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RELIGIOUS FANATICISM OR FAITH TRADITION: THE ENTANGLED SOUL OF AN IMMIGRANT

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Abstract: *The paper discusses two contemporary literary works, i.e. Hanif Kureishi's short story My Son the Fanatic and Elif Shafak's novel Honour. The discussion will concern the adaptation/rejection of religious values by the immigrant community in a new country. Specifically, the question of religion as the source of fears, threats, meaning or dignity in the process of identity construction will be addressed. Confronting the protagonists' perspectives with those of the mainstream culture serves as a means to present the protagonists' position towards themselves. The focus of the discussion is on the idea of liberation in the construction of one's identity. Liberation and entangled soul seen as the concepts typical for the Western thought will constitute the base to discuss the position of the Other towards themselves in their ideological struggle over the question of belonging. The purpose of the discussion is to show that two contradictory positions, i.e. of the Other and of the West, can be approached as mutually complementary rather than counteractive in analysing contemporary dilemmas.*

In sociological research on immigrants (Charles Hirschman, 2003) religion has been documented as an important factor in the creation of immigrant community. According to Hirschman religion helps to maintain cultural continuity with the homeland. By reaffirming traditional beliefs stemming from religion, immigrants find meaning and construct their identity in the new surroundings. In this way they combat the trauma connected with being separated from the old country and with beginning the adaptation process in a new country. By reference to this source I am not suggesting that immigrant literature denotes the reproduction of reality, but rather that it refers to the phenomena we know from reality. Literary fiction becomes an expression and construction of the life of an immigrant. As Alison Light notes (1991), "in looking at the literature of the period we are not only exploring fiction about . . . mentalities but creations of it". In the literary fiction of an immigrant we may recognize the tensions and struggles between the protagonist's self and the outside world resulting in violence and scapegoating, since, as Rene Girard postulates (1993), literature explores general human condition which is founded on desire, jealousy and rivalry.

The texts I have chosen describe the feelings and dilemmas of the second immigrant generation, the children of the immigrants who by the means of religion try to come to terms with the reality that surrounds them. Hanif Kureishi's short story centers around the

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relationship between a father and a son. Parvez, the father, chooses to follow a westernized lifestyle. His main objective is to secure the material needs of Ali, his son, which he strongly believes is what his son wants. “He had always been aware of the pitfalls that other men’s sons had fallen into in England. And so, for Ali, he had worked long hours and spent a lot of money paying for his education as an accountant. He had bought him good suits, all the books he required and a computer” (119). As his life in a new country sometimes seemed very tough, especially when he discovered that his son acted weird he “couldn’t sleep; he went more to the whisky bottle, even when he was at work” (120). His negative religious experience from his home town Lahore put him off all religions. He “loved crispy bacon smothered with mushrooms and mustard and sandwiched between slices of fried bread. In fact he ate this for breakfast every morning. . . . 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’” (125). In sum, the story focuses on the conflicting life perspectives of a son and his father. Both the father and the son strive to adapt to the realities of their lives in England, each in their own way. It is the son that will become the focus of a discussion on the role of faith and religion in the construction of a male identity of a second generation immigrant.

The second text by Elif Shafak tells the history of a family of Turkish Kurds who moved from a small Turkish village to London in search of a better life. The story is told by Esma Toprak, who describes the history of her family and who is to collect her brother from prison after he served sentence for honour killing. Like in the text by Kureishi here we meet characters who struggle with their life choices. On the one hand, they are enticed by the new life in a foreign country, on the other hand they live in the shadow of moral codes and principles that guide the life of their country mates back in rural areas of Turkey. The book explores the theme of honour killing.

In the Muslim community sexual intimacy outside marriage is forbidden and the woman who commits adultery is punished for bringing shame on the community by honour killing. The explanation of ritual killing varies. Sharif Kanaana, as quoted in Suzanne Ruggi’s article (13), maintains that it is connected with the issue of fertility and reproductive power. Daniel Kroslak (2009) believes that honour killing could be a wrong cultural and tribal tradition of pre-Islamic society. Kroslak admits that there are sections in Qur’an that can be interpreted as encouraging honour killing, but at the same time he adds that Islam maintains the protection of life and does not sanction any violation against it.

Elif Shafak’s book *Honour* deals with the theme of honour killing. This issue, however, becomes part of a broader discussion on the way of discovering one’s place in the community of immigrants in a new country. By the example of the character of Iskender, who is the eldest son in the family and on whom the responsibility of protecting the family after their father decides to leave them rests Elif Shafak raises questions about duty, burden, guilt and dignity in the immigrant community. The word community is chosen here deliberately, as it involves the concepts of membership, influence, integration, the fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection according to McMillan and Chavis’s definition (1986). All these concepts guide and influence the protagonists’ choices of the discussed works.

Both protagonists can be viewed as those who see their choices as obligations. Iskender as the eldest son in the family has to erase the shame brought upon his family by

his mother. Ali saw his obligation to save the honour of the community by sticking to the rules of Islam. “Ali said, ‘Real morality has existed for hundreds of years. Around the world millions and millions of people share my beliefs. Are you saying you are right and they are all wrong?’” (129) And Iskender in his conversation with the Orator, the Islamic fundamentalist whom he sees from time to time admits: “I need to take care of some family matters” (254).

In the literary criticism we find examples where the Western and Eastern perspectives are presented as mutually exclusive. Mohanty, the author of *Under Western Eyes* claims that women, with some exceptions, are very often presented as victims of Islamic code (338), and that there is no universal patriarchal framework which Western scholarship attempts to counter or resist (335). However, my position is that despite what feminist criticism has done to the readings of the fiction produced by minority Muslim authors, another perspective which seeks to take its roots both in the Western and Eastern traditions and views them as complementary, and not mutually exclusive is possible. One proposition of a better understanding of binary discourses of the West and Islam applied to the narratives produced by the Muslim writers has already been suggested in the text *Researching The Muslim Diaspora: Towards Developing New Approaches of Reading*. The authors claim that a better understanding of the protagonists’ selves can be done by means of positioning them within discourse and historical contexts. My position is that positioning the protagonists within the idea of religious spirituality may also offer an explanation of the protagonists’ struggles and dilemmas. While the authors of *Researching The Muslim Diaspora* use to the concept of Disenchanted Self (Leicester 1990) in their discussion on the struggle and competing values faced by the self of an immigrant, it appears that when we talk about the self of an immigrant it is something more than disenchantment that we deal with. It is true that the protagonists’ actions, on the one hand, are the result of the impact of social institutions and discourses and on the other hand can be seen as those guided by their self-knowledge, where respectively they can be interpreted as subjects or the disenchanted selves. However, a religious concept of a sin-entangled soul that both the Eastern and the Western perspectives offer is equally effective in the analysis of the protagonists’ choices. We may view the characters from the position of entanglement that has been created through their life choices. They take this position both as subjects and selves. Through their commitment to religious obligations their souls become sin-entangled. The discussion here seeks to incorporate two religious views , i.e. of the West and of the East, as complementary rather than contradictory.

The western perspective offers a position in which the protagonists’ selves can be compared to entangled souls, a term which has religious connotations in the western philosophy. The phrase can be found in Shelley’s anti-religious poem “The Revolt of Islam”. The concept of entangled souls appears in John Owen’s (1841) book *A treatise on the holy spirit and its operations*, where the author by reference to Psalm 130:4 defines an entangled soul as the one which wants to be free and because of sins only cries to break free, yet it cannot. The protagonists are the entangled souls in the sense that they commit a crime (rebel against their father / kill their mother) which brings on them more anger, frustration or sorrow. Such treatment of the protagonists’ selves types into the mainstream culture to which they belong or aspire.

Likewise, the Islamic paradigm of the Self presents the Self in the relationship between the man and the God, and in the relationship between the man and another man. In their religion Muslims go through betterment. First in this process of betterment there is conflict and then the stages of Transformation and Healing follow. Yasien Mohamed in “Knowledge and purification of the soul” explains that bodily desires dirty the soul. The light that guides the soul is the intellect. Good deeds are the purification of the soul. Forgetfulness of the soul leads to the forgetfulness of God. Both protagonists seem to abandon the intellect and are astray from the right way. Ali dropped school and Iskender joined the gang of young thugs where he seeks support and understanding. Their misguided concept of liberation from the oppressive western culture pushes them further away from their closest families towards religious fanaticism. They both fall prey to religion; Ali uses religion to liberate himself from the constraints of the Western culture, and Iskender rejects religion altogether, but feels obliged to save the family’s honour. Yet, instead of liberation they become even more entangled souls. As we can read in Iskender’s letter when he writes about himself “We, the scumbags of the earth – the wicked, the fallen” (135).

A universal vision of religion compels to see the male characters as entangled souls. Despite the fact that today [Muslim] diaspora has become much more orthodox, and that culture and religion have become substitutes for socioeconomic inequality (Ali 2002), this perspective can be described as universal humanistic perspective and offers a mutual ground for the West and the East in their responsive attitude towards the problems of an immigrant.

The postcolonial theory also offers a number of interpretations of identity. But as Grossberg notes the well-established models of oppression originating from post-colonial theory and used in Cultural Studies to analyze the concept of identity do not take into consideration the dominant and the dominated as mutually constitutive and rarely study the two together (90). As Grossberg further observes “Neither colonizer nor precolonial subject, the postcolonial subject exists as a unique hybrid” (91). The entangled soul commits the sin of rejecting hybridity, or if one likes preferring religious exclusivism over complementary diversity. It rejects the gains of postcolonial theology which favours religious pluralism over religious exclusiveness and believes diversity can be complementary rather than contradictory (Crockett and MacDaniel 5). The entangled soul of a protagonist does not seek the transgression of boundaries. On the contrary, Ali regresses to the group of orthodox, his father to a despotic authoritarian head of the family and Iskender to a fanatic protecting the honour of his family.

In the construction of their identity people describe their belonging to a common collective on the basis of set conditions. When living in a multicultural society they are confronted with religious pluralism which is favoured over religious exclusivism. Diversity can be complementary rather than contradictory as Crockett and McDaniel claim (5). Hybridity offers novel ways of combining ideas due to globalization. It is seen as the centre of multiple singularity of each individual. According to Crockett and McDaniel (11) rejecting hybridity may lead to rigid self-identities, which is visible especially in the case of Ali and his father Parvez whose stubbornness and rigidity do not allow them to shift themselves to negotiating positions. The protagonists by rejecting the idea of hybridity commit a sin of becoming rigid self-individuals. They build boundaries around themselves.

The protagonists struggle with norms and codes introduced and established by the society in which they live as well as with the norms and codes of their root community in order to come to terms with their selves. Iskender remembers a journalist who visited him in prison.

A journalist came to see me once: thin as a stick, but well dressed, short skirt, long sexy legs and all that. She visited me a few times, seemed to be on my side. 'Please rest assured, Alex, I only want to understand the story, and increase awareness in society by writing about it.'

How noble is that! Then she goes and pens the shittiest article. I was mucked around with as a child. It was all Mum's fault: as the elder son, I had been spoiled by her. 'This is a typical case of Middle eastern patriarchal tradition, 'blah, blah, blah. I was so irritated I never spoke to a journalist again. They're not really interested in the truth. All they want to do is to fit you into the story that's already in their minds. (Shafak 136)

In a similar tone Iskender comments on a politician who "used me as an example to smear all Muslims immigrants. "'This man [Iskender] is a prototype of the kind of immigrant who is clearly incompatible with the basic tenets of European civilization' he said" (136). And further Iskender remarks bitterly "To all these people, I'm invisible. So is my mother" (136). The feeling of loss and despair due to lack of understanding resulting from a narrow, one-sided perspective is clearly visible here. Hybridity is rejected both by the representatives of the immigrant community and the mainstream culture.

Both protagonists, Iskender and Ali, are not only overpowered by the codes of the mainstream culture, but they act under the regime of their root communities as well. According to Rose (1996) the subject establishes the relationship to the self through various mechanisms, which are sanctioned by society, and in the name of certain objectives such as manliness, honour, or discipline, which have been disseminated and implanted in different practices shared by a family or community. These practices that put oneself in particular regimes. The practices exert their influence on the personhood and one's conduct, where sometimes the conduct can be problematic both to others and the self. Ali and Iskender are guided by the mechanisms and practices of their native communities, which leads to their trauma and lack of understanding.

Furthermore, the construction of identity understood as identification means seeking the ideal. As Rose claims (133) "it is only from the perspective of models of personhood deployed in different practices, and the way they are articulated in relation to specific problems and solutions concerning human conduct that one can identify the peculiarity of those pragmatic attempts to install a single model of the individual as the ethical across the range of different sites and practices". Iskender and Ali are examples of their idealistic conceptions of a protector of family honour and a protector of traditional values. Since techniques for conduct are always practiced under some authority of some system of truth, in the case of the protagonists their religion appears to be that system of truth, a moral code. As Rose observes (135) morality is "most frequently articulated in relation to some relatively formalized code" But there remains an ethical question: Why did they do it and how do they feel about it. It is no denying that their deeds, disrespecting the father or honour killing, are

wrong conducts. But their identification with the ideal that was imposed or chosen by them., i.e. the ideal of the head of the family safeguarding the family's honour or the ideal of the community respecting Halal, Islamic dietary laws can be an answer to the above questions. The identification with the ideal results in their drive towards bettering the status or reputation of the family or oneself. On the one hand the protagonists' choices can be viewed as the ones made under the regime of the self, but on the other hand these choices were made in relation to demands and forms of authority (Iskender) or under conditions where ethnic roots were to be erased (Ali), while racial difference cannot. As Rose concludes (141) "the existence of conflict and opposition in practices which conduct the conduct of a person is no surprise and . . . one way of relating to oneself comes into conflict with others". Ali and Iskender were guided by the fears, threats, or at times even dignity in the process of their identity construction. The construction of identity is realized as struggle with oneself and against oneself within the regimes of family/community roles and religious/cultural practices. That struggle and conflict make them entangled souls which both the Western and Eastern perspectives afford.

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