

## ***Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist: A Postcolonial Perspective***

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### **Abstract**

*The study attempts to explore the post-colonial concerns in Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist. The Reluctant Fundamentalist is the story of Changez, a Pakistani immigrant, who is blindly in love with America and its culture. Times and again, he expresses his unlimited love for both. But after 9/11 the hidden enmity of America towards Muslims is revealed to him and he comes back to his native land with a broken heart and a new thought in his mind. In the novel, Hamid brings forth certain postcolonial concerns like the war on terror, intrusion, Hybridity, misrepresentation, stereotyping, Otherness and Orientalism, etc. This paper gives special attention to issues like misrepresentation, otherness, and discrimination of Muslims by Americans, and tries to bring forth how these issues are being handled by the writer. Hamid has attempted to explore the concept of stereotyping of immigrants by western society and counter-stereotyping of the oriental people in a very interesting manner.*

**Keywords:** Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, misrepresentation, otherness, discrimination of Muslims by Americans, the concept of stereotyping of immigrants

### **Introduction**

Mohsin Hamid is a versatile writer who wrote this novel to delineate the aftermaths of the 9/11 attacks. While reading the novel one cannot escape the postcolonial concerns, i.e. Othering, misrepresentation, discrimination, and marginalization. The binary opposition between East and West is the central interest of the novelist. Changez the colonized was forced by the colonizer to leave America and after returning to his homeland he starts spreading anti-American views. Changez is neither a fanatic nor a religious fundamentalist, but a nationalist and patriot.

One of the most important aspects of European self-projection in literature, as in colonist's politics, is representing the people who dwelt in the lands they claimed; the indigenous people colonized by them. They are portrayed in a metaphoric as well in a stereotypical way. They are termed as other. The process of otherness is a fundamental concept in colonization.

Due to the expansion of the European empire, the colonized people are exemplified as inferior, uncivilized people, as children or

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savage, animal, or inadequate masses. As Said (1978) rightly says “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences”.

Mohsin Hamid is a prolific writer, among South Asian Writers of English Literature (henceforth SAWE). Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* creating a wave of interest in South Asian writers in English. This book is quite different from colonial-minded works such as *Heart of Darkness*, which reinforce the idea of empire. It turns the concept on its head. In it, “the barbarian” –in Hamid story, the stereotyped fundamentalist” speaks while the officer of the empire remains quiet. It is a good critique of the colonial discourse, i.e. orientalism, and the stereotypical portrayal of the Muslims as orientals, others, terrorist extremist backward animals like and barbarians in the Western world in the post 9/11 era.

The study focuses on the issue of the stereotype concerning the 9/11 scenario, that caused a dramatic change to the socio-political conditions across the world particularly, to the Muslim community. The analysis is carried out to demonstrate the socio-political change in light of the backdrop of 9/11 to reveal the treatment of the Muslims by other Western communities. The study attempts to highlight the significance of Pakistani writers who exert all their efforts to portray the image of the Muslims after the 9/11 era with reference to Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The authors want to illustrate to the whole world that Muslims are not diehard-fanatics, and could not be treated as terrorists as exemplified in the novel.

### Literature Review

When it comes to immigrant stereotyping, Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* takes it very seriously to highlight the image of the Muslim community and their cruel treatment by the Western world. (Hamid, 2009) exemplifies the Western world, and their perceptions about the Muslims at large, and reveals their vile designs to subjugate the Muslim world in the name of terror.

Khalis (2012) rightly argues in his article ‘*Conflicting Images of Muslims in Post 9/11 American Literature*’ that Americans, says Changez, are responsible for causing others to suffer and be frustrated by smashing their sovereignty and integrity, personal self and relentlessly decimating their critical possessions.

Awan (2010) asserts that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* addresses the issue of immigrant stereotypes. He writes that a prolific Princeton graduate and Underwood Samson's genius business consultant, Changez, is suddenly forced into the role of terrorist or at least a terrorist look-alike due to the aftermath of 9/11 impacts.

Hartnell (2010) states that attacks on Arab Americans, as well as other ethnic groups perceived by hostile Americans as 'Muslims', spiked in the weeks following September 11. Bhabha (2012), a postcolonial theorist, proceeds by saying that the concept of stereotypes are designed particularly by those in power to promote colonial, and imperial motives. As a result, (Hamid, 2009) has used this concept to deconstruct Neo-imperialism through the deconstruction of stereotypical images of the West. On the other hand, the idea put forth by (Said, 1978) about "Orientalism" is of great importance as well. He highlights the aspects of a postmodern world that stereotypes about the Orient have been reinforced, as a result of 9/11, these Oriental stereotypes have become more prevalent. Also, in his book "*Culture and Imperialism*," he accurately depicted the fissure between east and west.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology employed in the current study follows the 'qualitative content analysis technique'. The available data on the novel is analyzed using a qualitative design rather than a quantitative manner. The analyses in the novel are carried out in the light of postcolonial literary theory. Postcolonial literary theory is the one that suits the design of the study to portray the events and incidents in the novel. Given the context of the post 9/11 immigrants' problems. This postcolonial theory is the very basis of the rhetoric of 'Us' and 'Others'. As most of the immigrants belong to the former colonial areas and experience the same marginal treatment which makes them uncomfortable. The issues portrayed by the novel is this which fall in the area of postcolonial theory; therefore, this theory has been chosen to be employed for the analysis.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Changez the protagonist of the novel met with the American in the old *Anarkali bazaar* and invited him to a cup of tea. Changez then buttonhole the silent American with his history, which he narrates in a monologue style. During the story, Changez often tells us that how the American sees Changez, the waiter, and even everything in the *bazaar* with a suspicious eye. The outlook of the anonymous American regarding Pakistan is dominating due to the colonial discourse. We are others in the eyes of America. At the beginning of the story, Changez explains to an American "do not be frightened by my beard. I am a lover of America" (Hamid, 2009). Every bearded man is known as other, backward, and terrorist in the western media. Changez by keeping beard realized his sense of being otherness while talking with the American. When the waiter came to serve tea to them in the hotel Changez informed us how the American responds to the waiter. "You

seem worried. Do not be; this burly fellow is merely our waiter, and there is no need to reach under your jacket” (Hamid, 2009). This statement of Changez reveals the fact that we are primitive, savage, and terrorists. They termed us a potential threat to their safety. The American makes himself ready so that he may encounter the burly fellow i.e. the waiter if he tries to kill him or blast him with a bomb. In the course of the story, Changez noticed certain seriousness in the American’s expression, due to the scar on Changez forearm “I see that you have noticed the scar on my forearm, here, the American misconceived it as ... though you are wondering what sort of training camp could have a given fellow from the plain such as myself cause to engage in these activities” (Hamid, 2009). The American considers that Changez is a terrorist who got training in the terrorist camp. An analysis of the novel reveals that Hamid depicts the other and orients as terrorists backward and secondary to the West.

The American also looked at Pakistani food and drinks with a suspicious eye. When the tea arrived at their table Changez told him “do not look so suspicious I assure you, sir, nothing untoward will happen to you... After all, it is not as if it has been poisoned” (Hamid, 2009). When food was served to them, he assured the American. He thus explains to him “I meant nothing sinister, I will go so far as to sample each these plates myself first” (Hamid, 2009). American visited the country of others and orients (Pakistan) where he looks at everything with a suspicious eye.

There is also a problem with the religion of orients. Islam is considered an oriental religion. According to the west, Islam is the root cause of global terrorism and extremism. It caused great havoc in the world. It instigates the Orientals to the destruction of the Occidentals. It is Islam, as they think was involved in the 9/11 attacks. That is why everybody is so much afraid of this religion in America. When Changez told the Americans that he wants to be, “the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability” (Hamid, 2009), everybody was shocked. The Americans have a sort of Islam phobia. That is why they launched a war against Afghanistan, which is an Islamic state. America further shows its enmity and hatred for Islam by brutally treating the Muslims in America. Islam is not an oriental religion. Because it is Islam that draws out Europe from the Dark Age and introduced them to the age of enlightenment, culture, science, and civilization. The misrepresentation of Islam in the western media as a religion that is responsible for all the global havoc is groundless. In fact, it is Islam that emphasizes the lesson of peace and humanity and makes the life of every citizen safe and secure.

Hamid has depicted the west as embodying concepts of enlightenment, rationality and has more culture, scientifically, and technologically advanced civilization. They have good qualitative

educational institutions, where the professors are Titans in their field. New York is a place of freedom, empowerment, and pleasure in the story. It is a freeing place for Changez where he climbs to the top range of the corporate ladder, he feels as though he is facing the boundless possibility. This is a most technologically advanced civilization. America itself proclaimed its greatness, "we are America the mightiest civilization the world has ever known" (Turner, 2002). Referring to the beauty of New York at night due to the decorative light Changez says "New York by night must be one of the greatest sights in the world" (Hamid, 2009). America is imposing its superiority over the third world countries by growing financial and social delamination, scarcity and misery. After the 9/11 attacks, the Muslims are stereotyped as extremists, terrorists, and backward, who are devoid of civilization? West considered the Muslims as a great threat to themselves. Even they are held responsible for the September, 11 attacks. Now America wanted to export science, democracy, and civilization to the orient's region in the shape of a war on terror. They consider this war as inevitable and the ultimate solution to the problems. However, it is quite ironic on the part of America that they are not fighting this war for the prevention of terrorism in the orient territories, but it is rather "the advancement of a small coterie's concept of American interest" (Hussain, 2004) ... Their motto of war is to "save the globe from terrorism" is an imperialistic design of America to control the resources of orient. This war is not fought in the best interest of humanity and particularly of the orient but it makes the orient more backward terrorists and extremists. It can be termed as an exploitation of the orient. It is due to these policies of America that life for others and orient becomes so much difficult. They are facing the consequences of this so-called war on terror.

Mohsin Hamid's fervent nationalism protests against the stereotyping of Pakistan in America where Pakistan is seen as a backward and uncivilized failed state. In America, Muslims are misrepresented as fundamentalists and radicals. As Changez tells the American thus, "We were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels" (Hamid, 2009). Fundamentalism is a very delicate issue. It involves suppression and prejudice for so many people; fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is considered to be the enemy of freedom and liberal values. In the West, it is only associated with religion and they consider religious fundamentalism, and Islamic fundamentalism in particular, as a prospective global threat. At the end of the cold war, a "global clash of civilization started and west only held responsible Islam for it" (Huntington, 2000). Islamic fundamentalism is not a root cause of terrorism. In the Islamic system, fundamentalism notes to a truly global neighborhood faith that needs to restrict participation and that must be in confrontation with other

unmitigated structures. Islamic fundamentalism is merely a response both to modernization and to post-modernity and that also tries in aspects of simpler entities to rejoin the world.

Blaming Islam and the Muslims for the rise of terrorism that threatens the US and the West is at the heart of the strategy developed by individuals and groups whose systematic attacks on Islam and Muslims, is due to either ignorance or hatred, constitute the recent and painful reality Islam phobia. Islam phobia is a strategic weapon in the campaign to marginalize Muslims by the Americans. On one level, Islam phobia stems from ignorance, deception, and misrepresentation. While on the other hand, it stems from a very basic human instinct to dominate, exploit, and abuse.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant fundamentalist* is a good critique of John Updike's *The Terrorist* (Updike, 2006). Updike is an American-born author who attacked the Muslims as terrorists. Updike is a spokesman for American exceptionalism and capitalism. He considers Islam and the Islamic world as a great threat to the safety of American capitalism. Like Huntington (2000), Lewis (1990), and Updike (2006), also consider Islam as the cause of the clash of civilizations, which arises the Muslims against the neoliberal notion of the West. The narrative stereotypically portrays the Muslims, "they are regarded as" enemies" of freedom" (Updike, 2006), who wants to replace the Western independent structure that safeguards public rights, forbearance as well as esteem intended for civil rights by way of "an ascetic and dogmatic tyranny" (Updike, 2006). The findings reveal that fundamentalist Muslims viewed American capitalism as propagating and corrupted, a Godless, soulless, and immoral society.

Updike's (2006) account contrasted the hateful and prejudiced perspective of Islamism with America's broad-based democratic system. This difference between Jack and Ahmad is revealed: "Did the imam ever suggest ...that a bright boy like you, in a diverse and tolerant society like this one, needs to confront a variety of viewpoints?" In shocking bluntness, Ahmad says ... Sheikh Rashid did not suggest that sir, he feels such a relativistic approach trivialize religion" (Hamid, 2009).

The analysis of the terrorists highlights that Islam is a militant religion, which motivates its followers to wage Jihad to destroy the west for its immorality and faithlessness. Islam is portrayed to be a religion that instigates people to take up violence against the Western community. Ahmad sums up this Islamic justification of the killing of non-Muslims, particularly Americans by quoting "the Egyptian ... political philosopher Sayyid Qutub" as follows, "He concluded that no people are more distant than the American people from God and piety ... makes them legitimate targets for assassination" (Hamid, 2009). In his conversation with Joryleen, Ahmad echoes the violent nature of

Islam, he says, "My teachers at the mosque say that all unbelievers are our enemies". He further adds, "The prophet said that eventually all unbelievers must be destroyed" (Hamid, 2009). Updike thus shows the Islamist ideology is nurturing terrorist attacks against America.

Hamid (2009), however, through the cultural representation of Pakistan dismantles the marginalization of Muslims as fundamentalists, and terrorists, amid is an ardent nationalist, he is a patriot and takes immense delight in the detailed description of his country. The pride of Pakistan resonated with his American companion in Changez's statement, "... we Pakistani tend to take inordinate pride in our food. Here in old *Anarkali* that pride is visible in the purity of the fare on offer...these, sir, are predatorily imbued with a hint of luxury of wanton abandon" (Hamid, 2009).

In the narration, Hamid depicted the culture of Pakistan as a rich culture that has an aesthetic tradition and creative inheritance. So, a painting recalls in Erica's room to Changez that "our miniature painting, of the sort one would find if one ventured around the corner of the Lahore Museum or the National College of Arts" (Hamid, 2009). During his first meeting with Juan Bautista, Changez highlight how books are loved... [his] family "and how his father's uncle was a renowned poet" (Hamid, 2009). At another place he refers to his home as "its enduring grandeur, its unmistakable personality, and idiosyncratic charm. Mughal miniatures and ancient carpets graced its reception room...It was rich with history..." (Hamid, 2009). Through this, Hamid tries to reveal the historical greatness and grandeur of the Muslims. Thus, to anonymous American Changez states:

"for we were not always burdened by debt, dependent on foreign aid and handouts in the stories we tell about ourselves we were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels but rather saints and poets and yes conquering Kings" (Hamid, 2009).

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which brought a catastrophe, the American biased attitude against Muslims in America is further intensified. The security personnel at the airport separated him from his other American fellows and asking him different questions, especially about his trip to the United States. American's cruel treatment of Changez is because he is a Pakistani-born Muslim. He is subjected to cruel questioning, and he is also wrong with an Arab in one incident. One day when he was walking in the parking lot, he was called a "fucking Arab" (Hamid, 2009). These remarks of the American show his contemptuous attitude against Arab people. Although Changez is not an Arab this greatly injures his self-esteem.

## Conclusion

Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reveals that terrorism and extremism are attributed to the orient and their

religion. The Orientals are treated as belonging to the other side and have no space in the Centre. They are to be compelled to leave the centre and are to be marginalized. The novel highlights the widened differences between metropolitan and the margin. The stereotypical characterization of Muslims highlights the inability of neo-liberals. It thus can only portray the Muslims as terrorists, mindless fanatics, and irrational bigots. The above discussion portrays Hamid's mastery in the realistic portrayal of the East. He has pointed out that Eastern people are far better than the image produced in the minds of the Americans. To sum up the findings of the study, we can say that Hamid has portrayed the immigrants and oriental people in a balanced manner.

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