

INTERPRETATION OF KUREISHI WORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL  
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW GENERATIONS

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## Overview of Entire Cultural Interpretation

This piece of work is a cultural interpretation of conflicts between the old and the new generation. Basing the arguments on the works of Haneif Kureshi, the study considers how both young and old characters perceive life, and how they can be used to justify that culture and identity are dynamic (Hall, 1989), not only from one generation to the next but also from one country or nation to the other (Hall, 1996). In one view, it was argued that the culture of British society, which is the core society in the Kureshi's works, has been constantly changing due to influx of diverse cultures. In another view, there are certain abstractions of the British culture that were also expected to remain constant. Thus, this study employed a multicultural approach to understand why different cultures and identities, when brought together, leads to conflicts and how such cultural conflicts have been solved among the generations and identities of British society.

In all the analyzed works of Kureshi, this study attempted to interpret cultural difference between the old and the new generation. The basis of argument in this study was that culture entails the image that a society has of itself in regard to a specific value system and a specific structure of feeling, hence leading to its identity (Hall, 1989; 1990; Hall, 1996). The analysis compared the conventional cultural values and practices, as were exhibited by the old generation, as well as those that are preferred by the new generations of various identities to draw conclusions on what seems to signify or contribute to cultural conflicts between the two generations.

A common feature among the 'Word and the Bomb, My Son The Lunatic, The rainbow Sign and The Buddha of Suburbia' is that they all address cultural heterogeneity (Hall, 1989; 1990; Hall, 1996). Cultural heterogeneity refers to a mixture of two or more cultures with diverse values and characteristics (Hall, 1989; 1990; Hall, 1996). It is a kind of culture with multiple ways to approach and accept values in life (Hall, 1990). In the context of Kureshi's works, there is cultural heterogeneity due to interaction between the West and the Asians, which are two different races. Hence the stereotypes adopt divergent interpretations of life. The cultural heterogeneity in these works of Haneif Kureshi is due to overlap between the old and new generation (Hall, 1996). Hence, in as much as the new generation tries to perceive life in a

different perspective, they would always be seen as uncultured. Besides, cultural differences in these works can be linked to historical way of Western life.

### **The Word and the Bomb**

In the *Word and the Bomb*, Haneif how people can be forced to practice what they were not used to before. However, sticking to what one was used to before can lead to much restraint from enjoyment. In the Kureshi's work, it can be noted that two cultural forces that pull in opposite directions to one another are Islamic cultures (Tariq 34) and the Western culture. Since culture is linked to religious values (Hall, 1989), the Islam faith conventionally prohibits consumption of pork and alcohol. However, Haneif Kureshi portrays that in the current generation, there is likelihood that a faithful Muslim can enjoy himself with drinks (Tariq 29). In his description, an essay published after the bombings reveals how Haneif Kureshi fled from the Imam's preaching in a mosque to the nearest bar where he sought for refuge (Hanif 76). However, this cannot be accepted by old Muslims who were brought up in Asian regions. This signifies that cultural differences between the old and the new generation are closely linked to social values in life (Hall, 1996). Analytically, the boy's illustration shows that social challenges have great impact on the trend in which a people's culture would follow (Hall, 1989). In the context of social constructs of people's culture (Hall, 1990), it can be seen that security concern can make the new generation have a different view of how culture should influence their lives.

It can be noted that coming together between the British and Asians led to a unique cultural identity, which later led to the emergence of new generational cultures. Therefore, it is from the uniqueness of the emergent culture that this study asserts cultural conflicts between the old and the new generation. Unique cultures can be traced from various constructs (Hall, 1989), and in the case of Kureshi's works, this can be traced from a mixed-race family, which can be noted when he describes his ambivalence when first visiting his father's relatives in Karachi (Behr 1).

The 'Word and the Bomb' tends to evaluate the competing claims of England and Pakistan to his allegiance, and the hypocrisies in both societies that mean neither can win outright. Analytically, not all cultural values and activities are explicit (Hall, 1989). Hence, it should be understood that there some of the British culture that can be misinterpreted due to their implicit nature. What others refer to being hypocritical aspects of the British, due to the outrage that emerged after the

bombing, which claimed that the perpetrators were British nationals (Behr 1), should just be understood as the invisible part of culture in regard to the onion model (Hall, 1996). These elements of culture can only be understood when one is deeply involved with that culture for a long time (Hall, 1996).

In the view of Hall (1996), it can be understood that what people may say is not what they mean. Based on the 'hypocrisy' that the West tries to show towards the Asian, it can be asserted that memories of humiliation that the first generation of Asian immigrants experienced can still remain to bomb their hearts hence this can greatly shape their view towards life while staying in another culture, which is not theirs. Thus, a new generation of Asians living in Britain is seen to be culturally disoriented due to Western influences. However, the *Word and the Bomb* seems to advocate for equality by dropping the white conservatism that demands gratitude for having tolerated a few years of multiculturalism (Kenneth 68). By Haneif Kureshi acknowledging how bitterness and confusion might lead a young Muslim to seek existential solace in fundamentalism (Nobil 34), it can be deduced that daily life experiences have greatly influenced cultural trends in British nation.

### **The Rainbow Sign (TRS)**

In *The Rainbow Sign*, Kureshi paints the suburb as a space in which thinking as well as argument is considered as taboo (TRS 50). Taboo in cultural aspect is that which is not accepted by the local culture. Taboo falls under practices that do not add value to a society (Hall, 1989). Based on these concepts, it can be learnt that an individual in his desire for knowledge is basically distinct from his community. Analytically, it can be learnt that culture is shaped by the setting of that community (Hall, 1989). Within this context of argument, the story of one becoming an artist in TRS is the most radical dissociation of the lower middle class given that this profession beyond is the suburb's scope. Thus, in the suburb life, one would encounter much resistance to his/her aspirations.

Even though the characters in TRS could belong to one cultural background, the old generation as depicted by the parent of the characters resists personal ambitions of their children, a cult that the young could only be break by persistence and personal sacrifice (Young 38). Thus, TRS suggests a society where the new generation would limitedly get opportunity to pursue what they

want if they don't come out to struggle and defend their decisions in life. Culturally, it can be argued that mindsets can shape how people view and value life and its objects (Hall, 1989). To the old generation, an artistic profession does not make meaning to them hence they don't value it. In contrast, the profession makes meaning to the young generation (Hall, 1996).

One might further observe the admiration for the city and urban culture in TRS as the negative representation of the lower-middle class people as a dissociation from an individual's past. Here, the protagonists in TRS look down on their past. However, it is interesting that Haneif explicitly speaks about himself. He describes how he was suffering under the English stereotypes (TRS 87). As an Asian stereotype narrating about his life experience, it can be understood that the West seems to mistreat Asians probably due to their social class. However, this is equally acknowledged as an undesired identity even by those who fall within the class itself.

The story in TRS depicts a redefinition of Britishness. Given that Britishness is forms the core topic of the analyzed texts in this write-up, Haneif asks "so what does it mean to be British?" (TRS 4) In this regard, TRS can be understood as a postcolonial story that illuminates a different and new cultural identity due to international influences (Moore-Gilbert 4). Similarly, Haneif can be seen as taking on what he calls "Britain's traditional racial-national culture" (Ball 16).

In addition, Haneif himself has repeatedly noted in TRS that sees a need to redefine Britishness (Ball 16). For instance, he states he states "Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. Ergo, there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time" (TRS 55). Therefore, based on all these facts, it can be argued that the current British culture is not what it was in the past hence those who lived in the past and still lives in the current times cannot have similar view as to what constitutes British culture.

In attempting to suggest the implications in TRS, (Christina 28) notes that redefinition of Britishness ought to base on the paradigmatic shift from the notion of culture as a closed and uniform system of meaning to the concept of culture as a heterogeneous web of sub-cultural relations. Such redefinition will signify a shift from the Anglocentrism, which has been the conventional core of Britishness (Homi 59). In asserting these views, the concept behind several rainbow colors depicts that Britishness is an identity that is first and foremost political (Paxman

56). The term considers diverse ethnicities under one fused political construct. Thus Britishness would refer to all people subject to the political construct: the English, the Scottish, the Welsh, and the Irish (Alamgir 19). Logically, this Haneif tends to suggest through TRS that such political ideologies cannot be accepted in the new generation where countries as well as individuals would want to be democratic and independent in making decisions central to their national or individual developments. In a way, redefinition of Britishness would therefore help the two culturally different generations have a common view of their stay in Britain rather than being under the monarchy system as it was before.

Haneif advocates eradicating cultural practices that can be traced to the pre-colonial era. Here, with the emergence of the British Empire, 'Britishness' came to include a host of other ethnicities, expanding its frame of reference with the expansion of the British Empire (Dick 79). "Until the rise of Scottish nationalists it was common, even among the highly literate, to confuse Britain and England" (Bogdanor 84). In Paxman's view, the reason for this is that the English based their 58 national identities absolutely on the basis of the United Kingdom and the British Empire (Rasheed 112). Being the dominating ethnicity in the British Empire, they "extinguished their ethnic identity within the idea of being British" (Paxman 13). Hence, Britishness in the context of TRS is the product of the most powerful peer-group within the nation metonymically identifying itself with the whole structure.

To further prove that TRS advocates a redefinition of being in Britain, it is noted that the main aspect of the discourse on British culture today is the process of dismantling Anglocentrism and its exposition as a hegemonic strategy to contain the existing heterogeneity of the national-political entity Britain (Jörg 48). This is due to changing composition of national population, which can now be defined by a mix of diverse sorts of interests, different kinds of histories, different kinds of cultural histories, different postcolonial lineages, and different sexual orientations (Paxman 207).

In addressing constant changes in the public's sphere, Schoene notes that Haneif's story of TRS posits that the issue of "The traditional Anglo-British identity has become untenably anachronistic (Schoene 113). Its nationalistic representations are invariably out of time and place, and either evaporate, or calcify and crack in the tropicalized, polycultural climate of the 1980s and 1990s." (Schoene 113) In another view, Haneif's tries to illustrate that contemporary

British cultural reality on the level of everyday culture needs an embracement of modern British culture to accommodate its populace (Bradford 202).

In the TRS, it can be learnt that the essentialist concepts of identity that restrict the characters are connected to a society that is still characterized by traditional images and values. Thus, the story tries to discourage the conservatives since they are the force within society that perpetuates anachronistic images of society (Bradford 54). TRS therefore signify that the representations of the past still shape people's way of seeing society (Bradford 61). However, a society defining itself along its traditional paradigms can also breed new forms of essentialism (Bradford 63).

In bringing out the tag of war between the old and the new generation in regard to cultural definition, it can be noted that TRS identifies the second generation youth with the ethnicity of their parents, without being considered part of English society. Haneif himself was brought up to be a normal suburban boy, but for his teacher "Hanif comes from India" (TRS 28). Thus, as already been noted, "The British were doing the assimilating: they assimilated Pakistanis to their world view. They also saw Asians as dirty, ignorant and less than human who are worthy of abuse and violence (TRS 29). However, "the Pakistanis were a risible subject in England, derided on television and exploited by politicians. They had the worst jobs, they were uncomfortable in England, and some of them had difficulties with the language. They were despised and out of place" (TRS 25). Therefore, it can be learnt that TRS is a story that is focused to reveal historical injustices that were inflicted upon the aliens. The story also portrays early British as extremely racist. Hence, in the context of current globalization, such mindsets needs to be abolished to make Britain a better nation for all irrespective of his/her race, nationality, origin and socio-economic status among others.

The most direct rejection of the protagonists in TRS, like Karim, can be noted in the racism that the novels connect to the lower class suburban community (Cacqueray 39). Here, Haneif associates this attitude with the older generation, which is set in the lower middle class and its mentality. In the memory of his own youth, Haneif refers to the racist parents of his school-friends (TRS 28). The rejection of the aliens represented as going hand-in-hand with the notions of social class. Haneif says "parents of my friends, both lower-middle-class and working-class, often told me they were Powell supporters. Sometimes I heard them talking, heatedly, violently,

about race, about ‘the Pakis’ ” (TRS 28). Such hatred towards immigrants is connected to low class status.

### **My Son the Fanatic**

Parvez can be seen as a member of the first generation, but has immigrated to Britain from Pakistan and works as a taxi driver in a northern England city, now for 20 years (Rita 22). Although he is a Muslim, Parvez doesn't follow a traditional Islamic way of life. He doesn't pray but rather has broken countless rules of the Koran. He drinks alcohol, eats pork pies and has an adulterous affair with Bettina, who is a white prostitute (Easthope 44). Parvez seems to be well integrated and assimilated into British society and strongly believes that they have to fit in England as immigrants (Philip 42). He says “You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in!” (Kureishi, 2009a: 293). He cannot understand why his son has converted to Islamic fundamentalism, and why he rejects Western civilization (Tom 24).

In the view of Milan Kundera, “human life is bounded by two chasms: fanaticism on one side and absolute skepticism on the other” (Saynor, 2001, 28). These two chasms have been successfully achieved in Haneif's story ‘My Son the Fanatic’ through the use of traditional East-West theme. Parvez migrates to England, which is perceived as a dreamland and as a country of opportunities. However, he begins to experience some changes in the behaviors of his son, Ali who is the only child. Ali has declined to acculturation, embraces his cultural roots and become a Muslim fundamentalist. Ali's tendency to the Eastern way of living and his disregarding the West turn into assaults towards Parvez. Although Parvez tries to tolerate his son's behaviors at the onset, he finally loses his temper and hits his son for having adopted the radical position of returning to their ancient religious traditions (Kureishi, 2009a: 298). This leads to a paradoxical conclusion questioning the impacts not only within multicultural British society but also the Islam community.

Just like TRS, it can be learnt that *My Son the Fanatic* seems to explore cultural differences between the old and the new generation. In as much as new view of culture can be associated with the new generation, the story presents potential proof that even the young can decline to adopt new cultural dimensions. Besides, the play reveals some racial tensions between the native and aliens in Britain. In the story about of the conflict between the Asian (Pakistani) father,

Parvez, and his son, Ali, *My Son the Fanatic* analyzes the father-son relationship. Based on Haneif's views, this story helps "to understand what it is to be a son, what it is to be a father, what it is to live in a world where there is radical Islam" (Kureishi, 2006). Thus, the story can be used to understand the alienation of young and radicalized Muslim.

The relationship between a father and a son started getting tense and finally ruined due to different views on their conventional religious cultures (Waddick 62). The struggle between conserving the original Pakistani religion, as purported by the father, and trying to fit into the British society brings out several uneasy moments between the father and his son. However, it can be deduced that the son neither wishes to drop their conventional religion and adopt the British culture where young aliens are most influenced by foreign culture (Oubechou 102). In another view, *My Son the Lunatic* negatively portrays Muslim beliefs and behavior.

In "My Son the Fanatic", Kureishi focuses his attention on the gap between two generations of immigrants living in Britain. He works over shifting values between a father and son whose struggle was between assimilation and separatist fundamentalism. The dissimilarities between these two generations of Pakistani immigrants to Britain are explicitly depicted to represent liberal and secular and a fundamentalism (Kureishi, 2005: 55). Ali's father, Parvez, is portrayed as enterprising while Ali is rebellious and zealous. Therefore, based on these characters, both conservatism and liberalism are not favorable ideologies to be adopted.

In reacting to 'My Son the Lunatic', Linden Peach purports that Haneif's story reflects "values have to be worked out through negotiation of the conflicts created by love and desire and by the clash and fusion of cultural and religious traditions" (Peach, 2001:18). It can easily be noted in 'My Son the Lunatic' that the author is trying to reflect on his ethnic background and suburban upbringing (Peach, 2001:34), which has great influence on his future cultural orientation.

Even though Ali has been brought up in secular Britain, he now supports "a new theocratic age" in which "repression is returning. Religion has come back to the West – with a vengeance" (Kureishi, 2009b: 302). Reflecting completely anti-multiculturalist ideas, Ali hates Western lifestyles (Kureishi, 2009a: 293). Based on the position of Ali's stand, it can be learnt that the West have unveiled hatred towards the Asian aliens (Kureishi, 2009a: 293) owing to the fact that their education cultivates does not exhibit pro-religious attitude (Kureishi, 2009a: 295). More

reasons that made Ali to disregard the West culture is their deeply rooted hypocrisy, adulterous, homosexuality, drug use, and prostitution (Kureishi, 2009a: 293-294). In this regard, it can be learnt that the conflict is not between religions but between civilizations (Sid-Ahmed, cited in Huntington, 2002: 213). Therefore, it can be noted that the underlying dilemma for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism but Islam, which presents a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power (Huntington, 2002: 218). Analytically, a powerful lesson that Haneif wanted to convey here is that young people can also make wise choices for the sake of their future. In fact, being a son would not imply that the new generation must follow and respect their parents' decisions even if such decisions can lead them to negative lifestyles.

In regard "My people have taken enough. If the persecution doesn't stop there will be jihad. I, and millions of others, will gladly give our lives for the cause (Kureishi, 2009a: 294), this analysis can learn that there are ethnic and racial tensions. This is because Ali is struggling to maintain and stick to his Pakistani cultural roots but he lives in England. Later, Ali's father goes through a drastic change and completely dropped old, typical English lifestyle and took up one that was more related to his ancestors and to religion. Here, it can be learnt that one's cultural orientation can highly be determined by his friends and associates, hence it good enough for Parvez to drop his friends.

The West can be blamed for its colonial past. It is a nation that in the past considered itself as having "a superior identity in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said, 1979: 7). Moreover, the "white men consider themselves superior to black men" (Fanon, 2008: 3). Therefore, based on 'My Son the Fanatic', there is likelihood that aliens' children who were brought up during such times, like Ali, still feel the oppression they faced in the colonial past of the West (Kureishi, 2009a: 297). In this view, the story tries to advocate eradication of such historical injustices and regard Britain aliens with a multicultural view. In this era when Britain is a multicultural nation, there should no such idea as 'superior' European versus the 'inferior' non-European.

What happens in the analyzed works of Kureshi can be comprehended based on the views of Huntington who links cultural identity with post-Cold War era. In his view, Huntington states that the most significant distinctions among peoples are not political, economic or ideological but

are cultural. Thus, this study asserts that the story advocates understanding of cultural gap between the young and the old and what it takes one to make a decision towards a foreign culture. In this view, what happens in 'My Son the Lunatic' portrays that people define themselves in terms of language, ancestry, history, values, customs, institutions and religion (Bowie 112). People also identify themselves with their tribes, religious communities, ethnic groups, nations (Schmidt 16). To a broader extent, people like to identify themselves with civilizations as the case of Ali's father who wanted to be part of Western civilization. (Huntington 21). This study further noted that 'My Son the Lunatic' is a story, which portrays that culture is dynamic not only within a given time frame but also across various nations, ethnic groups and religions.

Having different views towards what is acceptable within a given nation can easily lead to conflicts as can be seen between Ali and his father. However, this seems to be a critical representation of the tension that exists between Islamic countries and the Western nations. Hence, 'My Son the Lunatic' can be used to understand the roots of conflicts that seem to give rise to Islamic fundamentalism (Bogdanor 24). For instance, Ali identifies himself with his ethnic origin and religion. However constructing his identity and to provide recognition of this identity in a postcolonial pushes him to embrace a radical way to enable him convert to Islamic fundamentalism.

It can further be learnt that Haneif presents the Asian culture either as a separate culture or as part of the process in which all cultures are mixed together (Kureishi, 1999). Logically, 'My Son the Lunatic' portrays that young generation can make divergent decision but this basically relies on the benefits that the decision taken can yield. In the context of the text, the young generation of immigrants are choosing fundamentalism owing to its potential in creating purity security that young people need. On this note, Kureishi (21) states that fundamentalism should be considered as "an aberration, a desperate fantasy of worldwide black brotherhood; a symptom of extreme alienation" (Kureishi 21) the young generations are exposed to. Therefore, as a young alien in Britain, there is some sense of insecurity and inferiority. Thus, tensions that emerge between the generations are due to failures of old generation in giving good role models to the new generation. As a result, they act based on the concept that "If you feel excluded it might be tempting to exclude others" (Kureishi 305).

## The Buddha of Suburbia

In the *Buddha of Suburbia*, it can be noted from the language of the novels that movement is a way through which the human capacity can employ to find happiness and a meaning in life. People who are trapped in their life are literally “going nowhere” like in the case of Haroon, (Buddha of Suburbia 26). However, Heater, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, portrays a group of individuals who move from one place to the other in quest for happiness and survival in life. Heater was the only working-class person thus he becomes a sort of symbol for the masses (Buddha of Suburbia 175).

Analytically, the existence in the suburb is directly connected with the lower middle class. This is the story of the Indian parents’ migration into the suburb. However, this is always associated with downward social mobility. Haneif stresses this with portraying the luxuriant life in India and Pakistan that the fathers of Karim, Jamila and Shahid led before coming to England. In their home country, they belonged to the upper middle class. Haroon’s father was a doctor and his uncle a movie magazine editor in Bombay (Buddha of Suburbia 25). In India, Haroon moved in elitist circles. “Dad and Anwar loved to show off about all the film-stars they knew and the actresses they’d kissed” (Buddha of Suburbia 23). Haroon “went to school in a horse-drawn carriage” (Buddha of Suburbia 24) and in the afternoon he “played cricket ... and tennis on the family 18 court” (Buddha of Suburbia 23).

The *Buddha of Suburbia* portrays the internal hierarchy of the middle class (Ellingsen 58). From the perspective of this, being suburban and lower middle class is regarded as a “stigma,” (Buddha of Suburbia 134). Therefore, such internal dissimilarities prove that the “middle class’ is purely a middle class concept” (Buddha of Suburbia 10). As in Furbank (10), if the concept is used in the context of self-description, the label ‘lower middle class’ would just be a unique emphasis of social progress as well as a conscious affirmation of separation from one’s original socio-cultural aspects. Therefore, it can be argued that Hanaif brought the concept into picture with an intention that people don’t stagnate where they were born and brought up. In fact the fact that one was born in a middle class setting would not mean that they belong to it (Furbank 23).

Based on this text, there are certain differences that can be deduced between the new and old generations in regard to international movements (O’Reilly 84). Comparatively, the new

generation has high rate of movement across the borders in search for education and employment (Peter 76). This has led to acquiring of foreign cultures, an issue that the old are not at ease with. In *The Buddha of Suburbia* (75), Haneif contrasts the suburban obsession with display with the desire for refinement and culture. Academically, cultural differences between the old and the new generations can be linked to how the young characters in the text possess culture by possession of books.

Haneif portrays himself as an outsider in a community that cannot understand the desire that someone wants to be an artist, someone basically concerned with culture (Hanif 62). This shows how at times the old generation can hinder and make the young generation achieve their interests in life. To some old generation, culture is not considered useful but as a mere attitude holding that literature is only concerned with “flowers and trees and love and all” (*Buddha of Suburbia* 75). This view towards the young generation is comparable to the statements in *The Rainbow Sign* where thinking and agreements are taboos. However, just like in the case of TRS, the young protagonists in the ‘*Buddha of Suburbia*’ objects this view of old generation. Karim observes when Eva “spoke of the new Dylan Album and what Riverside studios was doing, I saw she wanted to scour that suburban stigma right off her body” (*Buddha of Suburbia* 134). In the view of the new generation in the text, cultural capital is the “easy talk of art, theatre, architecture, travel; the languages, the vocabulary, knowing your way round a whole culture” (*Buddha of Suburbia* 177).

The essentiality of gaining distance from the family is what can be learnt in Karim’s case. “In London psychologists were saying you had to live your own life in your own way and not according to your family, or you’d go mad” (*Buddha of Suburbia* 62). This is a strong confirmation that cultural tensions that exist between the old and new generation in other nations are due Western influence. In one way, they are good because they help the young generations to move away from old cultural views that hinder achievement of their full potential. In another view, the adoption of such Western ideologies deteriorates their relationship with their parents, who are still rooted to old generation ideologies. Moreover, much of views portrayed by the young generation in the *Buddha of Suburbia* are linked to their stay in urban regions. This is quite different from the old generation who majorly stayed in the rural settings. Thus, it can be asserted that urbanization offers a way of maturity among the new generation (Bart 107). In

conclusion, cultural differences between the new and old generation is attributed to globalization and western influence on other nationals.

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