

My son the fanatic

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



Religion is ignorance? For many years, the various religions of the world have been of great importance as identity markers among a number of different cultures. There are many ways to practice one's values and beliefs, and religion has, quite obvious, not just been the root of solidarity and intellectual fellowship. In the bigger perspective, religious differences have led to war and other severe disagreements. Gradually as the world has become globalized, people, and especially Muslims, are immigrating more and more extensively. This can certainly be profitable for those, who move to a better and safer environment, for instance from the Middle East to the Western world, but it might also come with the price of big difficulty. The matter of adjusting to a completely different society can be hard when having to maintain one's cultural background at the same time as embracing others'. In his short story " My Son the Fanatic", Hanif Kureishi treats the drawbacks of immigrating while bringing it together with more universal matters such as growing up. We are introduced to the Pakistani protagonist Parvez, who once migrated from his native country. He now lives in England with his wife and their son, Ali, who hasn't been brought up very religiously in spite of them being Muslims. This is presumably related to some unpleasant happenings that Parvez has experienced while learning the Koran during his childhood, and since that, he has " avoided all religions". Therefore, Parvez and his son behave, more or less, like ordinary Englishmen — nonetheless when looking on the surface. Ali has a girlfriend, plays videogames and watches TV. Parvez drinks alcohol, and his best friend is a prostitute named Bettina. But all of the sudden, Ali changes radically; he becomes rude, grows a beard, breaks up with his English girlfriend, throws

out his expensive belongings, and, what's worse, he grows to be his own father's antagonist by disrespecting, scaring and ignoring him. At first glance, the revolt of Ali seems like typical behavior for an ordinary teenager, who is growing into an adult, wanting to break loose from his parents and become an independent individual. But as the story proceeds, we learn that there is more to it. Parvez doesn't understand the transformation of his son, and he turns out to be very condemnatory and suspicious, even ignorant, by believing that " Ali was taking drugs and selling his possessions to pay for them" — probably for the reason that his Pakistani co-workers have sons who are involved in such affairs. In the attempt of solving the mystery, Parvez seeks help from Bettina, the only friend, with whom he can discuss personal matters. He can barely talk to his other mates about it as " he was too ashamed. " This may indicate that Parvez is still marked by his native culture in relation to upholding his private sphere and not being very well integrated — at least emotionally. The tale is written in the past tense and told chronologically by a 3rd person narrator, who has limited access for the reason that we only enter the inner thoughts and feelings of the protagonist. In a way, it's rather symbolic that Ali's intentions remain unknown to the reader as well as they are a mystery to his father. Yet, the style of writing is minimalistic without the use of symbols, imagery and complicated sentence constructions. This is furthermore a typical characteristic found in the genre of social realism - in which I suppose this publication from 1994 must be placed. This characterization is moreover based on its realistic description of society, post-colonial views, and, more specifically, its commentary on the cultural context, which will be discussed in conclusion. The language is of a

somewhat normal formality bordering on a high, and it only changes to a low when using direct speech. For instance, we see a significant change in the text on page 111, line 20-27, where the narration is dominated by long hypotaxis at first and then by short parataxis in the direct speech; “ But one night, sitting in the taxi office..., he broke his silence"..."Everything is going from his room...Why is he torturing me! " Hereby, this is one of the only cases where the author becomes considerably visible during the story. To me, it stresses that we are dealing with a critical (social) issue, and that the author is taking a stand in the way he portrays this immigrant family. But of course, it can also just be seen upon as a natural distinction between the written and the spoken language. Ali fits the description of a round character by having a many sided personality. On the other hand, his mother represents a flat subordinate character, which isn't developing at all. Furthermore, the little we get to know about her fits our biased idea of a Muslim housewife, who stays at home all day without interfering noticeably much. In a way, you may even consider both Ali and Parvez as stereotypical characters; Parvez is a low-/middleclass Pakistani immigrant, who drinks a little too much, works as a taxi-driver at night, picks up pretty ladies and then sleeps during the day, avoiding his wife. Besides, he seems somewhat repressive which must be characterized as being a typical Western view on Muslim men; “ He ordered her to sit down and keep quiet, though she had neither stood up, nor said a word". As earlier mentioned, the main character has acquired a number of habits from the Western world and he claims to like it saying that “ They let you do almost anything here". But he doesn't have an especially substantial life because of the way he has isolated himself

in a closed community among his Pakistani friends at the taxi office. This is also reflected in his dream of doing well in England, which involves Ali becoming a model child. It seems like Parvez is neither a complete Muslim nor a real Englishman, but, instead, caught between two cultures. This type of so-called identity split is exactly what the post-colonial literature typically aims to comment on. When Parvez finds out that Ali's activities is caused by his newly gained religious engagement, he becomes desperate. Parvez feels under heavy pressure, and it doesn't seem like he can handle the situation; "I feel as if I've lost my son...I can't bear to be looked at as if I'm a criminal". To soothe the pain, he consumes alcohol in great amounts, which only results in Ali taking a larger distance to his father as he is disgusted by the "enjoyments" of Western culture. Though, Parvez tries to win his son's respect and wishes of becoming a better Muslim by growing a beard. This leads to Ali being an image of a very typical incident of an immigrant descendant. Even if the story was written 15 years ago, it still deals with a very contemporary topic of young Muslims in the Western world, who become extremely fanatic with their religion. At Ali's age it is common to suffer an identity crisis, especially when being a part of a marginalized group that is excluded from society. Therefore, he finds an identity in Islam. However, the big problem is Ali's lack of knowledge as he has never been taught the Koran, and that is why he becomes a fanatic. In the end, Parvez' identity split escalates, which leads him into becoming as fanatic as his own son; he feels such impotence that he hits Ali. He has no words, and that is why he resorts to violence. The boy has made his father face that he is actually in conflict between the two cultures, so his world falls apart. This way of using the antagonist is

moreover a characteristic in post-colonial fiction. Finally, descendants of immigrants are very likely to feel that they should prove their Islamic competence and the self presentation becomes an essential practicing part; they grow a long beard, pray a lot and follow the rituals strictly, just like Ali does in the story when he is radicalized. What he doesn't understand to practice is the very values of Islam, meaning acceptance, tolerance and mutual respect towards other people like Bettina and Parvez. In fine, the message of the story might be that Religion sometimes equals ignorance, which is perfectly in line with the anti-/post-colonial beliefs, where the goal includes a heterogeneous world of a population that is intercultural aware.