



12-16-2016

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Recommended Citation

Clanton, Dan (2016) "My Son the Fanatic," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss2/13>

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Abstract

This is a review of *My Son the Fanatic* (1997).

My Son the Fanatic - written by Hanif Kureishi (who also wrote *My Beautiful Laundrette*) and directed by Udayan Prasad - is the story of Parvez, a Pakistani cab driver, who has moved to Britain with his wife Minoo and their son Farid. Parvez is working long hours to try and get money for Farid's upcoming marriage to Madelaine Fingerhut, the daughter of a Chief Inspector in the police department. As the story continues, we learn that Farid does not want to be married to Madelaine, and exhibits other seemingly bizarre behavior, enough so that Parvez is concerned he might be on drugs. Parvez turns to Bettina, one of the prostitutes he and the other cab drivers taxi around, for help. Soon enough, Parvez finds himself entangled with a German businessman named Schitz, whom he sets up with Bettina. Meanwhile, he and Farid are increasingly at odds due to Farid's increasing involvement not with drugs, but with Islamic Fundamentalism. The film mounts in tension until a confrontation between father and son, between acculturation and rediscovery of tradition, is inevitable.

My Son the Fanatic portrays one of the most intense and confusing conflicts between cultures today, viz., between Islamic tradition and Western values. The entire film tries to establish a dichotomy between the values of Islam and the values of the West. We know that Parvez was raised a Muslim, yet he seems to find a liberating freedom in his new cultural surroundings. It seems equally obvious that Minoo and Farid find a dangerous and often licentious freedom in the West. The

inter-familial conflict is evident right from the beginning of the film when Farid sells his guitar. This act is in explicit contrast to Parvez's almost guilty pleasure of listening to early blues and soul albums in the basement, almost as if he's afraid to admit his taste for Western music out in the open.

However, one of the main problems with the film is its very limited glimpse into the world of Islamic Fundamentalism in the West. This is a very important and interesting phenomenon, yet the director Prasad and writer Kureishi prefer to use it more as a device to aid Parvez's self-discovery than allowing it to exist on its own terms. At points (e.g., when The Maluvi comes to Parvez and asks for help) the film seems to imply that Muslim Fundamentalists are at least not what they seem and at most hypocritical. There is a danger in providing a limited presentation of Islamic Fundamentalism in a film in which it is supposed to play a major role in the development of the conflict. The danger is that for viewers not familiar with the beliefs and history of this movement, this type of portrayal could lead to fervent misunderstanding. That is, by only presenting Islamic Fundamentalism as a plot agent instead of presenting it sympathetically, the film may not only hamper the viewer's understanding of this phenomenon, but may actually contribute to the freakishly negative portrayal of Islam in general in the West.

My above critiques aside, this film is really about Parvez discovering himself, not about Islamic Fundamentalism or racism in England or love, although

all of those factor into his journey. As Farid is leaving home, Parvez tells him that "There are many ways of being a good man," thus signifying his low view of Islam specifically, as well as his implicit adoption of Western religiosity, which is becoming more and more relativistic. Not long after Farid leaves home, Minoo, too, decides to leave Parvez, and the two part company on ambiguous terms. Also ambiguous is the ending of the film. After Minoo leaves, Parvez tells Bettina "I have managed to destroy everything. I have never felt worse . . . or better." The last image we get of Parvez is of him listening to his music in his house, out in the open and having a drink. Does this indicate some sort of liberation for him? Has he finally found a balance between his Islamic upbringing and the Western culture in which he lives? If so, what might that balance be? The film leaves the viewer wondering as to the exact nature of Parvez's future, but it would appear that he has, in fact, found liberation in the Western culture Farid so intensely despises.

In sum, I found the film overall very engaging and interesting. Like all good films, *My Son the Fanatic* manages to steer a course between the particular (Parvez's self-discovery) and the general (Can religions or cultures ever co-exist without one being privileged over the other?) in a way that both charms the audience (Om Puri is magnificent) and awakens us to larger issues and cultural problems.