RESEARCH ARTICLE

IRONY, IDENTITY AND ISLAM: REJECTION AND ACCEPTANCE IN HANIF KUREISHI'S "MY SON THE FANATIC"

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ABSTRACT

A short story writer, novelist, playwright, screenwriter and film maker, Hanif Kureishi, born in 1954, is one of the most successful British Pakistani writers. Son of a Pakistani father and English mother, Kureishi, since childhood, was well acquainted with both the cultures. Having won several awards, Kureishi has carved a niche for himself as a significant post-colonial writer, who generally confines his works to London and South East. The story "My Son the Fanatic", written in 1994, is about the complicated relationship between a father and his son and how the difference of opinions of these two characters brings to surface myriad issues which are experienced by the people of the "Third World", living in the West. Islam, which has roots in the East, is always seen as a binary opposite of the West. The liberal attitude which the White World strongly contests for is not propagated by Islam. This divergence in the ideologies of the respective terms creates a ground for conflict and disharmony. Consequently, the Muslims living in the West try to impose their identity with more assertion to counter the Western culture. Islam in the West is always looked as the "other" religion which ultimately leads to marginalisation and stereotyping the Muslims. Kureishi, who possessed a hybrid identity, gives an impartial view of both the cultures in his works and compels the reader to contemplate on the several themes which he leaves open to be understood. The paper, therefore, will discuss the issues of identity and clash between Islam and West as addressed in the story, *My Son the Fanatic*

Keywords- Irony, Identity, Islam, West

1

While in the pursuit of providing enough for his family, Parvez unwittingly distances from his Islamic values and develops a strong penchant for Westernisation. Written by the acclaimed Pakistani writer Hanif Kureishi, "My Son the Fanatic" is a short story which intricately deals with the complex relationship of a father, Parvez and his son Ali. Ironically, Parvez belonging to the previous generation, who usually are seen as advocators of their roots, is outrageous at the fundamentalism explicated by his son Ali, a young lad in his early 20s. Depicted as an antithesis of his father, Ali, who considers the West as a repository of "pornography,

filth and sex" rejects the liberal values of the West. In an endeavour to seek purity of his soul, Ali unabashedly condemns the West and turns towards Islam. His quest for an identity through Islam in the White World reflects not only the wide gulf that exists between the two polar opposites, father and son, but also showcases a hopeless scenario for the reconciliation of the two. Shireen T. Hunter in her work *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilisations or Peaceful Co-existence?* asserts,

> Francis Fukayama has explained that because the history of mankind has been shaped by the clash of ideas, each idea struggling to establish itself as the universal creed and to organize society and polity according to its specific blueprint, the victory of Western liberal democracies in the Cold war, which established the superiority of Western ideas over socialism and the triumph of good over evil, brought history as defined in the above sense, to an end (Hunter 4).

This clash is evidently witnessed in the ideologies of these two characters. As mentioned, it is ironically portrayed that the older generation campaigns for the West while the younger generation seeks his identity in Islam. This polemical situation is convolutedly exhibited in the text. This paper, with regard to this story, will address the issue of identity of a "Third World" citizen in the White World and how Islam is considered as an antithesis of the West. There are several ironical implications, with respect to identity and Islam, which will be further discussed in the paper.

2

Baljit Singh in his essay "Politics of Identities: Global, South Asian and Indian Perspective" writes,

> The term identity can be defined with the help of two parameters; sameness and difference. The sameness concentrates on the self of identity and the difference focuses on the others of identity. It is not a closed, fixed, static and narrow in scope, rather, identity is open, dynamic, fluid and broad in perspective" (Singh 3).

Singh further in the essay asserts that it was the modern period that politicised identities. Drawing its trajectory from the beginning, he says that in the pre-modern period identities were not created but were given, "normative and established". However, now the politics of identity has emerged as a dominant discourse in the politics of nation-states as well as in the global politics. Therefore, the identity politics is the product of modernisation and modernity. The "modernisation and modernity" endeavoured to create "national identity in each nation-state but it met with dismal failure." In this process of creating identities a way was paved for the "assimilation instead of accommodation of local identities into the universal identity." As a result, local identities realised that they are being dwarfed by the universal identities, and hence "started asserting in public domain". This construction of identities was in contrast with the "imagined national identity", which has been modified by the nation-state around the globe. He concedes,

> [This] has further reinforced the local/ particularistic identities because the domination of majority cultural/religious group has become a pronounced fact in the national identity of each nation-state. Apart from this, they have refused to recognise and acknowledge the internal differences/ plurality within themselves. In the absence of an overall and universal plural identity, the particularistic identities have emerged on the political landscape of the world as well as nation-states."(Singh 4-5)

Singh's theory justifies the identity crisis that Ali encounters living in the White World. Ali's shunning of material possession, which signifies the Western materialism, shows his realisation of the pronouncement of the Western values on himself. This threatening self realisation resulted in overzealous enthusiasm for Islam. For Ali, it was only Islam that could forge a brand new identity and provide him an escape route from the western ideologies. Luca Mavelli in his essay opines that Muslim in the pursuit of consolidating their identities in the West come out as a threat to the Westerners (Totolli 9). They believe that their identity is being jeopardised by the assertion projected by the Muslims in establishing their Islamic identity. The anti-Islamic reactions which West projects "reflects a crisis in European identity, which is the crisis of its concept of secularity" (Tottoli 9). When an identity begins to take its shape, it not only modifies itself but inevitably impacts its other existing identities. Islam vis a vis the Western ideologies has its foundation on absolutely different grounds, which unwittingly poses an intimidation to the latter. In the last few decades, as Slua Fawzi discusses, that due to this "confrontation and reaction between the two terms is the Islamophobic phenomena

and reaction by some Western societies." Islam, in the West, has been considered synonymous with "terrorism, differing values and behaviours, and so on." Consequently, Muslims have been victim to "marginalization" and "stereotyping attitudes of surrounding societies" (Totelli 10). This further problematizes the situation of Muslims in the West who perpetually engage with establishing their own identities. Hence, the mutual abhorrence and a will to establish superiority over each other widen the existing gulf between the two.

Shireen T. Hunter in her work *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilisations and Peaceful Co-existence* discusses some premises from Hutingtons thesis where she writes that Hutington believed that Islam and Confucianism had absolute different foundations from that of the Western civilisation and its "democratic, secular, and liberal social and political ethos." The liberal ideas of the West do not find echoes in the conservative religions like Islam. Therefore, the conflict between the two in unavoidable (Hunter 6). As Haiffa A. Jawad in her work *Towards Building a British Islam: New Muslims' Perspective* defines Islam as, "Islam denotes an act of submission and envisages not only the acceptance of the outwards forms of any one particular prophet's practice... [but] the word represents that pure worship of, and obedience to, the Divine that is exemplified in the lives of all the prophets" (Jawad 3). Hence Islam is not only considered as a way of worshipping God but it serves as an umbrella term of how to lead one's life. However, the strict routine of life that Islam demands and its insistence on eschewing the materialism of the earthly life stands in sharp contrast of the ideologies of the West.

However, finding one's identity in the West by taking recourse towards Islam problematizes the text further and raises several questions. Ali's transformation is not only surprising to the outside world but he also faces resistance at home by his father. Bernard Lewis in his work *Islam and the West* asserts that in the West the term Islam does not only serve as the counterpart of Christanity but also of Christendom- "not only of a religion in the narrow Western sense but of a whole civilisation which grew up under the aegis of that religion... it is a political identity and allegiance, transcending all others" (Lewis 92). In "Neo-Traditional Salafis in the West: Agents of Self Expression" Adis Duderija says,

> [R]eligion becomes an over determining locus of Muslim immigrants' identity. Their identity, in other words, becomes religion based. This is not to say that western Muslim necessarily become more 'religious' ie religiously observant, but that Western Muslims construct their identity increasingly through the lens of their religious affiliation (Duderija 342).

3

While "My Son the Fanatic"*,* on a superficial level, depicts a polemical relationship between a father and his son, where the son's rebellious attitude is due to his inclination towards Islam, the story sagaciously delineates on the issue of identity and the stark contrast between the White World and Islam. Ironically, Ali belonging to the younger generation, who usually are lured by the liberal attitude of the West, negates those ideas, and on the other hand Parvez, the father, strongly stands for the West. Ali condemns the sins committed by his father which occurred due the impact of the Western culture. Kureishi writes, "Ali then reminded Parvez that he had ordered his wife to cook pork sausages, saying to her, 'You're not in the village now, this England. We have to fit in'. (Kureishi 104) Pork consumption which is prohibited in Islam is guiltlessly consumed by Parvez, only to "fit in".

Kureishi here tries to explicate that for people of the East living in the White World, the quest for identity becomes an indispensable issue in their lives. Having their roots in the East, it becomes a matter of great concern of how to bring about a sort of reconciliation between the two different belief systems. While for those who were born and brought up in the East and later migrated to the West, there remains a sense of nostalgia and longing of the past, but somehow they reconcile with their lives in the West, it is their children, who are born and brought up there, consequently become the victims of a "lost identity". The cause of the dilemma of the younger generation is due to the difference between the two cultures- the one that they practise in their homes and the other, outside, to which they are perpetually exposed. Therefore this compels them to choose a path to establish their own selves. 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" (Tottoli 9). Similarly, Ali shuns his Western ideologies and

reconstructs an Islamic identity with a hope to create a new sphere for himself. In the story, Ali realizes the absence of an identity in his life; he felt a sense of rootlessness, a lack of "spiritual dimension" which he realised would only be rectified by taking a path towards Islam. In an argument between Ali and Parvez, Ali tells his father, "You are too implicated in Western civilisation." (104)

By depicting clashes between Ali and Parvez, Kuresihi affirms the conflict between the two terms. However, it is aptly pointed by Bernard Lewis in *Islam and the West* that there exists "a certain asymmetry" between "Europe" and Islam as "one is geographical expression, the name of a continent...the other is a religion." (3) He further explains,

> For Muslims, Islam is not merely a system of belief and worship, a compartment of life, so to speak, distinct from other compartments which are the concern of nonreligious authorities. It is rather the whole of life, and its rules include civil, criminal, and even what we would call constitutional law. (3-4)

On the same paradigm, Ali is seen to accept Islam as not a separate entity which would just serve the purpose of "worship" but will direct his actions in life. Parvez, however, due to his childhood experiences considered the preachers of Islam as hypocrites. In an incident Parvez recalls the hypocrisy of clerics where they preached chaste, moralistic attitude but they perpetually "eyed boys and girls in their care" (102). Here Kureishi ironically explicates at the debauchery of the clerics who claim to be excellent learners and sincere practitioners of Islam but commit heinous crimes under the garb of Islam. In the course of the story, Kureishi compels one to think that in order to seek an identity of oneself in Islam, there should be a line drawn between fundamentalism and extremism. Parvez, though commits sinful acts, those prohibited in Islam, his endeavour had always been to fulfil his duties as a father. He is compelled to think of his own identity after he witnesses such a profound change in his son. Kureishi writes, "He knew he wasn't a bad man. He had a conscience. There were few things he was ashamed of, but on the whole he had lived a decent life." (103). However, the irony lies when Ali in a zeal to create his identity sought refuge in Islam, and rejected the western thoughts and accepted Islamic concepts, and left his father disheartened. In a verbal combat between the two, Farid says, "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" (104). Ali's propagation of violence in the name of Islam stands in its extreme irony. This exhibits how young minds in the name of religion are moulded by the self proclaimed preachers of Islam who foul their ideas about religion, which has its foundation on the concepts of peace, harmony, understanding and tolerance. Also here, the mother remains in the backdrop and is consciously not given any voice in the text. This deliberate absence of the mother shows how women's identity is carved by the rules laid down by the male members. Her voicelessness is synonyms with the absence of her identity or an identity which would be carved by his husband or son. In contrast, Bettina, who is serves as a bridge between Parvez's thoughts and the readers, is given a voice.

Kureishi in the story exhibits how, in the White World, acceptance of an identity which has its roots in the East and rejection of the Western norms brings significant changes in one's life, which not only impacts the life of the practitioner but, in a way, affects its surroundings as well.

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