

Representation of Identity Crisis in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

*This paper underscores the existential status of the immigrants in the United States of America as portrayed in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* written as a response to the 9/11 attacks occurred on 11 September 2001. In the post-9/11 situation, the identity of Pakistani immigrants is more at risk than before because of the perpetrators' religious identity as widely perceived to be extreme. Being Pakistani means being part of a society divided into different groups that are at odds with each other over religious, sectarian and political issues. In such a situation, where Pakistan does not only fight a war against terrorism but is a victim of terrorism as well, it is simply impossible to have a single national identity. Not only at home Pakistanis suffer the repercussions of terrorism but also in the United States of America as depicted in the text. The characters cast in the novel represent different ethnic groups of people who reside in the United States of America. They are divided into liberals. However, only Muslim characters seem excluded from society. They are treated as others in the land of democracy. They feel homeless and suffer existential crisis. The paper has aimed at exploring the causes of identity crisis in the novel. The event of September 11 changed the way the Islamic world views fundamentalists and terrorists. The obsession of Hamid is the loss of values, religious and political exploitation of the masses, suicide bombings and sectarianism, and the consequent evolution of individual identity perception in an alienating social framework.*

Key Words: Representation, Identity, Existence, Terrorism, Extremism

Introduction

Pakistanis as immigrants face existential crisis in the United States as depicted in the novel. Characters like Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid are marginalized because of socio-political and ideological variations. The article employs qualitative data consisting of main resource, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid. The article investigates into the similarities between the situation facing Pakistan

today and characters. The derived resources include the criticism on the novel. Qualitative research has been used to give a better approaching into the complex situation.

Pakistani immigrants like Changez suffer the repercussions of the 9/11 attacks as depicted in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and they under challenges in the aftermath of the event. The cultural differences are the primary bases of conflicts that push the immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants to the margin as shown in the novel. Muslim characters lead a self-doubting life and are a susceptible target of Islamophobia in the post-9/11 situation. The conflict between Muslims and Americans becomes intense when the former do not assimilate into the mainstream culture.

The United States of America is an involved nation, where aggression among various groups is manifest. The partition is not just due to ethnic differences. Rather the people are divided due to geo-political causes. The uniqueness for everyone is the matter of pride. When it is critical and attacked, she or he gets prepared to contradict the attacks at the cost of physical and financial benefits as Changez does in the novel. He leaves the United States of America although he has an exceedingly paid profession there. He undergoes existential crisis. His cultural and national identity is devalued and even his existence is not accepted by the extreme White Americans. His role limits to casting votes and choosing the political leaders. However, he is deprived of expressing his identity through different means and ways. Sometimes, he is in dilemma and cannot decide what to do.

Discussion

The paper investigates into the troubles faced by the Pakistani immigrant, Changez. The manipulation and manipulation makes his identity uncertain. As a Pakistani, he is marginalized in the United States of America. In the 21st century, distinctiveness of a frequent person like Changez has become even more insecure than it was ever before. The assorted response to incidents of terrorist attacks, and suicide bombs bring to attention the differences between the Americans and Muslims jeopardizes the personality of Pakistani immigrants.

Both Americans and Muslims distance from each other because of the suspicion intensified by the 9/11 attacks. Although some of them seek to stay intact with each other, the majority of the characters as portrayed in the novel maintain both physical and psychological distance. The cultural differences become the source of the political conflict in the aftermath. The people with the Muslim symbols are suspected of being associated with the act of terror. This distrust divides the American society into fragments. Consequently, the characters like Changez who have endeavored to adapt to the new cultural set-up in the United States of America are enforced to come back to their home. This highlights a state in which civilization is no longer cherished and people are embarrassed, killed and depressed

of all rights because of their loyalties to contradictory set of beliefs. People do not look at them as citizens but as radicals. The issue of distinctiveness is not determined even in a foreign land, where they have to visage racism and ethnic favoritism.

Mudassar Nazar perceives the post-9/11 condition in his article "Identity Crisis in Pakistan". Pakistan, a post-colonial nation, is facing identity challenges and has found it complicated to classify its identity, particularly since the September 11 attacks on the United States began. An analogous association runs through Pakistan's scenery. Some seek an Islamic state, some fight for a cosmopolitan state, some fight for a secular state, and some fight for a democratic Islamic republic. Should there be, and to what extent should it be (3)? Nazar focuses on issues that arose in the post-9/11 global situation. He did not elaborate on the identity crisis that the novel's characters suffer from. His overall observations do not convey a clear message to the reader, as this article focuses on the immigrant identity catastrophe depicted in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This excerpt highlights the issue of division between different sections of society. There is a conflict between fundamentalism and liberalism. There is further multiplicity and partition in these two groups of his. Genuine Pakistanis are denied identical rights as Pakistani citizens.

Identity is cultural and social. Human beings reside a particular society and develops the sense of being associated with different entities and symbols. Accordingly, they seek to be identified in the course of life. Provided that they are neglected or their associations are discarded, they experience identity crisis. As D. Asghar explains in his paper "Pakistan's Identity Crisis": "We have divided ourselves into so many classes and categories, from religion to economics to geography to language, that a complete overhaul is needed in order to "balance." "remotely close to Quaid's ideal" (1). Those who moved abroad in search of meaning in life still do not find their accurate identity. This problem is brilliantly expressed in modern Pakistani English literature. The article "Reluctant Fundamentalists See a Flawed American Dream – Leading to an Identity Crisis" states, "The great nation of Pakistan has been in an ideological and identity crisis since its founding" (8). It further states, "But after September 11, circumstances change, and so does Changez, the aptly named man himself. As he watches the American Dream explode before his eyes, Changez finally realizes who he really is and heads home" (8). Even in Pakistan he cannot recover this feeling of estrangement. This view is confirmed by many scientists. In the seminar "Identity and identity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*", the professor says.

In the context of 9/11, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an important signpost. By conveying a communication of peace, Hamid refutes Western chauvinism against Pakistanis. Ironically, it deals with the war on fright and all kinds of hostility. It creates an eerie atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion after the September 11 attacks. During the first

years of journal, the novel aroused unconstructive criticism, with the text being misinterpreted as an anti-American and opinionated work of art. The novel's protagonist, Changez, tells his story in a theatrical monologue to a quiet American narrator, who is later exposed to be a CIA agent tasked with slain Changez.

Changez has noticed a move in American behavior since September 11th. He moves to Pakistan from America and he engages in anti-American activities there. This novel challenges the existing stereotypes and misconceptions that promote extreme prejudice against those considered to be "other." (Low 194). "Other" refers to feelings of inferiority due to differences in skin color, religion, or nationality. Gail Chin Liaglow says in his book *White Skin – Black Mask: These Others* are subject to the process of "mimicry," as Homi K. Bhabha used the term for occupied subjects who imitate their colonizers in order to put aside their own skin. Through this, they try to fit into the society that has inaccessible to them. In this context, marginalized groups act in the same way as occupied subjects. Changez does his best to hide his Pakistani distinctiveness under the facade of his American uniqueness, trying to fully put together into American culture. A graduate of Princeton University, he loves the beauty of the Gothic style and believes that the American dream has "come true" (Hamid 3).

At a time he realized to be like a "New Yorker with the city at his feet" (Hamid 1). Before 9/11, America made him feel at home. After 9/11, he became disillusioned. The hospitable atmosphere of New York seemed like a delusion, no longer real one. Although the post-9/11 scenario advocated for peace and an end to fanaticism, America's tactic for ensuring peace was no less intense. The war on terror has increased fear and antagonism. After the attack, the Afghan tribal group al-Qaeda, which was "insufficiently equipped and poorly fed," claimed responsibility for the attack (Hamid 113). Changez states, "I am impressed by how traditional your empire is" (Hamid 178). It was like an imposing restoration in which the peculiarity between colonizer and colonized, between self and other, became distorted. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said reveals that the East is "the West's cultural competitor and one of its most deeply recurring images of the other" (2). The September 11 terrorist attacks hardened the negative image of the East. The Islamic world is measured a center of terrorism. This incident will widen an already obtainable gap. The West is civilized and pure, but the East is unsophisticated and crooked. This idea of superiority paved the way for colonialism. The relationship between the West and the East is a relationship of power, of varying degrees of complex hegemony" (5). The former holds economic, political and technological power, whereas the latter is deprived of these power dynamics in many respects. Therefore, the West retains its domination in the East.

Prejudiced attitudes are also evident in Erica's father's stance towards him, and recurrent references to political unsteadiness in Pakistan, fundamentalism, and spiritual attachment. Even after arriving in the Philippines, he is only respected by Filipinos when he hides his "Pakistaniness" under the guise of American culture. (Hamid 82) His beard makes him even more distrustful, as if he has some association to al-Qaeda, which once again makes his uniqueness problematic in the eyes of American society. He felt like he was being pushed from the hub to the periphery as a terrorist in a situation where ". The FBI was raiding mosques, stores, and even people's homes" (Hamid 107). Syed-ur-Rehman's article "The Success of Understatement" published in the News on April 29, 2007 states that the text has no sacred motives or intentions. Changez withdraws from Western life not because he feels that religion is his definitive dominion of comfort, but because he is disappointed with serving a civilization that does not esteem his culture of origin. This is because the United States is an external country. His return to Pakistan is therefore a decision not about spiritual fundamentalism but about a sense of distinctiveness. He lacks any sense of belonging to American society. His sense of disaffection is so brawny that he returns to Pakistan. The Americans saw him as a foreigner and a stooge of the attackers. He says: "I lacked a stable core. I didn't know where I belonged: New York, Lahore, both, or neither" (Hamid 168).

Numerous scholars have described Changez' actions in articles as anti-American. These papers incorporate "Booklist Review," "The American Dream Turns to Dust among the Twin Towers Rubble," and "Drinking Green Tea into Darkness." The reality is different because he is not a fanatic. He becomes confused and trapped by the image created by public estimation. At one point he is incorrect for an Arab and becomes the object of abhorrence. He has to tolerate Americans' dogmatic, racist, and prejudiced attitudes toward him. His identity crisis is summed up in the following line: He didn't know where he belonged. New York, Lahore, both, neither" (Hamid 168). Globalization brings many trends and identities to people. Being diasporic is the meeting of two unusual civilizations, or the collision of two conflicting things. In *The Suburban Buddha*, Karim expresses the loss of distinctiveness as follows: Perhaps it is the strange assortment of continent and blood, here and there, belonging and non-belonging that makes me restless and easily bored" (Kureshi 3). Qureshi writes in his essay book "Words and Bombs":

There was no empire" (3). This discrimination reinforces feelings of disaffection and the awareness of being "other." Lacan says: "our identity is given to us from outside and we are inherently alienated." It only hides the flaw, this fundamental otherness or otherness" (*Literary Theory, an Anthology* 124). The process of othering the immigrants based on their faith, nationality and culture perpetuates as long as the imbalanced relationship remains between the West and the East. People in the diaspora persist to search for a home. This

housing myth refers not only to the perception of housing, but also to the concept of a shelter that provides safety and security. These places of safety and sanctuary for Pakistanis have failed them in their own society. They are currently pressed to the margins by the bureaucracy and feudal system, the political mafia and the religious mafia. They are marginalized and displaced both at home and abroad. These divisions in Pakistani uniqueness are like national borders. McLeod summarizes Homi K. Bhabha's concept of boundaries in these words, "Borders are important borders full of contradictions and contradictions. Both separate and connect in different places. These are intermediate places that allow movement across barriers" (McLeod 217) People like the characters in these novels that break these barriers for advancement.

The well-informed Pakistanis leave their country for progress and opulence that they see beyond their national boundary. These Pakistanis want progress. They want to shake the image that has been forced on them as fundamentalists, extremists and Pakistanis. Even in their own countries, they want to shed the imposed image of them as agents, heretics, hedonists, and nonconformists. Fundamentalists take liberalism as an issue of divergence and expand it in response. Westerners view Muslims as destroyers and transgressors who can do nothing positive for society. In response, the "other" will imitate the image imposed on him. The false projection of jihadi ideas by so-called religious scholars has brought bad name to the entire Islamic state. The title "The Black Album" refers to the murky side of Islamic fundamentalism, how an existence fraught with setbacks and conflicts casts a shadow on human virtue. The struggle between the Islamic fundamentalism and American imperialism has pushed the liberal characters to the state of ambivalence whether they leave the target country or they stay there with hope for positive changes and version.

Conclusion

The inquiry of identity has been investigated in relation to the presence of Pakistani immigrants as portrayed in the novel. The defeat of identity is the biggest dilemma for people caught between two worlds. The Muslim characters are caught in-between situation when they reside in the United States of America. They are emotionally disturbed when they are humiliated and bullied publicly. Mostly, they are alienated and the experience of isolation leads them to missing for their homeland. They often end up being foreigners in both worlds, despite their best endeavors to combine in with their environment. It is difficult to assert one's own identity while various rival groups at war with each other deny individuals this original right. Individuals, whether liberal or religious, are viewed as "other" by opposing groups. Camouflage is important for integrating into social and cultural structures and protecting against destruction. They do not enjoy freedom of expression and discussion in societies threatened by dominant extremists. Those who question irrational

decisions are declared blasphemers, atheists, or traitors. Thus, like the characters in these novels, Pakistanis are facing a profound identity crisis at home and overseas. This kind of crisis can impact on the global relationship of the West with the East in a negative and disastrous way.

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