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Identity Labyrinths in the Post-9/11 Era: Transnational Writing in The Reluctant Fundamentalist

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Abstract: The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a popular work by Mohsin Hamid, the winner of the 2007 Booker Prize. Hamid, with his dual Pakistani-American cultural background, projects his own reflections on identity into this novel. Following the events of 9/11, the protagonist, Changez, experiences a dramatic decline in his status in New York, the city he calls home. Changez's perception of his identity undergoes a profound shock, and his loyalty to his homeland increasingly surpasses his attachments to money, power, and even love. The 9/11 events ignite deep-seated cultural conflicts, racial prejudices, and discrimination within American society, making Changez acutely aware of his dual cultural and ethnic identity and his status as an "other". This identity crisis prevents him from continuing his life and work in America and ultimately leads to the shattering of his pursuit of the American Dream. This essay uses Changez's identity issues as a central theme to explore his identity loss while chasing the American Dream, his identity crisis after 9/11, and his identity reconstruction upon returning to Pakistan.

Keywords: Mohsin Hamid; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; identity crisis; Transnational Writing; Post-9/11



1. Introduction

Mohsin Hamid, a Pakistani-born author celebrated for his nuanced exploration of identity, migration, and globalization, has emerged as a significant voice in contemporary literature. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) stands as a seminal work, blending political critique with intimate storytelling to dissect post-9/11 America through the lens of a Pakistani protagonist. Set in a Lahore teahouse, the novel unfolds as a monologue by Changez, a Princeton-educated Pakistani who recounts his life in the U.S. to an unnamed American tourist. Over six years of meticulous crafting, Hamid constructs a narrative that critiques American exceptionalism and xenophobia, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. Changez, once a thriving Wall Street analyst, confronts an existential crisis as his identity as a “model minority” immigrant fractures amid rising anti-Muslim sentiment. His dilemma—whether to remain in a country that now alienates him or return to Pakistan to engage with its socio-political turmoil—mirrors the tension between assimilation and loyalty. The novel’s structure, a dialogue-driven encounter shrouded in ambiguity, amplifies its themes. The absence of the American’s voice and the deliberate pacing—marked by descriptions of tea and meals—create an intimacy that belies the underlying tension. Hamid’s use of a Pakistani narrator addressing an American listener invites readers to confront their own biases, making *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* not merely a story of one man’s disillusionment but a meditation on cross-cultural misunderstanding and empathy in an era of global conflict. This paper argues that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* critiques reductive identity narratives imposed by post-9/11 politics. Through Changez’s labyrinthine journey, Hamid reveals how transnational identities are shaped by geopolitical forces, personal disillusionment, and the refusal of easy binaries.

2. Identity Crisis

Changez, from Pakistan, is an alumnus of Princeton University. He comes from a declining Pakistani aristocracy, possessing social status but lacking corresponding economic power. Witnessing the lavishness of the new-money class, he is determined



to realize his American Dream in the world's dominant power. Changez carries the hopes and expectations of his family, traveling alone at the turn of the century to the leading power to "leverage the imperial education system to accumulate cultural capital and convert it into economic capital" (Piao, 2019). As traditional Asian culture merges with advanced Western culture within Changez, his identity crisis begins to surface. This chapter primarily analyzes the identity crisis Changez faces amidst consumerism and intimate relationships.

Firstly, Changez is trapped in an identity crisis triggered by the pitfalls of consumerism. During his time at Princeton, Changez excelled academically, "My exam scores were top-notch, I was great at football, and students like me could get visas, scholarships, and full financial aid, and were invited into academic elite circles" (4). However, to blend in with American classmates from privileged backgrounds, he fashioned himself into what Mike Featherstone (1990) describes as a "self-taught consumer", aiming to transform his identity through consumer activities and acquire suitable and legitimate symbols. Changez, hailing from a once-noble but now impoverished Pakistani family, was clearly in a different social sphere from his American peers. While Changez was struggling with basic needs, cooking in the dorm's basement kitchen to save money, his American counterparts were either wealthy or from affluent families, flaunting their wealth and relying on parental support. This consumer-based disparity acted as a barrier, excluding Changez from social life. The effort to curry favor with the upper class and the deliberate performance of his self-image gradually pulled Changez into the vortex of consumerism and identity crisis.

Besides, Changez is trapped in an identity crisis triggered by his intimate relationship. Having ventured alone far from home to study in the United States, Changez struggles to fit in with his wealthy American classmates and desperately yearns to be understood and share his less-than-smooth journey as an international student. At this moment, the graceful, beautiful, and confident Erica appears like an oasis in the desert, rekindling Changez's youthful enthusiasm from his homeland. Meanwhile, Erica, from a privileged background, also symbolizes the American Dream. As Changez's relationship with Erica becomes increasingly intimate, he realizes that there seems to be a barrier between them, and he cannot reach the depths of Erica's inner world. Although Changez loves Erica deeply, he is unable to connect with her on a spiritual level and is merely seen as a substitute for Erica's deceased



former lover, witnessing Erica's torment from unrequited love while feeling helpless. He can only watch as his beloved woman gradually descends into madness because of another man. The once-vibrant and confident Erica becomes a skeletal figure, "Sitting at the bar is a gaunt Erica, no longer the vibrant and confident woman I once knew; her complexion is pale, her expression tense, and she seems like a stranger" (43). This profound change deeply wounds Changez and leads him to reflect on the intimacy between him and Erica. Changez later realizes, "Erica needs something that I cannot give her; even if I am willing to play a role that is not myself, it is of no use" (65), that Erica needs something he cannot provide, and even if he is willing to play a role that is not himself, it is of no avail. The author Hamid naming the female protagonist Erica clearly alludes to America, reflecting Changez's passionate love for Erica as a metaphor for the clash between his foreign culture and American culture.

3. Identity Loss

Though Changez, a young talent from Pakistan, lacks white skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair, and doesn't have a privileged family background or the coveted U.S. citizenship, he was selected for the prestigious Underwood Samson firm in his senior year, earning the boss's favor and leading several important projects. However, after the 9/11 attacks, this rising industry star felt a pervasive sense of alienation. Before 9/11, America's openness to diverse cultures had given Changez confidence and a sense of achieving his dreams, believing he had secured a ticket to American high society. Yet, in the wake of 9/11, the American society, scarred and changed, turned from its previous openness to a stance of hostility or suspicion towards foreign cultures, especially Islamic culture, which was demonized and viewed as a breeding ground for terrorism. Changez, once a brilliant student with a promising future, found himself lost in this desolate mental landscape, facing obstacles and seeking refuge in vain, his shattered American dream leading him to a state of confusion and helplessness. America's various hegemonic posturing within the international community, as well as Changez's ultimately failed pursuit of the American Dream, compels reflection on the dominant narrative framing the 9/11 attacks as "an atrocity perpetrated by evil forces against virtuous Americans' out of hatred and hostility towards America's liberal democratic system" (Leavy,2007), prompting scrutiny of whether American foreign policy bears some responsibility for the terrorist attacks.



One important perspective in postcolonial studies is the complex and interdependent relationship between the “self” and the “other” in the formation of subjectivity. Prominent postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha proposed the theory of “hybridity” in cultural identity. He argued that “cultural identity is not closed or essentialized but constructed through differences with the other, forming a hybrid cultural identity through negotiation and transformation with the other” (Bhabha, 2012). His theory provides a new perspective for marginalized minorities in multicultural contexts to strive for equal dialogue and achieve identity recognition. In a superpower like the United States, those who flood into New York with dreams are undoubtedly considered “others”. In *Orientalism Once More*, Said highlights the urgency of introducing narratives of the “other” as counter-discourses to the dominant discourse within post-9/11 political discourse. The political discourse he refers to primarily concerns the representation of Arab and Muslim imagery within Western political circles and media (Said, 2004). Changez represents such an “other” from the Third World. He embodies not only the Muslim world but also the minorities pursuing their dreams in America. After 9/11, America developed a fear of Muslims. “Hostile Americans, in an attempt to display their patriotism” (Hartnell, 2011), increased racially motivated attacks against Asian Americans and other minorities mistakenly identified as Muslims. Muslims were perceived as “violent religious extremists” (Scanlan, 2010), and this kind of racial discrimination became the catalyst for Changez’s identity loss.

In the U.S., the 9/11 attacks ignited deep-rooted cultural conflicts, racial prejudices, and discrimination within American society. This made Changez realize that his dual cultural and ethnic identity, along with his status as an “other”, highlighted his position as a vulnerable group in American society, with treatment vastly different from that of native American whites. The extra scrutiny during security checks, the cold stares from colleagues, and the hostility on the streets gradually made him understand that his culture and identity were making it increasingly difficult for him to integrate into American society. Internationally, the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan and retaliatory strikes against Islamic countries made Changez deeply anxious.

As a young intellectual, Changez once boldly believed that he stood at the center of the world from atop a skyscraper in New York. However, the pressures from both domestic and international sources after 9/11 caused him to feel overwhelmed and



awestruck, leading him to become anxious and lost. After deep reflection and self-examination, Changez came to the realization that, constrained by his “other” status, the American Dream for him would forever remain a castle in the air, a mirage—something desirable yet unattainable

4. Identity Reconstruction

After experiencing crises and confusion related to his various identities as an “other”, Changez used the 9/11 events as a means to reinvent himself. He abandoned his step-by-step plan for “success”, adjusted his standards of identity, and embarked on a path of reconstructing himself.

To avoid being othered, Changez embarks upon the arduous path of reconstructing his own identity. “Postcolonial writers employ the colonizers’ discursive apparatus to assert their own subjectivity and thereby challenge colonial hegemony to escape the voiceless status of the other and resist being objectified” (Ball, 2003). During his trip to Chile, Changez was inspired and guided by the president of a publishing company, Juan Bautista, to reconsider his identity. Inspired by Juan Bautista, Changez “compromises between the self and the ‘other’, thereby attempting to reunite two incompatible worlds”(Fu, 2018). Juan Bautista recounted the story of the Turkish Sultan’s Janissaries: Christian children who were captured by the Turks, trained, and became fierce and loyal warriors for the Sultan. “What they destroyed through their battles was their own civilization, making them forever homeless.” This story deeply prompted Changez to introspection. He felt he had become a modern version of a Janissary, serving the American Empire as it was invading a country related to his homeland and possibly dragging his homeland into war. This realization became a catalyst for Changez’s ultimate epiphany, solidifying and revealing his increasing hatred for America since 9/11. He saw the land as an enemy of his homeland and could no longer remain there, perceiving himself as a “servant of the American Empire” (107), which he found unbearable.

Changez returned to Pakistan and became a lecturer at a local university in Lahore, where he extensively promoted anti-American ideas. He made it his mission in the classroom to advocate for how to break away from dependence on the U.S., encouraging students to participate in demonstrations demanding greater independence for the government in international and domestic affairs and to question



various actions of the United States. In interviews, he stated, “No country imposes death on citizens of other nations as easily as the U.S., causing so many people from such distant places to feel fear” (165). In reality, Changez had not escaped the influence of the U.S. His “American identity” was subtly rooted in his subconscious. The financial courses he taught, the practical skills and concepts he imparted, were all learned in the U.S. “The American and Pakistani identities, in both latent and overt forms, constitute the present Changez. The U.S. represents a permanent, unhealable scar for Changez, leaving a mark on his psyche similar to his American identity. Even though he believes he has completely returned to his native identity, he is unwilling to admit that the shadow of his American identity still exists within him” (Li, 2018). Changez’s reconstruction of identity primarily uses his inherent “Pakistani-ness” to mask his “American-ness,” while relying on Western knowledge systems and the imperial economic model he once despised to secure a voice for his ethnic group.

The 9/11 attacks allowed Changez to rediscover his “self” and prompted a period of reflection on the United States. Through the portrayal of Changez’s arduous journey to self-discovery and identity reconstruction as an “other,” Hamid suggests that America should also engage in a process of self-reflection following the event. Moreover, Hamid’s second-person narrative technique invites readers to assume the role of listeners whilst reading the novel, “participating in the construction of the story and lending an ear to the voices of the Islamic world, which have long been silenced” (Wang, 2013). The trauma suffered by Muslim communities living in the U.S., as well as the deliberate and inhumane attacks on Muslim countries by the U.S. on the international stage, reflect America’s intolerance and refusal to communicate with minority groups. Therefore, as a victim of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. must reassess its global policies. To truly eliminate terrorism, it is not enough to wage a so-called “war on terror.” Instead, the U.S. must establish genuine, equal relationships with Third World countries and engage in equal dialogue to address the root causes of terrorism.

5. Conclusion

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid depicts the disillusionment of a young Pakistani’s American Dream. The protagonist, Changez, faces an identity crisis driven by consumerism and personal relationships during his pursuit of the American Dream. After the 9/11 attacks, he experiences a loss of identity but ultimately reconstructs his



self-identity. His journey also reveals various issues within American society and offers insights for finding appropriate identity standards in today's globalized context. Hamid's novel may provide valuable perspectives for contemporary America to emerge from the shadow of terrorism.

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