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**Navigating Cultural Boundaries: Themes of Xenophobia in Kureishi's  
Short story "My Son the Fanatic"**

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**Abstract:**

Hanif Kureishi's 1994 short story, "My Son the Fanatic" is a reflection of the current scenario of xenophobia and ethnic pigeon-holing of the marginalised immigrant community. In the paper, the author has tried to study how assimilation in the mainstream culture may not always bridge the gap of cultural differences. Rather, acceptance of the differences and acknowledging them can be a better way to deal with fragmentism and fundamentalism. As Hanif Kureishi has quite rightly expressed this in his essay, "...an effective multi-culturalism is: not a superficial exchange of festivals and food, but a robust and committed exchange of ideas – a conflict which is worth enduring, rather than a war" ("Carnival of Culture," 100).

**Keywords:** Ethnic pigeon-holing, fundamentalist, Better-Philosophy, and multiculturalism.

Hanif Kureishi's short story, "My Son the fanatic," (1994) is a testament to the sporadic growth of hatred and ethnic pigeon-holing in a multicultural world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although published nearly three decades ago, the book uncovers many realities that grip our society currently. The recent ongoing wars between nations, religious jingoism and racial intolerance are lived examples of a world torn apart by xenophobia and power politics. One can observe that religious intolerance has grown deeper in the current years despite numerous peace processes and resolutions. This paper tries to understand how violence, hatred and community pigeon-holing breaks a society, and how acceptance and acknowledgement of differences can be a better philosophy in restoring peace among communities.

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The short story, *My Son the Fanatic* (1994) revolves around the Pakistani taxi driver, Parvez, who lives with his wife and son in a suburb of London. The story begins with Parvez “[s]urreptitiously going into his son’s bedroom” (116) to get a clue about his son’s tectonic change of behaviour. On carefully checking Ali’s room, Parvez notices to his amazement that his son is getting tidier and all his belongings, “clothes, books, cricket bats, video games” are neatly kept because of which “spaces began appearing where before there had been only mess” (116). Although short-lived, Parvez is delighted to see some positive changes in his young son, Ali who is pursuing Accountancy course in a college, and is engaged to an English girl, Madelaine Fingerhut. For Parvez, Ali is the manifestation of his dreams of being a perfect English man. He is happy to see a shift in Ali’s behaviour from being a despondent teenager to a matured and sorted young man. As he goes deeper, and checks the dust bin, Parvez witnesses something odd that does not align with Ali’s changed behaviour. He finds Ali’s videotapes, computer discs, new books and fashionable new clothes in the dustbin. Not only this, Ali has also called off his engagement and changes his choice of attires from jeans and T-shirt to *Salwar Kameez* and a skull cap. This discovery had made Parvez nervous and concerned. Thus, at the very beginning of the story, Kureishi introduces us to the conflict of ideology and desire between the first generation and the second -generation immigrants.

Parvez represents the first-generation immigrants who tries to fit in with the lifestyle of the new found homeland. They eagerly jettison the old cultural practices of the old country in order to get accepted by their new neighbours and colleagues in the new homeland. Parvez chooses his identity according to the acceptable norms of the place. He accepts the western ways of living by eating pork and drinking alcohol (which in Islam is haram or Sin) and significantly declaring his liberal beliefs and ridiculing the Moulvis (the Muslim priests) for being hypocrites. He tells his wife to cook pork sausages as he firmly believes, “You’re not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in” (122).

He even procures harlots to the rich tourists in order to earn extra money to provide quality life to his family. And often faces humiliation and racial slurs from his customers like Mr. Schitz. He and his fellow brethren from Pakistan at the cabbie’s office are ready to tolerate humiliation on a daily basis in exchange for better payment to help them support their families. They educate their children in the hope that the children’s secured future will stop all the hatred and cultural biases that they face once they start landing lucrative jobs like lawyers, Chartered accountants or even

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doctors. Critics like R. Radhakrishnan (1996) and Vijay Mishra (2007) observe that the fellow first-generation immigrants like Parvez are ready to trade their cultural practices in an attempt to get acceptance in their new homeland. In so doing, the past cultures at home are suspended and new cultures are adopted. In this respect Stuart Hall observes:

Cultural identities are the point of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. 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. ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 226).

At the other side, one can observe the differences in the cultural practices between the west and the east which will be discussed elaborately later in this paper. For Ali, the western ideology was all about degradation of value system, and the eastern cultural practices, especially Islam was a respite from such degradation.

### **Assimilation a failed option in a multicultural city like London:**

Ali has witnessed the racial abuses and humiliation every other day. He has seen his father and his other Pakistani immigrant uncles face humiliation because of their position as immigrants. He has understood that no matter how much they try to assimilate with the British culture, they will always be relegated to the margins. Hence, he and his fellow Muslim friends decides to follow the call of Jihad and follow the ways taught by the *Sharia*. To Ali, the west is a bottomless pit and that it is only through the path of Islam that he and his future children can be emancipated from the grip of a decadent consumerist culture. Therefore, he decides to discard everything that represented the western ideology of liberalism like the video tapes, fashionable clothes, books, etc. he even calls off his engagement with his English girlfriend, Madeleine Fingerhut. His idea of resisting the western way of cultural hegemony was the adoption of Islamic fundamentalism along with joining the world-wide call of Jihad.

Unlike his parent's generation who believed in assimilating with the culture of the hostland, Ali and the second-generation immigrants lead a better life. They didn't have to struggle to make both ends meet. All they need to do was to study hard and get good jobs. But what the parents miss is that their children also suffer despite speaking the same language (their parents' language is heavily accented), and have

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grown in the same neighbourhood yet they are often bullied and abused owing to their race.

Kureishi here gives us an insight into the first-generation migrants like Parvez for whom religion and religious rituals were a signifier of poverty and cruelty. These Pakistani immigrants of the 1960s, "suffered an almost total lapse of religious observance, yet migration was not perceived as a threat to their heritage. It was possible to live on the margin of British society, avoiding any deeper involvement than work necessitated... The migrant lived and worked in Britain on behalf of his family" (qtd. in Gilman 140).

For Parvez, assimilating with the host culture is important to emerge as a new identity where the ethnic self is shelved. Like many of his immigrant friends from South-Asia, Parvez's adaptation to the British culture seems like a utilitarian move. He and the people of his generation understood it clearly that in order to survive in the new country, they have to adapt to the culture, or they will be pushed to the margins. As it was openly declared by the politicians like Margaret Thatcher and Enoch Powell who emphasised the assimilation of the immigrants to the home culture of England. Thatcher in a Powellian tone proclaims, "People with other faiths and cultures have always been welcomed in this land, assured of equality under the law, of proper respect and of friends. There is absolutely nothing incompatible between this and our desire to maintain the essence of our own identity" (qtd. in A. M. Smith 225).

Such attempts of assimilation in the host culture and lifestyle are meant to get social recognition and validation of their existence in the host country. It is an attempt to raise their social esteem which is often crushed in the host society through various means like racism, favoritism, oppressive rule, etc. We can explain this using Emmanuel Renault's idea of *Me'pris social'* which appeared in the book *Mepris Social: Ethique et Politique de la Reconnaissance* (1989): it could be understood as "social devaluation" or "lack of social esteem." While describing the origins of workings of the recognition and validation by society, which he calls "La reconnaissance sociale," he has identified three spheres of recognition. The first sphere is of family and friends, who validates the individual's existence within a group s/he belongs to. The second sphere is the workplace, where the individual performs a certain job entitled to him/her and which validates his/her usefulness to the society. The third and the last sphere is that of the

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nation, or a large group like a community where people share the same principles and have the same rights, and who, therefore, form another type of peer groups like the family and friends (qtd. in Král 116).

### **Fundamentalism as an answer to the western capitalistic thought:**

Kureishi, in his essay, "The Road Exactly," observes the failure of the first-generation immigrants" compromises and losses in order to belong without, "having to notice where you are, and, more importantly, not being seen as different, ... Where it hasn't, there is, in the children and grandchildren of great post-war wave of immigrants, considerable anger and disillusionment" (57).

However, for the children of the first-generation immigrants who cannot accept the history of exploitation, humiliation and political helplessness which their parents had undergone silently. These experiences produce a vivid effect on them who are unwilling to sit back and tolerate without any response. These children, after all, are not immigrants, but British-born citizens. They sound the same as the children of the natives of the host country. They follow the same fashion trend, yet they are cast aside and are attacked by other white peers. They are born with a different skin colour, but they speak the language of white peers. These hybrid identities cannot find themselves in any of the two positions of belongingness – the East and the West. As pointed out by Vijay Mishra they take recourse to their imaginary homelands in the "form of mosques, temples and the like" (201).

It is at this point where one can see that collision is a bit more than traditional father-son dynamics. We notice the generational difference in perspective between the two. Located against the father's voluntary blending with the culture and lifestyle of the host society, Ali, like Riaz in *The Black Album*, alienates himself with the host society and its culture. For the second generation and the third-generation migrants from South Asia, irrespective of their similarity with the hostland (their homeland), they are constantly alienated in all fields, be it education, job opportunities, salary structures and health care, which Professor Anthony Heath of the University of Oxford terms as "ethnic penalty"<sup>10</sup> (qtd. in Koser 98). This is reflected in the short story, "My Son the Fanatic" through Ali's aggressive expression, "'The Western materialists hate us," Ali said, "Papa, how can you love something which hates you?"' (122). He repudiates his father for being "too implicated in Western Civilization" (122). For Ali, his identity permeates the geographical boundaries and

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becomes one with that of his fellow Muslim brethren around the world. He, like many of the neo-fundamentalist friends from the Muslim world, believes in the emergence of a Caliphate, a heaven on earth which is the ultimate destination as described in the short story:

The law of Islam would rule the world; the skin of infidel would burn off again and again; the Jews and Christians would be routed. The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes... My people have taken enough. If the persecution doesn't stop there will be jihad. I, and millions of others will gladly give our lives for the cause... For us the reward will be in Paradise. ("My Son the Fanatic" 122-23)

Thus, Ali's turn to Islam to build his own identity involves going back to his cultural roots leaving aside the identity with which he was born – a Paki, an immigrant. The identity of the neo-fundamentalists lies in religion, it is a mode of self-expression. As Adis Duderjia observes:

Religion becomes an over determined locus of Muslim immigrants' identity. Their identity, in other words, becomes religion based. This is not to say that western Muslim necessarily becomes more "religious" i.e religiously observant, but that Western Muslims construct their identity increasingly through the lens of their religious affiliation. (342)

Roberto Tottoli in his work Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West asserts that "Islamic identities in the Western Muslim communities are the product of a reconstruction rather than traditional transmission" (9).

The two opposing worldviews cause conflicts and tensions among immigrants, which further propel the tension between being Muslim and being British. For example, Parvez, who belongs to the old generation of immigrants, leaves aside his ethnic identity in order to assimilate and construct a new identity in the new country, whereas his son, Ali, a second-generation immigrant, thwarts his naturalised British identity to construct a new identity by going back to the past, renouncing everything western that he deems decadent. Ali leaves his part-time job as a fashion model and the accountancy course to cleanse his soul for purity which has become dirty by living in Britain.

As distinct from Ali, Parvez's faith lies in the promise of capitalism which is about earning by all means and worshipping the power of money. He works in all

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hours in order to take care of his family, providing them with financial security and exposing his son to western education so that the latter may get easy access to the white world. It reflects the colonial effects that had left millions of natives during the Raj to follow their white masters who represented progress and modernity.

Parvez like many of his taxi-driver friends in the cabbie's office would laugh at the hypocrisy of "local mullahs ... thinking they could tell people how to live, while their eyes roved over the boys and girls in their care" ("My Son the Fanatic," 120). Even the *maulvi* who comes to stay at their home on Ali's invitation also tries to use Parvez's influence to procure permanent immigration in Britain. He also asks for material comforts like VCR, Heaters, geysers etc. Kureishi with his humorous sarcasm presents these hypocrisies. The moulvi, who preaches about the purity of soul, the rules of *Sharia*, and who calls England as a land of corrupt souls, ironically requests Parvez to arrange for permanent citizenship in England. He requests Parvez, "I need some legal advices. My work is here. I will stay... can you help me? In my own country we are treated badly, and everywhere else we are what? Pakis" (372).

As the story progresses, Parvez gets an opportunity to serve a German tourist, Mr. Schitz. A true symbol of western consumerist culture, Mr. Schitz is interested in buying the best. Parvez earns quite well while serving Mr. Schitz by arranging for a girl to sleep with him. Mr. Schitz is a representation of Kureishi's critique of western capitalism where there is no place for humanity, but only pleasure. This scene with Mr. Schitz also shows Parvez's dissatisfaction with his work. Mr. Schitz not only buys services of Bettina and Parvez, but he also humiliates Parvez as if it comes as a compliment to the latter's services. For Mr. Schitz, pleasure is everything and respect is not a substitute for pleasure. He, like a typical consumer, throws money and teams up costumes, makeup and the right kind of girl to enjoy his time at the Northern end of London. He categorically instructs Parvez that the pick-up girl must be in "boots... Spanish boots of Spanish leather" (306). On the very first day of his outing with Bettina, Schitz gifts her nice dresses and makeup to enhance her beauty and also to enhance her status to match him. Bettina comes wearing them, which Schitz describes boastfully that she is "wearing the finest cotton, cashmere, satin, and silk. Her boots are shining. Puss in boots I'm calling her now" (316). He addresses Parvez patronisingly as "Little man" and "kick[ing] him up the arse and laugh[ing]" (366). Susan Alice Fischer sees Schitz's character as the worst form of western materialism, "Schitz seems to represent not so much pleasure, always an important principle in

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Kureishi's work, as the worst aspects of capitalism. He throws money around as he buys and uses people, with little interest in humanity" (78).

As days passed by, Parvez becomes all the more troubled by Ali's complete transformation as a young fanatic. He sees the loss of his authority as a father and as a husband. His son leaves the house and also his wife, Minoo leaves him. He becomes exasperated by the situation and in a desperate attempt to bring things under control, Parvez hits his son, Ali. To that Ali asks him, "Now who is the fanatic?"

The author, Kureishi doesn't provide an answer to who actually is a fanatic. Instead, can refer to Nietzsche's definition of fanaticism and his groundbreaking idea of Christian morality which would answer Kureishi's question on "So who's the fanatic?" Nietzsche in his book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, argues that "Every system of morals is a sort of tyranny against "nature," and also against "reason"" (585). Nietzsche continues, "One may look at every system of morals in this light: it is "nature" therein which teaches to hate the *laissez-aller*, the too great freedom, and implants the need for limited horizons, for immediate duties – it teaches the narrowing of perspective..." (586). For the many possibilities of nature remain only possibilities as long as they are not reduced – through morality – into one realised possibility. Thus, the opposition between nature and morality is transformed into the tension or struggle of the will to power. Thus, the violent aggression of Parvez due to Ali's strong opposition to his value system makes him a fanatic too as he blocks the possibility of many possibilities of nature with one realised possibility of being correct.

### **Can love and acceptance fill up the gap?**

Kureishi doesn't provide us with an answer here to choose a way, but in a subtle manner, he addresses through his character Bettina his idea of a better philosophy for the neo-fundamentalist youths of Britain. Parvez and Bettina, choose love over any of the two extremities of materialism and fundamentalism. Their provisional decision of staying together for a moment with love and warmth reflects Bettina's idea of a "better philosophy" about "The purpose of life... How should we treat each other?" (325).

The *Fatwa* was released for Salman Rushdie after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) that has greatly moved Hanif Kureishi who went on an in depth research on the growing inclination of fundamentalist ideology among the youth of Britain. He wrote "My Son the Fanatic" nearly ten years before the London



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underground bombings on 7th July 2005 often referred to as 7/7. All the four accused in the bombings were home-grown terrorists – Hassib Hussain, Germaine Lindsey, Shehzad Tanweer and Mohammad Sidique Khan. In a videotape, Mohammad Sidique Khan declares:

I and thousands like me have forsaken everything for what we believe [...] Your democratically elected governments continually perpetrate atrocities against my people all over the world. Your support makes you directly responsible... We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation.<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation echoes the voice of Ali in the story where he talks about the worldwide brotherhood of the Muslim community's pledge for *Jihad* against the Western hegemony, "The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes... My people have taken enough. If the persecution doesn't stop there will be jihad. I and millions of others will gladly give our lives for the cause... For us, the reward will be in Paradise" ("My Son the Fanatic" 123).

Critics like Melaine J. Wright contend that "My Son the Fanatic" participates in the elision of "Islam" into "fundamentalism" in contemporary popular western discourse, feeding into what might be termed, following Stanley Cohen's classic definition, the "moral panic" surrounding young Muslims in the West today" (116). Susan Alice Fischer cautions against such a reading of the work which is a warning against the possible growth of an extreme form of intolerance between East and the West, between religious groups and western liberals as witnessed during the wild protests of *The Satanic Verses* Affair. Instead, Fisher suggests a better philosophy of love, brotherhood, and culture which can be attained by the far-reaching, all-encompassing and philosophical works of artists and intellectuals of the 21st century.

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### Notes:

1. For further reading see Mohammad Siddique Khan's speech in "London Bomber: Text in Full." *News.Bbc.Co.Uk*, 2005, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk/4206800.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk/4206800.stm).

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