



1 *My Son the Fanatic*: Happy Days: Father and Son Happily United

British cinema of the 1990s was shaped by box-office hits such as the romantic comedies *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) or *Notting Hill* (1999). In addition, there were also a number of movies focussing on the changing roles of men in light of what is often referred to as the «crisis of masculinity» such as *Fever Pitch* (1997) or *The Full Monty* (1997). British men – from different class backgrounds – have had to adapt to changes in the labour market and changes in gender relations. *The Full Monty* was especially applauded for its portrayal of men and how they coped with these changing models of masculinity. However, when looking at successful British films that focus on Asian British families, these developments seem to have bypassed migrant men. Many of these movies give the impression that the figure of the patriarchal Muslim father is always doomed to fail. He is either too well assimilated into British culture or too immersed in his own culture of origin. By examining father-and-son relationships in *East is East* and *My Son the Fanatic*, I want to discuss different failing Asian British masculinities which are vaguely attributed to «Muslim patriarchy». Whereas in the 1970s, it was predominantly the father who was held responsible for familial chaos and «misadaptation», there is clearly a change of focus onto the generation of sons who now pose the greatest threat to society in films set in Britain in the 1990s and afterwards.

My Son the Fanatic (1997)

The film *My Son the Fanatic* – directed by Udayan Prasad – was written by Hanif Kureishi and is based on a short story of the same name originally published in 1994.¹ The opening sequence shows a typical British country house in which Parvez (Om Puri) and his wife Minoo (Gopi Desai) prepare to celebrate their son Farid's (Akbar Kurtha) engagement to Madeleine (Sarah-Jane Potts), chief inspector Fingerhut's (Geoffrey Bateman) daughter. Parvez plays the role of the stereotypical submissive «happy native» who is marked by his accent and constant chattering while trying to brush over the Fingerhut family's visible discomfort at the prospect of their daughter's marriage into a Pakistani family. During the celebrations, Parvez insists on champagne and pictures.

The snapshot taken of himself and his son (cf. illustration 1) works as the cross-fade to Parvez's daily work as a taxi driver where the same slightly aged picture is now shown as a talisman on his dashboard. The depicted familial harmony between father and son proves to be short-lived. For reasons unknown to his father, Farid starts selling his «modern» clothes, records and sports equipment and breaks up with Madeleine. At first, Parvez suspects drugs as the reason for this sudden change in manners, but when he discovers his son is learning how to

pray, he secretly follows him to a mosque where he realises that Farid is gradually turning into a strict Muslim. In this setup, Kureishi explores the «irony of the reversal of the traditional parent – versus – rebellious – second-generation paradigm». ² In contrast to his newly religious son, Parvez listens to Western jazz music, likes to drink alcohol and gradually falls in love with the white sex worker Bettina (Rachel Griffiths) who is a frequent client of his. Like many migrant men of his generation, he expresses disbelief at the fact that his son voluntarily forsakes Western freedom. In his mind, migration meant the prospect of a better and more liberal life for his children: «I thought anything he wants, he can do.» ³ When his father confronts him, Farid expresses his rage which echoes the growing resentment of migrants in Britain at that time: «In the end, our cultures they cannot be mixed.» ⁴ Moreover, he explains what he seeks: «Belief. Purity. Belonging to the past. I won't bring up my children in this country.» ⁵

Farid belongs to a generation which has not been brought up religiously and is supposed to be fully integrated into the Western lifestyle. However, he longs for structure and limits, and he says that there is paradoxically too much choice. In contrast, his father Parvez, who wears Western dress outside the house and traditional clothing at home, has no attachment to Islam – his religious education in Pakistan involved constantly falling asleep and as a result earned him punishment by the Moulvi.

What is unusual in the visual representation of a middle-aged migrant man in this movie is the explicit portrayal of his sexual longing. We see close-ups of Parvez's face when he has sex with Bettina while another shot shows them cuddled up naked on the bed. Kureishi often depicts sexuality and sensuality as being in opposition to (Muslim) faith, which ultimately, for him, are two inconsolable spheres. ⁶ Throughout the film, the viewer clearly shares Parvez's point of view. In contrast, Farid's decisions remain quite enigmatic to the viewers. His frustration and his feelings of never being accepted as a proper Englishman are only expressed as angry outbursts directed at his father. Nonetheless, racism is present in the film: Parvez, too, is humiliated by his German client Schitz (Stellan Skarsgård) and is also suffering public humiliation by a comedian and the crowd in a local pub.

Ruvani Ranasinha criticises Kureishi's liberal viewpoint that cannot conceive of any internal Muslim critique of fundamentalism or sexist behaviour, noting, however, that the film is more nuanced than *The Black Album* or Kureishi's essay *Bradford* ⁷ since the audience does sense that Parvez's liberal ideas cannot solve all the problems. As his violent outbursts towards his wife and son demonstrate, Parvez is not depicted as an unambiguously positive character. This might also be attributed to the fact that Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) figures prominently as a subtext, especially with the parallels to the nightly taxi rides driven by Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in *Taxi Driver* and Parvez's through a deserted Bradford. ⁸ Ultimately, Parvez, too, is lost in this city and has to face the question of how he wants to spend the rest of his life. His son's rebellion coincides with his own midlife crisis, and both are portrayed as failing masculinities in some sense. His decision to stay with Bettina costs him his family and also the support of the migrant community. His friend Fizzy (Harish Patel), a well-off restaurant owner, and his co-workers shun him for what to them seems an untenable decision.



2 *My Son the Fanatic*: Desperately Trying to Get Farid Away from the Angry «Mob of Fanatics»

The climax of the movie occurs when the young Muslim men host a violent attack on the sex workers. A Molotov cocktail is thrown into a window, and Farid physically attacks Bettina pulling off her wig and spitting her in the face. Parvez is disgusted and literally grabs his son by the scruff of the neck to take him home in his taxi (cf. illustration 2).

This final confrontation of father and son results in Parvez beating Farid and throwing him out of his house. In the course of Parvez's assault, Farid screams and sobs and asks about Parvez's affair with Bettina and his father's double moral standards: «You call me a fanatic dirty man? Who is the fanatic now?»⁹ As a consequence of Parvez's violence and his affair, Minoo declares that she will return to Pakistan as there is no reason for her to stay in this country. Bart Moore-Gilbert sees the film as a nuanced description of the conflict of the liberal father and fundamentalist son when he asserts that: «Ironically, Parvez's liberal ideals leave him one of the most bereft and isolated figures in Kureishi's recent work, abandoned by both son and wife and alienated from former friends like Fizzy.»¹⁰ However, the end of the movie shows Parvez alone in his house, turning on the lights and having a drink listening to jazz once more. He has started his life anew while his son is erased from the picture and has been taken into the arms of the «Muslim brotherhood». The Muslim family has fully disintegrated.

For the most part, Muslim women are portrayed as outsiders to these male conflicts.¹¹ While in *My Son the Fanatic* Farid remains the alien and the viewer actually empathises with Parvez for most of the time, it is reversed in *East is East* – another highly successful movie focussing on a British Pakistani family and in which the sons appear in a more positive light and the father is the troublemaker.

East is East (1999)

East is East was one of the most successful British films of 1999 and is based on the theatre play of the same name from 1996 by Ayub Khan-Din, who also wrote the screenplay. A significant difference to *My Son the Fanatic* is that the film fo-



3 *East is East*: The Family: Still Intact Grouped around the Parents

cuses on the 1970s and hence is a retrospect portrait of a Muslim family of six sons and one daughter in working-class Salford. In terms of genre, the movie can be described as a tragicomedy with grotesque elements.¹² However, the film was advertised as a funny multi-cultural family movie and viewers might not have expected the scenes of brutal domestic violence. Judging from the colourful movie posters and trailers that highlighted the comic aspects of the movie, scenes such as when the dog attacks Mrs Shaw (Leena Dhingra) and her grotesquely ugly daughters, viewers might have been misled. In many respects, it seems as if the Muslim father simply cannot be depicted without irrational aggressive outbursts at his family. Once more, the father figure is featured prominently, and interestingly, this character is played again by the actor Om Puri, who now stars as the patriarch George. Nonetheless, the two characters represent quite different models of patriarchy. Even if George and Parvez are both immigrants to Britain with a Pakistani background,¹³ they are not of the same generation: George came to the UK in the 1930s and has adult sons in 1970. The war between India and Pakistan over the independence of East Pakistan features prominently in the film (although there are even more references to it in the play). Even if there are less explicit allusions to historical events in *My Son the Fanatic*, Parvez must have come to the country after WWII and has an adult son in the late eighties/early nineties.¹⁴ Both of them have low paying but labour-intensive jobs: Parvez works all night as a taxi driver and George owns an all-English fish and chip shop. His whole family – most significantly his English wife Ella (Linda Bassett) – have to work in the family business. Especially in their religious background and moral ideals, the characters could not be more drastically opposed: while Parvez dreams of the marriage between his son and the daughter of the English chief inspector Fingerhut, George insists unsuccessfully that his sons enter an arranged marriage with a suitable Pakistani bride. The familial conflict is revealed when the eldest son, Nazir (Ian Aspinall), runs away from his arranged marriage at the very last minute to the embarrassment of his whole family because it signifies his failure to fulfil his filial duty. Consequently, his portrait disappears and is shown to fade away from the family gallery (cf. illustration 3) leaving only the empty spot on the wall.

George is devastated and feels his reputation will be ruined in his community. After the eldest son breaks with the family, the focus shifts to the youngest son, Sajid (Jordan Routledge), who although is about 12 years of age has not been circumcised in contrast to his brothers. When this fact is revealed, George is furious and demands that he undergo the procedure as soon as possible. Even if George likes to think of himself as the undisputed head of the family, Ella, too has her say in things and answers back most of the time. On the one hand, she allows her kids to have some freedom, but she is also attentive to her husband's wishes at the beginning of the film: all her children have Pakistani names¹⁵, go to mosque and will have arranged marriages. Yet, George's insistence on maintaining strict rules in his house do not work, and the funniest scenes in *East is East* are those that depict the chaotic household 'between two cultures' with the children secretly eating pork or making out with the English working-class girls. Loretta Collins Klobah notes:

On one side, the film is seemingly responsive to contemporary theoretical discourses that chart plural signs of identity. On the other side, representations of the Islamic patriarch and the Muslim community fit harmoniously with public discourses that celebrate multi-culture even as they simultaneously continue to define British society in terms of 'Englishness', belonging and exclusion.¹⁶

George's concept of the male head-of-house seems antiquated, and often it is only violence that is left for him. Nonetheless, the white racist neighbour who supports Enoch Powell¹⁷ is ridiculed too, and when the priest, asking Ella about her getting along with Islam, ends his visit to the chip shop with «God bless», George wittily replies: «Allah go with you.»¹⁸ So, the film does try to put into perspective both white racism and Muslim patriarchal violence.

Ultimately, the conflicts revolve around George who fails to understand his sons' urge to live a 'normal' British life, which includes choosing their spouses. He is not English and in many respects neither is his family. The title-giving poem by Rudyard Kipling *The Ballad of East and West* opens with its most famous line: «Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.»¹⁹ Obviously, family Khan is the 'disastrous' outcome of such an illegitimate mixing of cultures. Ella Kahn hence is constantly portrayed as protecting her children saying that they are immediately looked down upon for being «a bit foreign».²⁰ But the children are not fully accepted in the Pakistani community either. Throughout the film, Ella won't put up with abuse either from the racist British or from the Pakistani community. Although she is the victim of his abuse, in the end, she stays with George, and we also get the feeling that she would do anything to protect her family including suffer this abuse. So, even though this is a film about father-and-son conflicts, there are strong female characters – albeit from an English and non-Muslim background. Ella and her friend Annie (Lesley Nicol) are much wittier than any of the Muslim women, such as Mrs Shah or her daughters, who remain almost silent throughout the duration of the movie and function as comic caricatures rather than as fleshed out characters. The only daughter of the Khans, Meenah (Archie Panjabi), is rebellious and talks back constantly, but when Ella meets another English woman who has married a Pakistani, we hear of her daughter's story who married a Pakistani and had to leave England for good. This foreshadows what might happen to Meenah if George gets his way.



4 *East is East: George Seeking Religious Advice*

After the disappointment of his son's refused marriage, George has rebuilt his reputation and agrees that his next two sons Abdul (Raji James) and Tariq (Jimi Mistry) will marry the daughters of the wealthy Pakistani family, the Shahs.

When the sons learn of their father's plan, they decide to run away and seek refuge with their oldest brother who – as we now learn – lives as a gay man with his white lover and works as a hat maker in a town nearby. Here for the first time, we encounter a differently «Othered» Muslim masculinity.²¹ Visually Nazir's flamboyant 1970s dress and hair function as one of the episodes of comic relief. His queer masculinity is a cliché rather than an exploration of an alternative queer Pakistani masculinity. Tellingly, Nazir can only realise his queerness in an egalitarian English surrounding. Homosexuality, once more, becomes the ultimate Other in contrast to the model of patriarchal Muslim masculinity and works as the signifier of Western «tolerance» in contrast to Islamic «backwardness».²² The intermezzo is soon over, and the runaways have to return to the family. The sons cannot understand how their father can be so obsessed with his insistence that they marry a Pakistani woman. George tries to persuade his son Tariq that the English will never approve of him and that only the Muslim community can offer him acceptance, which is why he is supposed to marry a Pakistani girl. In this row between father and son, Tariq finally confronts the patriarch: «Well, if English women are so bad then why did you marry me mam?»²³ Having married an English woman in some sense distorts George's self-definition as a Muslim patriarch. In the showdown of the movie, even the only practicing Muslim son, Maneer – whom his siblings call Gandhi due to his piety – breaks with his father and sides with the mother.



5 *East is East*: Finally Opposing the Patriarch

In the light of George's attack on them, the children no longer obey the law of the father and his power over the family is finally and definitively broken.

However, despite the fights between the two parents, the viewer also witnesses some tender moments between Ella and George. For instance, they enjoy watching a Bollywood movie as a family, or whenever Ella asks him whether he wants tea, he routinely asks for half a cup of tea. In the end, Ella stays with him and once more asks him by way of reconciliation if he wants tea. Even if George is not represented as a one-dimensional character, he «never really transcends this cinematic representation of threatening subalternity».²⁴ The future of the family is dependant on his realisation that his model of masculinity is ultimately outdated.

Conclusion

Within masculinity studies, there is a consensus that masculinity is not a pre-given or static concept.²⁵ However, there is still too little understanding of these differing masculinities and how they are shaped by the interdependencies of race, ethnicity, sexuality, age or religion. As the analysis of the two movies highlights, popular representations of Muslim masculinity often have to cite clichéd figures such as the «old patriarch» or «young fanatic». This is not to say that the movies offer one-dimensional images that can only be read in a certain way. While I do not advocate a policy of «positive images»,²⁶ it is interesting to look at what images predominantly circulate about Muslim men in the UK at the moment. What kind of Muslim masculinities become intelligible at what point in time? What does the relative absence of Muslim women on the big screen other



6 *East is East: Consoling the Mother*

than as victims of so-called honour killings or arranged marriages say about the visual repertoire of the Western images of migrants, let alone the almost complete absence of the representation of queers with a migrant background?

In both movies, *My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East*, the problems of immigrant societies are attributed to maladjusted male migrants. These conflicts are reduced to a familial level. The fact that fathers are harassed and not accepted in the 'host society' sparks different kinds of behaviours: on the one hand, the sons claim a British identity for themselves and feel the need to reject their fathers' traditions, or they believe the fathers have become too estranged from their culture of origin, which, in turn leads to the embracing of a rigid and fundamentalist Muslim identity.

These films focus extensively on the dysfunction of the migrant family rather than on social contexts. Hence, the problem of Muslim fundamentalism is presented as a breakdown of the nuclear family and not as a political issue. Muslim fundamentalism is portrayed as an angry reaction of defiant sons rather than as political radicalism.

While in the 1990s hegemonic white masculinity was characterised by the discourse of 'new men' – as in the films based on Nick Hornby's novels or *The Full Monty* – the representation of Muslim masculinities still cannot emancipate itself from images of rigidity and repressiveness. It almost seems as if somebody always has to be the fanatic.²⁷

Notes

- 1 Collected in: Hanif Kureishi, *Love in a Blue Time*, London 1997, pp. 119–131.
- 2 Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi. Writers and Their Work*, Tavistock 2002, p. 92
- 3 *My Son the Fanatic*, R: Udayan Prasad, UK/France 1997, Film/DVD, 87:00, hier 21:51.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 24:38.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 24:46.
- 6 The same theme is explored in his 1995 novel *The Black Album* where the young hero Shahid Hasan gives up his flirt with Muslim fundamentalism for the sake of his affair with his white middle-aged college teacher Deede Osgood. Cf. Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album*, London 1995.
- 7 Collected in: Hanif Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming. Reflections on Writing and Politics*, London 2002, pp. 57–79.
- 8 Cf. Bart J. Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi. Contemporary World Writers*, Manchester 2001, p. 169.
- 9 Prasad 1997 (cf. footnote 3), 77:30.
- 10 Moore-Gilbert 2001 (cf. Footnote 9), p. 168.
- 11 As an exception, the 2004 film *Yasmin* features a female protagonist suffering from anti-Muslim racism after 9/11. It also tells the story of Yasmin's (Archie Panjabi) brother Nasir's (Syed Ahmed) turn to (Muslim) fundamentalism and their father's (Renu Setna) – a devout Muslim – helplessness about his son's radicalisation. Even if the film is rather schematic in the depiction of Nasir's change from Westernized drug dealer to fanatic Muslim, it tries to present a view that includes the social climate of anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain after 9/11 rather than focus exclusively on the nuclear family and a generational conflict. It is not so much his father's misunderstanding, but police hostility after 9/11 as well as the systematic targeting of Muslim fundamentalist organisations that effect the changes in the young man. Cf.: *Yasmin*, R: Kenneth Glenaan, UK 2004, Film/DVD, 87:00.
- 12 Cf. Loretta Collins Klobah, «Pakistani Englishness and the Containment of the Muslim Subaltern in Ayub Khan-Din's Tragi-comedy Film *East is East*», in: *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2003, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 91–108.
- 13 The label Pakistani is not quite right with reference to George, as, of course, Pakistan was not founded at the time of his emigration. However, he strongly identifies as Pakistani in the light of the war between India and Pakistan.
- 14 One implicit reference point for Kureishi's writing of this period is the Salman-Rushdie affair and the hostile reaction of many British Muslims to the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and their approval of the fatwa (1989).
- 15 E.K. Tan notes the contrast between the naming of the children and how George – like many migrants from his generation – adopted a traditional English name and abandoned his

- real name, Nazeer. Cf. E.K. Tan, «Overriding Identity Politics with Affect in Ayub Khan-Din's *East is East*», in: *Interactions: Aegean Journal of English and American Studies*, 2006, vol.15, no. 2, pp. 125–136.
- 16 Collins Klobah 2003 (cf. footnote 12), p. 93.
- 17 Enoch Powell was a rightwing Conservative Party Member of Parliament and rose to fame with his infamous «rivers of blood» speech (April 20, 1968), in which he sparked racist fears of an «overflow» of migrants «infiltrating» the British nation.
- 18 Damien O'Donnell, *East is East*, Film/DVD-ROM, 96:00, 1999, 10:58.
- 19 Rudyard Kipling, *The Complete Verse*, London 2006, p. 187.
- 20 O'Donnell 1999 (cf. footnote 18), 19:43.
- 21 In the play *Nazir* is not gay. He is an absent character about whom we only learn through remarks in the family that he ran away to marry an English girl.
- 22 Cf. Jasbir K. Puar, «Queer Times, Queer Assemblages», in: *Social Text* 2005, vol. 23, no. 3–4, pp. 121–139 for an illuminating discussion of how (queer) Muslim sexualities are conceptualised in the service of discourses of U.S. exceptionalism during the war on terror.
- 23 O'Donnell 1999 (cf. footnote 18), 72:42.
- 24 Collins Klobah (cf. footnote 12), 2003, p. 98.
- 25 In their recent re-evaluation of the concept «hegemonic masculinity» Connell and Messerschmidt, for example, clarify: «Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting.» Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, «Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept», in: *Gender & Society* 2005, vol. 19, no. 6, pp. 829–859, p. 836.
- 26 In this context Kobena Mercer has coined the phrase «burden of representation». He explains: «When artists are positioned on the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production, they are burdened with the impossible task of speaking as «representatives», in that they are widely expected to «speak for» the marginalized communities from which they come.» Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle. New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, New York/London 1994, p. 235. Of course, it is important to show images of (Muslim) domestic violence; my point of critique is that it turns out to be almost the only visual representation of male migrants so much so that it gradually becomes the only legible code.
- 27 I would like to thank Katy Allen, Anne Koch-Rein and Beatrice Michaelis for their helpful comments.