

# Reading a Book, Reading a Film: A Portrait of Youth in “My Son the Fanatic”

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Youth is usually regarded as the image of the future, of something new, yet to come. This future is frequently associated with a rupture with the values of the past, a significant break with the standards, specifically the moral standards, of our parents – a break often involving conflict between generations.

It is often considered that young people are more liberal, more tolerant than their predecessors. But what to think when youngsters stand up for the conservative values that their fathers have rejected and even fought against?

This is, apparently, the case in “My Son the Fanatic”<sup>1</sup>, a short story by Hanif Kureishi, which explores the relations within a Pakistani family, specifically between a father, fully adapted to the English way of life, and a son, caught in the mesh of religious fundamentalism.

What my paper wishes to explore, however, goes beyond this father/son relationship, and takes, as its starting point, another dualism: the connection between Kureishi’s short story and its film adaptation by Udayan Prasad<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, it is my aim to compare and contrast the short story with the film: how different is it to create a film having as its starting point a novel from creating a film by taking a short story as its basis, especially, as is the case here, when that short story doesn’t amount to more than thirteen pages? How do we as readers and/or viewers stand before each of the two narratives?

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<sup>1</sup> Hanif Kureishi, “My Son the Fanatic” in *Love in a Blue Time*. (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *My Son the Fanatic*. Directed by Udayan Prasad. Screenplay by Hanif Kureishi. (UK: Miramax Films, 1997).

To address these questions, we need first to consider the connections between these two arts, literature and film. James Monaco, a film theorist, compares film with the other arts, from theatre to music, and reaches the conclusion that the novel is the art form that comes closest to film, due to their respective narrative potential: "The narrative potential of film is so marked that it has developed its strongest bond not with painting, not even with drama, but with the novel. Both films and novels tell long stories with a wealth of detail and they do it from a perspective of a narrator"<sup>3</sup>. This may be one of the reasons for the profusion of film adaptations of novels.

In *My Son the Fanatic*, the short story sets the foundations for the film, by providing the setting and the main characters, but it gets nowhere near the level of development of the latter. Kureishi wrote the script himself and he is an awarded screenwriter with a considerable part of his work having been either adapted or used as a source of inspiration for audiovisual media. Some examples are the adaptations of *The Buddha of Suburbia* as a television series, or the film *Intimacy*, based upon the homonymous novel and several of his short stories.

As Timothy Corrigan argues, films frequently elicit 'a strong emotional or intellectual reaction'<sup>4</sup> so that they are privileged means for both conveying and eliciting feeling. By adapting "My Son the Fanatic" to cinema, Hanif Kureishi, was able to extend his work in several ways: he added more characters; he changed the general tone of the story, introducing a touch of humour, that, in my opinion, is totally absent from the short story; moreover, he could reach a wider audience, thus contributing to a deeper discussion about the moral issues lightly touched upon in the book; to mention but a few of the more relevant differences between written text and film.

Nevertheless, a film is a collective work, whereas writing is an individual work, as George Bluestone says, in the classic *Novels Into Film*:

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<sup>3</sup> James Monaco. *How to Read a Film*. 1977 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001) p.5.

"An art whose limits depend on a moving image, mass audience, and industrial production is bound to be different from an art whose limits depend on language, a limited audience and individual creation."<sup>5</sup> It is very hard to discern how far Kureishi's collaboration goes beyond the writing of the script. For instance, did he have anything to do with the choice of actors, did the director give him any indications on how he wanted the film to be, did he have anything to say about the chosen musical score, or, most of all, did he even like the final product? If, on the one hand, my argument is that the film is an extension of the writer's work which I wish to analyse as such, on the other hand, I wonder how much of Kureishi's point of view is there in this film. What was he trying to achieve when he decided to develop the short story – not only develop it, but turn it into a different object – by using a medium that enables the message to reach so many more people than a book?

According to George Bluestone, adapting a written work to a film involves a process of additions, alterations and deletions.<sup>6</sup> The screen-writer and/or the director choose(s) what they want to keep, alter or omit. Sometimes the ending is changed, or a character is omitted, other characters are added or given depth, some dialogues are maintained exactly as they appear in the novel, while others involve different characters.

Kureishi's short story deals, essentially, with people and feelings, while the film develops the political, social and moral implications of the action more thoroughly. In the short story, the plot develops around the impotence of the father, Parvez, as he feels that he is losing his son to the fundamentalist way of thinking which he voluntarily abandoned years ago. In both formats, the son takes upon himself the role of judging his own father, of being the role model for the family. We know that he once had an English girlfriend, enjoyed art and music and collected loads of material things (records, videogames, fashionable clothes, etc). Now he throws the material things away, replacing them with praying and taking

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<sup>5</sup> George Bluestone, *Novels Into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction Into Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) pp.63-64.

<sup>6</sup> *idem.*

action within the community. At first, like most parents, Parvez looks for hints of subversive behaviour to account for the son's strange conduct. But what bewilders him is that Ali is getting tidier and he has even grown a beard, a detail which curiously will be omitted from the script, as well as his request that his father should grow one, too, or, at least, a moustache. It's almost as if moral uprightness should be shown in terms of physical appearance.

The son's actions are mistakenly taken by the father for signs of maturity, as can be read on the first page of the short story: "Initially Parvez had been pleased: his son was outgrowing his teenage attitudes."<sup>7</sup> But gradually, Parvez comes to realize the complex implications of the son's newly adopted course of action.

On the whole, the story foregrounds the extent to which youth is a decisive period for acquiring values and choosing ways of behaviour; at the same time, it draws attention to how exposed to all sorts of external influences youngsters are. In Parvez's case, his youth experience determined the path he followed, away from the rules of the Koran. He tells a story about his religion lessons that illustrates his reluctance towards any religion: "To stop him falling asleep when he studied, the Moulvi 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 avoided all religions."<sup>8</sup> In Ali's case, the absence of the father, working too many hours a day away from home, favoured the youngster's search for an alternative model. Ali, whose name in the film is Farid, turned to religion. The paradox is that, superficially, this could be considered a good thing. In the short story, Parvez is even relieved when he discovers that the son's strange behaviour is due to praying and not drug use, as he, initially, suspects. When he tells his friends, they are also puzzled: "The friends, who had been so curious before, now became oddly silent. They could hardly condemn the boy for his devotions."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hanif Kureishi, "My Son the Fanatic" p.119.

<sup>8</sup> *idem*, p.123.

<sup>9</sup> *idem*, p.123.

But, what could be a source of pride to a parent, becomes an unexpected generation gap too wide to be crossed, for Parvez wished that his son would take advantage of Western prosperity, instead of renouncing to it.

Parvez is a man desperately looking for love and companionship, and he finds it in the moments that he spends with Bettina, the prostitute and friend. Many of his thoughts in the short story become dialogues with her in the film. In the film his wife, who remains nameless in the short story and is referred to in a single paragraph, becomes another critical voice, alongside Farid's. Thus, he finds comfort in this relation with the prostitute. In the short story, Parvez and Bettina just talk and keep company with each other. In the film, Kureishi chose to extend this relation physically, with the camera frequently focusing on Bettina's body, as if it were Parvez's own look, in a growing desire that culminates in a sexual relationship – one more thing for Farid to criticize.

For the moment, let's focus on the short story. It is told by a third-person narrator, but the whole narrative is focused on Parvez. We accompany Parvez's actions and follow his thoughts, in a way which makes us sympathize with his misfortunes. Although in Farid's eye, Parvez is portrayed as being corrupted by Western culture – 'a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes'<sup>10</sup> – the fact that the reader sees through Parvez's eyes avoids any feeling of real antipathy towards this man. In fact, what the story makes apparent is paradoxically Parvez's human dimension, with his shortcomings and his perplexities which the reader shares as he goes along. The more Parvez sinks into drinking, friendship with a prostitute, and other offences against the laws of the Koran, the more he can be considered, after all, a human being, trying to live as best he can: 'He had a conscience. There were a few things of which he was ashamed, but on the whole he had lived a decent life'.<sup>11</sup> The son, on the contrary, ascribes himself superior righteousness, although estranging himself from his family, disrespecting his father, defending segregation, racism and sexism. At least, that would be the reader's

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<sup>10</sup> *idem*, p.126.

<sup>11</sup> *idem*, p.125.

perception when faced with the following statements: "Yet Parvez felt his son's eccentricity as an injustice. (...) And so, for Ali, he had worked long hours and spent a lot of money paying for his education as an accountant. He had bought him good suits, all the books he required and a computer."<sup>12</sup> Who wouldn't feel sympathetic with the effort of this father, trying to provide for his son a quality of life he could never have for himself? When Ali tries to judge his father's conduct, accusing him of breaking "countless rules of the Koran"<sup>13</sup>, he can only point out that Parvez has been eating pork and drinking alcohol. He is unable to accuse him of anything that the reader could consider as a serious and unforgivable sin.

Of course, this isn't exactly the case in the film. There is no third-person narrator, adopting Parvez's point of view, except for the camera, which can be a very crude observer and critic. So what does the camera show? First of all, while in the short story we only see through Parvez's eyes, in the film there is enough room for the rest of the characters to emerge, especially Bettina, who becomes the father's escape from the loneliness he feels in his own home. What was a story centred on the father/son relationship, becomes a more complex tale which mixes family, love, and moral issues. The viewer stands in a different position from the reader, seeing through the camera, instead of seeing through Parvez's eyes. Kureishi's script allows the viewer to constantly redefine his position, as he walks with Parvez through the night life, drinking, and, especially, the adultery which didn't exist in the short story. As Kenneth C. Kaleta puts it when discussing the short story, "The setting is the world of late night, a world of cabbies, dealers, and whores in north England."<sup>14</sup> The director transposes this setting accurately in the film.

If, on the one hand, Parvez is still shown as a likeable character, due to his humanity, on the other hand, we are faced with a man who cheats on his wife, arranges clients for the local prostitutes, etc. This portrait of

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<sup>12</sup> *idem*, p.119.

<sup>13</sup> *idem*, p.125.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth C. Kaleta. *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) p.158.



Parvez emerges with the help of the German character, Mr. Schitz, an addition to the plot, who takes Parvez through the meanders of nightlife, prostitution, drugs and decadence, making Parvez and the spectator fully aware of the negative side of Western culture that Farid so much emphasizes. Two parallel sequences in the film show a journey crossing today's Northern England, with all its contrasts. In the first sequence, Parvez drives Schitz through some places that remind him of his early days in that country, the tone being a bit nostalgic. In the second sequence, Parvez takes a detour, against Farid's wishes, to drive the mullah (an addition to the story, which highly amplifies hypocrisy inside religion itself) through what he calls the "real life", while Farid wanted to give him a guided tour which would leave out shameful visions of prostitutes wandering around the streets, and, worst of all, greeting Parvez. Another similarity can be found in the way the director films the preparations for the religious visit and Schitz's party simultaneously. Farid, his mother and his friends are shown untiringly preparing the house for the mullah, putting everything as respectable as possible and getting rid of what could be embarrassing (like pictures and specific objects). Set against this sequence is Parvez, hiring prostitutes and taking care of drinks and other luxury details, for the German's party. Both of them are busy and engaged in their affairs with the same devotion.

The German is also used by Kureishi to destroy Bettina's image in the short story where she almost takes the role of a psychologist or a family therapist than that of a prostitute, since she gives advice, companionship and understanding. Seen through Parvez's eyes, there is no evil in her, in spite of her way of life. In the film, however, the camera can't help but reveal the depravation of the world in which Bettina moves. To smooth this alteration, she is given a double identity: Bettina, the prostitute, can become Sandra – her real name – when she's alone with Parvez and redeemed of her sins.

Against Parvez stands Farid. In the film, he is still a disagreeable character, though capable of arousing mixed feelings within the elderly Muslim community. Farid and his friends are not welcome by the local religious congregation, for their approach is too violent and radical, but the elders cannot help feeling a certain admiration, because the boys stand up for their beliefs and their religion whereas they (Parvez and the rest of

the adult community) never did that. The scene where this is shown forces the viewer into a different level of approach, because it enhances the image of the father as someone who has unquestioningly adopted the Western way of life. Recent events in world history may have increased religious fundamentalism, so we tend to forget that many Muslim immigrants went to England and other Western countries in search of Western commodities. However, the sons and daughters of these immigrants, trying to build their identity, are easily enticed towards a sort of conservative point of view that most of their parents have already lost, as a result of a lifetime submerged in hard work. The growth of the Pakistani and other Muslim communities has forced England to deal with these two positions, which have been responsible for disturbances within and without the Muslim community that can no longer be ignored.

The general impression is that Kureishi didn't want to free anybody or anything from guilt or from a critical perspective in the film. Everyone is shown as having a negative side, as well as a positive one: Parvez, Bettina, Farid, the religious fundamentalists... Kureishi leaves it up to the viewer to decide for him/herself which side to choose. The short story provides us with a more limited freedom of approach, as we only have access to Parvez's point of view. On this topic, Kaleta states: "The short-story genres suits Kureishi's storytelling here, since there are no subplots that might distract from the impact of its central power struggle between Parvez and Ali that implodes to its inevitable violent conclusion."<sup>15</sup>

The short story ends with Ali asking "So who's the fanatic now?", a line that is kept in the film, but doesn't end it. The son is violently beaten by the father, both in the short story and in the film. Nonetheless, in the first instance, the beating seems to be a consequence of Parvez's drunkenness, whereas in the film, this beating only occurs after a series of other violent events which are not instigated by Parvez: the uncanny visit/invasion of the mullah, the violence of the Muslims against the prostitutes, the constant judgement of Parvez by his own son and wife, Parvez's economical difficulties caused by his son's debts, etc. The initial

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<sup>15</sup> idem, p.159.

humour gradually fades out throughout the film, and the tone becomes increasingly aggressive. When we get to the scene where Parvez beats Farid, the spectator and Parvez have respectively surpassed the limits of patience and sense. Both are exhausted by having had to deal for too long with violence, injustice, etc. Both want it to end. In the short story it does indeed end, but the film goes on to explore the family's increasing dismemberment. Farid leaves home, before Minoo, the wife, returns to India, all because of Parvez, or was it not exclusively Parvez's fault? Minoo makes clear that what has happened was a consequence of Parvez's selfishness: "Put self before family" is her accusation. Parvez seems to admit to his guilt by saying "I have managed to destroy everything"; yet, he says so with a slight tone of relief. And where does Parvez end? With or without Bettina, the final scene shows Parvez and his bottle of alcohol, and the final words we hear, after all the violence, are those of Percy Mayfield's song "Please Send me Someone to Love".

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