and definitions of identity. Kureishi exposes themes revolving around the immigrant's struggle living in London. Sukhdev Sandhu in her influential essay "Pop Goes the Centre: Hanif Kureishi's London" informs us that "Academics and more importantly-fellow artists have cited him [Kureishi] as the canniest and most entertaining chronicler of the black British experience. London, both its allure and abjection, has been the dominant theme of his writings" (133-4). As such, the stories deal with Pakistani immigrant families living in London; the central characters in "My Son the Fanatic" are Parvez (the father) and his son Ali. The text exposes issues that generate from the pressure of assimilation and the inability to view things from multiple perspectives. These issues include the intercultural struggle that occurs within the immigrant, the need to belong to a certain division of society, imposing questions of race, self-identity, and the dangers of "essentialising" one's identity. This research paper explores the tensions of hybridity and establishing one identity as superior to the other.

To begin with, in "My Son the Fanatic" Kureishi uses a father's perspective to inform the reader of the changes he notices in his son's behavior. Parvez's frustration and pain as a father distresses the reader. However we are not capable of

being wholly judgmental because Kureishi depicts Ali as a victim of colonial and racial ideologies which assert that the "West is the best" (128). Ali has become a religious Islamist and harbors a strong sense of hatred and resentment towards the West. He states: "My people have taken enough. If the persecution doesn't stop there will be *jihad*" (126). Ali is a Pakistani born in London, and like many other hybrids, is caught between being a Pakistani or living as any other English person would. He suffers from this blend of two cultures that are a part of his identity. Ali tries to choose one culture, one "pure identity", and follow one doctrine, one way of living. His intercultural struggle is not presented to us explicitly, given that Kureishi rarely outlines the inner conflicts overtly. The story begins with Ali throwing out his belongings and clothes. We are unaware of the past events that lead to Ali's radical change of temperament. However, we are able to infer that he has failed in achieving a balance between two cultures; Ali was unable to beat this prevailing intercultural struggle. He was not able to see things from more than one perspective, to use Said's term "contrapuntally." Also, Ali did not endeavor to see his father's side, which is similar to his own struggles, namely his father's experience as an immigrant under the pressure of assimilation. Instead, Ali "accused his father of 'groveling' to the whites" (Kureishi 128). According to Edward W. Said's

“Discrepant Experiences” when you fail to understand that all experiences are “overlapping and interconnected”, then you consequently “will demote the different experience of others to a lesser status” (Said 27). Ali demeans Parvez’s experience and overlooks it. Possibly this conflict arises from a fear of losing one’s “purity” and origins, as Sandhu notes, “Their lives [the immigrants] are petrified as they cleave dogmatically to their memories, the values and norms on which they and their parents were weaned” (152). Frantz Fanon also highlights this struggle in “National Culture” by labeling this exact struggle as a resistance to dominant Western ideology and values due to a fear of “being swamped... Because they realize they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people” (154). Kureishi represents this inner turmoil through Ali’s manifold perplexities of his sense of self and his dogmatic imbalances of judgments. Ali does not take into account that Parvez has gone through the same pressures of assimilation and belonging that he wearily undergoes: “Ali then reminded Parvez that he had ordered his own wife to cook pork sausages, saying to her ‘You’re not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in!’” (125) Parvez’s words are the verbal embodiment of the state of the immigrant, feeling pressured to “fit in” and be assimilated. Parvez, like Ali, is living with a bleak and incessant intercultural struggle which at times leads to mimicry of the West and western values.

Parvez and Ali both suffer from the overpowering need to belong to a certain segment of society. Perhaps this is the result of racial ideologies and the hierarchies that coexist with colonialism, racism, and sexism. Individuals try to fit somewhere on the social hierarchy and “other” themselves from the rest of the hierarchy. In doing so they both become extremists; they are unable to uncover a middle ground, and ultimately force themselves to the point of annihilation. Ali becomes a “fanatic” and Parvez obstinately rejects his religion and traditions. Ali feels isolated from society because of the racism that is usually inflicted upon immigrants or those who are not originally westerners. However as Sandhu points out, “It’s not only such treatment from white people... that makes Kureishi’s characters want to move away. Pressure is also imposed from within” (135). Ali confronts the issue of racism by becoming a racist himself. Instead of finding a more effective way of dealing with his intercultural struggle and the racial ideologies that flood society, Ali takes a destructive road which destroys his humanity and his relationships with others, particularly his father. He starts “othering” himself and alienating himself from the West. Ali refuses to listen to anyone but his own voice, or rather his fanatic voice: “Ali sounded as if he had swallowed someone else’s voice.” (126) Frantz Fanon’s *Concerning Violence* sheds light upon the struggles of the native, in this case we shall place Ali in the frame of the native. Fanon describes the native’s struggle in dealing with Western ideologies of Western supremacy as “produce[ing] in the native a sort of stiffening or muscular lock-jaw... it also happens that when the native hears a speech about Western culture he pulls out his knife-or at least makes sure it is within reach ” (10). Ali reclaims his identity by claiming a certain group of people as “his people.” He pushes his father away from him and refuses to accept Parvez’s way of life. Ali can only see things as right

or wrong, black or white. For instance, during a conversation with Parvez about Parvez’s views on life, Ali bitterly questions his father: “Around the world millions and millions of people share my beliefs. Are you saying you are right and they are all wrong?” (Kureishi 129) Ali’s question can be reversed and if he had been able to use Said’s notion of “counterpoint” and viewing things “contrapuntally”, he would not have asked such a question. Since “millions of people” share Ali’s beliefs (according to him), then similarly many people may possibly share Parvez’s beliefs and views on life.

Ali’s unwillingness to consider the “discrepancy” between his experiences and other people’s experiences and troubles, not only makes him fundamentally a racist but also a sexist. Given that the issue of belonging to a certain part of society involves class and social rank, Ali frowns upon his father’s friend, Betina. Betina is a prostitute that has a special friendship with Parvez. Ali categorizes himself as a Muslim and categorizes Betina as indecent and as even lower on the social hierarchy than he is. He insults her by saying that his father should not “let a woman like you touch him” (130). The hierarchy is not only racist, but also sexist. Although Betina is a prostitute, and due to certain social constructions may be viewed as morally corrupt, she proves to be the voice of wisdom in the story and she is able to view both experiences “contrapuntally.” For example, when Parvez tells Betina that he believes his son is taking drugs, “she judged neither the boy nor his father” (Kureishi 121). Another example that highlights Betina’s ability to view things from multiple perspectives is when she convinces Parvez not to let go of his son: “But you mustn’t give up on him, many young people fall into cults and superstitious groups. It doesn’t mean they’ll always feel the same way” (127). Unlike Ali and Parvez, Betina understands other people’s experiences and is neither judgmental nor racist. Kureishi manages to dismantle the stereotype of the immorality of the prostitute as deemed by society. She is portrayed as the one person highly aware of the hardships and realities of life and is open to different ways of asserting identity and accepting the Other. Although Betina may be perceived as the marginalized woman because of her profession, she does not reciprocate such prejudices towards others. On the other hand, Parvez is in a sense racist, although he may be completely unaware of his racism: “The previous day Parvez had been telling Betina that he thought people in the West sometimes felt inwardly empty and that people needed a philosophy to live by” (128). Parvez, like Ali, “others” the “people of the west” and judges them as being “inwardly empty.” He gives himself the right to suggest that “people in the west” are not living the way they ought to be living, and that they “needed a philosophy to live by.” As such, he elevates his spirituality, religion, and identity, whilst simultaneously devaluing the Other. Both father and son are condemnatory and separate themselves from the rest of humankind by placing themselves in certain groups of society, in certain positions on the social ladder, elevating themselves and condemning others.

Kureishi presents us with the problematic issue of hybridity and finding one’s identity. The problem arises when one’s identity becomes the only identity he/she can accept, when he/she does not take into account other people’s identities. Ali embarks on a search for a static self-identity, a “pure identity”

which consequently restricts him from developing a dynamic understanding of society and leads to racism and essentialism. A "pure" identity is inexistent; however Ali is ignorant of that reality. Sandra Baringer's "The Hybrids and the Cosmopolitans" defines this quest for selfhood and identity as intricate and even catastrophic: "The problem of selfhood for the mixed race characters...the issue is explored within an ambience of impending doom that seems to pervade" (108). Ali believes his identity as a Muslim is superior and that "The Law of Islam would rule the world, the skin of the infidel would burn off again and again...The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes" (126). Ali uses what Said labels as "politics of blame" to legitimize the Islamists or fanatics actions towards the west, the killings, terrorism, etc. Said underlines the problem of essentialism: "the difficulty with theories of essentialism and exclusiveness, or with barriers and sides, is that they give rise to polarizations that absolve and forgive ignorance and demagoguery more than they enable knowledge" (27). Ali "essentialises" the Muslims along with his identity. For Said, there is nothing "essential" and there is a huge benefit from "juxtaposing experiences with each other, in letting them play off each other to make concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences" (Said 28). If we apply Said's argument to Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" we can recognize the problem between Parvez and Ali as not only a clash of beliefs and identities, but also ignorance about how necessary it is to "think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant" (Said 28). In the final section of the story, Parvez beats his son brutally as a final attempt to reach him, "Parvez kicked him over. Then he dragged the boy up by his shirt and hit him...He knew that the boy was unreachable, but he struck him nonetheless. The boy neither covered himself nor retaliated; there was no fear in his eyes" (131). Kureishi uses this violent behavior exhibited by the father to illustrate the unstable state that the native or immigrant suffers from. Fanon describes this condition vividly: "The native's muscles are always tensed" (21). Ali audaciously asks his father: "So who's the fanatic now?" (131).

Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" forces us to consider and reassess the notions of identity and straightforwardly ask, what *is* identity? How are we able to define identity in a linear manner and establish an indisputable understanding of the meaning of identity? Everyone is relentlessly searching for an identity or, at times reclaiming their identity. For instance, people like Ali degrade other people's identities in a futile attempt to claim their own. They legitimize their racism towards others and are unable to view the world around them "contrapuntally." Ali and Parvez's, alongside with Azhar and his family's conflict springs from the pressure of assimilation and belonging. They are persistently attempting to find a part of society that allows them to intrepidly express their identities. The major downfall is what Sandhu ingeniously underlines as an ineffective effort to discover and activate one "simple" identity:

There's no simple, uniform Englishness with which anyone, yet alone an immigrant, could hope to assimilate. A cant term in contemporary critical discourse is 'in-betweenness.' It involves a rejection of simplistic

binarisms and oppositions such as colonizer/colonized, heterosexual/homosexual or margin/centre in favour of a more conjoined, 'hybridized' explanation of identity in which, as it were, forever the twain shall meet. (142)

The difficulty with "essentialising" one identity is that it imposes restrictions and makes it almost impossible to view things from multiple perspectives and accept other ways of asserting identities. It is exceedingly dangerous to suppose that there is such a thing as a "pure identity." We are all in a sense "creolized" and are a result of many ideologies and a combination of cultures. "Pure" identity is a false impression that is fed to people and it promotes racism and essentialism. In *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order*, David Punter tells us that Stuart Hull examines the dynamics of identities and eloquently points out that:

"Cultural identities... are the unstable points of identification. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin.'" (162)

To conclude, establishing a self-identity for the hybrid is extremely difficult, if not in one way or another, impossible. However, once self-definition is found, people idealize their identities and consequently endorse social hierarchies which continue to separate people not only from others but also from themselves. There is no reason to strive for establishing and maintaining one "pure identity" in order to declare its superiority. There is perhaps no better way to conclude this paper except in Brathwaite's words, "Although there is white/brown/black, there are infinite possibilities within these distinctions and many ways of asserting identity" (205).

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