

## **The Crisis and Complexity of Identity in Mohsin Hamid's 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist.'**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The Reluctant Fundamentalist a novel, in which Mohsin Hamid adopted the device of a dramatic monologue and has narrated a chance encounter in Lahore between Changez, a migrant of Pakistan and an unnamed American visitor. Changez's past has formed the main part of the novel who disclosed his student days when he studied at Princeton. He further narrated the loss of his promising job along with the collapse of his relationship with Erica. After facing a growing estrangement and disillusionment from the US response to 11<sup>th</sup> September terrorist attack, he returned to Pakistan, became a lecturer and activist and campaigned against American foreign policy. But he was a reluctant fundamentalist who had gone all the way over to the dark side of Islamic fundamentalism. This paper is an attempt to study the protagonist's crisis and complexity of identity which he faced while living in America as he was both infatuated and disenchanted by America at the same time.

**KEY WORDS:** Changez, Reluctant, America, Pakistan, Lahore, Capitalism.

Mohsin Hamid's, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a major literary work in the aftermath of 9/11 massacre, which has produced or maintained deep-set racial prejudices against Muslims. Hamid's novel has been highly instrumental in effacing or dismantling the Western religious bias against the Muslims, and thereby reminds us of Edward Said's statement:

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

The present paper is an insight into the narrator's identity when he faces a crisis while he is in America and which becomes complex when he goes back to his native place, Pakistan.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a novel by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, published in 2007. Hamid has said, '*The Fall*', by Albert Camus served as his model. He has used the technique of a frame story, which takes place during the course of a single evening in an outdoor Lahore cafe, where a bearded Pakistani man called Changez, tells a nervous American stranger about his love affair with an American woman, and his eventual abandonment of America. The novelist has used the unusual device of a dramatic monologue in which the Pakistani protagonist continually addresses an American listener who is never heard from directly.

Sarah Kerr has pointed out that,

"Maybe, we, the readers are the ones who jump to conclusions; maybe the book is intended as a Rorschach to reflect back our unconscious assumptions. In our not knowing lies the novel's suspense..."

She further says,

"Hamid literally leaves us at the end in a kind of alley, the story suddenly suspended; it's even possible that some act of violence might occur. But more likely, we are left holding the bag of conflicting worldviews. We're left to ponder the symbolism of Changez having been caught up in the game of symbolism—a game we ourselves have been known to play."

The novel is a quietly told, cleverly constructed fable of infatuation and disenchantment with America, set on the treacherous fault lines of current east/west relations, and finely tuned to the ironies of mutual - but especially American - prejudice and misrepresentation. The richest instance of the latter is in the way it plays with the idea of fundamentalism itself. From the

increasingly tense atmosphere arising between Changez and his American listener, the expectation is that Changez is moving towards the revelation that he has gone, however "reluctantly", all the way over to the dark side of Islamic fundamentalism. But in a neat reversal, it transpires that the real fundamentalism at issue here is that of US capitalism, specifically that practised by Changez's former employer, Underwood Samson, whose motto, as they do their pitiless bit for globalisation, is "Focus on the fundamentals".

Shortly after his 30th birthday in 2001, Hamid decided to leave the United States for London. On September 11 of that same year, he watched with shock as terrorists targeted his former home across the Atlantic. He has since written that:

[I]like many Bush-era self-exiles from the United States, I found that London combined much of what first attracted me to New York with a freedom America seemed to have the paranoid years after 9/11 (Hamid 2009).

He has expressed his mental agony through the protagonist of his novel, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist", which unfolds over the period of a day as Changez, a returned Pakistani migrant, encounters an unnamed American man in the streets of Lahore. It is unclear whether the American is a mere 'tourist' or an intelligence agent sent to assassinate him. At Changez's insistence, the two men share tea and a meal in the market place of Old Anarkali, before the former accompanies the American to his hotel through the dark night streets.

Changez recounts in detail his experience of the United States. He tells how, despite his success, he experienced doubts about his role in America and about America's role in the world. He moves from his respected family in Lahore to New Jersey, where he has attained a scholarship for Princeton. Graduating with honours, he then secures a high-paying job at a valuation firm. Between graduating and commencing his position at Underwood Samson, Changez holidays in Greece with his fellow Princetonians. Here, he falls in love with a troubled young American woman, Erica. Back in the United States, she introduces Changez to her wealthy parents, invites him to her home, and includes him in her elite lifestyle. However, Erica is traumatised by the death of her childhood sweetheart, Chris; although she feels affection for Changez, she most likely sees him as a shadow of her former lover. Unable to commit herself to a new relationship, she becomes increasingly introverted and depressed.

After beginning work at Underwood Samson, Changez goes to Manila on business. On the television, in his hotel room, he witnesses the Twin Towers fall on September 11, 2001; his reaction is one of unsettling pleasure. This initial reaction gives way to confusion –

about his identity, about his feelings for the United States and about his involvement in Underwood Samson. In the following months, Erica's emotional and psychological deterioration, which precedes the collapse of their friendship, is mirrored in Changez's growing physical and ideological estrangement from the United States. The complexity and the crisis of identity can be seen and felt strongly.

After returning to America from Manila, Changez visits his family in Pakistan. Once there, he can no longer ignore the fear and degradation they are experiencing as a result of foreign intervention and the threat of war from India. He refuses to shave off his beard: it is a symbol both of his individuality and of his Pakistani identity. He experiences discrimination in airports, in the workplace and in the streets.

With the passing of time Erica became increasingly ill and was moved to a clinic. Changez's disillusionment is evident to his boss at Underwood Samson. Jim still considers him valuable to the firm and sends him to Chile to assess an ailing publishing firm. But Changez, troubled by the political situation and preoccupied with Erica, is no longer charmed by the prestige of the company, nor passionate about his work. He neglects his task in order to follow Pakistani affairs online. Noticing his indifference, the chief of the publishing company confronts Changez and challenges the integrity of Underwood Samson as well as his personal integrity. Hamid has excellently portrayed their meeting, it is the catalyst for Changez's ultimate epiphany in the novel – his resentment toward the United States, which had been growing since September 11, is now solidified, and made palpable: he decides to abandon the assignment. He knows that after being fired from Underwood Samson, his American visa too will be forfeited.

As he returns to New York to pack his things, Changez discovers that Erica has disappeared from the clinic, presumed to have committed suicide. Her mother gives him a copy of Erica's manuscript before he departs. Upon return to Pakistan, Changez joins the university in Lahore, becomes a lecturer and an activist and protests against American foreign policy. The exact nature of his activism remains ambiguous.

Changez finishes his story, he has noted that the stranger is very apprehensive of their surroundings and he walks the stranger to his hotel where the stranger reaches into his pocket for something which has a metal glint. The narrator hopes it's his holder of business cards. The novel ends without revealing what the metal thing was, leaving the reader to wonder if the stranger was here to kill Changez.

The final scene is left open-ended: the reader cannot know whether the American is a secret agent who will assassinate Changez; whether Changez himself is the threat; or whether it was indeed a chance meeting between an innocent Pakistani and an American tourist, who after the last page closes will safely go their separate ways.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the dramatic monologue is conducted by Changez, who starts his conversation addressing to his listener in a street in the centre of Lahore:

"Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you? Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America.... Come; tell me, what were you looking for? Surely, at this time of day, only one thing could have brought you to the district of Old Anarkali —named, as you may be aware, after a courtesan immured for loving a prince—and that is the quest for the perfect cup of tea. Have I guessed correctly? Then allow me, sir, to suggest my favorite among these many establishments." [TRF]

For example, when they order their dinner Changez describes the waiter (apparently) reciting the menu and says:

"I could translate for you but perhaps it would be better if I selected a number of delicacies for us to share. You will grant me that honor? Thank you. There, it is done, and off he goes." [TRF]

Changez makes clear from the beginning that he is aware that the American is packing. When Changez first brings it up he is still relatively circumspect:

"You seem worried. Do not be; this burly fellow is merely our waiter, and there is no need to reach under your jacket, I assume, to grasp your wallet, as we will pay him later, when we are done." [TRF]

The formality of Changez' first approach to his interlocutor gives already that sense of ambiguity and distrust which is a recurrent theme in the whole novel. Hamid does not encourage the readers to completely trust the main character. They do not understand the real intention of Changez and do not know if the meeting happened by chance or it was planned by Changez or the mysterious tourist. Hamid uses his skills to instill in the reader's mind the doubt that leads him into imagining different scenarios, some of which transform the novel into an actual thriller. A perfect example of this procedure is the way in which Changez describes his interlocutor; if at the beginning he is just a tourist, after a few lines he becomes

a man on a mission and later the use of a satellite phone and the possibility that he may be carrying a gun are pointed out. It comes up several more times, and by the end, he's much more direct:

“When you sit in that fashion, sir, with your arm curved around the back of the empty chair beside you, a bulge manifests itself through the lightweight fabric of your suit, precisely at that point parallel to the sternum where the undercover security agents of our country -- and indeed, one assumes, of all countries -- tend to favor wearing an armpit holster for their side arms.”[TRF]

Hamid has effectively made use of the form of the dramatic monologue in creating a frame of mystery and tension, in which the reader feels to get deeper and deeper as he goes on reading. The novel takes the shape of a fake dialogue with an interlocutor that stays silent till the end and that creates an atmosphere of suspense that keeps the one in a state of high tension. The reader, without a context to take as reference is obliged to create a personal vision of what is happening. Mohsin Hamid's ability lays in the fact that he never denies any of the possible solutions, so that the reader is completely free to design his own explanation, according to his personal inclinations and a vision he has of the world. The author and reader are not sender and receiver of a message but players in a game. The narrator becomes an intermediary that leads the reader in the story which respects a realistic purpose but wants to remind him that art is above all artifice. The game in which Changez drags the readers goes on until the end, when the story is abruptly suspended, at the peak of tension, in a moment when even an act of violence seems luckily to occur. But as in "One thousand and one nights", art has the power to suspend any violence.

Until the novel finishes no violence can occur and the reader is thus left in doubt, left alone to find his way in a house of mirrors full of stereotypes that represents well the modern world. Changez' voice is that of an homodiegetic narrator, he tells a story in which he plays a vital role, the narrator and main character are the same person and the narrator presents the facts and the other characters through his point of view. But Changez never completely convinces the reader, who always holds the sensation that everything is deformed by the former's perspectives. Changez is a talented speaker. His voice is sometimes kind and polite, sometimes confidential and sometimes filled with tension and dignity. In some points it is clear that the formality and the archaisms of his language are the mark of his distance, of his

suspect and mockery towards his listener. Mohsin Hamid has chosen a narrator who represents one of the themes of the novel: the inevitable distance between appearance and reality and the way in which reality is distorted or hidden even without a specific intent from the part of the speaker. Two meanings of the word "formal" are considered. The former refers to the way in which something spontaneous as language is filled by Changez of ornaments till the point of becoming an element of disorientation. The latter is about work on the genre of the novel with its unique tensions, restrictions and essential playfulness. The pressures and deflections of the form allow Hamid to visit the various genres that are common to South Asian anglophone writing, which are often connected with the revelation of identity – autobiography; travelogue; the novel of diaspora or exile – and to commit himself to none of these.

The *Reluctant Fundamentalist* does have autobiographic insights, sometimes looks as a travel guide, but also tells a mysterious and dramatic experience. In an interview in May 2007, Hamid said of the brevity of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: "I'd rather people read my book twice than only half-way through."

The novel also touches upon Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and India. For Changez, Afghanistan is Pakistan's 'friend', a 'neighbour', and a 'fellow Muslim nation'. India, on the other hand, represents a cause of conflict; Changez and his family experience increasing uncertainty about their larger, more powerful neighbour, fearing the possibility of 'a full-scale invasion'. Indeed, during 2001 and 2002 there was a military stand-off between India and Pakistan over the disputed region of Kashmir, bringing both countries close to war. Pakistan's economy had suffered from decades of internal conflict, the ongoing confrontation with India, a rapidly growing population and shifting foreign investment. Hamid experienced this first-hand as a teenager when he returned from the United States to Lahore in the 1980s. Pakistan had become America's ally in the war against the Soviets (Russians) in Afghanistan, for which it was rewarded with billions of dollars in economic aid and military materials. However, once the Soviets were defeated, foreign aid dwindled and American rhetoric became increasingly hostile to Pakistan. Since September 11, the United States has again given Pakistan billions of dollars in military and economic aid.

I would like to mention here that the novelist has shown more concern with the cultural, social and political aspects in Changez's relationship with the United States than with religious aspects. It can be seen that a Muslim individual might oppose America's actions, independently of religious difference. Changez is frustrated with the

misrepresentation of Muslims as religious fanatics in the American media. The novel therefore aims to challenge negative portrayals of Islam and Islamic countries by painting a personalised, insightful portrait of a ‘potential’ terrorist. As Changez claims: ‘Such journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings as previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us.’

To conclude it can be said that this text is the comparison between the narrator’s home culture and his experience of culture and society in the United States, A crisis and complexity of identity can be observed of his being in a state of dilemma, of identifying himself with either of them. He is particularly observant of the wealthy and educated people of America from whom and from where he has attained a sound status, but at the same time he could not dare to ignore and neglect his motherland and his brethren.

Apparently, to compare the traditional and conservative as diabolic and as the symbols of terror have caused existential dilemmas for the sufferers and the oppressed. Changez, the protagonist of the novel, poses a serious question to the audience: “Why does everyone hate us?” This quite correctly points to the themes of fear and suffering of the Muslims as well as the Americans. It points to the institutionalization of racism in the era of globalization: where nations and races are still made subaltern by the superior and the mighty. Quite ironically, it is Hamid’s marginalized protagonist, Changez who does all the speaking throughout the novel, and makes the American listen to him. It is through this freedom of speech granted to Changez, that he undermines the American’s opinion about Pakistan, and underpins the advancing face of Muslims.

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