
THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST
EXPLORING THE IDEOLOGICAL BASIS AND BICULTURAL
CONSCIOUSNESS IN PAKISTANI DIASPORIC ANGLOPHONE FICTION

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the religious ideological basis, cultural ambivalence and a bicultural identity issues in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This Pakistani Anglophone novel carries different diasporic sensibilities. Issues related to culture, religion and its association with ideological grounds are very prominent. Elements of immigrant feelings and loss of identity are very vibrant. The writer shares migrant experience and the influence of a new culture of the host country, United States. While migrants from some of the Asian states, mainly those characterized by most recent immigrant waves, have really worse socio-economic situation than average immigrants; Pakistani people are among minorities. This research is qualitative in nature. Theories presented by Arjun Appadurai, Homi K Bhabha, and James Clifford about culture and diaspora support this research. This research is helpful to know about the concerns associated with the liminal space and issues related to identity loss, strong affiliation and recognition on the basis of religion and living with a bicultural identity.*

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Diaspora, Ambivalence, Islam, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid's experience of working in the American corporate sector effects his writing profoundly. The tensions identified here by Hamid between a fundamentally discordant experience of education and professional life is evident in all three of his novels *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013). Hamid's first novel *Moth Smoke*, delves into the growing culture of drugs, sex, crime and corruption amongst the elite residents of Lahore. This novel is a testament to Hamid's emotional

commitment to Lahore, seen in his representation of it as “an unevenly developed, international urban center, which constantly interconnects with its Punjabi rural hinterland” (Chambers, 2012:176). The composition of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (TRF) was well advanced when 9/11 happened. The narrative explores Changez’s life in America, along with the complexities of his professional and personal relationships both before and after 9/11 and retrospectively considers the unfolding of individual and collective relationships against this historical context. Teasing out the sensibilities of the 9/11 victims as well as those criminalized as a consequence of it, the novel problematizes the binary between the two. Chapter 2 offers a close textual analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* bearing in mind precisely this historicization of contemporary global terrorism and conflict. Reading the novel as a constructive and imperative destabilization of existing essentialist notions of identity, it is argued that neither Changez nor his silent American interlocutor can be assigned uncritical identities as a victim or aggressor. The use of the second personal “you”, used to great effect in all three of Hamid’s novels, invests an inextricable link between form and content in his writing. As Hamid has said in an interview with Chambers:

“In my novel, there is an attempt to fundamentally implicate the reader. So if you view the world as fundamentally [sic] a world where there is a war between civilizations, then the novel is a thriller. If you don’t, it is equally a random encounter between two separate guys who go their separate ways. So if it’s a thriller or not depends on the preconceptions we bring to it as readers” (Chambers, 2012:178).

The impact of 9/11 is extended from New York and Washington and displaced onto a wider world Chile, Manilla and Lahore are some of the sites from where the novel explores conflict and identity. Critics of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* have largely read it as a story of Changez’s alienation from and resentment against the U.S., while at the same time acknowledging the more complex allegorical possibilities of Hamid’s writing. However, reading of the novel offers a different stance on this matter, insofar as it proposes instead that Changez’s feelings for the U.S. transcend the post-9/11 animosity that is more or less expected of him. Instead, Changez remains inseparably connected to America, even after his departure from the country. This association, if anything, is strengthened as a consequence of his disappointments. This paradox, enabled by the novel’s transnational imagining, can be traced to Changez’s dual consciousness, one that concurrently allows him to experience the events of 9/11 as an “insider” as well an “outsider”, as an American and as a Pakistani. The resulting feelings of confusion, conflict and crisis of identity are all viewed affirmatively and

as presenting favorable possibilities in this study of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

AIMS AND PURPOSES OF THE RESEARCH

The contemporary research aims at identifying the problems and its causes emerged due to the cross-cultural immigration and diasporic sensibilities. The causes and effects of their sufferings are to be discussed from the cultural points of view to reach to a certain conclusion. The present research has an objective of evaluating the life and problems of immigrant protagonist in the selected text. Finally, a systematic investigation of cultural immigration and its critical study in the light of diasporic sensibilities and bicultural anxieties.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This research paper addresses the issues of religious basis, diaspora, bicultural identity and cultural ambivalence in Pakistani Anglophone fiction. Selected novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid is under research as it clearly highlights the cultural issues and problems on the basis of religious ideology. It also covers the concerns of broader area of hybridity.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

- The present research is limited to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by the diasporic Pakistani Anglophone writer Mohsin Hamid.
- Diasporic writers have written on different topics and worked in multiple genres in English. Of these categories, a novel by Mohsin Hamid is selected, as he has presented the problems of diaspora with different cultural properties.
- This particular research focuses on religious ideological basis and diasporic properties, which are determined to study the cross-cultural encounters.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To highlight the issues of diaspora in Pakistani Anglophone fiction.
- To present the geo-Islamic ideological basis and bicultural ambivalence.
- To point out the transnational and multicultural attributes in the selected text.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Q.1: How has Mohsin Hamid projected the diasporic cultural ambivalence in the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*?
- Q.2: How have been the issues of religion and culture highlighted in Pakistani Anglophone diasporic fiction?

Q.3: How have the problems related to Geo-Islamic conflicts brought to light while living in the liminal space?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is qualitative in nature, theories presented by Homi K. Bhabha, James Clifford and Arjun Appadurai about culture and diaspora support this research as a theoretical framework. The psychoanalytic theory makes a good foundation when looking into the character's psychological development, Louis Tyson writes in *Critical theory today*, "if psychoanalysis can help us better understand human behavior, then it must certainly be able to help us understand literary texts, which are about human behavior". According to the psychoanalytic theory, we are shaped as human beings through our early relations to other people, and how we solve our inner conflicts, which are a part of our psychological development. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is considered the father of psychoanalysis and his work is the foundation for modern psychoanalytic theory. In the following comes a presentation of Freud's basic theory that will be used in the analysis of the main characters in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. A model for describing different states of consciousness in a human being is to dive it into conscious, preconscious and unconscious.

"The next state is the Preconscious, where memories and things one has done. Quickly can be picked up in the conscious state. For example, when one suddenly remembers the title of a song that one has been thinking of or a particular incident when someone reminds one of it. The next state is the Unconscious, which is the most fundamental level of the consciousness if one wants to understand human behavior. This state is kind of a mental storehouse for all that a one's mind had gone through. During sleep and moments of stress, the unconscious may come bubbling up" (Bischof, 1968:57-60).

"The unconscious is of central importance in psychoanalytic theory. That is one of Freud's most fundamental insights and is still influencing psychoanalytic thinking" (Bischof, 1968:32-34). Psychoanalytic theory aims to help us understand and solve our psychological problems. For example, if a person has anxiety and is not aware of the reason for the problem, the problem can take control of her. That is why the existence of the unconscious is so central in psychoanalytic thinking. This research is helpful to know about the concerns associated with the liminal space and issues related to identity loss of first and second generations and living with a bicultural identity.

ANALYSIS

Interested in the intersection of literature, religion, politics and history, it is in this political climate of mounting fear and anxiety regarding Muslims both within and outside Europe and America. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* offers us a Pakistani auto diegetic narrator, Changez, who upon his return from America delivers a monologue to a wholly silent American listener, a visitor in Lahore with the professed purpose of explaining his own appearance, behavior and relationship with America and Pakistan. The American auditor, assigned no lines of his own in the narrative, communicates to the reader via Changez's paraphrasing of his comments, questions and descriptions of his body language. This device, at one level, allocates complete control of voice and agency to Changez the narrator. In other words, in the novel, America has "the right to remain silent" while an alternative version of events of 9/11 is presented to us. It is argued here that by making his auto diegetic narrator deliberately unreliable, Hamid has not only created a productive distance between authorial and rational perspectives but also made the relationship between America and the Pakistan more nuanced than a simple case of postcolonial resentment. In a similar vein, Janet Wilson suggests that "The withholding of any voice from Changez's companion and the ventriloquizing of his presence through answers to his questions seemingly "others" the American, so reversing the dichotomized western/subaltern relationship" (*Essays on Fundamentalism*, forthcoming). During this process Changez conveys his own anxiety with regards to the American (there are implications he may be armed), as well as the American's paranoia regarding Pakistan, making it difficult for the reader to develop uncomplicated sympathies. The use of second person narration, implicating the reader as a participant, allows for a range of interpretations of the novel to coexist.

TRF's significance as a contemporary novel has mainly been attributed to its role in combating the stereotypes held against Muslims after 9/11 and challenging the prejudices against Islam and Pakistan in contemporary America. As such, its reviewers have concluded that the novel attempts to challenge what Edward Said has called the efforts:

"To demonize and dehumanize a whole culture on the grounds that it is 'enraged' at modernity is to turn Muslims into objects of a therapeutic, punitive attention" (Said, 1981).

This process is further problematized by two important details. One, the novel's navigation of Changez's altered relationship with America is always seen through his class affiliation and second, Changez is never, even after his radicalization towards the end of the novel, shown to be particularly "Islamic". Islam in Hamid's novel is much more a "cultural identifier" than a "religious dogma" (Singh, 2012). Changez experiences a profound sense of exclusion and displacement both in Pakistan and in America before and after

9/11. Prior to 9/11, this displacement occurs on a subconscious level and is registered by Changez only retrospectively. In order to formulate an understanding of this experience, it investigates the shifting meaning of multiculturalism in Europe and America, highlighting its fragility both before and after 9/11. The second section introduces the notion of “double consciousness”; drawing from the works of W.E.B. Dubois and Paul Gilroy, it suggests that Hamid’s protagonist inhabits a fractured mental and physical space of double consciousness—first in his capacity as a student at an American Ivy League institution, and then as an employee at a powerful and exclusive investment analyst company, Underwood Samson. Considering both the limiting and the liberating possibilities of this double consciousness, the chapter moves on to ask on behalf of Changez, and borrowing from W.B. Dubois, the question: “How does it feel to be a problem?” This study suggests that 9/11, rather than being an inaugurating moment, serves to add a sense of urgency to an already urgent crisis. Changez’s retrospective and incensed enquiry into America’s politics and intervention in world affairs, particularly in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan is examined here, alongside an exploration of the reasons that lead to the formation of this perspective.

Terrorism, as reiterated by Hamid’s narrative and the other novels discussed in this study, is also a transnational phenomenon that needs to be understood in the context of its long historical duration, as opposed to instances of unique or singular violence. Changez eventually becomes the vocalizer of the reality that 9/11 is but one marker of violence in the world—a fact that American and European fiction after 9/11 seems to ignore in favour of or of monumentalizing the 9/11 moment. Equally, through Changez, Hamid affirms that notwithstanding its current signification, the term “fundamentalism” (and the associated term “fundamentalists”) has universal currency. In so doing, Hamid engenders alternative understandings of fundamentalism as part of his greater interest in interpreting the tragedy of 9/11 from a pluralized perspective. Echoing the exasperations of postcolonial thought more generally, Hamid says:

“It seems bizarre to me, The French are so French, the Germans so German, and everything is about narrow nationalism, as opposed to reaching out for a common humanity” (Chambers, 2011:187).

The effect of what Hamid calls “narrow nationalism” is sadly unmitigated by Anglo-American efforts at claiming otherwise “popular western perception tends to view the conflicts generated by 9/11 as a similarly benevolent endeavor (to colonialism) chivalric crusades to rescue women chafing under the burden of the veil, or politically idealistic measures to bring democracy to pre-modern, dictatorial regimes” (Singh, 2012:25).

The recent banning of the *burqa* by the French government in April 2011, alongside the caveat of a \$30000 fine against the male enforcement of the Islamic female garment on women is clearly couched in the language of secular universalism, allegedly aimed at protecting the dignity and liberty of Muslim women in the country. The impact of the *burqa* ban presents not just the limits of French state secularism and nationalism but also leads once again to the question of the gradual demise of “multiculturalism” in Europe and America. While political commentators and writers have increasingly expressed anxieties about the pressures exerted on it by 9/11 and 7/7, multiculturalism has of course been under threat long before this date. The fragmentations and divisions that are witnessed in the contemporary world are, despite what fictional and non-fictional writing in America and Britain may tell us, neither unique nor new. The anthropologist Sindre Bangstad suggests that

“European multiculturalism has a particularly dark history regarding its treatment of religious and ethnic minorities, and with that follows a burden of moral responsibility. It is a burden that must be shouldered even in the bleak and challenging times we are living in at present” (Bangstad, 2011).

Chrysavgi Papagianni reinforces this view:

“Despite the undeniable progress that multiculturalists have made in both Europe and America in our day’s events like ‘9/11’ or at least the manipulation of them by conservative politics, undermine multicultural efforts for coexistence and foster instead assimilation and monoculturalism” (Papagianni, 2010).

Hamid’s writing is a robust and determined attempt at historicising the tragedy of 9/11 and seeks to shatter the prevailing political myth of “Ground Zero”. Like Singh, “modernity [in Hamid’s novel] is unsettled by a historicity that questions the constitutive elements of crisis” (p.25). Changez’s disillusionment with (and sense of alienation in) America after 9/11 disclose a loss of faith in his “American dream” which had hitherto served as a way out of his declining wealth and class status in Pakistan. Running alongside his alienation in America is his sense of alienation in Pakistan, where he feels unable to form attachments or empathy and which eventually transforms into a desperate need to form affiliations with those people in Pakistan who far from being able to partake in the “American dream”, are palpably harmed by it.

DISCUSSION

Changez is both estranged from and drawn to America. *TRF* offers no clear divide between Changez’s admiration for America and the disaffection he later develops for it. He constantly challenges his previous identities and

sense of belonging but at no point in the narrative does he arrive at a settled identity. Even at a fairly advanced stage of his metamorphosis Changez's remains engulfed in a state of existential confusion that is effectively captured on his last day of employment at Underwood Samson. Unable to represent the firm any longer, Changez engineers his dismissal. It is a matter on which, despite Jim's appeal, he is unwilling to bend. At the same time, it worth noting that it is not a decision that is entirely clear to him, once again pointing to the "reluctance" of his gradual desertion of America. He describes this state of mind to the American listener: "No, please understand me, that I was convinced that I had made a mistake; no, I was merely unconvinced that I had *not* made a mistake. I was, in other words, confused" (p.181). At the same time however, Hamid establishes categorically that there is nothing simplistic about Changez's embrace of "fundamentalism" or his return to Pakistan. While Changez may not be as comfortable as Hamid about embracing a hybrid position, he is never at ease choosing one identity either. It is here that he locates the possibility of hope—of the existence of a kind of transnationalism that allows him, a declared opponent of the American State, and to love an idea of America, as well as his devotion to an American woman despite her continued rejection of him. He is torn between his class and emotional affiliation. Changez's state of "double consciousness", though overtly a source of confusion and vulnerability, in the final analysis could be a liberator and emancipatory apparatus.

FINDINGS

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, this condition of rage and frenzy, compounded by an almost hysterical desire for confrontation are symptomatic not so much of a newly acquired hatred for America or Americans, but of an intense and grievous disappointment at his own sense of belonging. Changez at no point speaks in terms of abandoning America. His efforts are rather directed towards curbing its excesses— "Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own" (p.190). Whereas this parodying of the Bush/Blair jargon during the "war on terror" seeps through, there are elements of sincerity here. Hamid's self-described "love story" about America, interrogates American nationalism and "triumphalism" that pervades America in the aftermath of 9/11. Like Hiroko, Changez too is struck by the American return to a self-absorbed and xenophobic nationalism: "you retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away" (p.190). From an exclusively personal perspective, this nationalism has been at the expense of his inclusion into America.

One of the ways in which Changez experiences the difficulty of severance with America is through his relationship with Erica. “She did not respond; she did not resist” (Hartnell, 2010:342). Noting this parallel, it would appear that “while Erica is initially quite charmed by her idea of Changez’s family life in Pakistan, her interest in him is merely transitory, fleeting”, gesturing towards American reluctance to empathize with the rest of the world” (Hartnell, 2010). Towards the end of the narrative Changez recognizes Erica “had chosen not to be part of my story; her own had proven too compelling” (TRF 167). In the face of his unrequited love, and despite it, Changez continues to subscribe to the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* in order to keep abreast with the lives of those he has left behind but always with particular attention to the remote possibility of re-discovering Erica. He continues to send her emails until finally her account becomes inactive and eventually resorts to posting her a letter every year, which is invariably returned to him.

This unwillingness and inability to “reconstitute” himself autonomously results not just from his relationship with Erica, but with America at large. These identities, once mongrelized, cannot be reverted to as separate selves. Hamid proposes the permanence of the affective bond between Pakistan and America. Changez’s relationship with America is altered but not terminated by 9/11 and the events that ensue in its wake. As Changez explains, in a tone that fuses relief with resignation, “Something of us is now outside and something of the outside is now within us”. It is interesting to then connect this sentiment with Changez’s very first words spoken to his American auditor, which now acquire a more genuine and earnest quality: “Excuse me Sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened of my beard. *I am a lover of America*”. This seemingly fractured position, expressed in his “fundamentalist” appearance and the simultaneous declaration of his love for America are indicative of two things: one, the frustration and confusion that emanate from his thwarted desire (for America and for Erica) and second, of the associated notion that his appearance is not antithetical to his “Americanness”. Changez’s optimism, so often neglected by readers in favor of his animosity with post 9/11 America, is poignantly encapsulated in the following lines:

“September had always seemed to me a month of beginnings, a *spring* of sorts, possibly because it marks the commencement of the academic year” (TRF, 187).

Do we believe Changez? Indeed, to search for a definitive answer to this question would detract significantly from the depth and complexity of Hamid’s story. This inherent destabilization and uncertainty a sense of negative capability which have meant that Changez vacillates frenziedly between being angered and placatory, sardonic and wistful, hospitable and hostile eventually sustains the novel’s transnationalism. Changez’s ambiguity is paralleled in the narrative’s stylistic features as the evening draws to a

close, the streets of the famous bazaar become gloomy and deserted. Shadowy figures lurk about and an air of suspense fills the pages of Hamid's novel. Are either Changez or the stranger armed? How harmless is that "glint of metal" that is detected in the stranger's jacket? Who, if anyone, will be harmed? As with any successful thriller, the possibilities are endless.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of 9/11 it has become clear that the impact of terrorist catastrophes can be exacerbated by the inflammatory works of journalists, film-makers and indeed novelists. As Scanlan (2010:267) further suggests, though several novelists "are at pains to suggest that the Islamic terrorist is a human being with whom we may have some sympathy, none of these writers creates a context large enough to include ordinary Muslims, people with differing political and religious perspectives". "Where", Scanlan appositely asks, "is the Charles Dickens or the Upton Sinclair of terrorist fiction?" (Scanlan, 2010:266). In such a context, Mohsin Hamid's novel does two things: it endorses the possibility of an alternative literary language of terror by charting the alienation of a young, privileged, Pakistani professional in America through a narrative that is "doubly conscious" and simultaneously explores the transnational potential of '9/11'. In the first case, by undertaking what Edward Said called the "voyage in" Hamid challenges the stereotype of America as a "haven for the oppressed" (Scanlan, 2010:267), powered by secularism, rationalism and utopic possibilities. By exploring the transnational implications of terrorism, and by grounding it historically, Hamid has advanced the possibility of a fascinating set of connections between America and Pakistan that is premised on a properly historicized understanding of the modern condition. Hamid shares Chatterjee's anxieties about the oversimplification of the relationship between the global north and global south and he echoes the complexity of the "love" felt by the latter for the former and both men that "Vasco da Gama must never appear on our shores again" (Chatterjee, 1998). Their paths eventually diverge: Hamid does not share Chatterjee's hesitation about the coexistence of love for America and a disregard for its politics. To him these positions, represented via Changez, are not mutually exclusive. The use of fear, domination and terror by the terrorists on 9/11 is as repugnant as that witnessed over the 500 years of colonial rule, deconstructing any simplistic analysis of the juxtaposition of victim and terrorist, moral and immoral, good and evil. This deconstruction is both timely and imperative.

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