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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**From Melting Pot to Islamophobia: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

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**ABSTRACT**

America was founded on the idea of the melting pot that guarantees success, an opportunity to prosperity and social upward regardless of race, religion or status at birth. After the events of 9/11, the idealized notion of the melting pot was abandoned. Therefore, another version of America initiates fueled by post-9/11 xenophobia and President Bush administration's "war on terror" launched on the pretext of promoting democracy. The Bush Doctrine, however, represented terrorism as a cause rather than an effect of the long history of Western colonization, oppression and manipulation of the Muslim World. This is exactly where the importance of Mohsin Hamid' novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), is manifested to challenge and subvert the dominant post-9/11 discourse. In Hamid's novel the "Other" is directly represented, not through the Orientalist discourse, but through an Easterner who changes his allegiance from a believer in and proponent of the neoliberal capitalist version of the American Dream to a skeptic and opponent of USA economic and political foreign policy. Therefore, this research argues that Hamid's novel attempts to delineate the discourses of Islamophobia, capitalism, economic and political domination of the west, and fundamentalism in context of 9/11 attacks and their aftermath.

**KEYWORDS**

9/11, American Dream, Islamophobia, Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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**1. Introduction**

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Islamophobia has significantly increased in the West as a dominant mode of prejudice and racialization following the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001 and the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005. Also, the rise of ISIS and the systematized attacks carried out by this organization in the UK, France, Germany, and Belgium increased the levels of racial and religious anxieties about the Muslim "Other". Nowadays, Islam is regarded by the West as a source of intolerance, terrorism and extremism aiming at destroying Western values. Moreover, George Bush's administration has officially adopted a neocolonial policy called the "Bush Doctrine". It primarily centers on using military power on countries which harbor terrorism or aid terrorists to protect American lives and interests anywhere in the world. The American neocolonial policy was also implemented as a justification for the assassination of leaders implicated in acts of terrorism against America, waging war in Afghanistan and the military occupation of Iraq. Complicit with the "War on Terror" agenda, a corpus of literature has emerged which is heavily based on the Orientalist discourse.

By contrast, the Muslim world regards the West as an arrogant, imperialistic colonizer targeting to exploit the natural resources of Islamic world and impose its materialism and mass culture. Deepa Kumar declares, in her book entitled *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, that "Islamophobia is about politics and not religion" and that the "Muslim threat has been mobilized largely by the ruling elites to serve a political agenda, whether the domination of Europe by the papacy in the eleventh century or US expansionism today" (Kumar, 2012, 193). In other words, Islamic terrorism is represented as a demon to be used by America to justify its political and economic hegemony over the world. After the 9/11 attacks, the whole process of demonization of Muslims

and Arabs began along with a parade of questioning, intervening, racial profiling, torturing of Muslims or anyone looking like a Muslim. This campaign was accompanied by public support in the American community.

## **2. Literature Review**

There is a growing body of fictional works dealing with the 9/11 attacks and its aftermath from the perspective of a Caucasian male writers as it is claimed by Kristiaan Versluys who also wonders whether the 9/11 fiction will witness more gender and ethnic diversity or not. (Versluys, 2009, 183) Mohsin Hamid, a British-Pakistani writer, however, belongs to the wide array of Eastern writers presenting the post-9/11 attacks from the perspective of the "Other" appropriating Judith Butler's idea that such writers create a "different order of responsibility in which we comprehend the forms of global power from the perspective of the 'other'" (Butler, 2004, xii). Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is part of the post-9/11 fiction that opposes the dominant discourse which links Islam with terror and shows Muslims as a potential threat to the values of Western Civilization. The novel offers a counter literary response and offers a platform to represent "Otherness" in the canon of 9/11 fiction.

In this novel, the "Other" is represented directly, not through the Orientalist discourse, but through a new kind of transnational narrative, different from the Anglophone literary representation of post-9/11 fiction. In his article entitled "'The Rules of the Game Have Changed': Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and post-9/11 Fiction," Peter Morey states that

Initial fictional responses to 9/11 often took the form either of "trauma narratives", attempting to trace the psychological scarring and mental realignments of characters caught up in the Twin Towers attacks, or semi-fictionalized "Muslim misery memoirs" which often serve to underscore the injustices of Islamic rule and justify neoconservative interventionism (136).

Looking at the literary representation of the 9/11 attacks by major American writers like Don DeLillo, for example, displays the resilience to established Orientalist perception of the "Other". Morey proceeds in his argument suggesting that Hamid's novel, on the other hand, is an example of a sort of deterritorialization of Literature which forces readers to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories of East and West, "Them and Us" and so on—those categories continuously insisted in "war on terror" discourse. (138)

The novel is written as a dramatic monologue with an egotistical narrator similar to Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess" which is about an egoistic Duke narrating the history of his late wife. In the same manner, Changez is narrating the history of his life in America pre and post-9/11 to an unnamed American listener during an evening in Lahore, Pakistan. Hamid's use of the dramatic monologue technique allows readers to see the world from Changez perspective at one point, prevents readers from knowing anything about the American and shows why he is there at Pakistan in that particular time. Is he CIA agent (as Changez implies) assigned to trace Changez movements and activities? Or is he a passing-by tourist?, which we are never told. Margaret Scanlan comments on this point in her essay on the postcolonial novel after 9/11 that the silence American interlocutor is "much of the novel's point" and she goes on to quote an interview with Hamid in which he states that "in the world of American media, it is almost always the other way around"; as representatives of Islamic world "mostly seem to be speaking in grainy videos from caves" (274). Therefore, the novel is basically an encounter between Changez the Pakistani narrator and the unidentified and completely voiceless American. At the beginning of the novel, the self-conscious Changez seeks to establish his identity to the voiceless American claiming his status in Pakistan. Changez states, "I am not poor; far from it" (3). He then explains that his family's wealth is from land-ownership and that his father and grandfather both "attending university in England," while he concludes that: "We employ several servants, including a driver and a gardener—which would, in America, imply that we were a family of great wealth" (9-10). Clearly, Changez is expressing a desire to set up a space in which he will be seen not as the potentially dangerous "Other," but as someone that commands the same dignity and respect as Americans so often demand when dealing with the "Other".

## **3. Analysis**

### **3.1 The "Melting-Pot" Paradox**

The novel traces the experience of Changez, a middle-class Pakistani immigrant, in American society of prior and after 9/11 attacks and how his status shifts between insider/outsider positions. Studying at Princeton, one of US's most prestigious universities on a full scholarship, the clever Pakistani Protagonist excels and after graduation, he secures a job in one of New York top valuation firms. At this point in his life, Changez is at the very heart of the multicultural/melting pot America living his American Dream. One of the major characters in the novel making the new immigrant's journey succeed is Jim who facilitated Changez professional and material accession at Underwood Samson, whose initials stand for US. Based on Changez narrative, he becomes Jim's protégé. Delphine Munos states that Jim is "the recruiting manager who facilitated Changez's material accession to the American Dream" (Munos, 2012, 400). Jim identifies with Changez and he calls his protégé "a shark" in Munos words "hungry for upward social

mobility, yet covertly consuming his cultural and racial difference to the point that the protagonist himself comes to believe that his Pakistaniness is invisible" (400). During their interaction, Jim reveals to his protégé that he comes from humble origins and he is a self-made man. Like Changez, he needs to work hard to make it through school and later on through his career.

Moreover, what attracts Jim to Changez is the latter difference which according to Munos is only valued by Jim: "if it can be co-opted and altered, first through its re-inscription into pre-existing raceless romances of upward mobility, then through its relegation to the past, indeed to the prehistory of Changez's American mimic self" (401). In the same respect, Anna Hartnell, in her article entitled "Moving Through America," associates Jim's specular appropriation of Changez's past and supposedly lowly beginnings with a colonizing gesture or rather a symptom of "the European imperial tendency to treat colonized cultures as the past of the western narrative of progress" (Hartnell, 2010, 341). That Jim's disdain for the past intersects with what Hartnell calls a "utilitarian version of the melting pot," within which the shedding of "old" loyalties and cultural particularities is crucial to the construction of a "new" American self (Hartnell, 2010, 341-342). Based on what is mentioned above, when Changez fails to be what is meant for him, Jim is the first one to expel him from the promised land.

The other major character contributing to Changez ascending Journey is Erica, an upper-class white writer with whom Changez starts a relationship at the beginning of the story. Erica manages to secure Changez cultural and social upward as he becomes her escort to Manhattan's elite circles. Their relationship, however, did not succeed because of Erica's fixation with a dead lover named Chris, who died of cancer. It officially collapsed after the 9/11 attacks when Erica suffers from depression and can never get over her dead boyfriend. The attacks brought Erica's experience with death to the surface and it seems to her that life is a cycle of dealing with loss. Eventually, she gets institutionalized after her mental deterioration until she commits suicide as indicated by Changez later in the novel.

If Underwood Samson and Jim stand for the capitalist America, Am/Erica stands also for American nationalism. Therefore, Changez's and Erica's love affair is an allegory of America's relationship to its immigrant countries. Changez has tried many ways to win Erica's heart, but all his attempts failed because of the dead lover. Later, reflecting on his demeaning experience with Erica, Changez reveals that while making love to Erica he played the role of Chris. Regarding this incident, he reflects: "I lacked a stable core [ ...]. Probably this was why I had been willing to try to take on the persona of Chris, because my own identity was so fragile" (151). Ironically, the dead lover is more alive than Changez himself. Determined to be part of the American system, the well-educated Changez tries hard to fit in well with his surroundings. He even states that he immediately becomes a New Yorker let alone an American. For him New York is an enchanting city full of new horizons and possibilities: "city of possibility with its magical vibrancy and sense of excitement" (157). Changez is willing to do what it takes to be a New Yorker. Therefore, he blindly follows Underwood Samson's guiding principle indicating "focus on the fundamentals," which he will later completely reject. He will also assume the role of Chris while making love to Erica to win her heart and body. Through Changez's relationship with Jim and Erica, Hamid dramatizes the protagonist's infatuation with the American system varying from his connection with Underwood Samson and Jim to his relationship with Erica. Having said this, his relationship with his host country has, unfortunately, influenced his relationship with his country of origin.

During a trip to his home before the attacks, Changez is unable to fit into his old life he had in Lahore. He looks around his residence and his country with something similar to disgust as he suddenly notices how shabby and ill-maintained his home at Lahore is. While observing the cracks in the ceiling and "dry bubbles of paint flaking of where dampness had entered its walls" (124), Changez continues to say: "I was shamed. This was where I came from, this was my provenance, and it smacked of lowliness" (124). He realizes that his home has always been like this, but as he says, "I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me" (124). This feeling of alienation and displacement towards his home will continue even after the 9/11 attacks. In other words, Changez will be unable to settle down neither in America nor in Pakistan.

At the peak of his achievement while living his American Dream, Changez wrongly thinks that "my Pakistaniness was invisible, cloaked by my suit, my expense account, and – most of all – by my companions" (71). However, his carefully constructed image of himself as a thrusting young US executive is shattered in a moment when, in a chauffeur-driven limousine which carries him along with his American colleague, Changez encounters the hostile stare of a fellow driver caught in a traffic jam on the streets of Manila:

There was an undisguised hostility in his expression; I had no idea why. We had not met before – of that I was virtually certain – and in a few minutes we would probably never see one another again. But his dislike was so obvious, so intimate, that it got under my skin. [...] I remained preoccupied with this matter far longer than I should have, pursuing several possibilities that all assumed – as their unconscious starting point – that he and I shared a sort of Third World sensibility. [...] I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making

my way home, like the people on the street outside. (67)

Here, Changez realizes that he is more connected to the Filipino man trapped in the jam rather than to his American colleague from Underwood Samson. At this point, he realizes that he connects more to marginalized countries as he finds solidarity in their struggle against the powers that control them. Perhaps these feelings might explain Changez initial response to the events of 9/11:

I turned on my television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but the news. I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased (72).

In this scene, Hamid shows the complexity in Changez position. His smile while viewing the collapse of the World Trade Center foregrounds Changez's resistance to belonging to America. Although he is a product of the American educational system, earning a considerable amount of money in serving America's capitalist system, and, most of all, in love with an American woman, Changez is glad that America is brought to its knees. Changez initial response to 9/11 attacks exposes his conflicted sense of belonging to the empire that has dominated and exploited many countries all around the world including his own country.

### ***3.2. Changez: The Face of Terrorism***

The events of 9/11 constituted a decisive turning point in the life of Changez and his relationship with his host country. This is when Changez realized that he is living in a nightmare and that the melting pot notion is not but a myth. He is brought face to face with the American closed policy as he suddenly finds himself victim of racial profiling and Othering. When Changez flew back from Manila to New York, he was "uncomfortable" in his "own face" (74). At the airport in New York, he is singled out and separated from his colleagues. While "they," his colleagues, joined the "queue for American citizens" he joined the queue "for foreigners" (75). At immigration office, he is asked repeatedly about the purpose of the visit, although he replies he lives there (in America). In this incident, not only Changez is reminded of his real status as an outsider or a foreigner, but also he is labelled as a terrorist for what he looks like, the religion he practices and the country from which he originates.

What Changez experiences is something that many people, who are or are perceived to be of Middle-Eastern origin, continually deal with in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Munos, drawing on whiteness studies and psychoanalytical theory, observes that only after the attacks of 9/11 does Changez experience a "crisis in self-identification" while noting that, until then, Changez had been a "model-minority" (Munos, 2012, 396) according to the American perspective. Although Changez is not Middle Eastern, his appearance is considered sufficiently similar to this group of people and, as a consequence, he suffers some of the same abuse that they did. After the airport incident, Changez is publically humiliated. In a parking lot and while Changez was passing by, a man calls him a "Fucking Arab". Infuriated, Changez calls out, "Say it to my face, coward, not as you run and hide" (118). Even in the subway, people were furiously staring at him. This is the same subway he used to take wearing a white embroidered Kurta, a Pakistani traditional custom, and yet felt part of the multicultural New York. Changez says, "More than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares" (130). His boss, Jim, realizes how Changez felt after these series of incident and tries to help him. In an attempt to reduce the pressure of the antagonistic climate surrounding Changez, Jim says, "I know what it's like to be an outsider"(132) giving further emphasis on Changez's situation as an outsider not only in New York, but also in his work place.

### ***3.3 "Focus on the fundamentals"***

As his American dream crumples, Changez finds it harder and harder to apply Underwood Samson's principle guideline, "focus on the fundamentals," which is the first lesson Changez learned from Jim when joining Underwood Samson. According to Changez, "It mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value" (98). Underwood Samson is known for evaluating companies to break them and selling them in line with the firm's motto for a company which, as Hartnell suggests, "seems to represent the pragmatic face of American state power" (Hartnell, 2010, 340). Now after what he has gone through, Changez sees focusing on the fundamentals as harsh and uncaring. Moreover, realizing that his making valuations has contributed to employees' loss job, he is unable to put aside his guilt.

When the U.S. starts bombing Afghanistan, a neighboring Muslim country to Pakistan, Changez and his team are assigned to evaluate a cable company in New Jersey. They consider how to make the company more profitable and compatible with their client's present operations which will ultimately requires "headcount reduction" (95). As a result, Changez and his team face the animosity of the company's employees who know Underwood Samson will ultimately be responsible for the loss of their jobs. Changez is uneasy with the burden he is to carry in the company's future. He truly sympathizes with the older employees who have spent a lifetime with the company. He wants to respect them, "show them deference--or even sympathy" because he knows

their means of living is coming to an end. Changez wants to address them with utmost respect, which the English language does not allow him, though his native language Urdu does. His crisis with Underwood Samson, however, will reach a peak in the next assignment in Chile where his company is assigned to assess the value of a non-profitable publishing company. The company's chief operating officer is an old man, Juan-Bautista, who is not pleased at the arrival of Underwood Samson to evaluate his publishing house for the prospective buyer. Changez takes an immediate liking to the old man who loves literature and is resisting a corporate raid of the book store he runs. He reminds Changez of his grandfather. When Changez and Jim first get to the book store, Juan Bautista asks Jim if he knew about books. "I specialize in the media industry," Jim replies. "I've valued a dozen publishers over two decades." To which Juan-Bautista replies, "That is finance" (141). Changez jumps into the conversation telling them that his father's uncle was a poet in Punjab. Later, Changez and Juan-Bautista connect over Changez's father's uncle, literature, books and most of all their mutual concern regarding the domineering capitalism of the new world. By this time in the novel, Changez is discontent with his work and, in the aftermath of 9/11, is questioning everything he had believed to be true. The climax takes place when Juan Bautista draws a parallel to Changez present situation with janissaries. Janissaries, Juan-Bautista explains were, "Christian boys [...] captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to" (151). Based on this, Changez views himself as a traitor, a modern-day janissary, "a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with kinship to mine" (152). Overwhelmed by questions of belonging and loyalty, Changez decides to be loyal to Pakistan, his birth place, where his family lives.

On the surface, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* could be read as a story about a young radicalized Muslim who became an enemy of America after being enchanted by the American Dream. However, Mohsin Hamid explains to Claudia Kramatschek in 2007 that his protagonist "is a reluctant fundamentalist because his environment sees him as a religious fundamentalist, though he isn't one. He, on the other hand, rejects the economic fundamentalism of the business world to which he belongs – a world oriented solely around gains and losses. For me, this is what fundamentalism is: looking at the world from a single perspective, thereby excluding other perspectives." (Kramatschek, 2007) In the novel, the word "fundamentalism" does not refer to religious dogma or to any religion in this respect since Changez is not a practicing Muslim. He, on the contrary, fully embraces the American culture. In the novel, Mohsin Hamid subverts the implications of the word "fundamentalism" providing different forms of fundamentalism such as economic and political fundamentalism. Therefore, fundamentalism is not related to Muslim extremism, it is associated with any ideology that refuses to see the other side of the story, or the other perspective of the story. Having said this, Hamid indirectly suggests that fundamentalism is associated with American capitalism since Jim, the number one man in Underwood Samson, states as the motto of the firm: "Jim, exhorts his employees mercilessly to "focus on the fundamentals." This term is used as Underwood Samson's guiding economic principle which means, as suggested by Changez, "single-minded attention to financial details" regardless of other implications. Later, Changez faces the true side of the meaning of strict adherence to the economic fundamentals of his company which is simply suggestive of the American economic control and domination all over the world. Changez is even surprised that it has taken him so long to understand and reach such a conclusion that he cannot be part of project of domination: "It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision" (177). Changez does not want to be part of the American Empire and its policy of domination, which controls the lives of poor people in developing countries.

He consequently becomes isolated from the American Dream, a disbeliever of the melting pot myth and angry at America as a whole for disseminating the concept of Islamophobia. Changez begins to see America as heartless and selfish, abusing people and destroying their lives both abroad and on its own soil in order to benefit itself. He begins to feel that the American Dream is all about this heartlessness and no longer wants to be a part of it. Changez develops apathy towards the world around him, which is seen through his attitude towards his job and the people around him. More importantly, when Changez realized that the pursuit of the American Dream has robbed him of his former identity, he then chooses to embrace more elements from his home country, such as his beard, which Changez describes as "a symbol of my identity" (130). This is when he is forced to choose one side, and he chooses the side of his home country, rejecting all what America represents.

#### 4. Conclusion

Hamid's novel resists providing one, definitive conclusion as it challenges readers to consider other perspectives. The novel also emphasizes the limitations of a singular perspective and a singular truth. Therefore, the story is a good example of changing one status according to new revelations. Towards the end of the novel and in a semi-surreal scene in the street of Lahore, Changez, while still addressing the voiceless American, fantasizes about his life in America until he finally confesses that while living in America he has been "changed," a word conjuring the idea of a dream as much as geographical movement:

Such journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us. (173-74)

The above quoted passage summarizes the journey Changez has undertaken to fulfill his American Dream and how he lost directions because of the blurred boundaries created by the Orientalist discourse after the 9/11 attacks. Therefore, Changez, at the end of the novel, has made his choice to go back to Pakistan, work as a university lecturer and become an anti-American activist.

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