

---

## **Re-complicating identity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

**Shafayat Hussain Bhat**

**Ph. D Research Scholar**

**Centre for Comparative Literature**

**Central University of Punjab**

**India**

### **Abstract**

At the heart of a person's life lies the struggle to define his self, to make sense of who he is? Diaspora represents the settling as well as unsettling process. While redesigning the geopolitical boundaries, cultural patterns, it has also reshaped the identities of the immigrants with new challenges confronting the immigrant in negotiating his identity. Diaspora becomes a site where past is given a new meaning and is preserved out of intense nostalgia and longing. The novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid is significant in its treatment of the issues faced by immigrants in the diaspora. Mohsin Hamid has grounded his resistance narrative in the identity narrative and through the prism of identity offers a deep insight into the American society and its ideals. The novel exposes the ugly side of the American society with its fundamentalist institutions and dislodges the narratives of fundamentalism as a Muslim monopoly and inverts the myths and discourses on identity to produce a counter narrative.

**Key words: Identity, Fundamentalism, Culture, Stereotyping, Resistance.**

Identity as it has unfolded in diaspora writings has changed our perception about this seminal issue that has for times immemorial been a central focus of academic circles across the world. More than an issue itself, identity has become a prism through which other aspects of life and culture are viewed. Whiteness, blackness, ethnicity, racial background, geographical locations, religion, distinct cultural practices, language, social and political affiliations of a person, his taste for food and his dressing sense are all such important components that place an individual in a particular identity framework. All these things determine the position and status that an individual can enjoy in a social structure and how society behaves with him. Mohsin Hamid's novel in this context puts forward a mind arresting narrative of a person's struggle with himself and his surroundings to find an identity for himself which remains elusive even at the end.

The novel, in the form of a monologue which we are supposed to consider a dialogue, offers a fascinating narrative of infatuation and repulsion towards America. The novel, an identity narrative could be seen as a cultural write back which tries to invert certain stereotypical narratives and discourses of hegemony.

People always identify themselves with a particular culture and culture is composed of customs, languages, rituals, practices, values and worldviews. Thus, those who identify themselves with a culture, their identities are also inextricably linked to that culture. In this concern, Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is very much intriguing and insightful when we talk of the cultural identity. The issue of cultural identity is very clearly discernible in the relationship between characters. Mohsin Hamid has used characters as symbols for their respective cultures and societies. The complex and uneasy relation between Changez and Erica stands for the respective American and Pakistani culture which cannot intermingle with each other but retain their respective distinct differences and identities. Changez's ultimate struggle for an identity of his own other than the American identity is grounded in his resistance to the dominant discourses prevalent in the American society.

Mohsin Hamid identifies individuals with their respective countries and cultures. Here individuals display the conditions of their countries. Nostalgic Erica stands for her country America which is caught in dangerous nostalgia of her glory and identity which they don't want to compromise anymore. On the other hand Changez's identity is very much fragmented like his country which is struggling internally with people identifying themselves with different mind-sets and ideologies. Changez prefers to construct his identity and the identity of his country by retelling the story of past. Time and again, he alludes to the past glory of his community when they were one of the best civilizations of the world. Here his identity is inextricably linked to past and grounded in history.

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 (34).

By recapitulating the past glory, Changez not only tries to reconstruct his identity but also produces a counter viewpoint to that of American viewpoint. Hamid not only challenges and creates new identities for his characters but also of their respective countries. The novel puts whole idea of identity into complex enigma which takes reader by surprise.

The whole dialogue that takes place between Changez and the American journalist shows the personal, cultural and political discontent that exists between the two countries. In the dialogue, Changez speaks on behalf of the east that has been subjugated and whose image has been created as a distorted one by the west. The journalist represents west but Hamid has on purpose silenced the journalist to present the eastern narrative as a counter narrative to the dominant narrative of the west. The opening lines of the novel show the central concern of the novel which is the doubt and suspicion that exists between the people of two countries, "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" (1). These lines set the tune of the supposed dialogue between Changez and the American. The question of suspicious identity and western stereotyping of the east is stressed in these lines. Changez's assurance to the American to be not frightened by his beard is to break that stereotype of west where they

consider every person with beard a terrorist. By doing this, he not only declares himself as a peaceful bearded person but also someone who loves America thus trying to rub off the doubt and suspicion from the mind of American. The reason for such trust deficit is also ascribed to the wrong notions of cultural superiority on part of America that creates an attitude of arrogance and a sense of superiority among its citizens which ultimately leads to the differences and miscommunication between the Americans and people of other cultures.

Changez who gets the opportunity to study in Princeton sees his dream come true. Right from the beginning, he acts like an American. He hides the fact that he is on financial aid thus trying to maintain a false image in the eyes of his fellow students. He says, “I was immediately a New Yorker” (33). He was entering the same class in America that his family was leaving in Lahore. He was imposing Americanness on himself and trying to erase the Pakistani side from his life. “At Princeton, I conducted myself in public like a young prince, generous and carefree” (11).

Changez changes all his outward behaviour for Erica but even then, he cannot take the position of a white American like Chris who even after his death wields tremendous control over Erica. Erica’s wearing the T-shirt of Chris shows the cultural bond and intimacy that she shares with Chris instead of Changez who has started loving her like a true admirer. “It occurred to me that my attempts to communicate with her might have failed in part because I did not know where I stood on so many issues of consequence; I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged – in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither”(56). The word “stable core” can be seen a word that Changez uses for his identity which he has almost lost while playing different roles. Daryoosh Hayati in an article, ‘East meets West: A study of dual identity in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*’ takes the insights from Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* to look at the relation between east and west and the writer says that, “the relationship between occident and orient is a relationship of power, of dominance and of complex hegemony” (4). Erica for most part determines the fate of this relation like a typical westerner who continues his or her hegemony on an eastern subject. He fails as a lover, not because he doesn’t qualify as a lover but because he cannot find that cultural link which could put them together in a congenial relationship. Sacrificing identity on part of Changez reaches its culmination when on account of failure to respond to Changez’s love by Erica, Changez offers to become Chris, a white American who is now dead but continues to wield control over their relation. Thus he sacrifices his identity, his name, his culture, and his values to become Chris. “I felt at once both satiated and ashamed. My satiation was understandable to me; my shame was more confusing. Perhaps, by taking on the persona of another, I had diminished myself in my own eyes” (106).

Changez’s journey of infatuation and disenchantment with America starts from Underwood Samsons. While introducing himself to Jim at the interview, Changez does not seem to be in any way ashamed of his roots and he describes his birth city Lahore as, “ancient capital of Punjab, home to nearly as many people as New York, layered like a sedimentary plain with the accreted history of invaders from the Aryans to the Mongols to the British” (7). Changez feels rather proud about where he comes from. But it is Jim who touches his delicate

nerve by asking him if he was on international aid. Changez in the beginning of the book mentions that he conducted himself in Princeton like a carefree prince thus hiding from others the fact that he was on aid. Changez does not want to disclose the fact that his family back in Lahore suffered from financial crisis and could not afford to send him for higher education on their own expense. Though Changez is appreciative of Jim that he had been able to judge him quickly but it also creates that bitter taste in him about Americans who one way or the other try to create an inferiority complex in others.

In Manila, he tries to assert his Americanness but he is not also comfortable with ordering those of his father's age which links him to his Pakistani identity. The way a jeepney driver gives a hostile look to him makes him wonder what significance it had. So the question arises, "which is he, the ignorant master or the canny subaltern? And has he sacrificed his identity in pursuit of status"? (Olsson 2). Changez was somewhere unhappy with the identity he was trying to adopt and impose on himself, he declares, "For to be an American is to view the world in a certain way". This thing can be seen in him right from the beginning of his stay in America though Changez has got everything of an American but he is not comfortable with the American ways of life. When Changez is sent to South America on a trusted —valuation mission, a while after 9/11, he has recently come back from a visit home to Pakistan. He has begun, initially subconsciously, to realize that he is actually a puppet on the string.

The episode of 9/11 perhaps makes Changez realise that he actually belongs to Pakistan and not America and he feels need to visit his family in Pakistan. As a symbol of his own identity, Changez grows a beard like his father and elder brother. Deliberating on the importance to grow a beard, Changez tells the American journalist that, "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" (130). Changez's growing beard stresses the fact that he has disassociated himself from America and he belongs to Pakistan and it designates his basic affiliation with his homeland and his roots which lie in Pakistan and not in America.

Returning to America with a beard on his face, Changez is associated with a different world, a different category; someone who does not belong to America but to those who were responsible for the tragedy of 9/11. —More than once, traveling 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). It becomes clear to Changez that what America had propagated regarding terrorism and Muslims was a false image and it was resulting in a gap between the insiders and the outsiders. Changez faces the dilemma of in-between-ness where he has partly snapped his cultural links with his Pakistani culture and beliefs and he has partly adapted to new American identity and ways of life. But the setback comes in the form of refusal of American society to accept him as part of their culture. This refusal comes to him in the form of failure of his unrequited love affair with Erica and brutal treatment that he receives in the post 9/11 America.

---

The propagated images and discourse on terrorism and the attacks of 9/11 thus already had their impact on people, influencing them in such a way that they perceive foreign-looking people with suspicion and presumption of possible terrorist ideas. This happened in the novel as well as in reality during the aftermath of 9/11. (Olson 15)

Changez is identified with terrorist or someone who is related with terrorists. The image in the minds of the Americans is very confusing as they take terrorists to be Arabs and that is why Changez is abused by an unknown person in street as “fucking Arab”. Incidents like this create a sense of strong desire for his own identity in Changez and ultimately he starts to realise that he cannot belong to American culture even after sacrificing so much for it. Even after mimicking and following American modes of life, his chances of assimilating in American society keep diminishing. He may sacrifice everything for his adopted culture and country but his identity even then remains of a doubtful Muslim. AtleHetland captures this dilemma and doubts in an article, ‘Cosmopolitan No more’, as, “Even if I am with you, you still have a suspicion that I might be against you”. Changez’s anger has resulted from the sense of his loss. This loss should not be seen only in relation to his material loss in form of his job and American girlfriend but the loss of his values and emotions which comprised his identity that he had sacrificed for American false identity. Changez’s journey of four years which he spent in America is full of success. During these four years, he realised his American dream but also faced the worst of situations as a victim of identity crisis, as a cultural other, as part of a subject culture. This journey reaches its culmination when Jaun Batista compares Changez with Janissaries. “As for myself, I was clearly on the threshold of a great change; only the final catalyst was now required, and in my case that catalyst took the form of lunch (150). Changez’s meeting with Jaun Batista proves decisive as Changez finally realizes that he was serving economic interests of a country which was using this economic might to suppress and dictate the other weaker countries of the world. Changez instantly realizes his position in American economic empire as that of a janissary who also works ferociously for his newly found master. "I was a modern-day janissary," he admits, "a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine ... (152).

Hamid has also been successful in subverting the meaning of the words such as ‘Fundamentalism’. He is critical of the American financial institutions that show no regard for human values and humanity. Their sole motto is to build their economic empire regardless of the impact it can have on the lives of the individuals. Hamid shows mirror to the American society which is breeding financial fundamentalism through institutions like Underwood Samsons. He wants America to change its views about the Muslims. The present day Changez is as capable as any other American in playing soccer and getting admission in a prestigious institution like Princeton and securing a job in top American firm. He is not the Changez khan of medieval times known for his cruelty and ruthlessness but modern day Changez, a product of highly sophisticated society culture. Changez in the end still faces the dilemma of his identity. His is a journey that continues. His identity is still in fragments. He

is still a lover of America. But he is also known for his anti-American stance. He has left Erica but he has not been able to forget her. His boundaries have been blurred in such a way that it is impossible for him to retain a single perspective and a single identity. He cannot proclaim his distinct identity. He can only be a reluctant fundamentalist. This is what he was at Underwood Samson and this is what he is back in Lahore Pakistan. The novel at the end is not all about the identity but through Changez's quest for identity, Hamid has not only portrayed the identity concerns in Asian-American diaspora but also inverted certain stereotypes about his country and people. He has tried to resurrect the identity of his whole community by retelling the history which for him becomes an essential tool

### **Works Cited:**

Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. New Delhi: Penguin Group, 2008. Print.

Hayati, Daryoosh. "East Meets West". *Journal of Subcontinent Research* 30.7 (2011): 31-52.  
Web. 15 Sep. 2014.

Hetland, Atle. "Cosmopolitan Nomore?". [www.humiliations study.com](http://www.humiliationsstudy.com). n.a, 10 Aug. 2007.  
Web. 05 Dec. 2013.

Olsson, Karen. I Pledge Allegiance. *The New York Times* 22 April 2007: n.a.  
[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). Web. 3 Dec. 2013.

Olson, Greta. "Identity and Identification in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*".  
[www.greta-oslon.com](http://www.greta-oslon.com). Greta Oslon, 2011. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.