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The Ambivalent Nature of Colonial Mimicry in Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic"

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The negative aspects of the underlying narrative dichotomy in Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" have not yet been explored through the lens of Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry. Taking its cue from Bhabha's theory, the main question of this essay is to examine how colonial mimicry in Kureishi's storyworld functions as a menace to the colonizer's Western structure and values. Colonial mimicry, in Bhabha's words, is "structured around ambivalence [...] an indeterminacy." Therefore, it is "at once resemblance and menace" (122, 123). In Kureishi's story, the father's nearly fulfilled desire to mime the hegemonic culture is challenged by his son's revolt against it by attempting to remove everything that represents Western culture. The son fundamentally questions his father's ability to enact cultural reform by mimicking the colonial culture, accepting his inferiority to it, and deviating from his Islamic obligations. Kureishi's story, therefore, represents the two aspects of colonial mimicry. On the one hand, the father has been enacting a full imitation, resemblance, or cultural integration into the colonizer's land in order to fulfil his dreams. On the other hand, his son revolts against what represents the Western culture and way of life. The conflict between the two poles brings about the central conflict of the story as well.

Colonial mimicry and the menace of the colonized/oppressed

The main narrative concern in Kureishi's story is an unresolved "conflict of generations" between a father and his adolescent son (Gilman 166). "My Son the Fanatic" is a narrative "concerned with the difficulties faced by immigrants and with Islam," and it belongs to Kureishi's works that represent "puritanical sons rejecting the liberalism of their fathers" (Thomas 119). The omniscient narration is written mainly from the father's perspective, revealing the way he feels perplexed and confused when he recognizes a radical change in his son's behavior. They are both portrayed as the Other in the storyworld. The son is not only under the "gaze" of his father but is also under the gaze of the narrator; Bettina, the prostitute; and, for a while, his father's friends. The narrative portrays both the failure of dialogue between the two clashing voices of father and son and the destructive power of religious fundamentalism.

"My Son the Fanatic" opens with the father's, Parvez's, efforts to make out his son's, Ali's, recent strange behavior. The son's rhetorical question at the end—"So who is the fanatic now?" (65)—undermines Parvez's lifelong efforts to resemble the voice of the colonizer. The real narrative conflict, therefore, is between the modified version of the colonial voice as imitated by the father and the son's voice, or the emancipated voice of the colonized or suppressed. Or, as Gilman says, the narrative conflict is "between the father's desires for the improvement of his son within the acculturated values of England and his son's newly discovered Muslim neofundamentalism" (164–65). Therefore, of the two aspects of colonial mimicry—resemblance and menace—menace is the dominant mode in this narrative. The son's discourse not only threatens the conventionalized discourse of his father, but also undermines the father's authoritative discourse, which is the discourse of colonial mimicry as well. Their conflict is, therefore, a conflict of origins, as the colonial

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mimicry is "a mimicry of the 'original' the 'true' which exists at the source of power" (Ashcroft et al. 88).

Kureishi's narrative shows how Parvez's mission of mimicry, which has made him, in Homi Bhabha's words, "*almost the same* [as], *but not quite*" (122, emphasis in the original) an English man, is dismantled or is rendered ambivalent by his own son. Bhabha constructed his theory of colonial mimicry based on Frantz Fanon's ideas in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon, according to Pramod K. Nayar:

> noted that the aim of the ambitious African was to speak the European tongue like the European himself, and lose all African inflection and accent. Elaborating upon this form of colonial subjection, Bhabha described the reconstruction of natives on the lines of their European masters through an assimilation of European religion, education, literature and cultural practices. Native subjects, argued Bhabha, seeking to be more like the white master, Anglicized and Europeanized themselves. What Bhabha and Fanon are gesturing at is the total domination of the colonized by the colonizer through insidious means. (104)

Parvez's discourse reveals the "the total domination" of the colonizer over him. Moreover, it represents one aspect of what Bhabha calls "colonial mimicry," which is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (122, emphasis in the original). Aware of his own difference, Parvez has tried to imitate the colonial culture as much as possible in a way that, as a colonized subject, now he can be considered "*almost the same, but not quite*." In other words, his desire to gain the identity of the colonizer has always been present. His growing anxiety throughout the narrative, however, stems from the process of constructing his identity, since "the dominant discourse constructs Otherness in such a way that it always contains a trace of ambivalence or anxiety about its own authority" (Ashcroft et al. 102).

The narrative conflict is enhanced by the fact that Parvez aspires to transfer his great enthusiasm for colonial values to his son. Ali's revolt against this attempt is unbearable to Parvez. Despite this, Parvez is aware that he himself is only a "reformed, recognizable Other." He has apparently been able to override his ambivalent mental state and has been successful in resolving the internal conflict triggered by his limbo, or in-between state. The "mode of colonial discourse," as Bhabha argues, is, however, "ambivalent" since it "continually produce[s] its slippage, its excess, its difference" (122). The indeterminate nature of mimicry, therefore, creates a double state. On the one hand, it "appropriates the Other," and, on the other hand, it is "the sign of the inappropriate" (Bhabha 122). In other words, there is an ongoing conflict between the two aspects of the Other—she or he is made to fit in with the regulations, reforms, and disciplines of the colonial discourse, and, at the same time, she or he desires to slip away from the "dominant strategic function of colonial power" (123). As an immigrant (a fact that is revealed by both the narrator and his son's discourse), Parvez has always tried to bring reform to different aspects of his life so that he can be a natural part of his new land. Ali's revolt, therefore, is a rupture in the colonial discourse that shows the ambivalent nature of his father's identity.

Colonial mimicry in Kureishi's story, therefore, functions on two complementary levels. At the level of the father, it is successful at provoking the colonial subject to imitate the colonizer's culture, attitudes, and behaviors. In Bhabha's words, as a mimic, Parvez "is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English" (125, emphasis in the original). He has internalized his own inferiority, and hence has accepted the supremacy of the ruling, colonial culture. At the same time, he has suppressed his national and ancestral cultural codes. His ambivalence or confusion appears when his son begins questioning his reformed beliefs. At the level of the son, the story illustrates the failure of mimicry to bring about a permanent change in how the colonized see the colonizer's cultural status and codes. Ali has realized the suppressed state of his cultural, racial, and religious voice. His awareness acts as a serious menace to the discourse of mimicry. Focusing on an ongoing conflict between the two opposing axes of the subaltern voice and the voice of the colonizer, Kureishi's narrative reveals how the "inappropriate" aspect of the mimicry has the potential to nullify its "appropriate" aspect. The story, therefore, relies on a clash between the

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native or subaltern voice and the voice of the colonizer. This situation, as summarized by Ashcroft et al., is in line with Bhabha's theory:

> [Bhabha's] introduction of the ideas of mimicry and parody as both a strategy of colonial subjection through "reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other," and the native's inappropriate imitations of this discourse, which has the effect of menacing colonial authority […] suggests that the subaltern has, in fact, spoken, and that properly symptomatic readings of the colonialist text can and do "recover a native voice." (175–76)

Getting out of the hybrid condition he lives in, the subaltern Ali struggles to "recover" his native voice, while his father Parvez tries not to fall into the hybrid space with which he is familiar. Hybridity is therefore a prevalent effect of the colonial mimicry in Kureishi's story. The space Parvez lives in belongs to neither the West nor to the East. It is a new space wherein the colonizer and the colonized coexist without yielding to the previous order. Likewise, Bhabha's definition of hybridity presupposes the simultaneous presence of both the colonizer and the colonized within one space, and their mutual agreement or consent to create a new space that is neither a replication of the colonizer's space nor a conventionalized space of the colonized. Instead, it is an average of the two, which represents both of them without belonging to either:

> Hybridity thus becomes a means of resisting a unitary identity, emphasizing instead multiplicity and plural identities, existing between cultures (native and colonial master's), in what Bhabha has called the Third Space. Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi and Derek Walcott present hybridity as an empowering condition for some and detrimental to others. (Nayar 92)

Hybridity does not result in the "Third Space" in Kureishi's story, since hybridity is presented as "detrimental" to both Ali's and Parvez's identity. While the son proclaims his desire to establish a new identity, the father gets more anxious and irritated about falling into ambivalence. In other words, by resisting any dialogue, their discourses mutually endanger each other. The discourse of colonialism, however, violates both discourses. Despite the physical absence of the colonizer from the storyworld, the story's ongoing conflict is brought about by the colonial ideology. Parvez speaks the colonizer's voice, as he has always been trying to mimic his way of life and thoughts in order to "fit in" (61) with the colonizer's culture. For example, Parvez expects full submission from his son. As a result, he does not allow Ali to enter into an equal dialogue with him, since he considers his own superiority to be beyond question. Ali has the same problem in that he tries to keep his adolescent fundamentalism without allowing for any ambivalence.

Ali is the child of an unhappy marriage between two quite different discourses. The dichotomy that finally brings about his revolt mostly comes from his own upbringing—mainly from how his father has taught his children to, on the one hand, use the advantages of the new land, yet, on the other hand, maintain their own cultural values. Parvez thought that he could use the advantages of the new land in order to advance his own life. The opening sentence of the story, however, shows how he has obtained the colonizer's attitude: "Surreptitiously, the father began going into his son's bedroom" (57). The secret nature of his visit to the son's room is evidence of his determination to step into his son's most private realm. In this way, the opening sentence of the story acts as an inauguration of the impending conflict between the father and son, or the colonizer and subject. The remaining part of the story narrates the father's reaction to his son's deviation from the principles he has already chosen for him.

The colonizer speaks in the absence

As a substitute for the colonizer's voice, Parvez exerts his authority and superiority in order to restore order to his society. Infatuated by the discourse of colonial authority, he abhors any change in either his thoughts or way of life. For example, he has worked as a taxi driver for the same firm for about twenty years. We are told that his son's changing behavior "bewildered" him to such an extent that he even was "unable to bring up the subject of Ali's unusual behaviour" (57). The adjectives he

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attributes to his son resemble the same adjectives given to the Orient by the Occident. He is "afraid of" his son. He finds him "eccentric" and laments that he is "developing a sharp tongue" (57). But he does not understand the reason(s) for his son's behavior, thinking, "why is he torturing me?" (58) He finds himself unable to speak to his son, saying, "I can't talk to him any more" (58). This adds to his anxiety, and he becomes restless and cannot sleep. To control his temper, he drinks whisky. His pain grows when he finds himself unable to share his suffering with any other person since he is "too ashamed" (58) of his own son to speak of him to others. His sense of inferiority returns, as "he was afraid, too, that they would blame him for the wrong turning his boy had taken" (58). For a long time, he was proud of his son, as he believed Ali had the best aspects of both Pakistani and British cultures, "Ali excelled at cricket, swimming and football, and how attentive a scholar he was, getting A's in most subjects. Was it asking too much for Ali to get a good job, now, marry the right girl and start a family?" (58). His happiness is bound up with his son's success. The moment he consults his friends about the problem, they instruct him "to watch Ali scrupulously and to be severe with him" (58). None of his Pakistani immigrant peers can help him.

Bettina is the only person who is able to relieve Parvez's psychological pain, although, as a prostitute, she represents the sociocultural deterioration of the West to Ali. She is the only person in the storyworld with whom Parvez "could talk…about things he'd never be able to discuss with his own wife. Bettina, in turn, always reported on her night's activities" (59). They gradually "had come to care for each other" (59). Following her suggestion, Parvez increases his efforts to keep Ali under his surveillance. He brings the boy under his full "gaze," keeping "his vigil gratefully" and watching "each mouthful the boy took." He even sets "his ear at Ali's door" and observes him "through the crack in the door" (59). He increasingly finds Ali wild and strange: "Ali had a horrible look on his face, full of disgust and censure. It was as if he hated his father" (61). Despite this, he tries to communicate with his son so that he might be able to persuade him: "Parvez tried to endure his son's looks and reproaches. He attempted to make conversation about his beliefs" (63).

The more the narrative proceeds, the more Ali questions his father's authority. Similarly, the more Parvez feels threatened by his son, the more he strengthens his surveillance and control. For example, mainly because of his childhood experiences, Parvez has been living a secular life in England, avoiding "all religions" (60). His son, however, seriously questions his tendency to follow the secular traditions of the West: "In a low monotonous voice the boy explained that Parvez had not, in fact, lived a good life. He had broken countless rules of the Koran" (61). Ali's ironic references to his father's relishing "pork" and drinking, along with remembering that his father once said to his mother—"'You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in'" (61)—all lead him to the conclusion that his father is "too implicated in Western civilisation'" (61). Accordingly, he urges his father to "mend his ways" (62) since he finds him filthy and dirty and believes his actions will lead him to Hell. He even accuses his father of "'grovelling' to the whites; in contrast, he explained, he was not 'inferior'; there was more to the world than the West, though the West always thought it was best" (63). Parvez's efforts fail to persuade his son that Western society is a pluralist society that provides equal opportunities for everyone regardless of opinions, and that its values are more humanitarian. Instead, Ali sees the West as the only cause of injustice to the Muslims and the driver of their oppression. He does not understand that "there are other beliefs" (63). When Parvez tells him he loves England because "they let you do almost anything," Ali yells that this is exactly "the problem" in Western society (62) because it puts the material life of the present higher than spiritual life after death. Parvez, however, believes that one should "make the best of" life and "enjoy the beauty of living" (64). He tries to persuade his son that Western way of life is more relied on the present.

The conversation between the father and son becomes the familiar clash between liberalism and (religious) fundamentalism. Unable to tolerate his son's ironic criticism, Parvez finally decides to send Ali away from home, saying, "'I'm going to tell him to pick up his prayer mat and get out of my house. It will be the hardest thing I've ever done, but tonight I'm going to do it'" (63), although Bettina tries to dissuade Parvez from doing so. Parvez, nevertheless, is unable to follow the principles

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of pluralism he claims that Western society offers. He follows the colonizer's policy in his incessant efforts to suppress his son's philosophy of life and religious beliefs. The final scene in which he violently beats his son while he is praying shows how Parvez himself is a victim of extremism and fanaticism. In this way, menace is an embedded aspect of the immigrant's discourse.

The revolt of the colonized

In his introduction to the film version of this story, Kureishi highlights his reasons for focusing on characters like Ali in his works by saying, "It perplexed me that the young people, brought up in secular Britain, would turn to a form of belief that denied them the pleasures of the society in which they lived, Islam was a particularly firm way of saying 'no' to all sorts of things" (*Dreaming* 215). He also recounts his experience with an immigrant named Ali who blamed the West for everything bad: "The 'West' was a word, like liberalism, for anything bad. The West's freedom made him feel unsafe. […] Renunciation made him feel strong" (*Dreaming* 217). Resembling the character Ali's mentality in the story, the real-life Ali that Kureishi met believed that "against [the] 'corruption' of the West to which so many had innocently travelled, a new authority could be posited—that of Islam and, in particular those who spoke for it" (*Dreaming* 219). It is such an authority that dismantles the established colonial authority in the storyworld.

While Ali increasingly hates his father because he thinks he is a blind follower of Western values, he assigns a universal function to himself. Resembling Don Quixote, he thinks that he can cleanse the world of evil. At the beginning of the narrative, written from the perspective of the father, the narrator reveals how Ali gets rid of anything denoting Englishness and the Western way of life—toys, computer discs, videotapes, new books, fashionable clothes, old friends, his guitar, his English girlfriend, and his television, video player, and stereo system. Furthermore, Ali's adolescent desire for self-proclamation and independence encourages him to reveal his flourishing identity, as he "grows a beard" (59), "prays," and, to his father's surprise, refuses to "accompany" his father "to take a night off and go out with the boy" (60). What makes his father deeply concerned about him is Ali's new prophetic mission and his "voice," which "sounded as if he he'd swallowed someone else's voice" (62). Ali thinks that his father should follow Islamic rules, saying "'Don't you know it's wrong to drink alcohol?'" (61). Believing in Jihad, he informs his father that that "The Law of Islam would rule the world; the skin of the infidel would burn off again and again; the Jews and Christers would be routed. The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes" (62). Moreover, he blames Western society for his present situation, claiming that living in the West has made him return to his origins, as "the West is a place of sin and permissiveness, and only jihad can cleanse one's soul for the reward of paradise" (Gilman 15). When his father asks him, "'What has made you like this?'" Ali says, "'Living in this country'" (62). He hates assimilation, "'The Western materialists hate us,' Ali said. 'Papa, how can you love something which hates you?'" (62). When he stops going to university and gives up his father's dream for him of being an accountant, he again condemns Western society, claiming that "'Western education cultivates an anti-religious attitude.'" Instead, he plans to "begin to work in prisons, with poor Muslims who were struggling to maintain their purity in the face of corruption" (63). In addition, he thinks that Western society is devoid of any worthy philosophy. Condemning its hedonism, Ali thinks that "people in the West sometimes felt inwardly empty and that people needed a philosophy to live by" (63). What is more frightening in his newfound identity is his misconception that he represents all "oppressed" people (64).

Ali's criticism is, in fact, the criticism of values that the Western world, in this case British colonialism, dictated to the natives of their colonies. Ali revolts against the power structure within Western society. Questioning the ideology his father follows, he says that "'Real morality has existed for hundreds of years. Around the world millions and millions of people share my beliefs. Are you saying you are right and they are all wrong?'" (64). His deconstructionist approach to the socio-cultural values of Western society includes all those who represent or imitate such a discourse. When Bettina says, "'you know, your father loves you more than his own life,'" Ali's reaction is painful:

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"'Then why is he letting a woman like you touch him like that?'" (65). Bettina's manner of clothing and behavior remind him of Western culture. He rejects her in the same way he rejects his father, since they both represent the colonizer's oppressive culture. His fundamentalism, nevertheless, does not end in physical violence. In other words, although Parvez finds his son "harsh" and "insolent" (62) and accuses him having "aggressive confidence" (65), he himself commits physical violence against his son. His totalitarian perspective leads him toward menace, as can be seen in the following scene:

> Ali was praying. The boy didn't even glance his way.
>
> 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 unreachable, 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?" (65)

What Parvez attacks here is Ali's blind fundamentalism. He finds this fundamentalism a destructive menace to both the father–son relationship, and unconsciously to that of the colonizer–colonized one. Ali's last rhetorical question, "'So who's the fanatic now?'" shows the common features of both men's behavior.

Representing both men as enemies of multiculturalism, Kureishi's story is an account of two men who stubbornly accuse each other of being fanatics. The story shows how an immigrant's fanaticism can threaten the principles of Western society, which might be successful in assimilating immigrants like Parvez, while quite unsuccessful in doing so for their children. Ali's revolutionary awareness not only deconstructs the conventional father–son relationship but, in doing so, dismantles the colonizer–colonized relationship as well. The new order, represented in Ali's new behavior, is taken by the father as a fundamental menace to the previous one since it does not fit in the sociocultural atmosphere of the storyworld. The violence at the end mainly derives from the fact that Parvez the colonizer expects his son to obey his principles in a similar way to the Western colonizer forcing the colonized to adapt his or her thoughts and attitudes. Accordingly, in agreement with Bhabha's theory, Kureishi's narrative implies that colonial mimicry has the same potential to menace Western society at it does to assimilate non-Europeans into the authority's, or colonizer's, culture.

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