

The Reluctant Fundamentalist: A Quest for Identity

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ABSTRACT: *During the colonial days, colonized people would mimic their colonialist masters, to gain acceptance. But they would soon realize, that in spite of their mimicry, they were still regarded as the lesser and inferior Other. In reaction, the colonized people would return towards their own roots, culture and indigenous identity. Mohsin Hamid in The Reluctant Fundamentalist has tackled the issues of mimicry and the quest for identity on the part of people from the so called developing cultures in the present day context. Hamid has shown that America has assumed the status of neo-colonial power, and behaves like a colonialist country and culture. The people from developing cultures mimic and adopt the American culture in order to gain acceptance, but are treated as lesser and inferior Other. In frustration, they espouse extremist ideas and assume extreme shades of indigenous identity. This article explores the issues of mimicry and identity in the context of American and Pakistani interaction, through the analysis of the novel in the light of Postcolonial critical approaches.*

Key words: identity, hybridity, subaltern culture, indigenous, colonialist, mimicry, superiority.

I. Introduction

Mohsin Hamid, a postcolonial Pakistani writer, has tackled the issues of identity in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. These result from the interaction among Erica, a white American woman, Changez, a Pakistani Muslim and Chris, an ex-boyfriend of Erica in the background, and also due to larger political and cultural factors. Hamid believes in the intertwined nature of the personal and the political (Hamish Hamilton, 2007). Erica and Changez, at one level, stand for their respective cultures and countries. Hamid handles these issues from the perspective of the so called subaltern culture and therefore writes back to the empire. He conveys to America, the present neo-colonial power, through Changez, the protagonist of the novel, that everything is not perfect with its culture and policies.

The study aims to show that the so called superior American culture and the “bearing” of America and Americans affect individuals and their identities in a very negative way, with very serious repercussions. Hamid shows that cultures and countries like Pakistan are not the only culprits for breeding extremism and intolerance. Hamid projects the glorious past civilization of this area, with the objective to convey that the culture and civilization of present day Pakistan is not lesser to that of American culture. Through Changez he presents the perception about America and its role in the global politics and affairs from the perspective of cultures designated and treated as lesser and inferior. Hamid further shows that the neo-colonial attitude and conduct of America breeds hatred for it around the world and is against its own interests.

II. Literature Review:

The novel has been commented upon by many critics. Saeed-ur-Rehman in *The News* (April 29, 2007), praises Mohsin Hamid for his skill in “the art of under statement. He believes that Hamid has presented a situation in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the American listens to the disgruntled Pakistani for such a long time, emphasizing that in real life it is the Americans and America who dictate to Pakistan and Pakistanis. Saeed asserts that Changez rejects America, because he is not happy serving a

civilization which does not respect his culture and background. According to Saeed, Changez's growing uneasiness with America intensifies when he becomes target of racial discrimination.

Paula Bock in *The Seattle Times* (April 10, 2007) views the changes in the character of Changez, in the wake of 9/11, as Hamid's "seething commentary" on America's image in the non-Western world today.

Alastair Sooke in *The Daily Telegraph* (April 18, 2007) finds the second novel of Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* more autobiographical than his first, *Moth Smoke*. According to Sooke, as the "war on terror" continues, this is quite a relevant book, handled perfectly. It portrays the cancerous suspicions between the East and the West.

Trevor Lewis in *The Observer* (March 11, 2007) has commented upon *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Lewis finds Changez's mixture of flattery and anger producing the fatal tension, between himself and his American companion and raising many questions. Hamid's novel, in the opinion of Lewis, poses more questions than it answers, and gives the impression of a certain theatrical trick. According to Lewis, the book stimulates the mind and quickens the pulse as it overpowers the imagination.

These reviews and comments have not dealt with the core issue of identity, being shaped by personal, cultural and political factors, in the context of interaction between Pakistani and American cultures. The present study intends to fill this gap. Therefore the novel merits an exhaustive and comprehensive analysis, which has not been undertaken so far. The present study aims at taking care of the core issue of the quest for identity on the part of a Pakistani living in America, in response to his experiences and observations, in the light of postcolonial theory.

III. Discussion and Analysis: The Portrayal of the Superior Status of American Culture and Mimicry on the part of Changez:

Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* depicts the interaction between American and Pakistani cultures in the context

of neo-colonialism. Even after independence, Pakistan and its people like many other so called developing cultures are still living in the shadows of American neo-colonialism, which has a direct impact upon people, their culture and their identities. He uses the individuals as symbols for their respective cultures and societies. The uneasy relationship between Changez and Erica represent the complex and complicated equation that exists between Pakistani and American cultures. The political posture and policies of America have an impact upon individuals and their identities. It has bred misunderstanding between individuals from these two cultures. This is why, the American sits with his back so close to the wall, out of security consideration, and on a very hot afternoon he keeps wearing his jacket. The suggestion is that he might be carrying a weapon inside his jacket (2). He also gets upset at the appearance of the waiter, probably; he takes him for a killer and is on his alert (3). He is even hesitant to take his cup of tea and Changez has to swap his cup with the American, reflecting the deep misunderstandings (7).

The American listener to Changez continues to remain ill at ease throughout their meeting (19). This further reflects the atmosphere of suspicion and the complexity which exists between individuals belonging to two cultures. He is alarmed at the power outage and rises to his feet. Changez has to assure him that everything is safe (36).

Hamid shows that in spite of America being the biggest provider of financial and military aid to Pakistan, the equation between America and Pakistan is very uneasy. Emma Duncan in *Breaking the Curfew* (271) refers to this situation. The hero of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a Pakistani Muslim with an historical and mythical name, Changez. Changez was a medieval Asian conqueror. The present Changez is the finest product of American system, with all As in academics from Princeton university. He is also a soccer star. He can grab an extremely competitive job in a well-established American firm, with a brand-name, which can ensure admission in Harvard Business School (3). He is attracted towards Erica, an extremely beautiful white American woman. Changez is deeply conscious of his culture and background and is

proud of the ancient civilization and cultural heritage of Pakistan (6). His attraction towards Erica stands for the immense attraction Pakistani culture experiences towards American culture.

Erica at the personal level is extremely pretty and attractive. She has a host of admirers due to her charm and appeal. Erica at the symbolic level stands for America. Her charm, attraction and presence reflect the world status and power of America. Even her name not only rhymes with America, but is actually a part of the name of America. Changez, in his desperate need for acceptance, has started hiding his Asian/Pakistani identity. He would introduce himself as a New Yorker and would behave and speak like an American (38). This is the manifestation of mimicry on the part of Changez. The condition of Changez can be compared to Sri Ram, the protagonist of *Waiting for the Mahatma* by R. K. Narayan. There is a marked similarity between the initial stages of these two protagonists in search of their respective identities. They both are from the sub-continent, and are both infatuated by the white Christian women. Sri Ram prefers the picture of the white queen to that of his dead mother. He wants his mother to be as beautiful as the British queen (6). Similarly, Changez is desperate for acceptance by Erica, even at the cost of his own identity. In a sense he marries “white culture, white beauty, and white whiteness” (Fanon, *Black Skin white Masks*, 45, 88). But even his mimicry cannot grant him acceptance and equality in the American society. He is still regarded as “Other” (40). His Pakistani-ness cannot be camouflaged by his expensive suit, expensive car or even by the company of his American friends (42). Changez assimilates American culture, and falls in love head over heels with Erica.

Like a text book subject Changez adopts the neo-colonial American culture in total. But he can never be like white Christian American, Chris, an ex-boyfriend of Erica. Chris, even after his death, has an impact upon the identity of Erica. It is not a chance that Erica is wearing the T-shirt of her dead lover, when Changes visits her for the first time. This shows the bond that exists between Chris and Erica, for belonging to the same culture. Changez is treated as a lesser Other by Erica’s family, in spite of his enormous achievements (33) and also by the interviewer, from Underwood

Samson, for his job when he refers to his financial aid status at Princeton (5). Hamid shows, that Erica fails to come out of her past love affair with Chris and fails to respond to the passionate love of Changez or rather his obsession with her. Her refusal to come out of her nostalgia for Chris and live in the present, has a negative impact upon the present relationship between Changez and Erica. Hamid shows that the relationship between Changez and Erica does not blossom, because their racial origins and cultural identities pull them apart. Their mutual relationship remains shallow and mechanical, in spite of Changez' obsession for Erica. Erica at the unconscious level withholds her body and soul from Changez, a kind of denial of the identity of Changez, because she feels that she belongs to her.

They make an attempt at love making which also fails (54). Changez' infatuation with Erica does not let him give up his mimicry of the American culture. This reaches its culmination when one day he offers to become Chris, in his desperation to overcome the dilemma of dysfunctional love on the part of Erica. Hamid shows that Changez, who is regarded as a citizen of a subject culture, resorts to the ultimate mimicry of surrendering his identity, to be accepted by his beloved belonging to the superior culture of the neo-colonial super power. He gives up his name, his identity, his values and culture and becomes Chris. The beloved accepts him. The implicit message is that the non-Europeans are acceptable to America and its culture only when they give up their identity and culture and "marry" the American dominant culture. This conditional acceptance of Changez on the part of Erica transports him into a world of momentary bliss and ecstasy (63). It works for the time being. But it leaves an indelible impact upon his identity. He experiences satiation and shame simultaneously. This is the turning point in his search for his identity

At the symbolic level Erica stands for the American culture, therefore, Hamid points his finger at the American culture for its negative impact upon individuals. Living in the past is not the only fault of Erica and America. Hamid shows that American culture suffers from very serious malaise. He shows that American individuals, the society and the government are guilty of displaying

arrogance, prejudice and discrimination on cultural and racial grounds. Changez recognizes the American, in Lahore, not by the colour of his skin, dress or fashion and style but by his bearing. "Instead, it was your bearing that allowed me identify you" (1). Sidhwa in her novel, (*An American Brat*, 174) also portrays an American with the same arrogant attitude. Hamid makes it clear that it is the "bearing" or the neo-colonial role of America around the world that has bred tension between American and Pakistani individuals and cultures.

Hamid shows that American culture breeds a sense of superiority among the Americans and their attitude of arrogance towards non-whites offends and annoys them. This breeds resentment against America and its culture. Hamid portrays the racial discrimination to which non-Europeans are subjected to by the American culture and society. He shows that American culture and society or not flawless and they are as intolerant towards the racial and cultural differences as any other culture or society. Jim, Changez' interviewer for the job, cannot accept that a man from Third World Muslim country like Pakistan could be that smart and intelligent. The father of Changez' beloved, Erica, has the similar condescending attitude towards Changez. He finds the attitude of the father of Erica offensive and insulting. Her father reminds Changez that he comes from a backward culture with its inherent problems of corruption, dictatorship, the class differences, poverty and fundamentalism (33).

Hamid offers his explanation on the issue of tension between American and Pakistani cultures. Jim Ottewill in *The Observer* (March 11, 2007) review rightly maintains that "*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an elegant and superb indictment of the clouds of suspicion that now shroud our world".

The hybrid nature, of Pakistani culture and identity is portrayed by Hamid in the novel. Changez tells the American that Pakistanis are not extremists and narrow-minded. Changez particularly points out that Pakistani girls from National College of Arts wear T-shirts and jeans, to reflect the flexible cultural attitude of the people of Pakistan (13). This shows the obsession of

Pakistani culture and individuals for American culture. These Pakistani girls wear T-shirts and jeans in mimicry of American culture.

Erica is a metaphor for American culture and colonialist ideology. Chris stands for the American determination to stick to its cultural, historical and ideological past. This attitude is responsible for the present love-hate relationship between the American and Pakistani cultures. Hamid focuses upon the issues of identity-crisis of the people from countries like Pakistan and the resultant shame and anguish (89), who experience attraction and repulsion towards American culture simultaneously.

IV. The Portrayal of the Darker Side of American Culture and Society and Changez' Disillusionment with it:

It is portrayed by Hamid that American society is full of racial and cultural biases and prejudices against the people from non-European countries. He shows that racial and cultural Othering of Changez by American culture affects him and pushes him on to a path towards his search for his identity. He is never accepted as an equal member of American society and is always made to realize that he is an outsider in that culture (69). His academic achievements, his polished and superior manners, his talent and potential are immaterial and irrelevant in this regard. This is why he shocks the circle of his friends with his joke to become one day the dictator president of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability (17). This constructs the paradigm of love-hate for Changez, towards American culture and society. The fact that his American friends fail to take it only as a joke and appear shocked, shows the lack of understanding between two respective cultures.

Hamid shows that America and its society are not free from the responsibility for promoting the monster of hatred, extremism and intolerance. He shows that non-Americans are subjected to discrimination and maltreatment by American culture and society on the racial and cultural grounds (56).

These instances of discrimination and humiliation in

America make Changez conscious of being an Other in American culture and society. The cumulative impact of his unpleasant experiences in America on his identity and psyche manifests itself in his unconscious smile at the fall of the twin towers, which he suppresses consciously (43).

Though, Changez himself does not approve of this kind of sick response, he shows that the racial and cultural discrimination breeds alienation among the non-Europeans. Paula Bock in *The Seattle Times* (April 10, 2007), also holds America and its culture responsible for the response of Changez, a Princeton soccer star, to the fall of the twin towers. Bock rightly terms this portrayal as a “seething commentary on America’s reputation in the non-western world today”.

The fact that his mimicry is of no use, gets itself revealed to him at the Manila airport (44). Hamid suggests that Changez’ mask of “whiteness” is soon torn apart when he is subjected to indignities and racial discrimination, on the basis of his racial and cultural origin, at the airport and immigration counters (44).

Changez’ position is not different from that of the Negro physician, discussed by Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks*,89)who was treated as ugly, dirty, nigger, in spite of his refined manners, knowledge of literature, or understanding of the quantum theory. At his return from Manila, he is separated from his colleagues at the immigration counter. He is made to join the queue for the foreigners. He is treated like a criminal and is made to sit next to a tattooed criminal, at the New York airport. His American friends do not wait for him and he rides to Manhattan that evening very much alone (45). Hamid shows that Pakistanis and Asian Americans after 9/11 were subjected to a similar humiliation and even worse (56). He is singled out as an Other due to racial and cultural differences.

Trevor Lewis in the *Sunday Times* also contends that discrimination and suspicions fuel Changez’ disliking and alienation and as he frees himself from the influence of the West, he questions the injustices perpetrated by America abroad. Fawzia Afzal in her book, (*Cultural Imperialism*,118), refers to a similar

love affair between Mira and Richard in *Some Inner Fury* by Kamala Markandayya, where the racial difference strips away the mythical illusion that there can be any kind of rapprochement between the colonizer and the colonized.

Hamid points his finger at America and American society and shows that everything is not perfect with it. He identifies the problems and flaws of the American culture. In the context of colonizer and colonized equation, even E.M. Forster (*A Passage to India*) shows that love or friendship is not possible between the masters and subjects. Due to similar reasons, Dr. Aziz finally returns towards his own Indian identity. However, Hamid still believes in the possibility of a meaningful, positive relationship between America and the non-European world. Hamid's narrative holds American culture and political policies responsible for pushing Changez on to the journey to disillusionment. Finally Changez drifts away from America, therefore, the title of the novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. He finally frees himself from the dual situation of love-hate for American culture and society.

Hamid also shows that American capitalism, with its focus upon the so called "fundamentals", is actually a cruel and inhuman system. This is another aspect of American that disillusioned him from America and pushes him on to his quest for his identity and his roots. Hamid is critical of the American capitalism as well. He shows that the driving force behind American culture is capitalism and the only concern of capitalism is "to determine how much fat could be cut" (57). Changez is distressed at the callous disregard of this culture to the people, which are thrown out of job due to the cyclical movement of capitalist economy (58). Dr Javed Qazi, another postcolonial writer, in his short story titled *Laid off Man*, also highlights the cultural and economic problems of America with disastrous consequence for the individuals. Hamid, in the spirit of a postcolonial writer, celebrates the Pakistani culture and highlights the love Pakistani people have for Pakistani food, like kebabs, tikkas, stewed foot of the goat and the spiced brain of the sheep. He also asserts the difference in eating preferences of Indians and Pakistanis and the western people (60-61)

Changez rejects the colonialist ideology and its assumptions of superiority by asserting his pride in his past Asian culture and civilization. He glorifies the past achievements of the indigenous culture he comes from and reminds American, he is talking to, of their past achievements (20, 61).

He regrets that every Pakistani abroad is treated as a fundamentalist (33). Hamid shows that it can have a negative effect upon the identity of the non-Europeans. Such attitude and remarks, he shows, make people touchy about their racial and cultural origins (33). Hamid portrays the American political policies which affect Changez in addition to personal and cultural issues disused so far.

Postcolonial Hamid blames America for its persistence to live in the past and continue to pursue imperialistic policies. He is also critical of America for its refusal to accept the cultural, political realities of the present day world. He shows that America has failed to take into account the national and cultural aspirations and identities of other people. Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows that America conducts its affairs around the world like a neo-colonial power. This conduct is marked by constant interferences, interventions and even occupation of other countries. This has alienated Changez from America, in spite of the fact that he was the product of American system, as propounded by Bhabha (*Sexual Subjects*, 312-23). This shows the impact of American political policies upon people like Changez.

Hamid portrays the American neo-colonial conduct and its interference in Muslim countries like Afghanistan (59). Hamid further blames America for its assumptions of superiority and its insistence to treat cultures and people as “others” with their own cultural and political identities. “Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own” (101). Ziauddin Sardar in the preface (*Black Skin White Masks*, xix) also contends that the “war on terror” has become a license to violate international law and any concept of human values and rights (xix).

In these circumstances, the mental condition of Changez is

very similar to that of Hardy in *Indigo* by Weston (1943). Hardy was deeply wounded by the racist statement of Aubrey Wall that he treats his dogs and horses better than Indians. Hardy turned to his own people for friendship and refused to go back to England (233). Changez is also conscious of the failures of America in coming to the help of Pakistan in times of crises (76, 78, 86). He also gives his response to American attack on Iraq (108).

V. The Portrayal of Changez' Rejection of American Culture and the Growth of His Indigenous identity:

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a microcosm reflecting the malaise, American culture and society suffers from and its negative and reactionary impact upon the identities of people like Changez. Dwelling upon the quest for identity on the part of Changez, Hamid refers to the janissaries in the context of Pakistani and American relationship. Janissaries were recruited by past empires (Ottoman) and were totally cut off from their own culture and identity. After their training, they were sent to fight and defeat the cultures of their origins. Hamid considers himself a janissary, cut off from his culture, stripped off his own identity and fighting for the preservation and protection of American Imperialism and culture. Hamid suggests that Pakistan and Pakistanis in their zest for the adoption of American culture, are actually working against their national and cultural interests (92).

Changez regrets that even after all the sacrifices and services of Pakistan and Pakistanis America has never treated Pakistan as its ally or friend. Pakistanis and Pakistan have suspicions that America even encouraged India to threaten Pakistan with invasion (76), instead of warning India to behave. Even the facility of bases provided to America for the conduct of Afghan war is of no use (86). Amir javed in *Modern Soap* has also portrayed the similar relationship between America and Pakistan at the political level. Amir shows that even the Pakistani president could not visit these American bases (88). Ziring also throws light on the relationship between America and Pakistan (*Pakistan in the Twentieth Century*, 296). This shows the impact of politics upon the personal identity.

Hamid is conscious of the fact that despite “the janissary like duties” done by Pakistan for America, America has never accepted Pakistan as a true friend. It is treated only like a box of tissue papers (91). Changez is extremely critical of American intervention in other countries on one pretext or the other. He also recalls the unreliability of America as an ally or friend (94).

Hamid shows that intolerance on racial grounds by American culture and the unilateral political policies of America spoil the relations between America and Pakistan and affect Changez at the personal level. Such considerations finally convert Changez, a product of American system in the real sense of the word into a reluctant fundamentalist. Postcolonial Mohsin Hamid shows America the weaknesses of its own culture and points out wrong political policies which breed ill will against America and its culture. He wants America and its people to review the situation and accept the responsibility for the tension and confrontation in the world. He wishes to highlight the causes for this resentment against America. People like Changez are treated as belonging to a subject race and therefore are discriminated against on the basis of their racial and cultural origin. Hamid in the spirit of a postcolonial writer blames America and its society for their failure to accept the people with different cultural, religious and racial backgrounds with the openness of mind.

Changez grows a beard in protest at the discrimination and humiliation he experiences while living in America to register his deep anger (78). This is a protest against American “bearing” and political policies. He comes back to his country and takes up a teaching position to create awareness among the Pakistanis against American designs. . Hamid warns that the current egocentric approach of America has the seeds of self-destruction very similar to that of Erica, who refused to come out of her past and perished. Before Erica committed suicide, she looked “diminished”, was not her usual self and confident. Changez was “horrified” to look at the appalling and “fragile” condition of Erica (62). Since, at one level Erica stands for America, Hamid already is seeing the impact of America’s current approach on its image, with indications of its entanglements with a “maze of psychosis” (63). Hamid, in *The*

Reluctant Fundamentalist wants America to review its policy towards the Third World, especially towards Muslim countries like Pakistan. Otherwise the fate of America cannot be different from that of Erica (99). Hamid is critical of the neo-colonial conduct and attitude of America towards Third World countries, especially the Muslim countries, because it negatively affects people and they develop extremist ideas and identities .

However, Hamid, through Changez also shows that the hybridity of culture and identity is unavoidable in the face of global interaction of individuals and cultures. Changez, even after his return to Lahore, still lives with the residual impact of American culture (104). His involvement with Erica has permanently become part of his identity (105).

VI. Conclusion:

The study has shown that Mohsin Hamid, , has shown the impact politics and culture can have upon individual identities. He has dealt with the issues of colonialist ideology, neo-colonialist “bearing” the internalization of this ideology, the mimicry and the resultant hybridity and its impact upon the identity of the people from the so called developing (lesser) cultures. Hamid has shown that unlike the contention of white American culture to perfection, it has very serious problems. He shows that the white American culture is as extremist, as intolerant of the racial, cultural and ideological differences as any so called Third World culture. The intolerant American culture is having its negative impact upon the Non-Europeans and is also breeding contempt and resistance against American policies around the world. Hamid rejects the contention that only the so called developing cultures produce and breed extremism. He points his finger at America and its culture for producing extremism, hatred and global tensions and confrontations. Hamid shows that disrespect and lack of acceptance by American culture of the people from other cultures is the biggest barrier in the way of natural and mutually beneficial interaction among various cultures and countries. The discriminatory and insulting attitude of America and its culture makes people reactionary and extremist like was the case with Changez who inspite of his education from Princeton, his love for a

white American girl, his job and status in America becomes the fundamentalist. Changez rejects all these benefits along with American culture and comes back to the culture of his origin, discards his hybrid identity and invents his new identity which is shaped by extremist ideology. Similarly, Hamid has portrayed that American interference and intervention in the internal affairs of other countries is neither in the interest of America nor in the interest of international peace and cooperation, because it breeds ill will and encourages people from developing cultures like Pakistan to embrace extremist ideologies.

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