

Neo-colonial Perspectives on Identity: Comparative Analysis of Male Characters in Mohsin Hamid's Novels *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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ABSTRACT: *With specific focus on the male characters of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, this paper seeks to re-address the concept of 'identity' within a neo-colonial perspective. The theoretical insights for this research have been drawn from postcolonial scholarship on identity, by theorists such as Homi, k, Bhabha and Ashcroft. Bhabha's concept of mimicry has been used to analyse both, Daru and Changez's, ambiguous perusal of an identity which is overwhelmingly tainted by the neo-colonial impacts. Whereas Changez grows out of his fascination of the colonist, superiority and delusional sense of identity offered by its cosmopolitanism and returns to embrace his cultural origins in Pakistan. Daru, on the other hand, remains mesmerised by the elite Americanised culture of Lahore, a metaphorical representation of the supposed superior American culture within Pakistan. Both men in the process of 'mimicking' the foreign culture lose their sense of belonging, identity, home and even freedom. The comparative analysis of these two characters is significant as their journey of self-realisation, exposes the dilemma of young Pakistani men caught in the clutches of neo-colonialism. This paper highlights and questions the complexities of cultural assimilation and acculturation as well as its repercussions for an individual's identity, caught at the cross roads of transcultural and increasingly globalised world of today.*

Keywords: Neo-colonialism, mimicry, identity, Pakistani Anglophone literature.

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Introduction:

Mohsin Hamid (1971), no doubt, serves as a pleasant new addition to the already expanding canvas of Anglophone literature. Hamid belongs to Lahore, Pakistan, but has also lived in America for almost fifteen years. His American exposure enriches his portrayal of American society especially with regards to a young men's interaction within American culture. Other Anglophone writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Kamila Shamsie and Qaisra Shahraz, by living in the West are able to blend in their insights of cultural assimilations, cultural clashes and cultural biases that prevail in the increasingly global world of today. Hamid, like Sidhwa, spends his time between America and Lahore. His dual position of belonging or identifying with both of the cultures i.e. the 'culture of the colonised' and the 'culture of the coloniser', culture of the followers and the culture of the trend-setters, culture of the marginalised Third World country and the culture of the dominant First World Masters' certainly allows him a privileged and unique position to speak from both perspectives, i.e. insider and the outsider.

Hamid focuses on the issues of cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism in all of his novels. All of Hamid's novels, centre on young Pakistani Muslim men who aspire to carve out their future in the postcolonial, financially struggling, and caught in the clutches of neo-colonialism Third World country, Pakistan. The two novels selected for this paper, *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are highly significant as both of these represent the struggles of a young Muslim man in his aspirations to achieve success in two varied cultures. Darashikoh (Daru) from *Moth Smoke* gives the inside-story of a man mesmerised by the elite culture of Lahore. Changez from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* allows an out-siders, first-hand view from the American culture who is similarly caught in the struggle to achieve success. Both of these men are mesmerised by the dominant culture i.e. the American culture. Whereas Changez lives in America and aspires to be like the Americans. Daru lives in Pakistan and aspires to travel to America. Unable to travel abroad, he does what is in his access i.e. he 'mimics' the ways of Ozi, an American educated young Muslim who returns to Pakistan. He gets carried away in his futile struggle to be like his rich elite friend, Ozi and loses his sense of self, identity and pride. Just as Changez, in his maddening pursuit of assimilation into American culture, successful job and marriage with Erica leaves him with utter disappointment, hurt pride and a lost sense of identity.

Thus, this paper highlights and questions the complexities of cultural assimilation and acculturation as well as its repercussions for an individual's identity who is caught at the cross roads of transcultural and increasingly globalised world of today.

Theoretical Insights on the Neo-Colonial Construction of Identity:

Homi K. Bhabha (1949), coined key concepts relating to the interplay of the coloniser and the colonised societies. These core concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence and third space help us to unravel the complexities of the cultural articulations of identity in a world where certain cultures are dominant, considered superior, more valuable and powerful as compared to the other less privileged and colonised cultures. These concepts can be seen as strategies and tools that the colonised people adopt and use to survive, re-fashion and re-construct their shattered existence in the face of forced occupation of their homelands, cultures and identities. For example 'mimicry' as described by Bhabha is a process quite similar to hybridity where the colonised people imitate, copy and adopt the culture, lifestyle, including language, ways of thinking and behaving, of the colonizers. However, 'mimicry' is not a simple act of copying another culture and its values. It is a complex phenomenon which can have grave consequences for one's identity, both cultural and personal. According to Bill Ashcroft (1990),

When colonial discourse encourages the colonial subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a 'blurred copy' of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. (Ashcroft et al, 1990: p.139)

As pointed out by Ashcroft, the 'blurred copy' that is produced is considered threatening to the coloniser. However, the two men under focus in this paper demonstrate that mimicking the master culture can also be dangerous for themselves, as exemplified by the delusional state of both men at the end of the novels. We can consider Changez as a product of hybridity and Daru can be seen as an end result of mimicry. Changez is an American groomed, Princeton educated, soccer star who works for a highly prestigious American firm. His relationship with an American woman proves to be the last nail in the coffin in turning him into

a hybrid species. In other words, he is a Pakistani by looks yet American in his lifestyle, beliefs and values. He is a mixture of two distinct and opposite cultures and this queer product is harshly rejected by the American society. Similarly, Daru's attempts to mimic the lifestyle and values of the master culture leaves him nowhere. He ventures too far from his roots and yet is unable to reach/attain the identity he yearns for. Consequently, like Changez he ends up in a mental chaos with two different personas fighting within him to claim a better share of him. This can be best exemplified by Changez's feelings, as he abandons America in the wake of 9/11, in the following words:

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 we previously imagined ourselves to be. (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p.197)

The above quote from Hamid, spoken by Changez refers to his relationship with Erica. However, examined closely it allows us insights into the complexities of identity construction claiming it to be a fluid process which can never be entirely reversible. In other words, both Changez and Daru are unable to completely regain themselves as the autonomous beings they previously thought themselves to be. Hamid tries to show that the individual's identity is not merely a product of one's own desire but a product of the culture to which we belong. Our identity reflects as well as defines the cultural milieu of the time in which it exists. This relationship is constitutive as well as dynamically unstable. Self is no more homogenous and autonomous entity but a part of a larger social, political, and economical system. And all these systems influence the identity construction in the society. Both men adopt and copy another culture and lifestyle which results in delusional individuals who feel trapped between hurt emotions and confused minds as their 'constructed identities' are challenged and called into question. With hurt emotions, both men, retaliate by seeking solace in what they otherwise would not indulge in. Interestingly, as this paper demonstrates, neo-colonialism can have negative effects on the identity construction of an individual, both through hybridity and mimicry, i.e. being in direct contact with the superior culture as in the case of Changez or even by dwelling in the re-created version of the Western culture as exemplified by Daru.

Literature Review:

Neo-colonialism means the cultural promotion and imposition of politically, economically and socially powerful nations over the less powerful and financially struggling countries such as the Third World countries. Neo-colonialism, also known as neo-imperialism, is a term first used by the Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah, which explains the influence of a powerful country over the developing one through, cultural imperialism, capitalism and business globalisation. Pakistan is a country that can be defined as a postcolonial Islamic state, which still retains the impressions of the British colonial legacy and is further being influenced by the Western cultural imperialism or neo-colonialism especially of the popular American culture as well as that of India due to the rapid expansion in media globalisation.

Neo-colonialism is the cultural domination of Western culture such as American culture over Third World countries like Pakistan. It is a form of colonialism that operates without geographical invasions. Unfortunately, Pakistani society is suffering from an acute case of neo-colonialism. People in Pakistani society suffer from an inherent sense of inferiority complex relating to their cultural belongings. British colonialism may have long ended, but Pakistani people are still mesmerised and hold superior the British culture and people. Similarly, in the neo-colonial phase, America, being the super power, also exerts its alluring attraction for the People of Pakistan. Mohsin Hamid, in his novels, shows how young Pakistani men desire to get education from American universities, want dollar paid jobs, and usually end up marrying white women in their desperation to assimilate in the culture of the Western master. Rich elites of Pakistan who have the means to travel to America take full benefit of the opportunity as Ozi and Changez. But men like Daru, who lack the financial means to travel to the West, mimic the Western returned people and desire to become like them.

Globalisation, aided by the rapid expansion of information and technology and media has squeezed the world into a 'global village' and turned the masses belonging to different cultures into the citizens of a global world which have increasingly began to show similar cultural preferences, mostly American influenced. Marwan M. Kraidy (2002), in his article, 'Globalisation of Culture through the Media' rightly notes that:

The received view about the globalisation of culture is one where the entire world has been moulded in the image of western mainly American culture...Without global media, according to the conventional wisdom, how would teenagers in India, Turkey and Argentina embrace a Western lifestyle of Nike shoes, Coca-Cola, and rock Music? (Kraidy, 2002, p.359)

Dawei Wang (2008) in his article ‘Globalisation of the Media: Does it Undermine National Cultures’, as the title indicates debates on the impact of globalisation on national cultures in the following words:

Globalisation shrinks concepts of distance between different cultures by dramatically reducing the time taken to cross distance that physically separates them. Therefore, the world seems smaller, and in certain sense bring human beings in closer contact with each other. (Wang, 2008: 204)

This increasing ‘closeness’ of the world cultures have received mixed responses from cultural theorists who highlight the consequences of this ‘drawing closer’ in both positive and negative ways. One of the possible benefits of globalisation is the obvious opportunity to understand the varied cultures and become global citizens. However, certain theorists see this as more harmful as Wang (2008) points out that, “the flow of media from the rich states to the poor countries may aggravate the already existing power gap between them, or that imported media cultures may threaten the native culture of the receiving country (Wang, 2008, p.203). This is precisely what Hamid has tried to capture in all of his novels. Globalisation aided by the media expansion has aggravated neo-colonialism especially in the case of Pakistan. As mentioned earlier, being a former British colony, Pakistan is a post-colonial Islamic state for whom globalisation is perhaps an extension or a different face of the already present cultural imperialism. According to Ania Loomba (2005):

A country may be both postcolonial (in the sense of being formally independent) and neo-colonial (in the sense of remaining culturally and/or economically dependent) at the same time. We cannot dismiss the importance of either the formal decolonisation or the fact that unequal relations of colonial rule are reinscribed in the contemporary imbalances between

'first' and 'third' world nations. (Loomba, 2005,
p.12)

As depicted by Mohsin Hamid, the Lahorites in his novel *Moth Smoke* exhibit an active and voluntary embracing of the Western Americanised culture which is also known as cultural imperialism. This may be in response to the inherent sense of inferiority associated with the cultures of the Third World countries by the capitalist, First World countries. This point has been emphatically raised by renowned Postcolonial cultural critics and theorists like Edward Said in his popular works *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Shirin Zubair (2012) in her article, 'Crossing Borders, Reinventing Identity (ies): Hybridity in Pakistani Fiction' quotes Said (1994) in the following words;

Imperialism lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic and social practices. Hence, the cultural forces-including linguistic hegemony- enable imperialism to exist beyond territorial or geographical boundaries by shaping the world view of the colonised without force. (Zubair, 2012, pg. 68).

As explained in the above quotation it is this subtle shaping of the world view has been geared towards the American culture and values. Consequently, a voluntary embracing of the Westernised cultural values especially by the Pakistani elites have created disparity within Pakistani culture with extreme opposites. This clearly shows the inherent power neo-colonialism is able to assert in defining, shaping and re-constructing the self-image of individuals, both within Pakistan and in the diaspora.

Critical Analysis and Discussions:

The description of Lahore as presented by Hamid in both of his novels is of a city where mostly two kinds of people live. One comprises of the elite class, Western educated, party loving people who own air-conditioned massive houses and expensive cars. Aurangzeb, known as Ozi, belongs to this class of people. Paul Jay in his article, 'The Post-Post-Colonial Condition: Globalization and Historical Allegory in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*' asserts that:

Hamid's Lahore is thoroughly Westernised and bourgeois. Parties in the Book attended by Lahore's

‘ultra-rich young jet set’ feature sushi from Japan, talk about multinational import-export deals, wine, scotch, and characters on cell phone to want to ‘do lunch’. Much of this behaviour is patently self-conscious, an effort by characters who have lived in the West to create the illusion they are still there. (Jay, p. 57-58)

As evident, these Lahorites, like Ozi mimic the ‘American’ culture as a result of inherent fascination with it and by this mimicry they are able to assert an equally grand impression on the people who are not financially strong enough to travel to the USA. Daru, is one of those characters who, unable to travel to the USA, finds himself mesmerised by the display of grand wealth, sophisticated living style, extravagant parities, and USA based MBA degree of Ozi. Changez, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Daru in *Moth Smoke* are two men who hold American culture in high esteem, one succeeds to ‘live in’ the American culture and the other ‘lives in the illusion’ of the American culture. Changez stands for all what Daru aspires to be. Perhaps Changez’s character can be seen as Daru’s supposed life had he the financial means to travel to the USA. Hamid by creating Changez allows us to see how young men like Daru experience identity crisis when they finally succeed in their desire to live in the American culture. Similarly, by keeping Daru as a separate character in another novel, he again shows the readers how young men like Daru often ruin their lives in a mad perusal of American inspired life style. By creating both of these characters he reveals the detrimental effects of neo-colonialism which like an alluring force manages to effect young men both within diaspora and their own cultures.

It is quite significant to see how these men attempt at cultural assimilation in their own targeted cultures. Obviously, Changez’s target culture is the American culture within the American society and Daru’s targeted culture is the elite Americanised culture of Lahore. An easy life filled with luxury, huge houses, expensive cars, branded clothes, attractive independent women are the similar targets these men desire to achieve. Both men, use women and sex as an attempt at cultural assimilation. The use of the term ‘cultural assimilation’ is not only to define Changez’s efforts to become part of American culture, but also Daru’s efforts in *Moth Smoke* to become part of popular, elitist, Americanised culture of Lahore. Both men aim for cultural assimilation in which they fail. However, as mentioned before it is worth noting the efforts they make in their journey of acceptance by the dominant culture.

Daru in *Moth Smoke*, becomes intimately involved with Ozi's wife 'Mumtaz' whereas Changez is in love with dead Chris's girlfriend 'Erica'. The characters of both of these women are quite significant. Whereas Erica is an American girl, Mumtaz is a Pakistani born American. Erica, a young, highly educated, sophisticated with attractive body can be taken as the metaphorical representation of America, the country who holds a similar mesmerising charm over Pakistani people that she has over Changez. Mumtaz, an equally beautiful woman is presented a girl suffering from identity crisis, integrated into the American culture, yet marrying a Pakistani man Ozi. If Erica, the 'original America' is not in the reach of Daru, he is content with an American Pakistani, 'a reflection of American culture', bold and beautiful, educated, liberal in the matters of sex with a sense of independence. Both men use these women as a part of their attempt to gain cultural assimilation through sexual union with these women. Whereas Changez wishes to replace Chris, Daru desires to take Ozi's position in Mumtaz's life.

Changez's relationship with Erica is really interesting as it symbolically reflects a futile struggle of a man belonging to an inferior culture who tries to assimilate and blend himself into the superior culture. Changez is always required to give answers to many questions and is held suspicious by Erica's parents who don't approve of his Pakistaniness. An American degree, accent, and lifestyle, all these achievements at times fail to hide his humble and inferior belongings. Though Changez experiences social rejection on many levels through the attitude and body language of many people but the most humiliating experience that shakes his inner core and pride is when he tries to replace Chris during one of his sexual encounters with Erica, "then pretend", I said, "Pretend I am him", I said again. And slowly, in darkness and silence we did." (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, pg. 120).

Changez's attempt to replace Chris shows the height of mimicry and voluntarily losing one's one identity. Interestingly it is only after Changez offers to 'become' Chris that Erica and her body accepts him willingly for the first time. However, this proves to be a big blow to his male ego as Changez describes his feelings of rejection in the following words, "I felt at once both satiated and ashamed. Perhaps by taking on the persona of another, I had diminished myself in my own eyes; perhaps I was humiliated..." (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, pg. 121). This experience proves to be a turning point for Changez who realises that

both America and Erica will never accept him as 'Changez'. Erica's stubbornness and inability to forget her past lover and to accept Changez in a way shows America's stubbornness to accept a Pakistani's, like Changez's, past associations with Pakistan and assimilation into American culture, as will be demonstrated in an later incident after 9/11 at Manila Airport.

Daru and Mumtaz's relationship in *Moth Smoke* runs along similar lines as Changez's. Daru wants to possess everything that Ozi has including his wife Mumtaz. As Ozi starts to reject him, Daru finds solace in having an affair with his wife. Sexual encounters with Mumtaz allow Daru to temporarily forget his miserable conditions and to feel as if he is replacing Ozi in Mumtaz's life. The more time he spends with Mumtaz, the more disillusioned he becomes and drifts further away from his roots. He clings to Mumtaz in a similar desperation as exhibited by Changez. But Mumtaz, like Erica, fails to offer a permanent companionship to Daru and remains entangled in her own troubles. She leaves Daru as Erica does and both of these men fail terribly in their futile struggle to gain a new identity by shedding their previous associations.

Whereas Changez's return to Lahore, is a symbolic rejection of the Western colonist culture which also is a result of rejection by the Americans which he experiences in the wake of 9/11. His act of growing a beard can be seen as a symbolic resistance and repercussion of the hostility faced by him in the American society due to being browned skinned. He is held suspicious due to his innate cultural and religious associations with Pakistan and Islam. His years of living in America, an American degree, a high paid dollar job, socialisation with American friends and intimate relationship with an American woman, strategies that he could employ in order to attain cultural assimilation, all came crumbling down in the face of naked racism and harshness that he had to face shortly after 9/11. In other words, his years of efforts at cultural assimilation were dismissed in a few moments during the incident at the Manila airport:

When we arrived, I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners. "What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?" she asked me. "I live here" I replied. "That's not what I asked you, sir" she said... (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, pg. 86).

The humiliating incident as faced by Changez continues during which he is further detained for secondary inspection and has to travel alone as his friends leave him there. As evident in the above quotation Changez is required to explain his purpose for entering into a country where he has been living and has been trying to become a part of. Changez tries to nurse his hurt emotions yet deep down in his heart he is made aware of his 'otherness', his innate association with an inferior culture, and a clear lack of trust on the part of the real Americans.

Daru faces a similar sense of rejection and hurt pride at the hands of Ozi who intentionally discriminates between him and his other elite friends in the *Moth Smoke*. Ozi excludes Daru from his circle of friends by not inviting him to one of his parties. We as readers are aware that Daru is not financially strong enough to maintain his Americanised ways and imitation of Ozi's lifestyle. He becomes a burden, a nuisance and a threat for Ozi's sophisticated lifestyle just as Changez becomes for America. Hamid clearly illustrates how the notions of mimicry and cultural assimilation, in the increasingly globalised world of today, fail to suppress racial hatred, mistrust and discrimination. Both men resist this social rejection in different yet similar ways.

Daru attempts to become part of the popular culture of Lahore but his attempts are thwarted. This leads him to the hidden yet very much prevalent world of crime. It is by holding a gun in his hand that he is able to feel the power that he was constantly being denied by people like Ozi. Similarly, Changez returns to Pakistan or in other words returns to the culture and identity that he was constantly being accused of belonging to, identity that he never chose himself but was pushed towards it, just as Daru is provoked to the world of crime by a constant rejection and social deadlocks which leaves him with no other option. Both Daru and Changez face humiliation which forces them to revert to their roots. Changez returns to Lahore and Daru in desperation seeks solace in crime. Their attempt to gain a new identity is thwarted by the society thereby negating the notions of cultural assimilation.

Conclusion:

The tale of both of these men, Changez and Daru reveals how youngsters of present day Pakistani society are caught in the clutches of neo-colonialism and desire to either live in America or a re-created version of America within Pakistan. As they try to dwell in a foreign culture, ultimately they experience mental conflicts and identity crisis at certain

points in their lives. Their ultimate rejection by the people belonging to the superior Western culture may have detrimental effects upon the self-image and identity. This story by Hamid actually acts like a window into the larger world where immigrants belonging to the Third World countries like Pakistani are forced to inhabit the countries like the USA, either due to economic or educational reasons. Their lived experiences of racism pose a challenge to the notions of cultural assimilation as well as complexities associated with hybrid identities. *Daru* and *Changez* demonstrate how identity in the globalised world of today is shaped and defined by powerful cultures especially with the expansion of media and technology. They also show how harmful this can be to the cultural identity of the receiving country and people. Thus, this paper highlights and questions the complexities of cultural assimilation and acculturation as well as its repercussions for an individual's identity, caught at the cross roads of transcultural and increasingly globalised world of today.

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