

Film Review: *My Son the Fanatic*

A moving and unconventional love story

Written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Udayan Prasad

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My Son the Fanatic won recognition at the Cannes Film Festival last year and it deserves a wide audience for its attempt to explore complex issues. This collaborative work by Kureishi and Prasad is a moving, often funny, and stubbornly unconventional love story about a Pakistani taxi-driver and a prostitute. Set in the north of England, the backdrop to the story is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the growing tensions within a community that borders on the city's red light district at one end and the mosque at the other.

Om Puri gives a remarkable performance as Parvez, a middle-aged immigrant from Pakistan who has been driving taxis for 25 years. Anyone familiar with the work of this veteran of Indian cinema, particularly with such greats as Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, will expect nothing less.

Parvez' work involves ferrying prostitutes and their 'clients' across the city. The film begins with him putting in extra hours at work to pay for the party celebrating the engagement of his teenage son, Farid (Akbar Kurtha) to the daughter of the local Police Commissioner. Soon it is clear that all is not well with Farid, as he breaks off the engagement and gives up his studies in accountancy.

Parvez confronts his son and discovers that Farid is involved in a hard-line Islamic group. In his attempts to dissuade Farid, Parvez is continually thrown onto the defensive. After listening to his father's plea to try to fit into society instead of being driven by extremists, Farid retorts 'It is you who have swallowed the white and Jewish propaganda that there is nothing to our lives but the empty accountancy of things'.

Parvez takes Farid for a meal at a restaurant owned by an immigrant friend who has become a wealthy

entrepreneur in order to try to talk him round. As Farid rails against the 'sinfulness' of 'capitalist society', Parvez slips further and further into drunken despair.

Here we have two radically different personalities. Parvez has apparently assimilated himself into western society. Traditional Muslim values have little or no appeal for someone who considers himself 'a man of the world'. He listens to jazz records, appears to have no time for religion and is a casual drinker. The one scene in which he is racially abused tells us that he is somewhat resigned to this aspect of his life. Working in the seedier end of town, he has seen the slimy underbelly of 'polite' English society. But at least 'it's not as hard as life back home', he comments.

Farid on the other hand, like many second generation Asian youth, feels like an 'unwelcome visitor' to Britain. In one of his first confrontations with his father, Farid angrily tells him that the Police Commissioner father of his fiance could not bear to be in the same room as them. For him, religious fundamentalism seems to offer an alternative to a prejudiced and immoral society.

A turning point in the story is the arrival in town of a wealthy German businessman, Schitz (Stellan Skarsgard). Schitz employs Parvez to find him a prostitute. Parvez knows a girl called Bettina (Rachel Griffiths) who works the red-light district. In an attempt to lift her out of the squalid and dangerous world on the street, he suggests her to Schitz who is staying at a plush hotel. Bettina begins to see more of Parvez and they slowly fall in love. She is attracted by the fact that he doesn't want to take advantage of her. Normally wary of the people around him, Parvez tells Bettina that he thinks her an 'amazingly special woman'.

The inner drive of this man seems to be a desire to break with conventional norms and find someone to whom he can relate. The two talk about each other's lives. Parvez says he thinks he is losing his son, but Bettina suggests that maybe Farid is just searching for something else, an alternative to 'just living to make money'.

Kureishi and Prasad

This is not totally new territory for Kureishi. Semi-autobiographically all his previous novels and screenplays have concentrated on the lives of second generation Asian males (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie get Laid*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*). His previous novel, *The Black Album*, was based around *The Satanic Verses* affair and showed how Ayatollah Khomeini's issuing of a religious fatwa (death sentence) against the author Salman Rushdie affected life in parts of inner-city London.

My Son the Fanatic comes from a slightly different perspective. It views the story from the standpoint of someone from the original wave of immigration into Britain from the Indian sub-continent. There is also a depth to the story lacking in his previous films. This is in no small part due to the direction of Udayan Prasad. Prasad also directed the excellent *Brothers in Trouble*, a sensitive portrayal of the lives of the early Pakistani, Indian and Bengali immigrants to Britain. Kureishi's tendency to shock for effect rather than to provoke thought is tempered by Prasad's insightful contribution.

My Son the Fanatic is nominally about two controversial issues. The first is about the love between not just an Asian male and a white woman, but between a member of the 'Muslim community' and a prostitute, stretching cultural taboos to their limit. The second is an equally courageous depiction of the destructive role of religious fanaticism. The scenes in which the Muslim 'elders' whip up young Asians against the prostitutes are striking in this respect.

Sadly the film's weakness also resides in its treatment of Islamic fundamentalism. The explanation of its attraction for large numbers of other youth is somewhat shallow. The resort to caricaturing Islamic extremists as frenzied, almost clownish, that was present in *The Black Album* reappears in another form. The members

of the Islamic group that Farid falls in with are portrayed as rather a sheepish lot, with a blatantly hypocritical leader. Farid makes a few denunciations of the wickedness of contemporary society, and we are asked to accept this as the reason why young people are prepared to take up a doctrine that may ostracise them from their family and friends. Kureishi stops at the point where a deeper exploration is needed.



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