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The Turmoil of Identity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Abstract

The study aimed to limelight identity crisis in Mohsin Hamid's much reckoned novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. It considers discrete complications in the journey of the pivotal character Changez in America (before and after 9/11) who primarily becomes accustomed to its lifestyle and later through various symbols becomes inquisitive of his own motives in America. He sees himself as a mercenary of American interests and his corroboration to the cause of the firm Underwood and Samson as a transgression to human notions. Changez's introspection, turmoil of East and West civilisation, shattering of his American dream, racial prejudices in America, his torn commitments and eventually his protest against American policies becomes apparent in the discussion of his identity crisis.

Keywords: Identity crisis, 9/11 fiction, politics , nostalgia

Mohsin Hamid's magnum opus *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* features the pivotal character torn in his commitments to his aspirations, patriotism and religious affiliation. The protagonist baptised as Changez meets concertedly to an anonymous American who becomes his mute double ghost and who is addressed by Changez and whose narrative is preoccupied with his pre and post 9/11 tirades. The novel is divided into first person and second person narrative, where the former witnesses Changez's wayfares and the latter deals with his ambiguous

American confidante. Their alarming encounter signifies balefulness and an anticipated antipathy that might eventually bring them into conflict with each other. Changez accosts the strange man in Anarkali Bazar of Lahore and identifying him as an American, he says:

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. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a mission, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services. (1)

The story which takes the shape of dramatic monologue begins in a restaurant where Changez reflects on his trysts in America as an energetic, infallible and assiduous young man, initially in his studies at Princeton and later in his job at Underwood & Samson. His instant success in America readily manifests his abilities and quest for achieving American dream and which is further corroborated by his acceptance in the American society where he incarnates as a “New Yorker” (33) and later by his elite girl friend Erica. These accomplishments are enough for him to be accepted in the American society where these symbols are counted and admired. Changez’s Pakistani identity seems to disappear in front of his staunch American identity and his Pakistani name solely becomes his Pakistani inheritance. Further, his selection to the Princeton is not an easy job as he apprises to the American about the gravity of competition he has to face because large number of Pakistanis’ are inclined to go to America and test their fortune. He unreservedly remarks America’s feat in selecting the best candidates across the globe and who in return are expected to serve their master country as he asserts, “Students like me were given the visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society” (4). Taking opportunity, Changez zealously describes his family’s affluency in Pakistan as his divulging information about his scholarship to the American may have given an unfavourable opinion. He makes straight that he belongs to a well educated family who have been gradually made vulnerable to poverty due to divisions in the family and reduction of prospects because of economic crisis in Pakistan. He asserts:

I am not poor; far from it: my great-grandfather, for example, was a barrister with the means to endow a school for the Muslims of the Punjab. Like him, my grandfather and father both attended university in England. Our family stands on an acre of land in the middle of Gulberg, one of the most expensive districts of the city. We employ several servants, including a driver and a gardener-which would, in America, imply that we were a family of great wealth. (9-10)

Changez's spasms of inner conflict are discernible in his musings about America's global dominance and its mercenary approach towards profits. He despises the lowliness of his country vis-à-vis America's utilitarianism and ascendance as a global leader. His pang reflects Marx's famous statement who in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* proclaims that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (305). He thinks America perpetrates poverty in the developing countries by robbing them of their brilliant minds and who are readily allured by the prospect of wealth and riches. Those who are selected work vehemently to ascend the ladder of their American dream and unconsciously hamper the prospects of their own country by aligning with a country responsible in threatening their country's economic position. Changez reflects on his similar notion where he exclusively bothers about his personal prospect and who unconsciously turns against his own country as he states, "Looking back now, I see the power of that system. . . . We international students were sourced from the globe . . . sifted . . . until the best and brightest of us had been identified. . . . In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society. . . . And for the most part we were happy to do so. I certainly was, at least at first" (4).

Changez is instantly drawn to Erica who is also on her vacation to Greece and becomes his soulmate in America. She also represents America (Am+ Erica) which is visible in her name as well as in her attitude which is elitist and captivating. Changez describes her, ". . . so stunningly regal was she . . . like an Empress (17) and "a lioness . . . invariably surrounded by her pride" (22). Soon, their relationship begins to flower which signifies Pakistan's relationship

with America which is arbitrary and ephemeral due to their dissimilar impulses. Their feelings for each other gradually transform into fondness and affection in the wake of their need and desire. Erica is disheartened due to the death of her former boyfriend Chris who died of cancer and Changez is nostomaniac about his natal home in Lahore, Pakistan. For Erica, Changez supplants Chris, which gives her satisfaction and for Changez Erica symbolises ‘home’. This also completes the success anecdote of Changez who loses his Pakistaniness to his new American identity as Erica becomes his “official escort at the events of New York society” (85) and who introduces him to American ways of life. Changez narrates:

This role pleased me indeed. I was presumptuous enough to think that this was how my life was meant to be, that it had in some way been inevitable that I should end up rubbing shoulders with the truly wealthy in such exalted settings. Erica vouched for my worthiness; my way of carrying myself—I flattered myself to believe—suggested the impeccability of my breeding; and for those who inquired further, my Princeton degree and Underwood Samson business card were invariably sufficient to earn me a respectful nod of approval. (85)

Moreover, his abilities and sincerity towards his job in Underwood & Samson upsurges his significance. He is received amicably by his seniors and is admired for his competency which is supplemented by his strange complacency and formality that seems to be absent in his colleagues which he describes, “I was aware of an advantage conferred upon me by my foreignness, and I tried to utilize it as much as I could” (42). Jim, his senior who is aptly skilled in analytics and who is responsible for Changez’s selection in the firm ardently reflects on Changez’s thirst for accomplishments, “You are a watchful guy. . . . It comes from the feeling of out of place” (42-3). His aspirations for material amenities also emanates from his consciousness of his limited access to resources in Pakistan where his family is reduced to poverty. He just wanted an opportunity to exploit his potential to restore his family’s position and when it appears, he makes no compromise. He himself realises, “I could, if I desired, take my colleagues out for an after-work drink—an activity classified as “new hire cultivation”—and with impunity spend in an hour

more than my father earned in a day!” (37). Furthermore, Changez is not oblivious to the arrogant attitude of Americans who assume superiority over the people of other countries which perturb him time and again. This begins when the disparities and the anarchy in Pakistan are mentioned and as such is apparent in his meeting with Erica’s father who siffs pleasure in disparaging his country which is relatively much poorer and where the circumstances are detestable. He is enraged to associate himself with a country that has failed to materialise the dreams of its citizens and becomes aggressive and nationally conscious. Not only this, he becomes nostalgic and identifies himself with a civilization that is historically rich which he proclaims in the following lines:

Nothing prepared me for the drama, the power of their view from the lobby. This, I realized, was another world from Pakistan; supporting my feet were the achievements of the most technologically advanced civilization our species had ever known. . . . Often during my stay in your country, such comparisons troubled me. In fact, they did more than trouble me; they made me resentful . . . for me to be ashamed. Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed. (34)

The notion of binaries and the stereotypification of ‘other’ haunts him and creates a crisis in his life which Stephen Reicher underlines in “The Context of Social Identity: Domination, Resistance, and Change” by arguing that:

This is a perfectly natural behaviour, just as personal identity defines our uniqueness relative to the individual, so our distinctive social identity is defined by what marks us out as different from other groups. Social identities are necessarily defined in comparative terms and so group members indulge in social comparison between their ingroup and relevant outgroups. (929)

Soon, Changez comprehends dormant imperialistic notions in the canons of Underwood & Samson which treasures the slogan “Focus on the fundamentals” (98) in its execution of work. His infatuation for America soon upsurges into adverse abomination, where he becomes vulnerable to acute crisis of confidence. Even on his trip to Manila, where he is supposed to evaluate a publishing company, he is excruciated to witness its (Manila’s) advancement vis-à-vis Pakistan on account of its vulnerability to economic and administrative crisis. In addition, the mechanical objectivity of his colleagues in relation to their work seems improper to him as he detests commanding to the aged workers of his father’s age. This transformation in his attitude portend and prescient his redundancy in the American way, who work objectively and disregard any subjectivity in the execution of their work. Changez, who belongs to the third world nation, shares their pain owing to their similar culture and norms. This becomes ostensible when he earnestly desires to treat aged workers with respect and affection as he reveals, “If English had a respectful form of the word you—as we do in Urdu—I would have used it to address them without the slightest hesitation” (98). Such ramblings escalate rather than decipher his complication as on one hand he tries to adhere to his Pakistani principles and on the other hand he urges to assert like an American. This becomes evident in his narration, “I did something in Manila I had never done before: I attempted to act and speak . . . like an American. The Filipinos . . . look up to my American colleagues . . . instinctively as members of the officer class of global business—and I wanted my share of that respect as well” (65). In Manila, Changez discerns almost all of his inner trepidations and becomes keen to comprehend his identity crisis. He ponders over the question of his purpose in America and his latent hatred for his foster country that has made him a mercenary of its interests. Irving Solomon in *Karen Horney and Character Disorder: A Guide for the Modern Practitioner* states that the “. . . compulsive need to reduce

basic anxiety leads to a variety of self-defeating behaviors; these behaviors then produce more basic anxiety, and the cycle continues” (4). It is relevant in understanding Changez’s aberrant misgivings and his restlessness in America. Further, America’s devastation and subordination of the weaker nations through its policies and its constant interference in their inner matters often lead to debilitating consequences. Similarly, Underwood and Samson is analogous to the United States which exclusively works for its benefit and takes no responsibility to the misery it creates in the lives of the workers whom it deprives of their jobs. Such pang of conscience restricts Changez’s adventures in America and eventually, impedes his crusade for material amenities.

Changez’s hatred for America gathers momentum which coincides with the annihilation of the twin towers. His reaction to this carnage is a macabre smile as he feels captivated by the symbolic destruction of America’s might and superiority. His satisfaction at the cost of America’s destruction signifies the gravity of his antipathy and aversion against America that has subordinated the entire world. Changez describes his satisfaction to his disconcerted American in the following lines:

I turned on my television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but the news. I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased. (72)

Observing the anger of his American confidante, Changez immediately responds that he revered the symbolism which the events signified and that he is not indifferent to the plight of the afflicted and the dead ones. He asserts, “I was not at war with America. . . . I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?” (73). America’s intrusion and its military exercises in the weaker countries which frequently lead to the loss of the lives of the common people is largely a factor responsible for it being despised by the people. Moreover, the ruthlessness of America in intimidating those countries to emulate its policies becomes detrimental because such biased policies economically favours America as Changez

proclaims, “Your country’s constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role” (156). Further, his tendency to parallel his attitude with the Americans’ seems convincing as he states, “Surely you cannot be completely innocent of such feelings yourself. Do you feel no joy at the video clips—so prevalent these days—of American munitions laying waste the structures of your enemies?” But you are at war, you say?” (84). Accordingly, Changez comprehends the 9/11 event to be reverse aggression which is concomitant to America’s own stubbornness and ruthlessness.

Changez then proceeds to apprise the American of his meeting in Manila with Jaun-Bautista, who is in charge of a publishing agency and where, he is escorting Jim in this enterprise. Bautista overtly dislikes the team of Underwood and Samson and is repulsed by their presence in his office. Bautista proves to be subtle in dealing with the team of analysts and easily recognises Changez’s psychological infirmity. Bautista’s conversation with Changez completely transforms the course of the novel and immaculates his (Changez’s) conflict ridden mind. Bautista informs him about Janissaries who comprised to be a ferocious army of Ottoman Empire and who were Christian children, taken at a very tender age while conquering their lands and who were transformed to be ruthless soldiers and were engaged in war against their own people (Christians’) and civilisation. Bautista’s words serve their purpose and which significantly solve the complications of Changez who begins comparing himself with the Janissaries and a mercenary of a nation that is keen on destroying his own people and civilization. He admonishes his own actions and disparages his association with Underwood and Samson that perpetrates America’s supremacy in its dealings with the destiny of the infirm company and the workers while only bothering about its own profit. Bautista’s narration follows:

May I ask you a rather personal question?” “Certainly,” I said. “Does it trouble you,” he inquired, “to make your living by disrupting the lives of others?” “We just value,” I replied. “We do not decide whether to buy or to sell, or indeed what happens to a company after we have valued it.” He nodded; he lit a cigarette and took a sip from his glass of wine. Then he

asked, “Have you heard of the janissaries?” “No,” I said. “They were Christian boys,” he explained, “captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to. (150-51)

Further, the policies of the United States change drastically after the cataclysmic event of 9/11 that lead to the stereotypification of Americans’ as innocent victims and the Muslims’ as potential terrorists and enemies which Bernard also observes, “led to a simplifying and mainstreaming narrative centered on a desire for retaliation” (172) and according to Brian Monahan provided, “the Bush administration a moral ground to respond militarily”. This reaction becomes pivotal in transforming Changez’s attitude towards America and who assumes it to be a threat to his own ‘religion’ and ‘country’. Sharmila Mukherjee construes his crisis in her article entitled, “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist: A Novel by Mohsin Hamid*” explaining:

However, as a Muslim male, Changez too has to swiftly pay the price for the attacks; when he returns to the U.S. from Manila, he is barred at the gates, as it were, by an immigration agent, and a series of encounters between the now securitizing paranoid state and the foreign national with questionable ethnic filiation follows. Changez narrates the experience in a tone of flat banality, as though he were merely following the inexorable course of history.

Changez, who once championed the candidness of America, is now injured by its strange predisposition and who sees it as a hysterical nation unable to endure any pain and which perpetrates its aggression in the world so easily. This change becomes ostensible where Changez’s Muslim ethnicity makes him vulnerable to inquisitiveness and additional interrogations. He narrates one such incident at the airport where his otherness jeopardises his identity, “At the airport, I was escorted by armed guards . . . where I was made to strip down to

my boxer shorts . . . I was, as a consequence, the last person to board our aircraft. I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty” (74). The attacks of America on the Afghani civilians in what America calls a retribution on Afghanistan results in annihilation and carnage of this Muslim country. In the guise of “war on terror” America is keen on destructing Afghanistan as far as possible and economically feed on its resources to empower its own economy. Each event relegates Changez’s motivation to stay in America and to shift to his own country Pakistan which is largely due to monstrous symbols which designate, “We are America. . . . beware our wrath” (79). Changez’s American dream gradually begins to vanish in this melodrama and who begins to question his own motives and aspirations. Also, his beliefs of American secularism prove to be farce due to its jingoist nostalgia and uncertain inclination of its past’s greatness that has been mutilated by the terrorists attacks. In spite of his shattering dreams, he still endeavours to search for his identity in America where he more comprehends his otherness and a symbol of threat to Americans as once he is aggressively approached by a white man and is called a “Fucking Arab” (117). Even in the corporate sector the position of Muslim employees are unfavourable as they are fired from their jobs with lame excuses and deprived of various privileges. Changez mentions in this direction, “I had heard tales of the discrimination Muslims were beginning to experience in the business world—stories of rescinded job offers and groundless dismissals—and I did not wish to have my position at Underwood Samson compromised” (120). He decides to go to Pakistan to escape the abuse and antipathy in America for a brief period. The circumstances in Pakistan are uncertain owing to attack on Indian Parliament where Pakistan is very much suspected and India’s desire for revenge further escalates problems for Pakistan. Further, the situation is exacerbated by America’s insistence on Pakistan to cooperate in its effort of “war on terror” campaign in Afghanistan which is a neighbour. Also, he is hurt to witness America’s aversion in solving Pakistan’s matter with India where the former is prone to full scale invasion by the latter.

Narrating his reaction when he enters Pakistan from America, he narrates that he is baffled to witness extreme poverty of his native country, “There are adjustments one must make if one comes to Pakistan from America . . . I recall the Americanness of my own gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing” (140). This is largely due his conditioning of mind in America where comfort and extravagance is given priority and which Pakistan is unable to materialise. He explains, “I was struck at first by how shabby our house

appeared. . . . I was saddened to find it in such a state – no . . . I was ashamed. This was where I came from . . . and it smacked of lowliness” (124). The inferiority of his home embitters him and shatters his illusion of extravagance as he is unfamiliar to such disparity in his country. His admonition of America for Pakistan’s economic infirmity becomes another cause for his alienation from America and association with his own culture that is visible in his growing of a beard, Changez narrates:

It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind; I do not now recall my precise motivations. I know only that I did not wish to blend in with the army of clean-shaven youngsters who were my co-workers, and that inside me, for multiple reasons, I was deeply angry.
(130)

Changez’s remarkable transformation and endeavour to associate with his own culture and identity is misconstrued in America where such symbols signify deviance and where he is seen as a jihadi or fundamentalist that further aggravates his misery. He states, “More than once on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares” (130). His beard becomes a matter of concern rather than a solution in his attempt to connect with his identity which is apparent in the reaction of Americans. Anna Hartnell explains in the context as, “. . . a national culture determined to assimilate difference only as past, as history. If heritage is not converted to history and basically discarded, as is the case with Changez, who . . . insists on wearing a beard . . . then integration on any terms is no longer possible” (342).

Changez’s last attempt to stay in America rests on his beloved Erica who feels mutilated following 9/11 attacks and gradually isolates from him and succumbs to concealed memories of Chris. Changez’s efforts to integrate with her bear no fruit as she seems to be lost in the wilderness of her memories. Her nostalgic inclinations become a source of trepidation for Changez for he earnestly loves her and desires to be in proximity with her. Earlier his intimacy

with her is solely dependent on his imposition as Chris for she is unable to replace Changez's body with Chris's. Later, her hysteria leads to her damnation and after her few trysts with her life probably commits suicide and dies. Changez's helplessness and frustration owing to her neglect of him have lasting consequences and who ultimately becomes more anxious in deciphering his troubles and predicament. Erica for Changez is home and her demise consequently anticipate the shattering of his American dream which he himself utters:

Like so many others in the city after the attacks, she appeared deeply anxious. Yet her anxieties seemed only indirectly related to the prospect of dying at the hands of terrorists. The destruction of the World Trade Center had, as she had said, churned up old thoughts that had settled in the manner of sediment to the bottom of a pond; now the waters of her mind were murky with what previously had been ignored. I did not know if the same was true of me. (82-3)

Significantly, his personal ruin coincides with his professional and the symbols to which once he used to associate in America gradually begin to alter his career prospect. His inner ramblings hamper his emulation of the pursuits of the firm that objectifies the human values to mere profit and loss statements. Further, the racial discrimination and persecution to which he becomes vulnerable dismisses the idea of his belongingness in America and reconfigures his notion of integration and intimacy with Pakistan and finally his resigning from Underwood and Samson as the narrator himself details, "It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision" (157). His disgust is further enhanced by Pakistan's reliance on America for financial grants which is unacceptable and embarrassing and who, on his return to Pakistan joins a university as a Lecturer where he takes a valiant initiative to dissociate from America's financial grants. He becomes the brainchild of Pakistani dream and is corroborated by the swarm of students in the realisation of this dream. He earns admiration from the intellectuals and the laymen but is disparaged by the well wishers of America, who portray him in a different light. He does not succumb to the pressure of the brutalities of police and even ear drops that America

might send an assassin to murder him which is hinted in the presence of his American confidante who might be an assassin which is visible in the following lines: “I see I have alarmed you” (1) ; “I can see you quite clearly as you stand there with your hand in your jacket” (60) ; “Once more I am raising my voice, and making you rather uncomfortable besides” (102) ; “Surely you can no longer feel the need to hold back” (123) ; “You, sir, . . . seem ready to bolt” (176). Such mistrust between the two characters leaves the plot in a cliff-hanger and only hints at the ambiguity of the plot. The American perceives Changez to be a terrorist or a jihadi sympathiser and on the other hand Changez imagines the American to be an assassin. Their apprehensions becomes apparent when Changez narrates , “It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (183).

Conclusion

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Mohsin Hamid’s magnum opus manifests the crisis in the life events of Changez. The novel not only unravels the conflict between Eastern and Western civilisation in escorting the identity crisis of the protagonist but also features his dilemmas and disenchantment. The plot also emphasises the annihilation of Twin Towers and the Pentagon in the United States by the terrorists and simultaneously maps the demise of Changez’s American dream. It is at this time that the novel gains momentum in discussing the difference between the Pakistani and the American culture. Changez’s resentment against America also enlarges owing to the powerlessness of Pakistan where the former subordinates the latter on social, economic and political level. Even the nostalgic inclinations of his beloved Erica after 9/11, who succumbs to the concealed memories of her former dead boyfriend, Chris and who is later perceived to be dead, undermines Changez’s dreams of belongingness in America. Moreover, Changez’s meeting with Bautista is significant in explaining the leitmotif of identity crisis because he compares Changez to a janissary who is unconsciously fighting against his own country by aligning with Underwood and Samson, a symbol of American might and force, that like America creates misery in the lives of the people by terminating them from their works, for America, too is responsible in dissipating wretchedness in many countries.

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