

Mohsin Hamid's the Reluctant Fundamentalist: A Projection of Resistance and Dissent

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Abstract

The various acts of violence and their serious repercussions resulting in the changed historico- political situations in different parts of the nations across the world have put a significant impact on the writers and their writings. In the same manner, the incident of bombing of the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 put an indelible impression on writings of all the writers throughout the world. Born in Pakistan but having experienced life for many years in the USA and the UK as an intellectual and eventually returning to his homeland Pakistan in 2009, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is based on the serious ramifications of the incident of 9/11 on individuals misunderstood as religious fanatics or terrorists by America due to an atmosphere of distrust and suspicions. The paper attempts to analyse how the writer has tried to project the neo-colonial attitude and superiority of America over the people belonging to non-European countries that further leads to hatred and extremism in their minds. Having gone through the experiences of being treated as 'other' by the American society in spite of all the acculturation, assimilation and 'mimicry' of American culture; Mohsin Hamid has tried to write back to the 'empire' on behalf of all the people of third world nations. The paper also explores that the voice of dissent is very much present throughout the novel, as Hamid challenges the so called multicultural society of America revealing that only third world nations like Pakistan are not responsible for proliferating extremism and hatred in the world but it is also the global policies and politics of America full of racial prejudice and discrimination towards the non-Europeans who are treated as 'other', 'inferior' or as 'outcastes' by it and ultimately to show their dissension, they breed and justify their hostility and violence around the world.

Keywords: Resistance, Dissent, dissension, Reluctant, Fundamentalist.

Various acts of violence and their serious repercussions resulting in the changed historic- political situations in different parts of the nations across the world have put a significant impact on the writers and their writings. In the same manner, the incident of bombing of the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 put an indelible impression on the writings of all writers throughout the world. They have been stimulated to modify their perspective towards the issues that they raise in their works due to such incidents. In this world of globalisation, the transnational forces such as global migration of people, information technology and capital flow have resulted in gradually diminishing national boundaries and nation states that has been proved as an advantage for common people but the non state actors have made use of them as an assistance to create terror in the world. Thus the writers, especially from third world countries were compelled to raise and reflect upon the issues of changing identities and subject positions of the people belonging to the countries of their origin.

Born in Pakistan but having experienced life for many years in the USA and the UK as an intellectual and eventually returning to his homeland Pakistan in 2009, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is based on the serious ramifications of the incident of 9/11 on individuals misunderstood as religious fanatics or terrorists by America due to an atmosphere of distrust and suspicions. It shows how a Muslim individual might oppose America's actions, independently of religious difference.

The paper 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. The paper also attempts to analyse how the writer has tried to project the neo-colonial attitude and superiority of America over the people belonging to non-European countries that further leads to hatred and extremism in their minds. Having gone through the experiences of being treated as 'other' by the American society in spite of all the acculturation, assimilation and 'mimicry' of American culture; Mohsin Hamid has tried to write back to the 'empire' on behalf of all the people of third world nations. The paper also explores that the voice of dissent is very much present throughout the novel, as Hamid challenges the so called multicultural society of America revealing that only third world nations like Pakistan are not responsible for proliferating extremism and hatred in the world but it is also the global policies and politics of America full of racial prejudice and discrimination towards the non-Europeans who are treated as 'other', 'inferior' or as 'outcastes' by it and ultimately to show their dissension, they breed and justify the hostility and violence around the world.

Hamid shows that cultures and countries like Pakistan are not the only culprits for breeding extremism and intolerance. Through Changez, the central character of the novel, he delineates his 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. Hamid blames America for its assumptions of superiority and its insistence to treat cultures and people as "others" with their own cultural and political

identities. Frustrated with the misrepresentation of Muslims as religious fanatics in the American media, Hamid shows it by depicting the character of Changez in this novel. The novel therefore aims to challenge negative portrayals of Islam and Islamic countries by painting a personalised, insightful portrait of a ‘potential’ terrorist. The discriminatory and insulting attitude of America and its culture makes people reactionary and extremist like Changez who in spite of his education from Princeton, his love for a white American girl, his job and status in America becomes the fundamentalist. Talking about the immigrants from third world countries living in America, the novel tries to break the stereotypes and misconceptions that promote prejudiced and biased views against these people who are assumed as ‘Others’ by the natives. The protagonist of the novel, Changez has been shown assimilated into the American culture, feels at home in America and is able to make his ‘American dream’ come true feeling like a New Yorker.

The narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* unfolds over the period of a day as Changez, a returned Pakistani migrant, meets an unnamed American man in the streets of Lahore. It is unclear whether the American is a mere ‘tourist’ or an intelligence agent sent to assassinate Changez. At Changez’s insistence, the two men share tea and a meal in the market place of Old Anarkali, before Changez accompanies the American to his hotel through the dark night streets. The novel consists of a dramatic monologue in which Changez recounts in detail his experience of the United States, first as student and then in international finance. He tells how, despite his success, he experienced doubts about his role in America and about America’s role in the world. Changez moves from his respected family in Lahore to New Jersey, where he has attained a scholarship for Princeton. Explaining his feelings, he says, “*This is a dream come true, Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible. I have access to this beautiful campus, I thought to professors who are titans in their fields and fellow students who are philosopher – kings in the making*” (Hamid, 3). Graduating with honours, Changez then secures a high-paying job at a valuation firm. Between graduating and commencing his position at Underwood Samson, Changez holidays in Greece with his fellow Princetonians. Revealing his feelings, he admits in front of the American fellow sitting in Pakistan that being in Princeton made his American dream fulfilled, “Yes, it was exhilarating. That, in an admittedly long winded fashion, is how I think, looking back, about Princeton. Princeton made everything possible for me” (Hamid, 15).

He is attracted towards Erica, an extremely beautiful white American woman. Changez is deeply conscious of his culture and background and “feels 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. 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). 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. But even his mimicry cannot grant him acceptance and equality in the American society. He is still

regarded as “Other”. 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.

Erica introduces Changez to her wealthy parents, invites him to her home, and includes him in her elite lifestyle. 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. They make an attempt at love making which also fails (54). Erica at the unconscious level withholds her body and soul from Changez, a kind of denial of the identity of Changez.

In his attempts to show his strong infatuation with Erica, Changez does not 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.

However, Erica is traumatised by the death of her childhood sweetheart, Chris; although she feels affection for Changez, she most likely sees him as a shadow of her former lover. Unable to commit herself to a new relationship, she becomes increasingly introverted and depressed. Soon after beginning at Underwood Samson, Changez goes to Manila on business. On the television in his hotel room, he witnesses the Twin Towers fall on September 11, 2001; his reaction is one of unsettling pleasure. This initial reaction gives way to confusion – about his identity, about his feelings for the United States and about his involvement in Underwood Samson.

In the following months, Erica’s emotional and psychological deterioration, which precedes the collapse of their friendship, is mirrored in Changez’s growing physical and ideological estrangement from the United States. Torn between his social identities, he expresses his feelings towards the incident of 9/11 as “... the impending destruction of my personal American dreams. The power of my blinders shocks me, looking back – so stark in retrospect were the portents of coming disaster in the news, on the streets, and in the state of the woman I had become enormed” (Hamid, 93). With this incident, his feelings for Erica also come to an end forever, as he says: “I found not just those daydreams but the woman herself vanishing before my eyes” (Hamid, 104). Here begins his search for the real identity when he decides to choose one side of the two, i.e. to be considered as a hybrid one or a Muslim one. He decides to go back to his roots and raises a voice of dissent against the “American Empire” that has raised questions about the identity of Muslims and other minorities living in it.

After returning to America from Manila, Changez visits his family in Pakistan. But the incident of 9/11 changes his sense of belonging with the American society, as the Americans consider him an outcaste and a lackey of attackers. The prejudiced, racist and discriminatory attitude of the Americans towards him is so strong that he decides to move to Pakistan to regain his lost identity and to show his dissension towards the so called 'Empire'. His identity crisis is summed up in his lines, "I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged- in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither" (Hamid 168). Changez is confused caught in the image built towards him by the society, as he is not able to recover his lost subjectivity in Pakistan too. This racial discrimination aggravates the sense of alienation and forces one to consider him/ her as the 'other'. Lacan says, "...our identity is given to us from outside, and we are constitutively alienated. The imaginary or narcissistic character of all desire merely conceals this basic fault, this radical alterity or otherness in human existence." (*Literary Theory, An anthology* 124). He is depicted as the victim of the society divided by race, where there is no place for one who is neither black nor white. The narrative revolves around the revelation of the protagonist's ambiguous background after previously "passing" within white society and the subsequent tragedy of he or she being rejected from it (3). Due to his beard, which is a symbol both of his individuality and of his Pakistani identity, he is considered as an Arab and experiences discrimination in airports, in the workplace and in the streets.

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, as she dies a tragic death eventually in the end of the novel (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. 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.

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. He has tried to raise voice on behalf of all the people from third world countries going through changing

histoico-political circumstances and coming across the dilemmas of racial indiscrimination, while living in Western or European countries, by writing back to the ‘empire’.

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