



The Constitution of *Pakistanness* in the Two Central Characters in Kureishi's *My Son the Fanatic*

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Abstract

One's cultural identity has constantly been a critically never-ending question, particularly in the context of immigration. To put it simply as an 'essential' entity can also be problematically uneasy. This research will analyze how the central characters (Parvez and Ali) in Kuresihi's *My Son The Fanatic* construct their subjectivity by conducting a descriptive analysis and applying Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity. Parvez, a Punjabi immigrant father, spends his adult life assimilating into English culture and intentionally desires to leave his *Pakistanness* due to his bad past experience when living in Lahore. Meanwhile, Ali, born and raised in England, is obsessed to construct and reclaim his *Pakistanness* by devoting himself to radicalized Islam because of his negative experience being a Muslim in England. The research finding posits that in constituting their cultural identities, there are some complexities which cannot be separated from their personal experience. Besides, this also suggests a critical discussion about cultural identity that is mostly deemed 'essential' as well as eternally 'fixed'.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity; Subjectivity; Diaspora; Immigration; Pakistanness*

Introduction

An individual's cultural identity has always been open to a discussion, specifically in the immigration context. In the new society, individual immigrants have to able to adapt and deal with differing cultures. This situation, of course, puts them in the most dilemmatic position between retaining their culture of origin or becoming part of the society. Additionally, the adaptation process can also be various depending on how these individuals interpret as well as perceive their circumstances. This can also be influenced by how they interact with the particular settings. For example, immigrants potentially tend to retain their ethnic identity when pluralism is encouraged or accepted. Also, the importance of asserting national identity will appear when there is pressure to assimilation. However, when there is a hostility towards particular groups, ethnic identity can be either strengthened or rejected as a way of dealing with negative attitudes (Phinney et al, 2001). In other words, identity should be understood in many different ways since the process of adaptation are highly variable depending on particular situations.

The issue of cultural identity has attracted many writers' attentions and been written through many literary works to portray how cultural identity is constructed and given meaning in different social and cultural settings. The fluidity of one's cultural identity in immigration context is the key issue to be discussed as the acculturation process and the construct of ethnic identity are either unclear or used interchangeably (Liebkind, 2001). One of the writers who tells many varied concepts related to cultural identity and assimilation is Hanief Kureishi. As a postcolonial writer, many of Kureishi's works talk about identity crisis, one of which is a short story titled *My Son The Fanatic* published by The New Yorker in 1994.

A number of scholars have already discussed about this short story from many different perspectives and approaches.

The objective of this analysis is to focus on how the central characters in the story constructs their subjectivity and cultural identity as immigrant Pakistanis living in England which, of course, is far from 'home' (Lahore). The first character is Parvez, a Punjabi immigrant father, intentionally desires to leave his *Pakistanness* due to his bad past experience when living in Lahore and spends his adult life assimilating into English culture. The second character is Ali (Parvez's son) who was born, and raised in England, and was also obsessed to reclaim his *Pakistanness* by devoting himself to radicalized Islam because of his negative experience being a Muslim in England. Through a descriptive analysis, the use of Hall's concept of cultural identity and other relevant concepts and theories, this research also aims at seeing how these two central characters are represented in the story and the factors which influence the constitution of their self-identity.

In the context of immigration, an individual's subjectivity and identity have always been a reflective question to be discussed with. Why is it so? Because they are mostly and simply understood as the 'taken for granted' entity which was innate, 'fixed', 'final', and out of representation. However, according to the anti-essentialist view, subjectivity and identity cannot be separated from the representation, particularly language. This means that language is not a mirror which reflects an independent object world. In other words, meaning is understood to be generated by virtue of the difference between signifiers. Thus, black is not white, men are not women, Australians are not British, and so forth. Consequently, this implies that the so called 'identity' is said to represent a cut or snap-shot of unfolding meanings, a strategic positioning which makes meaning possible, or it can also be understood as a description of ourselves in language to which we are emotionally committed (Barker, 2002: 109).

According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is understood as a way of how we perceive about the self. It is always problematic since it is a constant process of 'being' as well as 'becoming' that is constituted under representation. Hall argues that identity is not 'essential' and is a consequence of a collective culture. In his article *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall said that:

"Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter to of "becoming" as well as of "being". It belongs to the future as much as the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power." (Hall, 1990:225)

"It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'." (Hall, 1990:226)

From the above quotation, it can be concluded that cultural identity is a never-ending process which is inevitably connected to history, culture, and power as it undergoes constant transformation. As a result, identity is unstable since it is always constituted through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth.

In cultural studies perspective, identity is said to be a cultural construction since the discursive resources which constitute the material for identity formation are cultural in character. Therefore, individuals, in particular, are constructed in a social process commonly understood as acculturation without which we would not be persons. In other words, being a person is a cultural question and without language the concept of identity is, of course, impossible to understand (Barker, 2004: 93).

In understanding the meaning of one's identity, the concept of representation will also be used in this analysis. This will be utilized to see how individuals are represented within a discourse. According to Hall, there are two pivotal concepts of representation. First, it is used as a way of describing the 'reality'. Second, it presents other types of representation which contradicts the 'reality'. In addition, Edward Said's concept of representation will also be applied in this study. He argues that it is a constructed 'reality' which is derived from representation. Therefore, to get a critical understanding of identity, it is important to see representation as a collective 'game' within tradition, history, and ideology.

Based on cultural studies view, Chris Barker wrote that:

"Representations are constitutive of the meaning of that which they purport to stand in for. Moreover, it does not only involve correspondence between signs and objects but also creates the representational effect of realism. Intrinsically, the representation is inseparable from questions of power as it has got the potential to provide some kinds of knowledge to exist and exclude other ways of seeing." (Barker, 2004:177)

Research Analysis

The story tells about Parvez who is curious about the changes in his son, Ali. The plot begins when Parvez visited Ali's room and noticed so many changes in it. He was also wondering why his son was getting rid of his personal belongings such as computer disks, toys, videotapes, clothes, and books. Surprisingly, Ali also broke up with his girlfriend and stopped hanging out with his friends. In addition, in terms of physical appearance Ali changed. He was growing a beard. All of these changes made Parvez feel upset because he worked really hard to send Ali to college to become an accountant and get a better life in England.

Finally, Parvez talked about his son to his friends, mostly to Bettina, a prostitute who he had befriended and known for almost three years. After hearing Ali's unusual behavior, she told Parvez some warning signs and asked him to find out if his son is a drug addict or not. Nevertheless, Parvez was sure that she was mistaken as he watched his boy praying five times in a day at home without fail.

On the other side, Ali began to dislike his father and stay away from him. Unlike Parvez who liked to get drunk and choose to avoid all religions, Ali became more religious every single day. The conflict between father and son raised when they went to a restaurant. Ali showed him a rude and arrogant lack of respect because the father ordered whisky, which Ali thought that in Islam it was wrong to drink alcohol. Another tense intensified when Parvez was trying so hard to know why Ali did not respect him again as a father and hated him instead. Knowing the fact that Ali insisted on doing what he believed, Parvez became angry, dragged the boy up by his shirt, and hit him until his face was bloody.

This study will explore how the two main characters define their *Pakistanness* as immigrants living in England. The first character is Parvez, a Punjabi immigrant father spending his adult life

assimilating into English culture and intentionally desiring to leave his *Pakistanness* due to his bad past experience when living in Lahore. The second character is Parvez's son Ali who was born and raised in England. He is obsessed to construct and reclaim his *Pakistanness* by devoting himself to radicalized Islam because of his negative experience being a Muslim in England. The factors which influence the characters' decisions to deconstruct or reclaim their cultural identity will also be critically revealed in this analysis.

Glorifying the West to Deconstruct Pakistanness

As the first main character in the story, Parvez is implicated by the Western civilization. Unlike many Muslims from Pakistan, Parvez really celebrates and glorifies the British culture. He likes to drink alcohol and forces his wife to cook pork which is strictly forbidden to be consumed in Islamic traditions. Additionally, he tries so hard to fit in, as seen in the following quotation:

Ali then reminded Parvez that he had ordered his own wife to cook pork sausages, saying to her, 'You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in.'

Parvez was so annoyed and perplexed by this attack that he called for more drink.

'The problem is this, the boy said. He leaned across the table.

For the first time that night his eyes were alive. You are too implicated in Western civilization.'

Parvez burped; he thought he was going to choke. Implicated!' he said. But we live here!'

'The Western materialists hate us, Ali said. 'Papa, how can you love something which hates you?'
(Kureishi, 1994: 104)

Additionally, since living in England, Parvez does not only try so hard to fit in the British culture, he also avoids any religions and celebrates the freedom. His desire for assimilating the western civilization and being a person who disbelieves religions is motivated by his childhood bad experience when he was growing up in Lahore. Parvez was badly treated by a Maulvi (Islamic scholar) when he went to a religious school.

"Parvez had grown up in Lahore where all the boys had been taught the Koran. To stop him falling asleep when he studied, the Maulvi had attached a piece of string to the ceiling and tied it to Parvez's hair, so that if his head fell forward, he would instantly awake. After this indignity Parvez had avoided all religions. Not that the other taxi drivers had more respect. In fact, they made jokes about the local mullahs walking around with their caps and beards, thinking they could tell people how to live, while their eyes roved over the boys and girls in their care"
(Kureishi, 1994: 102)

From the above quotation, it can be concluded that Parvez's decision to deconstruct his *Pakistanness* is caused by his bad experience when in Lahore. The Maulvi attached a piece of string to the ceiling and tied it to Parvez's hair to keep him from sleeping, so that if his head fell forward, he would instantly awake. For Parvez, this 'indignity' turned him against religions and became a path away from religion which reflects those of his fellow first-generation Punjabi immigrants to England.

The reasons why Parvez distances himself from his native culture confirms what Hall argues about cultural identity. Hall said that cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. In other words, Parvez's desire to fully assimilate into British culture and society is based on his personal choice and experiences which can't be separated for the past history.

In addition, Parvez's willing to deconstruct his *Pakistanness* can be seen from his obsession to 'force' his son, Ali, to make 'complete' assimilation to British culture. Knowing the fact that he is a first-generation immigrant whose opportunities have been limited, Parvez work so hard to send Ali to school and grant him access to better opportunities and upward mobility as the second-generation. In other words, Ali can be concluded as the key assimilation that Parvez really expects from and also the time to totally deconstruct his *Pakistanness*.

Reclaiming Pakistanness as a Way of Going Back 'Home'

The second main character that will be given a spot in this analysis is Ali (Parvez's son). As a Pakistani descent who was born and raised in England, Ali is really obsessed by his father's native culture and hates the Western civilization. His desire to leave all about British culture and adopt a radicalized version of Islam is caused by his bad experience of growing up in England as the son of Pakistani immigrants.

Unlike his father who believes that Islam is full of hypocrites due to his past experience when living in Lahore, Ali perceives that the Western culture is a sink of hypocrites. He thinks that western people are individualistic, materialistic, and concerned with sexual pleasure and enjoyment, as seen in the following quotation:

"Ali addressed his father fluently, as if Parvez were a rowdy crowd that had to be quelled or convinced. 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." (Kuresihi, 1994: 102)

Ali's criticisms against the West makes him consider that full assimilation is never possible because he assumes that the West view Muslims and immigrants as outsiders. Therefore, Ali decided to give his accountancy, this makes his father really upset. Moreover, instead of going to college, Ali was going to work in prisons with poor Muslims who were struggling to maintain the purity of Pakistan.

"What had finished Parvez off was that the boy had said he was giving up his accountancy. When Parvez had asked why, Ali had said sarcastically that it was obvious."

Western education cultivates an anti-religious attitude.' And, according to Ali, in the world of accountants it was usual to meet women, drink alcohol and practise usury.

'But it's well-paid work,' Parvez argued. 'For years you've been preparing!'

Ali said he was going to begin to work in prisons, with poor Muslims who were struggling to maintain their purity in the face of corruption. Finally, at the end of the evening, as Ali was going to bed, he had asked his father why he didn't have a beard, or at least a moustache." (Kuresihi, 1994: 105)

Due to the aforementioned reasons, Ali began to reclaim his *Pakistanness* by growing beard, adopting a radicalized version of Islam, building his sense of community with poor Muslims living in prisons. Moreover, in constructing his *Pakistanness*, Ali started to get rid of his personal belongings such as computer disks, toys, videotapes, clothes, and books. He also broke up with his girlfriend and stopped hanging out with his friends.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it can be inferred that the idea of *Pakistanness* in the two main characters cannot be separated from their own personal experiences. Parvez distances himself for his native culture

due to his past experience when growing up in Lahore. He was badly treated by a Maulvi (Islamic scholar) when he went to a religious school and this makes him choose to stay away from his own native culture and fully assimilate the western culture as a form of freedom.

In contrast, Ali's negative experience as a Pakistani descent living in England makes him dislike the western civilization and perceives that the Western culture is a sink of hypocrites. He thinks that western people are individualistic, materialistic, and concerned with sexual pleasure and enjoyment. The western education he learned from college was designed to cultivate an anti-religious attitude. As a result, he began to reclaim his *Pakistanness* by growing beard, adopting a radicalized version of Islam, building his sense of community with poor Muslims living in prisons. All in all, the construction of identity in both characters shows what Hall argues about cultural identity as a way of how we perceive about the self. It is always problematic since it is a constant process of 'being' as well as 'becoming' that is constituted under representation. Therefore, through the analysis, it can be concluded that the notion of identity as 'essential' is somehow problematic.

Additionally, it can also be inferred that in the West perspective, assimilation is considered as a highly encouraged path for immigrants to be accepted in the 'new' world, while radicalization is condemned negative and to be fought against.

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