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Interrogating Religion and Diaspora in Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic"

Religion has been a crucial and deciding factor in India. Interrogating religion in India does invite controversies as it is considered to be a sensitive matter. There have been murders, rapes, turmoil, crises, borders and division of lands in the name of religion. India is a country where religion and gender are born even before the birth of humans. Every human here is recognized according to her/his religion, caste, class and gender. India has been witnessing the religious fundamentalism and fanaticism since ages. Till date there are debates on religion, intolerance and freedom of expression discussed in India. India is becoming more fanatic and exhibiting intolerance off late.

But the more important issue discussed here is does religion exist even in the Indian diaspora? The Indian Diaspora is well known for its cultural practices, intellectuality, languages, varieties of food and attires. The question of religion does interfere in Indian diaspora and there are chances of Indians becoming more religious when they are diasporic. The guilt of segregation from the nation, culture, religion and the guilt of non-indianness affect the psychology of Indian diaspora in an indirect sense. As Salman Rushdie notes that 'past is not a foreign country but the present is' in his "Imaginary Homelands", the Indian diaspora is stuck in-between or is in a hyphenated position between the past and present.

Indian Diaspora

The historian Vinay Lal substantiates that, Although the Indian diaspora is today an incontestable fact of world culture, its global presence marked by such diverse cultural phenomena as Bollywood, Indian writing in English, tandoori cooking, and

even the emergence of a new class of aggressive Indian business tycoons, it is not a matter of wide public knowledge that overseas Indian communities embody a strikingly wide array of political and socio-cultural histories. Perhaps nothing illustrates better the unwavering hold that the US has on the middle-class Indian imagination than the shocking ease with which fabricated figures – purporting to establish that 30–40 per cent of all doctors, engineers and NASA scientists in the US are of Indian origin – appearing in the once prestigious daily *Times of India* were widely trumpeted as an instantiation of a resurgent India and as a sign of what Indians can achieve in the unhindered spaces of diasporic settings. (Lal 2)

J.D. Cohen Shaye and Ernst S. Frerichs (1993) underscore the nature of diaspora in the ancient world and signal its continued pertinence to the present: The contemporary common usage of the word “diaspora” which links the word to the experience of the Jewish people in their exile to Babylon and their dispersion throughout the Mediterranean world, is too exclusive an application. Viewed as a mass migration or movement or flight from one location or locations, diaspora could be viewed as an event in the history of several people of antiquity. Clearly the fact of dispersion and its many consequences have been an experience of many people, ancient and modern. Major issues for investigation include the question of whether, and how, those “dispersed” people maintain a sense of self identity and a measure of communal cohesion. The central question for diaspora people is adaptation and how to adapt to the environment without surrendering group identity. These questions faced by the diaspora communities of antiquity are still apparent in modern times. (Vertovec 4)

Religion and Fanaticism

The terms *fanaticism* and *fanatic* come from the Latin adverb *fanatic* (frenziedly, ragingly) and the adjective *fanaticus* (enthusiastic, ecstatic, raging, fanatical, furious). The adjective is based on the noun *fanum* (place dedicated to a deity, holy place, sanctuary, temple). We also find some similarity to those terms in the verb *fan* (devote). Combining together the noun *fanum* and adjective *fanaticus*, the term *fanatic* is understood as, for example, “a temple devotee who is orgiastic, inspired, frantic or frenzied”. From explanatory dictionaries we can take for example Webster’s which describes a fanatic as “a person with an extreme and uncritical enthusiasm or zeal, as in religion or politics.” Psychologist of religion Tõnu Lehtsaar has defined the term *fanaticism* as “the pursuit or defence of something in an extreme and passionate

way that goes beyond normality. Religious fanaticism is defined by blind faith, the persecution of dissents and the absence of reality.” Lehtsaar has explained *extreme* and *extremity* in this context as the following: “Differing from balance. Extremity does not indicate something different in principle but different in degree, intensity, frequency or importance. Extremity does not indicate qualitative but quantitative differences.” According to Christopher C. Harmon, “fanaticism involves great energy, single-minded direction and a lack of any restraint or moderation. It is characterised by extremes of effort and fervour of intensity.” There is an expression that has been ascribed to Voltaire (although he never said this in his writings, but it fittingly summarizes his attitude toward freedom of speech): “I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Here we do not find the conviction of having absolute truth that characterizes the fanatic, yet there is a fanatical fighting attitude for freedom of speech in this saying. In a similar manner someone can fanatically defend someone else’s rights and could even be ready to die for them. Harmon gives an example of the religious fervor of an ascetic or spiritual teacher that can be considered peculiar to his contemporaries but can be seen as an example of a virtuous person for future generations. Thus fanaticism can be either good or bad depending on how and for what reasons someone acts fanatically. (Marimaa 30,31,34)

In religious fanaticism the powerful energies of transpersonal experiencing feed the personality, allowing one to operate beyond the uncertainties of normal human existence and the norms of consensual morality; here one can attain the utter confidence and certainty of an idealized prophet or messiah. In the words of psychologist Frank Haronian (1983), religious fanaticism would be an extreme case of “infatuation with the sublime.” It is then no surprise that according to The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Little, Fowler, & Coulson, 1933) the word “fanatical” derives from the Latin root *fanum* meaning “temple,” and that one definition is, “possessed by a deity or a devil.” In religious fanaticism, this possession or identification forms a charismatic personality that can attract and enthrall other individuals, groups, and most tragically, even entire nations. (Firman, Gila 4)

My Son the Fanatic

Hanif Kureishi is a controversial writer on religion, race and sexuality. His short story "My Son the Fanatic" is a rare and unique piece of literature. This story represents the struggles of embracing religion in diaspora and throws light on fanaticism with reference to religion and culture. Kureishi very sarcastically showcases the question of being fanatic and who is being more fanatic in the story which is constructed in a very subtle and stunning way.

The story revolves around the relationship of a father and son i.e. Parvez and Ali. Parvez has migrated from Pakistan to England for good and has struggled rigorously for the welfare and establishment of the family. Working as a cab driver for almost twenty years in England has made Parvez more English and less Pakistani. He is a proud father of Ali, a teenager, who studies accountancy and praised him before his Punjabi friends, for his academic scholarship and excellence in cricket and other activities. But Parvez's happiness did not remain for long. There was a mysterious change in Ali's behavior that was quite disturbing and worrying him. Ali was becoming tidier, was getting rid of computer discs and fashionable clothes. He had also separated from his English girlfriend for no specific reason. The T.V, guitar and the sound system were thrown into the dustbin. Soon the room was almost empty and there were not even pictures on the wall. Parvez began feeling uneasy for this eccentric behavior of his son. When it was beyond his capacity to tolerate, he broke off before his friends and discussed about Ali's strange behavior. After a long discussion they concluded that the boy was addicted to drugs.

Bettina, a prostitute and a confidante of Parvez also suggests checking the eyes, syringes and pills of Ali when Parvez reveals before her about Ali's behavior. Moreover Ali's health was not diminishing and he was being more watchful. Ali had sensed that he was being watched and gave a sarcastic look at his father. There was another surprise for Parvez when he saw that Ali was growing a beard. One night Parvez peeped into the keyhole of Ali's room to witness and investigate what was going on. But to his bewilderment the boy was praying. Parvez no more could spy him as there was nothing actually wrong with the boy. The boy was just growing religious.

Though Parvez as a boy in Lahore had studied Quran taught by a Maulvi, he was not so religious as his son and usually avoided all the religions. As a father he wanted to understand his son's new found spiritual dimension and so decided to take him out for dinner. But to his shock Ali declined his company. Parvez had to convince Ali by stressing that a son had to

respect the father and his wishes. During dinner Ali exhibits a sarcastic behavior towards his father when Parvez has alcohol and pork because they were forbidden according to Quran. He also blames his father as Parvez believed and practiced western civilization. Nevertheless Parvez couldn't help and feels humiliated and harassed by his son consistently. There is a pent up frustration in him and is exploded at the climax of the story when he hits Ali who was praying. Ali doesn't react or stop praying but asks his father 'who is fanatic now'? The story ends with the question.

Religion in Diaspora

My Son the Fanatic has a thorough debate on religion and fanaticism in the context of westernization in diaspora. There are many elements discussed here through Ali and Parvez. We are introduced to Parvez in the beginning of the story as a liberal and democratic father worried about his son's unusual behavior. The debate between the son and father begins when Ali opens up with his new spiritual dimension 'Islam'. When Ali throws off the expensive products like T.V, Guitar, Computer discs and western clothes Parvez doesn't actually realize that Ali is showcasing a derogative or negative impression towards the western practices by getting rid of those products. Ali has broken his relation with his English girlfriend as well. These actions of Ali indirectly exhibit that Ali is no more western and is transformed into a new personality. His transformation is revealed when Parvez witnesses Ali praying five times a day in a very religious way. This scene in the story is the first point which explains Ali's spiritual dimension i.e. Islam. One thing which goes noticeable is that nowhere does the author mention any religions, not even Islam. If Ali epitomizes being radical, Parvez is secular accepting the diaspora. Ali doesn't embrace the west like his father and hence they both are dichotomies.

The severity of Ali's fanaticism is evidenced when he begins to grow beard. This severity is also exposed when he pragmatically performs it while having dinner with his father. When his father drinks alcohol, Ali abuses his father by condemning that it is forbidden. To quote, 'But it is forbidden,' the boy said. Parvez shrugged, 'I know.' And so is gambling, isn't it?' 'Yes. But surely we are only human?'. (Kureishi 103)

Though Parvez tries to convince his son that he had the right to enjoy after been struggling for almost twenty years of hard toil to settle in England. But the boy is headstrong and

stubborn. He continues to blame his father that he had broken the rules of Quran by drinking, gambling and eating pork. Ali accuses Parvez for being westernized. He comments that, “The Law of Islam would rule the world; the skin of the infidel would bum off again and again; the Jews and Christers would be routed. The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes”.(Kureishi 104)

Ali’s transformation was so bewildering for his father that he drinks more than the usual after listening to his son’s comments and humiliation that he had not lived a proper life by not following Quran. Ali is unstoppable and continues to claim that the western civilization induces anti-religious attitudes and so there will be jihad and living in England has made him fanatic. These instances explore that religious fundamentalism exists in diaspora in a very deep way. Ali represents extreme religiousness whereas Parvez represents extreme non religiousness. However there is also a reference in the story where Parvez begins to grow a beard to please his son, but that goes unnoticed.

Ali has grown spiritual and philosophical because he opines that enjoyment is a bottomless pit. He also abuses Bettina and her intimate behavior with his father. After the incident of humiliation of Bettina, Parvez explodes the frustration towards his son. He goes to his son’s room and observes that his son was praying. But, “Parvez kicked him over. Then he dragged the boy up by his shirt and hit him. The boy fell back. Parvez hit him again. The boy's face was bloody. Parvez was panting. He knew that the boy was un-reachable, but he struck him nonetheless. The boy neither covered himself nor retaliated; there was no fear in his eyes. He only said, through his split lip: 'So who's the fanatic now?'. (Kureishi 108)

The climax of the story is stunning because it is the son who claims that his father was more fanatic than he is as Parvez was exhibiting a violent behavior. But it is not so. It is Ali who is more fanatic than his father. There is a grave and stubborn calmness present in his behavior filled with utter sarcasm which was not tolerated by the father. Parvez is definitely not against the religion or the religious practices of Ali but he is broken to pieces because of Ali’s humiliations and insults which torment his heart. He expects his son to respect him and to say that his father will not go to hell after death. Throughout the story Parvez is calm but worried about his son’s behavior. His struggle as an emigrant has turned futile because of his son and his fanaticism. There can also be another point of view discussed in the story. It discloses that every person is fanatic in his or her own way. Our beliefs and practices reveal the fanatic

attitude present in us. But when we do not tolerate and try to impose our beliefs upon others it leads to negativity, destruction and chaos in the society.

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