

## “The Damaging Path of Assimilation”

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## Summary:

In this essay, I discuss the damaging path of assimilation and how it can result in several consequences as it leads someone to having a disfigured identity and a disruption in the sense of belonging thus leading them to feeling alienated. I tend to do so by discussing two short stories that explain what exactly happens to someone when they immigrate and are forced to assimilate to a different culture in order to fit in. Yasmine Gooneratne's "Bharat Changes his Image" and Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" are two famous stories that show us what two different families end up going through and what they encounter the minute they try to change and hide who they truly are.

It is indeed an undeniable fact that colonized people and immigrants tend to assimilate into the dominant culture to be accepted and thus avoid the feeling of alienation. Not only does one tend to assimilate, but rather becomes involved in a tangled web of identity and cultural struggles. According to Siobhan Holohan, assimilation is "A notion whereby on entering new country immigrant groups are encouraged, through social and cultural practices and/or political machinations, to adopt the culture, values, and social behaviors of the host nation..." (92). This perplexing path leads to many damages that affect one's identity. For example, assimilating to the dominant culture often results in a struggle to balance hybridity, cultural issues, being 'othered,' and the emergence of racist ideologies. Yasmine Gooneratne's "Bharat Changes his Image" is a famous published short story that revolves around a Sri Lankan married couple who migrate to Australia for a better living. However, as they try to fit in, Bharat/Barry and Navaranjini/Jean end up facing several issues concerning their cultural identity. While trying to understand this new multicultural experience, Navaranjini/Jean narrates the story from her perspective. Another famous story that portrays the same struggles is Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic," which focuses on a Pakistani family who migrates to England to find better opportunities in life. In this story, Parvez (the father) informs the reader of the new problematic changes his son Ali is going through. Thus, by examining Yasmine Gooneratne's "Bharat Changes his Image" and Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic," this paper argues that the process of assimilation can result in several consequences as it leads to the creation of a disfigured hybrid identity, a disruption in the sense of belonging, and thus resulting in forming a social hierarchical ideology.

Surely, there is no issue with embracing hybridity and becoming multicultural. However, a problem can arise when an individual rejects his/her own culture and identity and views it as inferior to the culture to which he/she is to adapt. Kovacs and A.J Cropley argue that "In the process of endorsing the observable behaviours of the receiving society, he may begin to express prejudice against immigrants less assimilated..." (226). Thus, when the immigrant assimilates and obtains the different characteristics of the dominant culture, he/she ends up perceiving their own culture and identity as the 'lower other.' This can be very much seen when both Bharat/Barry and Navaranjini/Jean form a racial prejudice against Asians with fear to be mistaken as them when ironically, they are Asians themselves. Then, comes the issue of combining two identities, which can be harmful because one may end up losing their sense of self if they become too invested in forgetting and hating themselves. In his famous essay "Creolization in Jamaica," Edward Brathwaite discusses the process of mixing two identities, known as Creolization. Brathwaite claims that a creole identity is formed when an enslaved black person obtains the cultural identity of his white masters (202). From that, the process of creolization can be seen in both stories but in exclusion to slavery. To which a creolized (third) identity is formed and results in several struggles. Last, according to Shahn Alshammari, 'hybridity' becomes a concern when people consider their own identity as superior and above that of others (58). Consequently, this can lead to a process of othering, like how the West perceives the East as inferior. However, in Kureishi's story, Ali comes to view the West as inferior, thus making them the 'other.'

To begin with, one must note that the type of assimilation seen in both stories is a cultural one, which can be best defined as "ethnic groups taking on the cultural signifiers of the host nation" (Holohan 92). As mentioned previously, the immigrant develops a new (third) identity, which is a disfigured one that results in several intercultural struggles. As according to Brathwaite, creolization begins with 'seasoning,' and it is the process of being branded a new name and learning to speak a new language (203). In Gooneratne's story, Bharat/Barry and Navaranjini/Jean begin their journey of being 'seasoned' from the moment they changed their names from Navaranjini and Bharat Mangala-Davasinha into Jean and Barry Mundy. Another example is when they aspire to learn to speak the Australian dialect. Thereby creating a new identity that is ingrained with a sense of shame from their past selves. This new identity is not welcomed anymore to fit within their past selves since they aim to abandon their Sri Lankan cultural identity. Navaranjini's name is a popular one in Sanskrit<sup>1</sup> while Bharat's name means India and it has a deep meaning to "commemorate his grandfather's scholarship in Indian languages" (Gooneratne 888). To replace such meaningful names out of fear of mockery is an understandable reaction, but then again it erases one's

<sup>1</sup> "Sanskrit is the primary sacred language of Hinduism, and has been used as a philosophical language in the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism" (World Civilization).

own identity. When it comes to the issue of self-perception, Bharat/Barry is the first to feel that he has a serious problem with his image. His wife claims that she did not even know he had an image until they arrived in Australia (Gooneratne 884). This sense of identity disfiguration is a direct result of assimilation; Bharat/Barry begins to hate his image, then his culture, and soon develops a racist attitude towards East Asians. Bharat/Barry fears being different as it makes him feel like an outward alien that will soon be exiled if he tries to embrace himself. As he tries to explain his feelings to his wife, he notices how puzzled she is and thus says “We’re Asians. They’re Australians. When Australians meet us, that’s what they notice first. Difference” (Gooneratne 884). What Bharat/Barry fails to understand as he dives deep into his self-hatred, is that it is normal to feel different and not entirely a big deal. Yet, this is what assimilation does to the immigrant, it makes him/her develop a sense of shame and hatred towards his own identity.

Furthermore, when it comes to the sense of belonging, the immigrant goes through a disruptive process, due to the fact that belonging “...involves both identification with and feelings of attachment to a social community” (Simonsen 2019). It is indeed difficult for the characters in both stories to feel a sense of belonging since they lack identification and attachment to both England and Australia. While belonging is important and a necessity, one cannot deny that the immigrant becomes a product of mimicry due to the need to belong. The term ‘mimic-men’ comes from the second step of creolization which is socialization, to which the slave is obligated to participate in social activities just to fit in and thus, belong. (Brathwaite 203). This act of mimicry is seen and can only be appointed onto Bharat/Barry and Navaranjini/Jean when they begin to imitate and socialize with Australians. For example, when they both change their names to common Australian ones. It can also be seen when they swapped their Austin car for a Holden and when they moved to a different suburb (Gooneratne 888). It can also be seen when they head to socialize in a reception hosted by Bharat/Barry’s workplace (Gooneratne 889). They are thus a product of imitation due to the disownment of their culture and rejecting their old images just to be accepted and feel like they belong.

In Kureishi’s story, Parvez and his son Ali are also in need to belong and fit somewhere. In their case, this urgent need to belong can be seen as “a result of racial ideologies and the hierarchies that coexist with colonialism, racism, and sexism” (Alshammri 58). Ali is in an extreme need to belong and fit with his Muslim-Pakistani community, so the lack of his own culture in this new westernized community turns him towards extremism and Jihad.<sup>2</sup> Ali comes to believe it is the right path and ideology because the west is corrupted claiming that “western education cultivate an anti-religious attitude” (Kureishi 127). His father Parvez also needs to belong somewhere, which is why he tries hard to be more westernized. As a result of adopting western culture, he becomes a product of mimicry. What Ali fails to understand is that his father is not attempting to assimilate out of spite towards his own identity, but out of fear of being alienated and left out.

The sense of alienation is a direct result of living in a new community that either makes the immigrant feel unwelcomed or presents an attitude that discourages self-embrace. For Bharat/Barry and Navaranjini/Jean, the Australian community was unwelcoming and racist towards them. As stated by Bharat’s professor Ronald Blackstone, “‘Asians’ he’d said on radio, ‘pollute the air with the fumes of roasting meat. And we Australians, he’d added, ‘must be alert to the dangers involved for our society if we allow Asians in who cannot assimilate and except our customs’”(Gooneratne 886). Unfortunately, it is indeed very much easier to assimilate and embrace the Australian culture than to live differently, because only then will they be treated with respect and looked at with high regard. On the other hand, Ali begins to feel alienated as a result of feeling unable to express his own culture. His father Parvez is very much rejecting anything related to the Pakistani culture and Islamic rituals and encourages everything western upon his son. According to Alshammari, Ali “like many other hybrids, is caught between being a Pakistani or living as any other English person would. He suffers from this blend of two cultures that are a part of his identity” (57). Another example of the fear of alienation is when Parvez orders his Muslim wife to cook pork sausages, claiming that they are not in the village anymore and how “This is England. We have to fit in!” (Kureishi 125). Evidently, the sense of alienation results in major changes in one’s personality which can cause issues to everyone involved.

Moreover, the process of changing one’s identity and cultural values just to belong leads to the issue of a drastic change in morals and ethics. For Bharat/Barry, he ends up neglecting his values and respect towards his wife. This can be seen when he calls his wife ‘stupid’ which is very shocking since he has never done it before. Therefore, the lack of respect is very evident as he indulges in being so westernized “...never once, before we came to Australia, did my husband ever call me ‘stupid’ (Gooneratne 884). Another example is when he changes their family name to Mundy without telling her first which

<sup>2</sup> “Jihad in the Koran is projected as exerting effort to change oneself, and also in certain situations physically standing against oppressors if that's the only way” (Handwerk).

also shocked Navaranjini/Jean “Well. I’d have liked some warning. After all, it’s my name, too” (Gooneratne 888). One last example is when Navaranjini/Jean jokes with him about trading her in for a new wife, which startles him, and it can be an indication of him considering it or even cheating on her (Gooneratne 889). On the other hand, Parvez goes against everything that his Islamic culture forbids, as he begins to drink alcohol, eat pork, and he even goes as far as befriending a prostitute. Of course, this upsets Ali to the point where he disrespects his father’s new friend Betina (the prostitute). The change in morals and respect does not only result from being so westernized, but it also comes from trying hard to assimilate into a culture that everything Islam goes against. The judgment that Ali presents against his father is not what a good Muslim must do; it is a direct result of not being able to practice his Islamic culture properly when his father is supposed to be the figure that leads him towards righteousness. Meaning, he feels ‘othered,’ so he results in hierarchal racism and sexism towards Betina and the West in general (Alshammari 58). Ali then continues to say that the West is empty and lacks philosophies to live by (Kureishi 128). This is an evident sign that being so westernized and being forced to assimilate affects one’s values and attitude.

Furthermore, comes in the issue of a hierarchal social ideology that is formed to reinforce one’s identity which is driven by fear, ego, hatred, and racism. Alshammari argues that “The problem arises when one’s identity becomes the only identity he/she can accept, when he/she does not take into account other people’s identities” (58). This is something that can be seen in both Ali, Bharat/Barry, and Navaranjini/Jean as they are both unable to mix identities, thus struggling to juggle both. For Ali, he ends up developing a mentality that makes him believe that being a Muslim-Pakistani is superior to any other religion and nationality. The emphasis is placed more on his religious identity because he eventually becomes an extremist. The issue is as such, when one is forced into fitting this new identity and is made to feel alienated had they not assimilated to the dominant culture; the individual ends up developing a mentality that believes his own identity is superior and above others. Hence, the idea of having a hybrid identity is out of the question for Ali because he perceives the west as inferior when ironically it is more common for the West to perceive the East as inferior. One example of him being infuriated with westerners is when he judges his father for being too westernized, asking him how he could possibly love something that hates him (Kureishi 126). Ali’s new perspective is an extreme shock to his father when he states, “The Law of Islam would rule the world, the skin of the infidel would burn off again and again; The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes” (Kureishi 126). Furthermore, Alshammari brings up an important point where she claims that “Ali embarks on a search for a static self-identity, a ‘pure identity’ which consequently restricts him from developing a dynamic understanding of society and leads to racism and essentialism” (58-59). Thereby, his ideology that only one identity can exist within himself is a direct result that is embedded with being forced to assimilate to the western culture. This is why he results in alienating himself because this new westernized society and his father’s new persona make him feel as if he cannot fit himself inside this new bubble of extreme freedom. Now, it is not to say that Ali is on the right track, but one cannot wonder if he would have turned into an extremist had he not been exposed and forced into being so westernized.

In contrast, Bharat/Barry and Navaranjini/Jean begin to develop a sense of hatred towards their own identity out of shame and obligation to fit it and assimilate. Thus, they begin to see themselves as above and better than other Asians. After the racist comments they heard on the radio by Professor Ronald Blackstone, Bharat/Barry’s sense of identity becomes damaged. Then, they both begin to feel ashamed to be associated with Asians as they both consider themselves to be ‘real Asians’ and not Chinese or Korean. That is when they begin to disassociate themselves from their ethnicity and change drastically. One may claim that their process to separate themselves from Asians is a way for them to reinforce a new identity; one that accepts assimilation, becomes more westernized and is accepted by Australians. However, this process leads to a racist discourse and mindset towards both Asians and Australians. For Navaranjini/Jean, she claims that Asians are not racist about color and that they just “honor a very ancient and holy tradition that has clear rules about what’s beautiful and what’s not” (Gooneratne 885). This is her idea of ‘not being racist,’ but it is clear racism as she considers her color to be ‘golden delicious’ and at the highest rating of colors in Sri Lanka (Gooneratne 885). What is truly ironic about Navaranjini/Jean, is that she is so focused and concerned about the racism that she and her husband are experiencing, that she tends to neglect and deny her racist discourse towards Far East Asians. At one point she tries to cheer her husband up but does not acknowledge that her comments are backhanded with racism. “‘Why should you care what Blackstone says?’ I asked. Your eyes aren’t slit and your head doesn’t slope. It’s obvious he doesn’t mean you.” (Gooneratne 887). Another incident is when she refers to Far

East Asians as ‘Ching-Chongs’<sup>3</sup> but does not consider this term to be racist because apparently “racism is unknown in India and Sri Lanka” (Gooneratne 885). However, this does not help Bharat/Barry at all as he becomes depressed and embarrassed about how he looks. Interestingly enough, Bharat/Barry and Navaranjini/Jean are also racist towards Australians. Bharat/Barry believes that Australians cannot tell the difference between one Asian and another because they never had an empire (Gooneratne 884). On the other hand, Navaranjini/Jean sees that Westerners and Far Easterners are all alike, as she considers them all as pale, sallow, and compares them to raw shellfish before they get some color and taste into them (Gooneratne 885). At the end of the story, she is still unaware of her own racism as she confronts Professor Blackstone. When offered a sausage roll by a servant at the party, she goes off saying “What do you take me for? A pork-eating Ching-Chong?” (Gooneratne 891). Navaranjini/Jean does not go home with a new attitude and respect, but rather remains on the same ignorant path alongside her husband.

To conclude, in this essay I have attempted to demonstrate that while assimilating to the dominant culture may seem like the right path to escape racism and feeling alienated, it may also be a destructive decision that leads to serious consequences. As seen in both stories, the main characters go through an undertow of identity disfiguration all because they feel that they are obligated to assimilate or else, they would be excluded. Thus, the intense pressure and need to assimilate can result in the fallout of the individual as it may consist of many intercultural struggles like a disruption in the sense of belonging and a sense of alienation. Furthermore, it leads to the creation of a third identity that does not seem to fit in either community. Thereby, the individual ends up with an internalized hierarchal ideology that places his/her identity above others.

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<sup>3</sup> “Ching-Chong is an ethnic slur and a pejorative term sometimes used in English to mock the Chinese language, people of Chinese ancestry, or other people of East or Southeast Asian descent perceived to be Chinese” (Wikipedia).

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## "مسار الإستيعاب المغلوط"

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زينب وليد المسعود

### الملخص:

في هذا البحث، أقوم بمناقشة قصتين عن كفاح اسر تحاول بتغيير هويتهم من اجل الشعور بالانضمام والانتماء والتخلي عن شعور الوحدة والغربة. في قصة ياسمين وحنيف، تحارب الشخصيات التغيرات وتحاول التمسك بهويتها وتقوم شخصيات أخرى بالسعي للتقليد ومحاولتهم للانغماس في المجتمع والثقافة الجديدة. ولكن في النهاية يتلقى كل شخص حتمه ويتعرض لعواقب ونتائج لم تكن بالحسبان من اضطراب في الهوية وحتى انعدام الشعور بالانتماء لكلا الثقافتين