# My Son the Fanatic

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HANIF KUREISHI

Hanif Kureishi was born in 1954 in Bromley, South London, England. Kureishi's father was Pakistani while his mother was English. He attended a few different universities, ultimately graduating with a degree in Philosophy from Kings College London. He began his writing career writing erotic fiction in the 1970s, and then moved into playwriting. In 1985 he wrote his screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which was adapted into a film. The screenplay—which was progressive for its depiction of an interracial gay couple and its honest depictions of the discrimination that Pakistani people face in England—won the New York City Film Critics Best Screenplay Award and was nominated for an Academy Award. He has written several other screenplays, including one for the cinematic adaptation of "My Son the Fanatic." Kureishi often incorporates his own personal experiences as well as the experiences of his family members into his writing, including for his 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*. His family, however, has publicly disputed the truth of the autobiographical material that has inspired much of his writing, and claim that they've been misrepresented in his work. Kureishi has three sons and currently resides in West London.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The stories in Kureishi's *Love in a Blue Time*—including "My Son the Fanatic"—span the time period from the 1970s to the early 1990s. As a Cold War tactic against the expansion of the Soviet Union Western countries began supporting fundamentalist Islamic groups opposing the Soviets immediately following World War II. By the 1970s, Western nations, notably the U.S. and the U.K., regularly supplied fundamentalist groups who were allied with regimes that supported Western interests with both money and weapons. In this way, the West played a significant role in the continued rise of fundamentalist Islam during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Additionally, this era of postcolonialism saw increased numbers of immigrants fleeing instability and violence in their home countries, and often settling in the Western nations that had once colonized their countries of origin and contributed to the very instability that the immigrants were now forced to flee. Kureishi's Pakistani characters living in London are examples of such immigrants. Once abroad, Muslim immigrants, especially, faced discrimination often fueled by sensationalized depictions of radical Islam that overshadowed the reality of Islam as it's practiced by those who aren't fundamentalist. That discrimination, in turn, sometimes pushed the children of immigrants—who felt the loss of their past history and the pain of being discriminated against in their new home countries—to embrace a more fundamentalist Islamic face in response. "My Son the Fanatic" depicts just such a culture clash between first and second generation Muslim immigrants to England.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"My Son the Fanatic" was originally published as a stand-alone short story in a 1994 edition of *The New Yorker*, and was republished in Kureishi's collection of short stories, *Love in a Blue Time*, in 1997. Like Kureishi's other most notable works—including his novels *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* as well as his screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette*—"My Son the Fanatic" depicts the lives of Pakistani immigrants living in England. His work often explores themes of immigration, assimilation, fundamentalism, postcolonialism, identity, and coming of age. Kureishi's stories share themes in common with other notable postcolonial novels and collections such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** My Son the Fanatic
- **When Written:** Early 1990s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1994
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonial
- **Genre:** Fiction, Family Drama
- **Setting:** London, England
- **Climax:** Parvez and Ali argue about Ali's newfound love of radical Islam and his disdain for England and the West.
- **Antagonist:** Through most of the story, it appears that Parvez is the protagonist and Ali the antagonist. However, the story's ending turns things on their head, such that Parvez might be considered to be both the antagonist and protagonist.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Silver Screen.** "My Son the Fanatic" was adapted into a film, which was released in 1998. The film follows the same basic storyline, but contains a number of changes, including the addition of a new timeline, new events, and new characters. Notably, Ali's character—called Farid in the film—is portrayed as significantly more radical, and even violent, in the film adaptation.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Parvez, a first-generation Punjabi Pakistani immigrant to England, notices that his college-student son Ali has begun throwing away his possessions and withdrawing from his friends. Parvez's friends—who, like Parvez, are Punjabi and work as taxi drivers—believe that Ali's strange behaviors can be explained by drug addiction. Parvez's closest confidant—a prostitute named Bettina who is one of his regular customers—agrees with this assessment.

Soon, however, Parvez uncovers that Ali's new and bizarre behaviors are caused by a newfound devotion to a radical and fundamentalist version of Islam. Throughout the rest of the story, Parvez attempts to convince his son to abandon his extreme beliefs and get back on track with his previous life path: to become an accountant, and more generally to assimilate into English culture that Parvez sees as the final indication that he has done well in England, and that immigration was worth all that it cost. Parvez does not confide in his wife about what is going on with Ali, but instead increasingly depends on Bettina for advice and emotional support as he navigate this conflict with his son.

Parvez quickly realizes, however, that Ali is steadfast in his beliefs. Over a disastrous dinner, it becomes clear that Ali is obstinately opposed to Western culture, which he views as full of hatred for Muslims and shallow, materialistic, shamefully indulgent, and concerned only with the pursuit of pleasure. Ali demands that his father abide by basic rules of the Koran, such as refraining from drinking, gambling, and eating pork. It's clear his beliefs are extreme, however, when he tells his father about his desire to aid in bringing the "Law of Islam" to rule the world, and his willingness to give up his life for the cause of jihad.

Despite his extreme beliefs, Ali at times levels valid critiques against the West. For example, he points to the negative effects of Western imperialism, white supremacy, and the violence that Western nations inflict upon Muslim countries and people. In a final conversation between the two, Parvez attempts to reason with Ali by expressing his personal philosophy of the world, and pleading that the only way for his legacy to live on after his death is through Ali and his success. Ali remains unmoved.

At the end of the story a heated confrontation between Bettina and Ali—in which Bettina tries to reason with Ali on behalf of Parvez and Ali insults Bettina for being a prostitute—sends Parvez over the edge. Enraged, he physically attacks Ali, although he knows that even this final, desperate act will not bring his son back from the brink of his extremist beliefs. As he is bloodied while passively enduring his father's frenzied attack, Ali asks Parvez who is the fanatic now.

## CHARACTERS

**Parvez** – Parvez is Ali's father. He is a Pakistani immigrant in England who makes a living driving a taxi at night. He has a wife, although he does not seem to like her much, and when he seeks emotional support it is from one of his regular customers, a prostitute named Bettina. The story revolves around Parvez's concerns about Ali's newfound devotion to fundamentalist Islam. This unnerves Parvez for two significant reasons. For one, Parvez's early experiences with Islam as a child growing up in Lahore turned him off from all religions entirely, a sentiment that he shares with many of his fellow Pakistani immigrant friends. Most importantly, however, is that Ali's devotion to a radical version of Islam directly conflicts with Parvez's ultimate dream of assimilating totally into English culture and society. He believes his dream for assimilation will only be realized in Ali, who was born and raised in London and was on track to starting a successful, white-collar career as an accountant. Parvez copes with his distress over Ali by drinking whiskey and confiding in Bettina, who coaches him on how to try and talk Ali down from his new fundamentalist ideology. However, each time that Parvez confronts Ali about his new beliefs, the two clash. Parvez defends the lifestyle and ideology that the West has to offer, while Ali vehemently insists that his father is a bad person not only because he has broken so many rules of the Koran (like drinking and eating port), but because he so steadfastly believes in a country that discriminates against, and inflicts violence upon, Muslim people. These repeated insults anger Parvez and fuel increasing disdain between the two, in turn pushing Ali further away and deeper into his radical beliefs. By the end of the story, after Ali insults Bettina, Parvez becomes enraged and drunkenly attacks Ali. In this moment, Parvez becomes the fanatic in the story, and enacts the Western violence against Muslim people that radicalized Ali in the first place.

**Ali** – Ali is Parvez's son. He was born and raised in London, but both of his parents are immigrants from Pakistan. Ali was successful in school and sports throughout his childhood and adolescence. He had close friends as well as an English girlfriend, and was studying accounting at university. The drama of the story revolves around Ali's sudden shift from a life of assimilation to one devoted to fundamentalist Islamic beliefs and practice. This shift begins when Ali starts throwing out clothes, books, cricket bats, video games, and other possessions that, to him, represent what he now sees as the indulgence and excess of Western culture. While his father views Ali as the family's final step towards achieving full assimilation into English culture and society, Ali's experience of growing up as the child of immigrants in England has turned him against assimilation entirely. Instead, he wishes to reclaim the identity and culture that his family left behind in Pakistan, but in this quest winds up entangled in the ideology of a radical version of

Islam that doesn't actually match the former religious practices of his family. While his father delights in Western values like the flexibility and freedom to enjoy life and its excesses, Ali is steadfast in his beliefs that enjoyment and materialism are antithetical to a virtuous life. At times, Ali deploys valid critiques of the West, pointing out the destruction wrought by Western imperialism and the Western violence perpetrated against Muslim peoples and countries around the world. He asks his father how he can love something which hates him so publicly. Ali, however, takes his beliefs to the extreme, and is willing to give his life for jihad to end the persecution that he describes. Ali's unwillingness to give in to Parvez's desire for him to assimilate ends up enraging Parvez, and leads him to drunkenly attack Ali. This final action makes Ali's point that the West is itself fanatical for the hatred and violence it deploys against Muslim people.

**Bettina** – Bettina is a regular customer of Parvez. She is a prostitute, and Parvez drives her home nearly every night after she's done working. Parvez talks more openly with Bettina than he does with his wife, and their relationship takes on the characteristics of an emotional affair. Bettina becomes Parvez's confidant and main source of advice as he struggles to confront Ali and convince him to abandon his radical Islamic beliefs. Towards the end of the story, Bettina and Ali meet in Parvez's cab, where she and her revealing clothing, flashy accessories, and fragrant perfume come to represent the Western culture of temptation, materialism, and enjoyment that Ali despises. When Bettina tries to advocate for Parvez by confronting Ali about his fundamentalist Islamic beliefs, Ali shames her for being a prostitute. Enraged, and hurt in what was a fight between a father and son, Bettina gets out of the car, and this is her final appearance in the story.

**Parvez's Wife** – Parvez's wife, Ali's mother, remains unnamed throughout the story, and only shows up in two passing references. She is significant for her absence. A Pakistani immigrant like Parvez, she represents how he has forgotten and abandoned his cultural identity in exchange for full assimilation into English culture, as he confides not in his wife, but his regular customer, the English prostitute, Bettina. Parvez's wife appears in the story only when Parvez is ordering her around. One of these incidents in particular enrages Ali. Ali remembers, and holds against Parvez, the time that he ordered his wife to cook pork sausages, despite the fact that Muslims don't eat pork, because Parvez saw it as part what was required of them if they were to fully assimilate into English culture.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### IMMIGRATION, ASSIMILATION, AND RADICALIZATION

Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" explores the tensions between a Punjabi immigrant father, Parvez, and his second-generation, British-born son, Ali. Parvez has spent his adult life assimilating into English culture and society after immigrating from Pakistan, and dreams that his son will complete this transformation. He is therefore appalled when Ali abandons his studies to become an accountant and instead devotes himself to a radicalized version of Islam and espouses hatred of the West. Parvez believes his son needs to be saved from these bad choices and ideas, but the story complicates this simple narrative. It does this first by showing how Parvez's own move away from Islam was motivated by his negative experience in religious school as a youth, just as Ali's newfound devotion to a radicalized Islam is motivated by his negative experience of being a Muslim in England. The story's ending—when Parvez is so enraged by his son's behavior that he physically attacks him. to which Ali responds, "who's the fanatic now?"—further blurs the line between assimilation, which is seen in the West as the socially acceptable course for immigrants, versus the socially maligned course of radicalization. That blurring, in turn, highlights that assimilation is itself a choice that is more complicated and harmful than it initially appears.

Parvez's desire for assimilation is at least in part motivated by a reaction against his Islamic religious background. When Parvez was growing up in Lahore he went to a religious school where he had to study the Koran. At one point in school, a Moulvi (Islamic scholar) attached a piece of string from Parvez's hair to the ceiling so that he'd be yanked back awake if he started to fall asleep in class. This "indignity" turned Parvez against religion forever, a path away from religion that mirrors those of his fellow first-generation Punjabi immigrants to England. He and his friends, for instance, scoff at the local mullahs in London for what they perceive as their hypocrisy for "thinking they could tell people how to live, while their eyes roved over the boys and girls in their care." For Parvez, distancing himself from Islam and his native culture is also critical to his desire to fully assimilate into English culture and society. In one particularly symbolic moment, he forces his wife to cook pork, representing a departure from his past culture, and justifies this departure by insisting "We have to fit in!" Beyond cultural behavior, fitting in is also directly tied to financial success for Parvez. As a first-generation immigrant his opportunities have been limited, and he's been forced to make immense sacrifices—working ten-hour days, forgoing hobbies and holidays—in order to try and guarantee that Ali will have access to better opportunities and upward mobility as the second-generation. This is why Parvez views Ali, born and raised in England, as the key to full

assimilation. His own hard work has set Ali up to get a white-collar job as an accountant, which will in turn allow Ali to easily provide for a future family. For Parvez, "Once this happened, [he] would be happy. His dreams of doing well in England would have come true." For Parvez, being first-generation has locked him out of such opportunities, and therefore he sees the complete assimilation of his son as perhaps the only path to acceptance and opportunity for his family in England.

However, Ali's experience of growing up in England as the son of Pakistani immigrants has driven him to adopt a radicalized version of Islam that directly conflicts with this father's dreams of assimilation. Having been born and raised in England, Parvez's view of the country is radically different from his father's. Just as Parvez believes Islam is full of hypocrites, Ali believes that "the West was a sink of hypocrites." Despite his extremism, Ali makes many valid critiques of the West, including that it is materialistic, individualistic, and concerned with pleasure and enjoyment at the expense of other things. The critique which perhaps reveals the most about his experiences growing up as the child of immigrants in England comes when he asks his father: "'The Western materialists hate us'…How can you love something which hates you?'" This critique suggests that, beyond just recognizing the West's political disdain for the Islamic world, Ali has himself felt the effects of prejudice and discrimination despite his having been born and raised in England, which has then contributed to his desire to distance himself from it. The implication is that Ali's experience as a second-generation immigrant has allowed him to see that full assimilation is never possible, and that the West will always view Muslims and immigrants as outsiders.

In the West, assimilation is the accepted and highly encouraged path for immigrants to take, while radicalization is condemned and feared. In the final scene, "My Son the Fanatic: complicates this idea by blurring the line between assimilation and radicalization not to advocate for radicalization, but rather to highlight the fact that assimilation is not as harmless a choice as it appears. Parvez's devotion to the course of assimilation leads him to attack his own son, and between punches Ali asks: "So who's the fanatic now?" Ali's searing, final question reveals the fanaticism behind assimilation. Parvez turns on his own son, which is symbolic of the ways in which assimilation requires that immigrants turn their backs on their own culture in order to gain acceptance in their new homes. The assimilationist decision to dilute or even abandon one's culture is a radical choice in its own right, and Kureishi suggests that neither extreme—assimilation or radicalization—should be the path that immigrants choose or are forced to take.

## IMMIGRATION, FATHERS, AND SONS

"My Son the Fanatic" explores the ways in which the father-son relationship is further complicated by the internal and external pressures of immigration and the desire to assimilate. Parvez is a first-generation immigrant whose opportunities have been limited. He works tirelessly in a blue-collar profession as a taxi driver in order to provide for his son, Ali, and guarantee that Ali experiences upward mobility. Many fathers' dreams are wrapped up in the success of their children, and the story captures how such dreams can be even more powerful for immigrants, who see their own assimilation as reaching its fruition through their children. By the end of the story, though, Ali has veered completely off the path that his father created for him, and this departure destroys their relationship as father and son. Through this implosion, Kureishi highlights how the pressure that first-generation immigrant fathers put on their sons to fulfill their dreams of assimilation can backfire and cause their second-generation children to, instead, attempt to reclaim the culture and identity that is lost when immigrants start life over in a new country.

Initially, Parvez is confident that his academically and socially successful son, Ali, will realize his—Parvez's—dreams of full assimilation into English culture. However, this confidence is shaken when Ali starts behaving strangely. As Ali begins to mysteriously throw away his possessions, though, Parvez becomes deeply worried and feels "his son's eccentricity as an injustice" after all the hard work and sacrifice he's made to provide Ali with everything he needs for a successful life in England. Parvez wants to confide in his friends—fellow Pakistani taxi drivers—but is ashamed and afraid to admit that his son may be falling victim to the "pitfalls" of "bad girls, truanting from school and joining gangs" that they've seen ruin other men's sons. Parvez experiences his son's "failures" as something shameful, showing that he sees his own success at assimilation as tied up in his son's success.

When he discovers that Ali's strange behavior has nothing to do with drugs, though, and is rather due to his newfound devotion to a fundamentalist version of Islam, Parvez is not at all relieved. Instead, Parvez desperately attempts to get his son back on the carefully constructed path to assimilation that Parvez had set for him. Parvez responds to the revelation that Ali has been praying by wanting to confront him about his sudden interest in religion, because he senses that it directly conflicts with Parvez's goal of assimilating into English culture. The confrontation, however, is disastrous: Parvez discovers that Ali has adopted fundamentalist Islamic beliefs and is staunchly opposed to Western culture and society. Ali is fanatical enough that he is willing to give his life to jihad in order that the "Law of Islam would rule the world" and to stop the persecution of Muslims worldwide. Parvez is deeply disturbed, and feels that he's "lost" his son. Parvez is realizing that his dreams for assimilation that depended on Ali are slipping away.

By the end of the story, it is clear that rather than actually leading to assimilation, Parvez's desire for and attempts to

achieve assimilation have driven Ali in the opposite direction. In a last attempt to reason with Ali, Parvez sits down to explain his personal philosophy of life in hopes that his son will be amenable to his view of the world and finally give up on his fundamentalist beliefs. Parvez explains that he believes one's life ends completely after death, and therefore the only way for a person to live on is through their children and the future generations to come. With this point, Parvez is expressing to Ali that his own hopes and dreams for success and full assimilation into English culture can only be realized through Ali. Parvez's philosophy, moreover, is one of individual success that explicitly rejects any idea of heaven. At this point in the conversation, Ali responds that he can't enjoy life because "all over the world our people are oppressed." Ali's embrace of all Muslim people as his own marks a complete reversal from his father's views of life. Ali experiences his father's efforts at assimilation as having cut him off from his past and culture, and so he embraces that culture as the core of his identity. The story shows that Ali's reaction is extreme, though: the fact that Parvez has no idea what Ali means when he says "*our* people" reveals that Ali's attempt to reclaim his Islamic Pakistani heritage is disconnected from the actual reality of the culture of his parents who were actually born and raised in Pakistan. The extremity of Ali's shift in worldview suggests that it is driven as much by a rejection of his father and his father's goals as it is by anything else.

In the dramatic final scene of the story, Parvez finally accepts that Ali is "unreachable," and that his departure from the carefully constructed path to full assimilation is final. Parvez has now become one of the fathers he used to pity because they could not prevent their second-generation sons from falling victim to the "pitfalls" of life in England. Parvez's subsequent physical attack on Ali is, in a sense, an attack on the destroyer of his dream of assimilation. That the failed dream leads to such an attack speaks to the pressures of immigration and assimilation, and how that pressure is magnified when such dreams become tied up in relationships between father and son.

## THE WEST AND ISLAM

In "My Son the Fanatic" the modern conflict between Islam and the West is embodied in the strained relationship between Parvez and his son Ali. Parvez delights in what he views as the flexibility and freedom offered by the Western culture of England. He drinks whiskey, eats pork, maintains an emotional affair with a prostitute, and scoffs at what he and his friends perceive as the hypocrisies of Islamic mullahs telling everyone else how to behave. Ali's sympathies, however, go in the other direction. He rails against the West and Western culture for its materialism and focus on personal freedom and pleasure above all, as well as for the way that the West views Islam as both inferior and violent while at the same time oppressing and inflicting violence upon Muslim people around the world. When Parvez, in a moment of fury at the judgement levied against him by his son, attacks Ali, it is an action that replicates the Western violence against the Middle East that radicalized Ali in the first place. In this moment, Kureishi highlights the West's own moral failings and its direct role in the radicalization of Islam that it deplores.

Throughout the story, Parvez is deeply committed to the West and what he believes is its superior culture that allows one the freedom to "do almost anything" and enjoy life's pleasures to the fullest. Parvez delights in the materialistic pleasures of the West, from bacon, which he "couldn't deny that he loved," to whiskey, to his friendly relationship with the prostitute Bettina. Not only does he love the freedoms he feels he is afforded in England, but he desperately wants to abandon his former culture in favor of full assimilation into this new culture of his adopted country.

Ali, in contrast, is deeply committed to Islam, and though his beliefs are rooted in a deeply fundamentalist version of Islam, he does highlight relevant points about the impact that Western freedoms have on the rest of the world. Ali is deeply opposed to the materialism of Western culture, and this opposition is clear from the very beginning of the story when he begins throwing away possessions that, to him, represent the excess and undue attention that Western culture pays to the pursuit of individual pleasure and satisfaction. But Ali's criticism of the West goes deeper. At one point in the story, Ali asks his father how he can love the West when the West has time and again demonstrated its hatred for immigrants, and especially those from the Islamic world. Through this question, Ali is pointing to the ways that the West inflicts violence and oppression on Muslim people through imperialism that wreaks instability in Muslim-majority countries, and also through the fury and discrimination directed at Muslim immigrants who then move to the West to escape the havoc in their home countries that the West helps create. Ali views Parvez's desire to assimilate as "grovelling to the whites," and as a way of reinforcing the global problems of white and Western supremacy. There is truth to Ali's claim that "the West always thought it was best," and aims to position other cultures as "inferior." Parvez himself briefly admits that there is truth in some of Ali's beliefs about the West, when he confides in Bettina that he thinks "people in the West sometimes felt inwardly empty and that people needed a philosophy to live by." Though Parvez remains adamantly opposed to the philosophy that Ali has chosen, in this moment he acknowledges that the materialism of the West is at least in part problematic.

Parvez proves Ali's point about the West in the story's final scene when, drunk on whiskey and despair, he physically attacks Ali. In this action, Parvez asserts dominance over Ali through violence, just as the West does to the Islamic world.

Parvez enacts just the sort of behavior and worldview that radicalized Ali in the first place, and "My Son the Fanatic" more broadly implicates the West in the creation of the fundamentalist strains of Islam that the West deplores.

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN

In "My Son the Fanatic" women play a secondary and supporting role to the men at the center of the story. In Parvez's circle of taxi drivers, wives are something to be avoided. Parvez's wife shows up briefly in the story, and only in moments when he is ordering her around. As Parvez becomes increasingly concerned about his son, Ali's, new and erratic behavior, he seeks advice not from his wife, but from the prostitute, Bettina, who he drives home each night and with whom he is carrying out an emotional affair. While this relationship seems friendly and mutual, at the end of the story, Ali takes his anger and disgust with Parvez out on Bettina, and thus she is unnecessarily harmed in this conflict between father and son. Kureishi's portrayal of the relationships between men and women in "My Son the Fanatic" highlights the general reality that women bear the brunt of men's inability to deal with their own emotions and vulnerability.

Parvez's unnamed wife appears in the story only when he is ordering her around, and her absence itself represents how Parvez has turned his back on his past life in Pakistan to achieve his goals of assimilation in England. The first reference to wives in the story comes early on when the narrator explains that Parvez and his fellow Punjabi cab drivers prefer the night shift not only because it pays better, but because it means they can sleep during the day and avoid their wives. From early on in the story, then, it's established that wives are something to be avoided. As Parvez's concern over Ali's behavior grows, he confides in Bettina, rather than his wife, Ali's mother. When he spies on Ali and discovers that he's praying, his wife is "still awake, sewing in bed," but unaware of what is going on. Parvez doesn't open up to her about what's happening with Ali, but instead orders her to "sit down and keep quiet, though she had neither stood up nor said a word." She appears here in the story only to be ordered around by Parvez, and remains unaware of the emotional turmoil that Parvez is experiencing over Ali. The second time Parvez's wife is directly referenced in the story is in an anecdote that Ali retells and uses against Parvez as evidence that he has been a bad Muslim, and therefore a bad man. Ali remembers that Parvez had, against the dietary rules of Islam, "ordered his own wife to cook pork sausages, saying to her, 'You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in!'" Again, Parvez's wife appears in the story only to be ordered around, but this scene also reveals how his wife, symbolic of his past life in Pakistan, is a casualty of Parvez's unyielding desire to assimilate into English culture. He wants assimilation at whatever cost, and in this moment that cost is the agency and desires of his wife.

Bettina, and the emotional affair she shares with Parvez, represents Parvez's preoccupation with the West, but she also simultaneously takes on a role as the dumping ground for Parvez's emotions and vulnerability that he otherwise cannot deal with on his own. While it's unclear if Bettina and Parvez's friendship has ever become physical, it is clear that they are carrying out an emotional affair. Parvez feels protective of Bettina after having once rescued her from a violent client. Bettina always sits in the front of Parvez's cab, like a friend, rather than in the back as customers do. That Parvez can "talk to her about things he'd never be able to discuss with his own wife" reveals both the intensity of the emotional connection between them as well as the ways in which Bettina represents the freedom and flexibility of the West that Parvez loves so much. Parvez completely ignores his wife, part of his past Pakistani life, and instead focuses on Bettina whose "short skirt, gaudy rings, and ice-blue eyeshadow" represent what Ali would consider the shameful pleasure and temptations at the heart of Western culture. Bettina's perfume, "which he loved," intoxicates Parvez just as the West has for the fact that "they let you do almost anything here." What's most ironic about the relationship between Parvez and Bettina is that he considers her one of his regular customers. She pays him to drive her home each night after working her rounds as a prostitute, but on these long car rides back to her house it's Parvez who should be paying her for the emotional labor she provides him.

In the story's penultimate scene, Parvez is driving Bettina when they spot Ali walking alone on the street. Bettina jumps at the opportunity to meet Ali, and, once he accepts the ride, attempts to reason with Ali on behalf of Parvez. Bettina attempts to reconcile father and son by explaining to Ali that Parvez only wants what's best for him because of how much he loves him. In response, Ali lashes out at Bettina, and insults her for being a prostitute. Bettina, hurt, storms out of the car. Her final attempt to manage Parvez's emotions and vulnerability for him has resulted in her being hurt in a conflict that was, ultimately, between father and son. In other words, she becomes Ali's punching bag, and Parvez has indirectly brought violence upon her just like the customer he'd once rescued her from had done. Women in the story, whether ignored or confided in, end up being harmed by the men around them.

# SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

## WHISKEY

In "My Son the Fanatic," **whiskey** symbolizes Parvez's intoxication with the West, and his deep desire to assimilate into English culture at the expense of the

ties to his past life and culture in Pakistan. Throughout the story it's implied that Parvez is an alcoholic. He uses alcohol to cope and gets drunk on whiskey from the very beginning of the story when he first becomes concerned about Ali's behavior through to the final scene when, completely drunk, he physically attacks Ali. Parvez's drinking puts strain on his relationship with Ali—who berates his father for drinking because it violates a basic tenet of the Koran—and thus represents his departure from his Pakistani life and culture. Parvez's inability to quit drinking mirrors what Ali describes as Parvez's deep implication in Western culture. Parvez is as physically intoxicated with whiskey as he is metaphorically intoxicated by the materialistic and hedonistic culture of the West that he is so desperate to fully assimilate into.

## BEARDS

Throughout the story, **beards** represent both Ali's commitment to his Islamic beliefs, as well as Parvez's desperate attempts to bridge the widening gap between him and his son. After Parvez's friends convince him that Ali's new behavior could be explained by drug abuse, Parvez goes on the lookout for physical changes in Ali that might indicate addiction. The only physical change that he notices, however, is that Ali has started growing a beard. The beard symbolizes Ali's growing belief in a fundamentalist version of Islam, which Parvez only uncovers later. After finally discovering what is going on with Ali, and right before he goes to bed after their first long and heated argument about Ali's new beliefs, Ali asks his father "why he didn't have a beard, or at least a moustache." He wants his father to wear at least this one symbol of Islam. Parvez is fiercely opposed to Ali's demands and beliefs, but he is also desperate to bridge the gap widening between him and Ali, which is putting him at risk of losing his son entirely. Therefore, he decides to grow a beard. As the two sit down to their second argument about Ali's beliefs, Parvez hopes that Ali will compliment his growing beard, and recognize it as an attempt to concede to at least one of his beliefs. But Ali doesn't notice the beard at all, suggesting that Ali is only interested in full-on devotion to his own ideas about Islam and not his father's less stringent efforts that he nonetheless hopes will help him bridge the divide between him and his son.

## BETTINA'S PERFUME

Bettina's **perfume** appears at the end of the story and symbolizes Parvez's love of the West. Throughout the story, Bettina herself represents both the freedom and flexibility of the West that Parvez tells Ali is the reason he loves England so much. Parvez explains, "they let you do almost anything here," and one of these things he is able to enjoy in England is carrying out an emotional affair with Bettina, who herself can pursue her career as a prostitute. In the story's penultimate scene, Parvez and Bettina give Ali a ride in Parvez's cab. It's only when Ali enters the vehicle that Parvez notices the way that Bettina is dressed, and realizes that she will appear garish and shameful in Ali's eyes. He notes, particularly, that her perfume, "which he loved," permeates the air in the cab, and he opens a window to try and mask the scent. His love for her perfume represents his love affair with the West, or as Ali describes it, his implication in Western civilization. In this scene, Parvez suddenly becomes acutely self-conscious of the delight he takes in Bettina all things Western. In front of Ali, he attempts to deny how deeply implicated in Western culture he has become by opening the window and hoping the perfume dissipates, but he can't escape how deeply involved in Western culture he has become.

## THE SEATING ARRANGEMENTS IN PARVEZ'S TAXICAB

Parvez's **taxicab**, specifically the seating arrangements in the cab, represent the growing distance between Parvez and Ali that is the cost of Parvez's unwavering desire to assimilate fully into English culture. From the first mention of Bettina, the narrator specifically notes that she sits not in the back of Parvez's cab, like a customer would, but in front beside him. This alone indicates the closeness of their relationship. At the end of the story, when Parvez, Bettina, and Ali are all in the cab together, Bettina is already sitting in the front seat, so Ali sits in the back like a customer would. The physical distance between Parvez and Ali, in comparison to the closeness he shares both physically and metaphorically with Bettina, symbolizes that Parvez's relationship with his son has become distant because he privileges proximity to the West over maintaining connections to his Pakistani past and heritage.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Love in a Blue Time* published in 1999.

## My Son the Fanatic Quotes

❝ But Parvez had been unable to bring this subject up with his friends. He was too ashamed. And he was afraid, too, that they would blame him for the wrong turning his boy had taken, just as he had blamed other fathers whose sons had taken to running around with bad girls, truanting from school and joining gangs…Was it asking too much for Ali to get a good job now, marry the right girl and start a family? Once this happened, Parvez would be happy. His dreams of doing well in England would have come true. Where had he gone wrong?

My Son the Fanatic

**Related Characters:** Parvez (speaker), Ali

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 120

**Explanation and Analysis**

Preoccupied with the mystery of Ali's changing behavior, Parvez is becoming increasingly worried but is still too fearful to confide in his friends. Parvez's fear is rooted in shame. He and his friends, fellow first-generation immigrant fathers, have witnessed other fathers' sons fall off the track to assimilation and success that they've so tirelessly worked to provide. Parvez and the others blame the fathers themselves when their sons "go bad," and so Parvez sees Ali's behavior as his own personal failing. Further, the fact that Parvez connects his worries about his son's assimilation to his dreams for himself makes clear that his own dreams of assimilation are dependent on the success of his son in taking the next step in assimilation.

What Parvez can't see is that it's not only the pressure and expectations that the fathers' put on their sons that leads to those sons' rebellion, but that the son's different goals are a function of the conditions and reality that they face as second-generation sons growing up in the. While the first-generation assumes that the second-generation born and raised in the adopted country will have an easier time at assimilating—and are correct in this assumption in some ways—the second-generation still feels the effects of discrimination and prejudice in a way that influences their views of what success and assimilation mean. The second generation can get closer to full assimilation, but because they are closer they can sense that they will never be able to fully assimilate—they will always face prejudice.

Meanwhile, it is ironic that what Parvez will later describe as his love of the freedom and flexibility of Western culture directly conflicts with his desire to keep Ali on the strict path to assimilation that he's created for him.

❝ He returned his father's long looks with more than a hint of criticism, of reproach even, so much so that Parvez began to feel that it was he who was in the wrong, and not the boy!

**Related Characters:** Parvez (speaker), Ali

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 122

**Explanation and Analysis**

Following the advice of his friends as well as Bettina, Parvez spends several days scrutinizing Ali for signs that is changed behavior is the product of drug abuse. But he finds no such evidence, and begins to realize that while he is scrutinizing his son, his son is also scrutinizing him.

This quote is the first hint about Kureishi's point that assimilation is perhaps just as suspect as radicalization. While the story revolves around Parvez and his intense focus on figuring out what is wrong with his son, Ali regards his father with equally intense scrutiny and sees *him* as the one who has a problem. When Parvez discovers a bit later in the story that Ali has bought into a radicalized version of Islam, both he, and presumably the readers, will position Ali as the antagonist in the story. But Kureishi wants readers to consider what Parvez refuses to see; that the desire to assimilate at the cost of all else is itself a flawed position to take. From this perspective, Parvez may in fact be in the wrong just as much as Ali is.

❝ In fact they made jokes about the local mullahs walking around with their caps and beards, thinking they could tell people how to live, while their eyes roved over the boys and girls in their care.

**Related Characters:** Parvez (speaker), Ali

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 123

**Explanation and Analysis**

In light of his revelation that Ali's behavior is due to a newfound devotion to Islam, Parvez reflects that he and his fellow first-generation friends all scoff at Islam for what they see as its hypocrisies. Parvez has forsaken all religions after an unpleasant experience incident in his childhood at his Islamic religious school, and many of his first-generation

friends have too, presumably because of their own experiences with Islam growing up in Muslim countries and communities. Both what they see as the strictness of Islam coupled with its evident hypocrisies have turned them against the religion.

What's interesting is that Ali views the West in a way that is remarkably similar to the way his father views Islam. He is bothered by its hypocrisies, and his experience growing up surrounded by those hypocrisies has turned him off from the culture in general, just as his father was turned off due to his own experiences as a boy. While the Western world tends to valorize total assimilation and demonize radicalization, the story suggests that the two are more similar than they might appear: each is a reaction, in opposite directions, to a lived experience of unpleasantness and hypocrisy, and each in its way is radical: it is a total repudiation of a culture rather than a more measured approach.

Meanwhile, though Parvez is angered by the mullahs who tell people how to live while themselves acting in ways that are inappropriate, he is ironically more similar to the mullahs than he is willing to admit. Parvez tells Ali how to live, and wants Ali to get married and have a nice family while Parvez himself ignores his wife and instead carries out an emotional affair with Bettina.

❝ Ali then reminded Parvez that he had ordered his own wife to cook pork sausages, saying to her, 'You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in!'

**Related Characters:** Parvez (speaker), Ali, Parvez's Wife

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 125

### Explanation and Analysis

At the restaurant where Parvez and Ali have their first major argument about Ali's religious beliefs, Ali rails against his father not only for eating pork against the rules of Islam, but for forcing his wife to break the rules by cooking it. In this exchange with his wife, Parvez replicates the West's imperialist relationships with the rest of the world. Just as the West forces assimilation upon immigrants, and exports Western culture abroad, Parvez is forcing his wife to give up a piece of her culture and identity that she may not have wanted to surrender. Additionally, Parvez discounts their past life in Pakistan by reducing it to a "village" in contrast to what he sees as the far grander and impressive England. These words carry a sense of condescension that likewise mirrors the way the West often regards the rest of the world with a sense of superiority.

This flashback also demonstrates the sexism inherent in Parvez's relationship with his wife. This scene is one of the two that his wife shows up in, and in both scenes, she exists only to be ordered around by Parvez. This moment, then, is both a scene of sexist and cultural violence.

❝ 'The problem is this,' the boy said. He leaned across the table. For the first time that night his eyes were alive. 'You are too implicated in Western civilization.'

Parvez burped; he thought he was going to choke. 'Implicated!" he said. 'But we live here!'

**Related Characters:** Ali (speaker), Parvez

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 125

### Explanation and Analysis

Halfway through their argument at the restaurant, Ali accosts his father for being so deeply committed to assimilating into English culture and society. While Parvez finds this statement ridiculous, it's another moment that contains at least some truth that is lost on him entirely. Ali recognizes that Parvez has sacrificed too much in his desire to assimilate. While Ali's response may also be extreme, and while he is likewise unwilling or unable to see how his own position is flawed, it's true that giving up one's culture and past life is an extreme decision to make. In Ali's view, Parvez is reinforcing the West's sense of cultural superiority as well as the harm that the West often inflicts upon the rest of the world.

Parvez's response to his son's accusation is also important. In that response, Parvez suggests that he can't be "implicated" in Western civilization because they are in fact a part of Western civilization—they live in Western civilization. Parvez vies himself as already ensconced in England—assimilation is just the execution of fully claiming that part in the country and in Western society. But Ali, who as a second-generation immigrant was in fact even more assimilated than his father, does not share the same feeling of being a part of Western society. The story suggests that simply by being more assimilated, Ali can see that in fact what his father sees as just a matter of course—the family's

assimilation—will actually never be possible. No matter how hard they try, Ali makes clear, they will never be actually seen as Westerners by other Westerners. So he sees himself as something outside of Western society, while Parvez sees himself as already being a part of it.

> 'The Western materialists hate us,' Ali said. 'Papa, how can you love something which hates you?'

**Related Characters:** Ali (speaker), Parvez

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 126

**Explanation and Analysis**

One of the final points that Ali makes during the argument at the restaurant forces his father to confront the fact that the West will always view immigrants as foreigners despite how much one tries to assimilate. There is ample historical and modern evidence to support Ali when he says that Westerners often hate immigrants, and especially those from the Islamic world. While Parvez still believes that Ali's hard work and status as someone born in England will mean that he will be able to complete the course of the family's assimilation into English society, Ali has grown up in England still feeling like a foreigner due to the racial and cultural discrimination that immigrants and their children must endure. As the second-generation, Ali understands, in a way that Parvez cannot, that the West will never fully view immigrants as assimilated, and instead always regard them at least in part as racial and cultural outsiders.

> 'But I love England,' Parvez said, watching the boy in the mirror. 'They let you do almost anything here.'

**Related Characters:** Parvez (speaker), Ali

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 126

**Explanation and Analysis**

On the way home from the restaurant, Parvez is astonished that Ali says simply living in England is what caused him to take up his radicalized version of Islam because this differs so significantly from Parvez's experience of England. Parvez's view of the West differs so significantly from Ali's in large part because Parvez was born and raised in Pakistan, while Ali has only ever lived in England. For Parvez, the West offers him a type of moral and materialistic freedom that he feels he did not have back in Pakistan. He delights in what he sees as the ability to enjoy life in whatever ways he wants, which includes drinking and carrying out an emotional affair with a prostitute.

Ali, however, recognizes the emotional emptiness that comes from growing up in a materialistic culture that privileges enjoyment above all else. Parvez himself later admits that he believes Westerners experience an "inward emptiness," but doesn't understand that his son, himself a Westerner because he was born and raised in England, experiences that emptiness, and seeks a cure for it in his new religious beliefs, even if that cure may be misguided and too extreme.

> Ali accused Parvez 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.

**Related Characters:** Parvez (speaker), Ali

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 128

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Parvez decides not to kick Ali out, Ali persists in his criticisms of his father, and points out that his father's desire to assimilate only reinforces Western imperialism and supremacy worldwide. It's clear that Ali's perspective on assimilation is vastly different than his father's. Parvez, as a first-generation immigrant in England, views assimilation as both appealing and even necessary for survival in his new home. On the other hand, Ali, as the second-generation, views assimilation as a way of forcing immigrants to demean themselves for the comfort of white Westerners. Having been born and raised in England as the son of immigrants, Ali has watched his father work tirelessly and thanklessly as a taxi driver in his adopted country, and recognizes that, no matter how hard he or his father try, they will always be viewed as foreigners in England both racially and culturally.

On a larger scale, Ali recognizes the role that assimilation plays in upholding white and Western supremacy across the world. Western culture positions itself as the global default,

and just as it encourages immigrants to assimilate, the West likewise tries to export assimilation across the globe through colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. Ali knows his father has bought into this belief that the West is the best and wants him to recognize the ways in which his drive to assimilation has distracted him from what are valid and necessary critiques of the way the West operates in relation to the rest of the world.

"'In other people. I will continue - in you.' At this the boy appeared a little distressed. 'And your grandchildren,' Parvez added for good measure. 'But while I am here on earth I want to make the best of it. And I want you to, as well.'

**Related Characters:** Parvez (speaker), Ali

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 128-129

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote describes the heart of Parvez's philosophy of life, which he hopes will convince Ali to abandon his new Islamic beliefs and return to the path of assimilation that Parvez has laid out for him. From the very beginning of the story, it's clear that Parvez, like many immigrant fathers, views his son's success as the marker of the family's full assimilation into English society.

Parvez never explicitly tells Ali that his own dreams are hinged entirely upon Ali's future success as a fully-assimilated English accountant, but he comes closest in this scene when he tells him that the only way he will live on after his death is through Ali and his grandchildren after that. Ali disagrees with this philosophy of life because he has his own dreams and goals that conflict with Parvez's dream of assimilation. Ali's refusal to carry out Parvez's dreams situates Parvez as one of the many first-generation immigrant fathers he feared becoming early on in the story: those who placed their hopes and dreams on their second-generation children, only to be disappointed when those children choose new paths for themselves based on their experiences of being born and raised in their parents' adopted country.

"'All over the world our people are oppressed,' was the boy's reply.

'I know,' Parvez replied, not entirely sure who 'our people' were, 'but still – life is for living!'"

**Related Characters:** Ali (speaker), Parvez

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 129

**Explanation and Analysis**

Believing that his father's philosophy of life is shallow in comparison to his new radicalized, Islamic philosophy, Ali redirects the conversation and highlights the persecution of Muslim people globally. Ali's use of the phrase *our people* reveals that his decision to embrace Islam is at least in part an attempt to reclaim the culture and identity he feels his family lost when they immigrated to England. While Parvez and first-generation fathers like him idealize and follow the path of assimilation Ali's second-generation experience has left him critical of assimilation.

Ali's experience of being born and raised in England as the child of immigrant parents has left him critical of the West for the discrimination and prejudice it leverages against immigrants, and especially those from the Islamic world. The first-generation, like Ali's parents, however, are focused on surviving and providing for their children in the face of the lack of opportunities that exist for immigrant families. In other words, Parvez hasn't necessarily been afforded the time and space to be critical of his new home because he's been so busy working to give his son the privileges that will allow him to advance in English society, but that very privilege has afforded Ali the time and space to develop what are often valid critiques of the West.

The irony here is that, in his attempts to reconnect to his parent's culture, Ali has latched on to a radicalized version of Islam that doesn't represent his family's Pakistani culture and heritage. This disconnect is evident in Parvez's confusion over Ali's use of the phrase *our people*.

"Parvez became aware of Bettina's short skirt, gaudy rings and ice-blue eyeshadow. He became conscious that the smell of her perfume, which he loved, filled the cab. He opened the window.

**Related Characters:** Parvez (speaker), Bettina, Ali

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 129-130

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Parvez picks up Bettina who has been meeting one of her clients in a poor neighborhood, Parvez and Bettina spot Ali walking home and pick him up because Bettina wants to talk to him. However, Parvez immediately becomes self-conscious of how he knows Bettina looks in Ali's eyes. Bettina's accessories represent both the objectification of women as well as Parvez's intoxication with Western culture. While Parvez loves her skirt, rings, eyeshadow, and perfume, he knows that Ali sees them as inappropriate and shameful. Both men view Bettina through a misogynistic lens; Parvez's is based in the desire for women, while Ali's is rooted in the desire to control women.

Additionally, Parvez's love of Bettina's perfume symbolizes his love of, and commitment to, English culture and assimilation. Just at the scent of the perfume permeates the car despite Parvez's attempt to hide it by opening the window, Parvez's love for the West is all-encompassing. Like Ali told him earlier in the story, Parvez is fully implicated in the West and there's no hiding or denying where his allegiance lies.

❝ 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?'

**Related Characters:** Ali (speaker), Parvez

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 131

**Explanation and Analysis**

As Parvez beats Ali in what amounts to both a desperate, final attempt to beat the fundamentalism out of his son and a kind of revenge on the person who has destroyed his own dreams of successful assimilation, Ali gets the last word and flips the script on his father. The rhetorical question that ends the short story forces the reader to reconceptualize their assumptions about assimilation versus radicalization.

While readers, and the Western world at large, likely view assimilation as the socially acceptable course for immigrants, and in fact in many ways encourage and even force immigrants to assimilate, Ali's question points to the fanaticism inherent in the choice to abandon one's culture and heritage.

Ali's question also forces readers to consider the ways in which the West's actions against the Middle East are likewise fanatical. While Western society often portrays the entire Islamic word as violent, disorganized, and radicalized, the violent actions that the West takes against the Middle East are normalized and often justified as necessary. Ali's question highlights this hypocrisy.

This isn't to say that the story is meant to advocate for radicalization. Rather, through its end the story demonstrates that there should be more options for immigrants making their homes in a new place beyond only the binary choices of assimilation and radicalization.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## MY SON THE FANATIC

Parvez, a Pakistani immigrant in England, begins to secretly visit his son's room because he has noticed changes in it. At first the changes in Ali's room are welcome. The room, once messy, is now clean and orderly. But when Ali's possessions gradually begin disappearing, and brand-new items are thrown out or given away, Parvez becomes alarmed. He also notes that Ali has recently broken up with his English girlfriend, and that his friends no longer call.

*Ali's room becoming clean indicates a growing discipline. But Ali throwing away his possessions suggests a discipline that is at odds with the Western focus on attaining material goods. Cutting off his English friends further indicates that Ali is in the early stages of his departure from English culture. Parvez's concern over Ali's new behaviors signifies the beginning of the conflict between father and son that will drive the plot of the story.*

Parvez is unable to confront Ali about these changes, as he finds himself suddenly afraid of his own son. Questions he does pose to Ali are met with sharp, inconclusive replies. Parvez is especially upset by Ali's strange behavior because he was worked so hard throughout his life to provide for his son, including paying for his education to become an accountant. Parvez fears that these changes might indicate that England is ruining his son like it has the sons of other immigrant fathers.

*Parvez's fear of Ali represents both the growing distance between father and son as well as the West's fear of Islam and Muslim people. Parvez, like other first-generation, immigrant fathers, has worked hard to ensure that his second-generation son will thrive and experience upward mobility in their adopted home. The stories of other immigrant fathers who lost their sons to negative influences in England exist as warnings of what can go wrong for Parvez and other first-generation fathers. Parvez sees Ali and his future as an accountant as the final step to achieving full assimilation into English culture for his family, and fears that Ali is squandering his own hard work and sacrifice by straying from this carefully constructed path to success.*

When Ali's room is bare of almost everything, including even the pictures that once hung on the walls, Parvez is disturbed enough that he can't sleep. He starts drinking more **whiskey**, even on the job. Parvez is a taxi driver, and most of his coworkers are fellow Punjabi immigrants from Pakistan who work the night shift in part because the money is better and in part so they can avoid their wives by sleeping in the daytime. They enjoy a "boy's life" in the taxi office, where they bond over card games, jokes, lewd stories, meals, and conversations that span the personal and political.

*The accelerating changes in Ali's behavior alarms Parvez because he can sense in it the loss of his dreams of full assimilation through his son. Though Parvez doesn't yet realize it, Ali's behavior is driven by his new Islamic beliefs, it is significant that his reaction is to drink more whiskey, which in the story represents his intoxication with Western culture and rejection of Islamic religion (which does not allow drinking alcohol). Meanwhile, the first mention of women in the story presents them as something to be avoided.*

Parvez knows he needs to confide in his cabbie friends about Ali's troublesome new behaviors, but he is ashamed and fearful that they will blame him for these changes the way they blame other fathers whose sons get caught up in drugs, gangs, and illicit sex in England. What's worse is that Parvez always bragged to his friends about his son's successes in school, sports, and life. Parvez's "dreams of doing well in England" hinge upon Ali's success. He desperately wants for his son to settle down as an accountant with a nice wife, and, eventually, children. Now this once certain future feels less guaranteed.

*Parvez struggles to be vulnerable with his friends and is unwilling to acknowledge (or unable to see) his role in the conflict with Ali. Once confident that he would achieve his dream of full assimilation through his son's successes, Parvez is starting to realize that his son's goals and dreams may conflict with his own. Parvez's shame at the change in Ali's behavior makes clear that he sees his own success and worth as connected to Ali's success at assimilation in England.*

Parvez finally breaks down one night and confides in his two closest friends at the taxi office. His friends are convinced that Ali must be selling his possessions in order to buy drugs. They advise Parvez that he must be strict and get Ali under control before he goes "mad, overdose[s], or murder[s] someone." Parvez leaves the office convinced that his son has become a "drug addict killer." Outside, he is relieved to see one of his regular riders, Bettina, waiting for him in the front seat of his **taxicab**.

*Parvez's friends, also first-generation immigrants, are sympathetic towards him because they share his dreams of a successful assimilated life in England. The friend's incorrect diagnosis of the causes of Ali's change, though, is ironic—they imagine him as becoming lost in the "do anything" ethos of the West such that he has become addicted to drugs, when in fact he has turned against the West. Bettina shows up for the first time in this scene, and the relief that Parvez feels when he sees her demonstrates his emotional dependence on her.*

Bettina is a prostitute. The cabbies know the local prostitutes well, as they drive them to and from liaisons each night. Parvez and Bettina have known each other for three years, and they spend the long drives back to her house talking about their lives and hopes. Parvez talks with Bettina in a way that he can't with his wife. He also feels protective of her ever since he rescued her from a violent client one night. Shaken by his friends' suggestions that Ali is on drugs, Parvez confides in Bettina who advises him to be on the lookout for signs of drug abuse such as bloodshot eyes or mood changes.

*The fact that Parvez can talk to the English prostitute Bettina in ways that he can't talk to his own wife represents his further departure from his past life and culture in Pakistan in exchange for full assimilation into Western culture. He feels protective of Bettina, but in reality, she also protects him by providing him with the space to be vulnerable and by helping him manage his emotions that he could not otherwise deal with. The irony is that Bettina is a prostitute, and for her emotional labor Parvez should be paying her. Instead, she is paying him for the long rides home.*

Relieved to have a plan, Parvez begins to carefully observe Ali's every move. As Parvez watches over Ali, he notices that his son is likewise watchful over him. In fact, Ali looks at Parvez with such a critical eye that it leaves Parvez feeling like *he* is the one who is behaving strangely. Eventually, Parvez realizes that there are no signs of drug abuse, and that Ali isn't even selling his possessions, just throwing or giving them away. The only physical change he notes is that Ali is growing a **beard**.

*The way that Parvez and Ali both regard each other with increasing scrutiny in this scene continues to demonstrate the growing distance and suspicion straining their relationship as father and son. Under Ali's watchful eye, Parvez's feeling that he is the one behaving strangely begins to blur the line between assimilation and radicalization, and protagonist and antagonist, in this story. It suggests that Parvez is just as suspicious for so wholeheartedly embracing assimilation as Ali is for embracing Islam. Ali's increasing devotion to Islam is represented here by his new beard, which is a physical signifier of devout, fundamentalist Islamic belief.*

One night after staying out late discussing the matter with Bettina, Parvez comes home and uncovers a clue to Ali's mysterious behavior. As Parvez is standing in the hall, he hears his son's alarm go off. He rushes to hide in his bedroom, and orders his wife "to sit down and keep quiet, though she had neither stood up nor said a word." Peering out from his bedroom, Parvez observes Ali go into the bathroom to wash up. When Ali returns to his bedroom, Parvez follows behind and presses his ear to Ali's door. From behind the door, Parvez hears a muttering sound that leaves him "puzzled but relieved." He realizes that Ali is praying, and, through continued spying over the course of several days, confirms that Ali is praying the full five times a day required in Islam.

*This scene is the first of only two where Parvez's unnamed wife shows up very briefly. Unlike Bettina, Parvez's wife is unaware of the conflict unfolding between her husband and her son. He doesn't confide in his wife the way he confides in Bettina. Instead, Parvez regards his wife as someone to order around, rather than someone to collaborate with. His orders here are especially pointless and authoritarian, given that she was already quiet and seated when he demanded that she be quiet and stay seated. He orders her just to order, and barely even actually sees her. This scene is also significant because Parvez discovers that Ali is not addicted to drugs and is instead practicing Islam, and therefore establishes that this conflict between father and son is rooted in a greater conflict between the West and Islam.*

In light of this realization, Parvez thinks back to his boyhood in Lahore and his time spent learning the Koran. He remembers that one day an instructor attached a string to the ceiling and then tied it to his hair, so that if he fell asleep the string would yank him awake. This incident left him with a distaste for all religions. Similarly, his taxi driver friends scoff at the mullahs of their neighborhood and enjoy exposing what they see as their hypocrisies. However, when he tells Bettina and his friends that Ali's strange behavior turned out to be prayer, no one knows what to say as religions is not so easy to condemn as drugs.

*This flashback to a formative moment in his childhood in Pakistan establishes Parvez's distaste for religion in general, but particularly his disdain for what he views as the strict authoritarianism of Islam. This authoritarianism conflicts with what he will later explain is his love for the freedom afforded by life in the England and the West. His fellow first generation taxi drivers likewise scoff at Islam, further highlighting the way that their desires for assimilation in the West is in part a reaction to the negative experiences with Islam and religion in their youth.*

Parvez wants to sit down and talk to Ali about his newfound interest in Islam. After refusal and evasion on Ali's part, Parvez convinces him to have dinner. The next day, though, Parvez meets with Bettina in his car and recounts the uncomfortable dinner he shared with Ali the night before. At the start of the meal, the waiter, a friend of Parvez's, brings him his usual **whiskey** and water. Immediately, this sets off a fierce debate between Parvez and Ali. Ali scolds his father for violating the tenets of Islam by drinking and gambling. Parvez, upset, keeps drinking and gets more and more drunk. As the waiter refills his whiskey, Parvez realizes that his son is looking at him from across the table with a face full of disgust and hatred.

*Ali's initial refusal to have an open conversation with his father foreshadows that their relationship may be irreparable. That Parvez unloads the stress of his uncomfortable dinner with Ali onto Bettina further establishes that she is the vessel for the emotions he cannot manage on his own. The whiskey, symbolic of Parvez's intoxication with the West and his desire to assimilate into English culture, sparks the conflict that will further polarize Parvez and Ali. As Parvez gets drunker and drunker throughout the meal, representative of his further commitment to English culture, Ali only becomes more steadfast in his fundamentalist beliefs.*

Midway through the dinner, Parvez is so upset and enraged that he throws a plate on the floor. He is furious that his son is trying to dictate to him the difference between right and wrong, while suggesting that he is a bad man who has lived a shameful life. Ali continues to insist that his father has lived a bad life because he has broken so many rules of the Koran. He admonishes Parvez for eating pork, and for pressuring his wife to cook it for him by telling her that "You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in!"

*When Parvez throws the plate on the floor, it not only signifies the climax of this argument, but foreshadows Parvez's eventual resort to violence against his son. That Parvez responds to Ali and his new beliefs with violence mirrors the way that the West also often responds to Islam and the Muslim world with violence. This scene is the last in which Parvez's wife is briefly mentioned. Again, she exists only for him to order around, and in this particular flashback the fact that Parvez orders her to cook him pork (a food prohibited in Islam) represents that he has sacrificed his old culture entirely for the sake of assimilating into a new one. He is forcing Western values onto his wife in a way that echoes how the West often forces their cultural values and beliefs on the rest of the world through imperialism or assimilation.*

Ali then tells his father that he is "implicated in Western civilization." Parvez believes this is absurd, and replies, "Implicated!...But we live here!" Ali continues, telling him that Westerners hate them, and asks how he can love something that hates him for who he is. Ali preaches to his father about the coming rule of Islam over the world, the hypocrisy of the West, and his willingness to give his life for jihad if the persecution of his people does not stop. At this, and with eyes full of tears, Parvez directs his son out of the restaurant while feeling as if the voice speaking these words is not Ali's at all.

*This passage is significant because it highlights the extent to which Ali has been radicalized while he simultaneously leverages valid critiques against the West. Ali's willingness to give his life for jihad indicates that he has become radicalized. At the same time, he points to the prevailing Western prejudice against the Islamic world and Muslim people, and highlights the hypocrisy inherent in his father's desire to assimilate into a culture that will never fully embrace him regardless of how hard he tries to fit in. Parvez notes that Ali's voice no longer sounds like his own, and this signifies his full transition from the boy who was to live out his father's dreams to a young man that has been radicalized. Parvez, meanwhile, can't comprehend himself as being "implicated" in Western civilization because he sees himself as already being part of Western civilization. Parvez doesn't and can't understand his son's rejection of the society in which they live.*

On the way home, Ali sits in the back seat of his father's **taxicab**, as if he is a customer. Parvez asks what inspired him to adopt this radicalized version of Islam, and Ali explains that it was simply living in England. Confused, Parvez tells his son that he loves England because "they let you do almost anything here." "That," Ali replies, "is the problem." Parvez is so distraught that he veers into a passing truck and knocks the side-view mirror off his car. He knows he is lucky not to have gotten stopped by the police, which would have resulted in a lost license and lost job. When they arrive home, Parvez falls in the road injuring his hands and tearing his pants, but Ali doesn't help his father get back up.

*Ali's decision to sit in the back of the cab represents the distance growing between him and Parvez, both ideologically and as father and son. In this scene, Ali explains that growing up in England as the son of Muslim immigrants is what turned him against the West. It is significant that this is the exact opposite of Parvez's of experience growing up in Pakistan, which turned him against Islam. Parvez hearkens back to his past when he explains to Ali that what he loves most about England and the West is freedom to enjoy life and all of its pleasures. This is in comparison to what he remembers as the strict Pakistani culture of his youth. Parvez had thought that Ali would naturally follow the path he had initially set, and did not comprehend that Ali's own experiences as a second-generation immigrant might push him in a different direction. That Ali ignores Parvez after he's fallen on the concrete represents that any loving bond that existed between father and son is lost at this point.*

As Parvez recounts this story to Bettina, he tells her that he is so desperate to get through to his son that he would even be willing start praying. Simultaneously, he is enraged that his own son is telling him that he belongs in hell. The last straw for Parvez, however, had been when Ali told him that he was dropping out of accounting school because Western education is anti-religious. Instead, Ali says that has decided to work with Muslims in prison struggling to maintain their Islamic purity. Before finally heading to bed for the night, Ali asks his father why he doesn't at least have a **beard** or mustache.

*Parvez is both desperate to win his son back, while also so angry with him that he can't see through to a compromise. Ali dropping out of accounting school marks his official departure off the path of assimilation that Parvez had so carefully and painstakingly constructed for him. Parvez's dream of assimilation for his family is now dead. Ali's final words to Parvez that night refer back to the beard, a physical symbol and marker of Islam. His desire that his father at the very least have some facial hair reveals how that Ali's ideas about his father are just as idealistic and misguided as Parvez's were about Ali. Parvez was looking for Ali to give their family a path into the English middle class, while Ali is looking for his father to offer a bridge back to a religious connection to Islam that Parvez never felt.*

Parvez concludes the story of this terrible night by telling Bettina that he feels that he's lost his son. He can't stand that Ali looks at him like he's a criminal, so has resolved to kick him out of the house. Bettina, however, convinces Parvez not to kick Ali out, arguing that it's normal for teenagers to be superstitious or caught up in cult-like beliefs. She tells Parvez that Ali will grow out of it, and trusting that she's right, Parvez lets Ali stay and continues to endure his son's scorn.

*At this point Parvez knows that he has lost his son, but it's Bettina who convinces him to keep trying to win him back. Again, Bettina serves as the voice of reason who helps Parvez manage the emotions and interpersonal conflict that he cannot manage on his own and will not open up to about with his wife. Bettina is becoming increasingly involved in a conflict between father and son that has nothing to do with her.*

Ali's preaching shows no signs of fading, however. He claims that Parvez is "grovelling to the whites," rather than acknowledging that there is "more to the world than the West." Sarcastically, Parvez asks how Ali could know this given that he's never left England. Ali looks at him with contempt.

*In this exchange, the story captures both the impassable ideological gulf that has developed between Parvez and Ali, but also how both characters are at once both right and wrong in those different believes. As he reframes his father's desire to assimilate as a desperate attempt to make himself palatable to white Westerners, Ali rails against white and Western supremacy, imperialism, and the violence that the West often unleashes upon Muslim people. Parvez doesn't acknowledge, or perhaps engrossed in his rage cannot see any truth in Ali's beliefs. And yet Parvez's point that Ali has never lived in Pakistan also can't be denied. Ali's vision of what his father left behind in also leaving Pakistan is an idealized one, with no basis in experience. Parvez did experience it, and that experience turned him against religion. Just as Parvez can't engage with Ali's criticisms, though, Ali views Parvez's points only with contempt.*

A few days later, Parvez and Bettina are together in Parvez's car, and Parvez explains to her that he does believe that Westerners are sometimes "inwardly empty," and that everyone needs "philosophy to live by." Bettina suggests that he sit down with Ali and share his philosophy, in hopes that Ali will see and be influenced to see that there are more than just his own beliefs. The following night, Parvez sits with Ali. Before their conversation begins, he hopes that his son will notice the **beard** he has started growing, but Ali says nothing.

*When talking to Bettina, Parvez finally admits that there may be some truth to what Ali has to say about the West. He suggests that the pursuit of materialism and pleasure above all else can result in feelings of emptiness and unfulfillment. Again, Bettina tries to push Parvez to try to heal their relationship and pull Ali back from the brink of extremism. Parvez has even started growing out a beard to show Ali that he is willing to compromise. However, the fact that this gesture goes unnoticed by Ali suggests that Ali at this point is uninterested in any type of compromise.*

Parvez begins by talking about the importance of respect, especially between children and their parents, which appears to resonate with Ali. Encouraged, Parvez explains that he believes life ends with death, and that once "rotted in the earth," you live on only in your children, grandchildren, and generations to come. Ali appears less receptive to this idea, but Parvez continues, explaining that he wants to make the best of his time on earth, and wishes that Ali will, too. Confused, Ali asks what this means. Parvez clarifies that he means that one must enjoy life, but Ali retorts that "enjoyment is a bottomless pit."

*The fact that Parvez's appeal that children must respect their parents resonates with Ali is ironic given that he's spent the entire story insulting his father. Ali wants to respect his elders, but only elders of a certain sort. Parvez's theory that life only continues after death through one's children is his way of telling Ali that his hopes and dreams for an assimilated and successful life in England hinge entirely upon Ali. Parvez explains that his philosophy of life prioritizes enjoyment, but to Ali this is the source of the emptiness that Parvez acknowledged Westerners often have. In other words, in his final attempt to win his son back, Parvez simply reveals how entrenched he has become in the materialistic and individualistic ways of thinking and living that prevail in the West, and which Ali despises.*

Parvez wishes that Ali could recognize the beauty of living, but Ali is focused on the oppression of "our people." Parvez is unsure of what Ali means when he says, "our people." The conversation ends when Ali asserts that millions of people over the course of hundreds of years have agreed with his beliefs and asks who Parvez is to suggest that he is right while these millions of other people are wrong. Shocked by the forcefulness of Ali's beliefs, Parvez is left speechless.

*In this scene it's clear that Ali in part views his extreme Islamic beliefs as a way to reclaim the culture and identity his family lost when they came to England and tried so hard to assimilate. While the first-generation wants to survive in their adopted country, and see assimilation as critical to survival, the second-generation mourns the loss of the culture that they've been cut off from while simultaneously dealing with discrimination and prejudice. It remains important to note, though, that the radicalized version of Islam that Ali espouses is not in fact the same religion that Parvez left behind. Ali, in wanting to reconnect to a lost past, has become much more strict and radical in his religious beliefs than was the past world he is trying to reconnect to.*

One evening sometime after this failed conversation, Parvez has picked up Bettina. She has visited a client and they are driving through a poor neighborhood where there are two mosques. They drive past Ali. Bettina insists that they pick him up because she wants a chance to talk to him. Ali gets into the back seat of the **taxicab**, as Bettina is sitting in the front seat. Parvez becomes suddenly aware of Bettina's "short skirt, gaudy rings, and ice-blue eyeshadow" as well as the strong scent of her **perfume**, which he himself loves.

*That it's in the poor neighborhood where there are two mosques reveals the hardships and discrimination that Muslim people face in England and the West. In this scene Bettina finally gets directly involved in the conflict between father and son. She sits up front with Parvez, which signifies both the closeness of their relationship as well as Parvez's love of the West. Ali sits in the back, again representative of the distance between he and his father, and more figuratively the distance between his father and Islamic culture. Parvez suddenly becomes self-conscious of Bettina because he knows how she will appear to Ali. Her perfume, which he loves, permeates the entire cab, and represents how deeply entrenched his love of the West has become. Suddenly ashamed of this fact in front of Ali, he tries to open the window to dissipate the scent of the perfume, but there is no escaping the truth of who and what he loves.*

Parvez begins driving faster, as Bettina asks Ali where he's been that night. Ali replies tersely that he was at the mosque. When Bettina asks him how he's doing in school, Ali retorts, "Who are you to ask me these questions?" Bettina places her hand on Parvez's shoulder as she explains to Ali that his father loves him deeply and is simply very worried about him. Ali counters that if his father loved him he wouldn't let a woman like Bettina touch him. At this point, both Bettina and Ali regard each other with looks of pure fury. Bettina asks, "What kind of woman am I that deserves to be spoken to like that?" Ali simply replies, "You know," and then threatens to get out of the car. Before he can, Bettina lets herself out despite Parvez's protestations.

*Bettina gets in the middle of the conflict between father and son when she begins to reason with Ali in an attempt to mend the relationship that Parvez has failed to save. Ali responds by shaming Bettina for being a prostitute is a moment of misogynistic violence. Because she was so devoted to her role as Parvez's emotional manager and advisor, she is the one who ends up hurt in what was always a conflict between father and son. Bettina's exit from the car represents the ways in which Ali is interfering with Parvez's dreams of, and ability to, fully assimilate into English culture.*

Parvez and Ali return home in silence. Ali retreats to his room while Parvez retreats to his bottle of **whiskey**. Parvez pours himself drink after drink and attempts to distract himself with TV and the newspaper. Unable to calm down, he goes upstairs and paces back and forth in front of Ali's closed door before finally deciding to enter. Inside his room, Ali is praying, and does not acknowledge his father's presence. Parvez suddenly begins to attack his son, kicking him, dragging him up off the floor by his shirt, and hitting him again and again until Ali's face is bloodied. Though he "knew that the boy was unreachable…he struck him nonetheless." Ali does not try to fight back or protect himself. Without a hint of fear in his eyes, he asks his father: "So who's the fanatic now?"

*At home, Parvez and Ali can no longer bear to be in the same room. The distance between them is final. Parvez resorts to his whiskey, one of his cherished Western freedoms, and his drunkenness is symbolic of his deep allegiance to the West and assimilation. Just as Ali is lost to his fundamentalist beliefs, Parvez is equally as lost in his all-encompassing desire to assimilate at the expense of all else. And the loss of that dream pushes him to despair. Although Parvez knows that no intervention will save Ali from the path he has chosen, he attacks him anyway in a final and desperate attempt to win him back. This moment replicates the violence that the West unleashes on the Islamic world in their attempts to change or control it. This is the very same violence and imperialism that radicalized Ali in the first place. Ali's final words to his father blur the line between radicalization and assimilation in order to demonstrate that assimilation, which has turned Parvez against his family, is itself a radical path to take.*

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