

## My Son the Fanatic

The most popular British movies of recent years have typically favored historic settings--in what British film insiders call "heritage" films (such as *Mrs. Brown, Wilde*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *Elizabeth*, or *Shakespeare in Love*) or charming, self-effacing comedies (such as *Cold Comfort Farm*, *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty*, *Waking Ned Devine*, or the current *Notting Hill*). Not all recent British movie-making has been merely history and farce, of course, and while some Brit directors have offered a tougher, less sentimental look at their society (especially Mike Leigh and Ken Loach), none has done a better job at showing its contemporary cross-cultural intricacies than director Udayan Prasad and writer Hanif Kureishi in their new film *My Son the Fanatic*.

The culture clash depicted in the film is a crucial one in post-imperial Great Britain: the wary adjustment of a traditional, class-driven society to a steady flow of immigrants from its ex-colonies. Emigres, especially from the sub-continent of India and Pakistan, have been settling in England for decades, time enough to both fit in and to determine where they still *don't* fit in. Some elements of this theme were entertainingly addressed in Hanif Kureishi's first screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986). In *My Son the Fanatic* (which Kureishi first wrote as a *New Yorker* story) that immigrant population is personified in Parvez, wonderfully interpreted by veteran Indian actor Om Puri.

We come upon Parvez as a 25-year veteran of English life in the Northern provincial town of Bradford. A poor but honest taxi driver, he has not prospered like some of his other transplanted countrymen, especially Fizzy (Harish Patel) who now owns a fancy restaurant, but Parvez still defends a society whose relative freedom offers him a chance at success. His more traditional wife Minoo (Gopi Desai) has never adapted fully to English life, and Parvez finds richer female companionship in conversation with a local call girl Bettina (Rachel Griffiths) whom he shepherds around on jobs servicing a smug German businessman (Stellan Skarsgard).

Whatever his problems, however, Parvez has proudly raised a bright and modern son Farid (Akbar Kurtha) in this semi-brave new world and hangs his highest hopes on him. Farid, however, is behaving strangely, summarily dumping his sweet English fiancée, for example. Parvez suspects drug use, which he tries to smell out, but it's not coke Farid's been using, it's the Koran he's been perusing. He has become part of a tight study circle of imams-in-training, rejecting utterly the Western devils among whom he has always dwelt and even insisting that Parvez take into their home a prominent Pakistani "Maulvi" (Muslim priest). Parvez initially indulges his son--and Minoo, who shows signs of siding with Farid--but cannot stomach what is happening to his life. His only human outlet becomes the sympathetic Bettina, who becomes his lover, an act ensured to completely alienate what's left of his once-treasured family. A final confrontation between the local Islamic fundamentalists and the local streetwalkers forces Parvez to make the most unenviable of choices...

Told almost wholly from Parvez's point of view, *My Son the Fanatic* manifests completely the personal agonies the taxi driver goes through. No paragon, he is the kind of hard worker who realizes how lucky he is to be slogging it out in Bradford rather

than in Karachi. The opening scenes (very funny indeed), where he is trying to charm his potential English in-laws, show how desperately he wants to fit into British society, trumpeting his son's prospects while simultaneously mangling local slang. As his son's passion for Allah grows, the father's passion to assess his own place in the world grows apace.

As Parvez, Om Puri (who has appeared in *Gandhi*, *City of Joy*, and *The Ghost and the Darkness*, among others) ) authentically captures the variegated, multiple pressures on such a man. It is a finely observed portrait, full of nuance and nerve. Not a conventionally handsome lead, Puri frequently evinces a pained expression on his weather-beaten face, the same expression that reflects the struggle of a man to fathom the earth shifting all too rapidly beneath him. It is a part played full out, without vanity, and wholly convincing. We understand this man, and we want him to somehow succeed on his own terms, even if it is unlikely he will.

Puri is nicely seconded by a good all-around ensemble, including the ubiquitous Skarsgard as the sleazy (and aptly named) Schitz and Kurtha as the epitome of the zealous, judging youth, railing against decadent Britain in a ripe English accent. His key counterpart is, however, Rachel Griffiths as Bettina. Griffiths, nominated for an Academy Award this year for her portrayal of Hilary du Pre in *Hilary and Jackie*, is a versatile Australian actress with a burgeoning career (she was in *Muriel's Wedding*, *Jude the Obscure*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, inter alia), but she was not the director's first choice for the part. But in what seems on its face an implausible assignment--playing an attractive hooker warming up to a much older Asian cabbie--Griffiths makes Bettina and her romance gently, shyly, and completely believable.

*My Son the Fanatic* is no summer blockbuster, but rather a refreshing dip into the psyche of a real human being--something rare enough to find at the movies these days.

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