

# Friendship, religion, fanaticism, and identities



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Hanif Kureishi's well known short story " My Son the Fanatic" (1997) explores themes of friendship, religion, fanaticism and identities. In a detailed discussion, this essay will discuss the significant relationship between the father, Parvez, and his friend, Bettina, who works as a sex worker. The discussion will begin with a contextualization of the passage found on page 97 and followed by an analysis of the use of spaces and places to reflect each of Parvez's different identities.

Parvez, is a man from Lahore, Pakistan and the father of his son, Ali. It is implied that Parvez's wife is living with them, but she remains unnamed throughout the story and is hardly mentioned. This creates a sense that Parvez and his wife are not close and later allows the reader to realize just how important Bettina is to Parvez, as she is the only woman he is close to in his life. Parvez immigrated to London from his home country in order to seek a better life for himself and his family, leaving behind his old life, culture and Islamic religion. He works as a taxi driver and throughout his time as a taxi driver, he befriends a woman, Bettina, who he lifts to work in the evening. After starting to notice little changes in his son's behavior that were out of character for him, he started to worry whether Ali was taking drugs or getting into other kinds of trouble. While hanging out with his co workers he asked them what their opinions on the matter were, but to no avail he was unsuccessful in pin-pointing the cause of his son's new behavior. The extract then begins with Bettina sitting in his car, which is " to his relief" as he is able to confide with Bettina about his son, which he has done numerous times in the past, and asks for her advice on the situation. The passage then goes on to explain how Parvez met Bettina and how their friendship

blossomed until this point in time where they are sat in his car talking about his son (Kureishi 97).

Parvez initially met Bettina one evening when he lifted her to meet a client. Many of the taxi drivers lift the sex workers to work in return for sexual favors. They became friends after he saved her from one of her clients who turned violent and from then on they “ had come to care for one another” (Kureishi 97). One is unable to conclude whether Parvez’s relationship with Bettina ever went further than a friendship like the other taxi drivers who gave the prostitutes rides in return for sexual favors, or whether they had a friendship in which they truly looked out for each other and supported each other. This support is the main aspect of their relationship.

Parvez receives support and advice from Bettina which he doesn’t receive from his wife. The story quotes “ he could talk to her about things he’d never be able to discuss with his own wife” (Kureishi 97). Having his wife play a minimal role in the short story shows just how important Bettina is in Parvez’s life. Bettina takes his wife’s role as the person he relies on, comes to for comfort and advice and possibly for his sexual needs as well. When Parvez is worried about his son, Bettina is the woman he goes to for advice. There is no mention of Parvez ever discussing his son with the wife, who is the mother of Ali and should be the first person Parvez goes to. They also “ saw each other most nights” (Kureishi 97) which means that Parvez constantly confided in Bettina, also proving just how important her role in his life is. She was not just a friend that he occasionally would talk to, Bettina had a constant involvement in his life.

Parvez has many different identities which are reflected by the use of different places or spaces. Parvez had an identity when he lived in Pakistan, a new identity that he lives in London and he has another identity when he is in his taxi. In Ali's eyes, Parvez also takes on the identity of a fanatic which appears briefly at the end of the story.

One of Parvez's identities is the identity and life he used to live in Pakistan before he immigrated. In Pakistan he used to abide by cultural and religious practices and morals while growing up. This is the identity that his son, Ali wants him to associate with and the identity Ali, himself has embraced. However after an " indignity Parvez had avoided all religion" (Kureishi 99) and this lead to his second identity. The identity he took up when he moved to London. When he started his new life in England, Parvez was open to adopting all the western cultures and didn't abide by morals of his old religion such as not eating pork or drinking alcohol (Kureishi 101). Parvez became comfortable with his new laid-back lifestyle of indulgence and did not believe he was living an immoral life. When Parvez confronts his son about his son's new found religious ideals, Ali reprimands his father for becoming " too implicated in Western civilisation" (Kureishi 101). Parvez's new house in London, represents the identity of the new Parvez and his new life.

One of Parvez's main identities is the identity he takes on when he is in the space of his taxi. His identity as a taxi driver which includes his relationship with Bettina has become the most important identity of his life. His relationship with Bettina only takes place within the boundaries of his taxi. They never interact outside of his taxi due to the nature of her job and the

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fact that Parvez's relationship with her would be frowned upon. The identity that Parvez lives within the space of his taxi is very different to the rest of his life. The relationship he has with Bettina and how he interacts with her is different to his relationship with his wife and within the space of the taxi Bettina takes on the role his wife should play in his life. Within the taxi Parvez feels comfortable and able to express himself without feeling judged as Bettina "judged neither the boy nor his father" (Kureishi 97). This is different to the judgement and condemnation he receives from his son who looks down on him as Ali believes his actions are immoral because they don't abide by his own Islamic morals.

There is also the identity of the fanatic Parvez that takes place inside Ali's bedroom. At the beginning of the story, Parvez was unused to Ali's strong religious ideals and therefore deemed Ali's behavior as religious fanaticism. Ali's bedroom represents Parvez's idea of fanaticism because Ali began to sell all of his belongings and empty his room from all material possessions, and it was in his bedroom where Ali would pray. However, by the end of the short story it is Ali who believes that Parvez has taken on the identity of the fanatic. In a drunken rage Parvez beats Ali when he starts to pray because he is angered by Ali's new religious ideals (Sundar). Parvez turns to rage and physical violence in order to try and prevent his son from following these ideals and this is why Ali believes Parvez is acting like a fanatic when the beating took place in Ali's bedroom.

In conclusion, it is clear to see the extent of Parvez and Bettina's relationship and just how important Bettina has become in Parvez's life while she takes on the role that his wife should have played. The theme of friendship is

explored through Parvez and Bettina's relationship and the themes of religion and fanaticism are explored through Ali and Parvez. One is also able to identify Parvez's different identities and see the use of places and spaces to reflect these identities.