

***The Reluctant Fundamentalist:* Hybridity and the Struggle for Identity**

Amani Sami Salmeen

English Language Department,
Jubail University College,
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,
Email: SALMEENA@ucj.edu.sa

Published: 15 April 2019

Copyright © Salmeen.

Abstract

Mohsin Hamid is a Pakistani novelist and consultant. His second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, was widely acclaimed. This Paper discusses the issue of hybridity and identity struggle as experienced by the main character of the novel, Changez. He is a Pakistani who graduates from Princeton University and joins a high-end valuation firm in America. This paper examines the issue from a postcolonial perspective. Changez struggles to remain in-between, but his personal, social and political experiences lead him to take a difficult yet expected decision.

Keywords: hybridity, identity, struggle, culture

Introduction

The main Character in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez, struggles to find his identity within the western culture. Changez is a Pakistani who graduates from Princeton University and joins a high-end valuation firm. The story takes place in Lahore where Changez meets an American tourist, and he tells him his story of how he loses his love, job, identity and sense of belonging. The world after 9/11 is not the same, and this has greatly contributed to his struggle. He suddenly has to stop at airports for inspections because of his identity. Being a Pakistani and a Muslim is no longer a reference to one's religion and culture,

Cite this article: Salmeen, A. S. (2019). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist: Hybridity and the Struggle for Identity*. *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science*, 7(3), 31-37.

but a stereotype and a label with many implications. Changez also struggles to find a place for himself in the American school, market, and society. But all is lost. The shift from caring about one's self to one's nation and country is reflected clearly in this novel. This paper discusses the struggle of Changez's hybrid identity, and how the personal, social, and political conditions affect him.

Background

Hybridity is used here to refer to the cultural mixing between the West and The East. HomiBhabha introduced the concept of hybridity to describe the construction of culture and identity within the conditions of colonial discourse. (Meredith 2)

While Edward Said's *Orientalism* keeps the space of the colonizer and the colonized separate, Spivak argues that because of the dominant regime of colonial discourse, the post-colonial subjects have no voice. Bhabha; however, is interested in the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized, which results in a fusion of cultural forms and cultural perspectives(167). This fusion leads to the existence of an in-between space. HomiBhabha remarks in his book *The Location of Culture* that this third space destroys the representation of culture as an integral code but rather a "homogenizing, unifying force."(37)Changez is a Pakistani who develops a hybrid identity as he immigrates to America in pursuit of the American dream and aiming for a better life. However, throughout the novel, he fluctuates between one identity and the other, and the fusion of the two identities is shortly lived and finally ends with the 9\11 attack.

Discussion

The first half of the title connotes a state of hesitation and resistance and the second half connotes an extreme reaction, though not purely religious, which represents his state of mind in the novel.

The fact that the novel is written in dramatic monologue gives the Muslims, represented in Changez character, a voice. Changez believes that the Muslim voice on the 9/11 attack is ignored. As Ingrida Egle Zindziuviene comments:"Changez's determined voice and strong opinion make the reader sympathize with him. Moreover, it makes the reader accept or seriously reconsider his point of view"(153)

Changez's interlocutor appears to be unjustifiably fearful. The narrator repeatedly and sarcastically reassures his interlocutor that he means no harm and everything that seems to alert him is simply the result of the stereotyping and exaggeration that make fear, suspicion, and caution be his first instinct in Lahore. This is evident in the very first sentence:"I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard" (Hamid 1).He specifically refers to his beard because it has come to be falsely associated with fundamentalism and terrorism. Another instance is when the unnamed visitor seems suspicious of a man who turns out to be the waiter. The sarcastic manner in which Changes converses with the visitor seems to mock his fear, which is exaggerated. The mundane activities that take place around them seem to stress this point, too.

During Changez's journey to Greece, he stands an observer; an evaluator of his peers' behavior. He does not see himself in the way they behave. He is annoyed at how they spend a large amount of money for a meal, and how they talk down to those whom they pay for their service. He remarks:

I... found myself wondering by what quirk of human history, my companions—many of whom I would regard as upstarts in my own country, so devoid of refinement were they—were in a position to conduct themselves in the world as though they were its ruling class (Hamid 13).

Changez comes from a culture where the elder is respected and values are upheld. He has experienced what it is like to live a life of struggle and hardship. On the other hand, he sees those young individuals who are born into fortune but lack manners and sophistication.

Changez imitates the American lifestyle and tries to behave accordingly in order to fit and have access to power. Changez starts to “mimic” the attitude, styles, and behavior of the other culture. Amardeep Singh explains Bhabha's concept of Mimicry which Changez demonstrates in the first half of the novel:

Mimicry in colonial and postcolonial literature is most commonly seen when members of a colonized society (say, Indians or Africans) imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of their colonizers (say, the British or the French). Under colonialism and in the context of immigration, mimicry is seen as an opportunistic pattern of behavior: one copies the person in power, because one hopes to have access to that same power oneself. Presumably, while copying the master, one has to intentionally suppress one's own cultural identity, though in some cases immigrants and colonial subjects are left so confused by their cultural encounter with a dominant foreign culture that there may not be a clear preexisting identity to suppress.

Changez comes from a different culture. He has a different set of values and expectations. In the beginning, he seems to try really hard to blend in. He even considers himself a New Yorker; tempted by the power and the desire to fit in. At first, He accepts being a part of the American culture and living the American dream. However, he is aware that he is different and can never be looked at as an equal let alone an American"...and was well liked as an exotic acquaintance"(Hamid 11). He is well aware that he is the "exotic" other and will always be looked at and regarded as such. Nonetheless, he assumes a hybrid identity. Changez talks about being in New York. He states: "moving to New York felt, unexpectedly-like coming home" (Hamid 18). He talks about his own culture in the same paragraph: "Urdu was spoken by taxicab drivers... the presence of a Samosa -and -Channa serving establishment..." (Hamid 18). The two identities merge.

He is welcomed by the multicultural city of New York and sees a future for himself, has a good job, and accepted by everyone. He sees parts of his home, cuisine, and music in New York. It might be the only part of America where he feels that he belongs. He says: "I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker" (Hamid 19).

There are two characters who are aware of Changez's struggle; Wainwright and Jim. The former sympathizes with him until the end while the later acknowledges his intelligence and hard work but prioritizes work. Wainwright is Changez's colleague and seems to understand and empathize with Changez. As Changez lets loose a little and enjoys living the American life, Wainwright makes a statement, an allusion to star war, that foreshadows and states what's to come: "Beware the dark side, young Skywalker"(Hamid 21). Wainwright is the only one who does not shun Changez after he grows his beard and advises him to shave it. On the other hand, Jim, Changez's boss, who comes from a humble background himself, is the first to recognize Changez's lack of really belonging: "You know where that comes from? ... It comes from feeling out of place"(Hamid 23). He realizes that even before Changez himself.

The feeling of foreignness and being out of place haunts Changez throughout the novel. There are incidents where Changez opts to refer to himself as an American from New York. For instance, when he goes to the Philippines, he tries really hard to show that he is one; however, the way white Americans are treated is different from his treatment. He cannot escape his cultural identity and feels ashamed of that. He reproaches himself for choosing to be an American when he wants to be seen in a favorable position. The struggles between the two identities is strong.

In addition to mimicking the culturally privileged American culture to appear in a position of power, he also brags about his job; another aspect which gives him more sense of security. When he visits his girlfriend's house and is met with disrespect by the gatekeeper, he states the nature of his job: "as I stated my business—this had its desired effect"(Hamid 26). In another instance, Changez realizes that New York is wealthier than Lahore, and Manila was as well. This fact upsets him; "I attempted to act and Speak, as much as dignity would permit, more like an American"(Hamid 32).

He smiles when he first knows of the attack on the World Trade Center. Not because he is a vicious person or enjoys bloodshed, but in the back of his mind he sees it as a victory. He states: "I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (Hamid 35). America is no longer as invincible as it seems to him.

Changez cares deeply about the troubles of his homeland. He is upset and occupied with the Indian-Pakistani conflict. Later on, when he is ranked number one in his firm and awarded a prorated bonus, he cannot enjoy his achievement and is worried that his country might be at the verge of war.

The turning point in his identity struggle is when he goes back to New York. He experiences the post 9/11 America first hand. Of all his colleagues, he is stopped for inspection in the airport because of his racial background. He is infuriated by the looks, the insults, and the discrimination he is met with. He begins growing his beard. Changez's struggle to be a part of two cultures, two "opposites," intensifies by the 9/11 attacks. The way in which this matter was handled enforces his reaction against the American identity. Darda argues that Agamben describes Bush's conduct after 9/11 as the moment at which the "emergency became the rule" (qtd.in Mosaic 117). The policy of treating individuals as potential criminals instantly puts them in the defense. Changez's political experience is the

trigger behind his later reaction and rejection. Simon Frith comments in his book *Culture and Identity*: "In talking about identity we are talking about a particular kind of experience, or a way of dealing with a particular kind of experience. Identity is not a thing but a process" (110)

The fact that Changez experiences hybridity makes him aware of both cultures and sees the perspectives of both. He is more aware and more immune to assimilation. It enables him to see the injustice and bias against him and his people. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue:

Indeed hybridity, rather than indicating corruption or decline, may, as Bhabha argues, be the most common and effective form of subversive opposition since it displays the 'necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination (9).

Changez's hybridity enables him to view one and the same situation through the eyes of an American and a Pakistani. He states after visiting Lahore:

I recall the Americanness of my own gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing. I was struck at first by how shabby our house appeared, with cracks running through its ceilings and dry bubbles of paint flaking off where dampness had entered its walls. The electricity had gone that afternoon, giving the place a gloomy air, but even in the dim light of the hissing gas heaters our furniture appeared dated and in urgent need of reupholstery and repair. I was saddened to find it in such a state, more than saddened, I was shamed. This was where I came from, this was my provenance, and it smacked of lowliness (Hamid 56).

His attitude towards his house changes instantly. In the same exact page, he views his house as a Pakistani, as a son, and as a person who grew up in it and contemplates how he begins to be what he dislikes the most. He realizes that he himself has changed. He realizes that being away in a different culture has changed him and feels disturbed by this realization. He states:

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 when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country's elite (Hamid 56).

He defends his country and the way it is portrayed in the media, and the way some easily believe what the media depicts: "in the stories we tell of ourselves we were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see in your television channels but rather saints and poets" (Hamid 47). This point further moves him away from the western identity. He sees the different way in which the eastern culture is perceived, and how misrepresented it is.

After coming back to America, his language begins to reflect his pride in his heritage, culture, religion and country. He seriously considers going back to his country.

All the aspects that make it easy for Changez to be a part of the American culture fail him. Changez fails to establish a sense of belonging. He fails to belong to his girlfriend, Erica, whom he tries to be a part of her life but fails. Erica cannot forget her deceased

boyfriend, and Changez loses her to depression and possibly suicide. There is no chance for him to live in America, start a family, or even work.

When he goes on a business trip to Chile, he is overcome by his emotions and perplexed by what's happening in his country. He sees the true colors of politics. He says: " My blinders were coming off, and I was dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of my arc of vision"(Hamid 65). He realizes that he never approves of the way America "conducted itself in the world" and how it interferes with the affairs of others (Hamid 70).

This form of imperialism is what Edward Said describes as lingering in cultural aspects and the political, ideological, economic and social practices (9). This is the point where his struggle rests.

Changez sees the futility of what he is doing. His job means nothing to him. The majority of the people around him no longer welcome him. He is an unwelcomed bearded-stranger. He decides to go back and be with his family. He intends to do something for his country. As he leaves America, he causes a security alert in the airport. He is not surprised this time as he expects it. He helps his country by speaking against the American policy as a lecturer and protesting against it.

Changez's experiences could be the reason why he loses his job in America. He alienates himself from the society. By the end of the novel, we cannot for sure say that Changez becomes an extremist, but he does become a strong opponent of the US.

Conclusion

The end of the novel does not give a clear answer as to what happens next and is left to the reader to fill in the blanks, but it is safe to say that the ending represents the future of American-Pakistani relations, or the west and the east. Both have the ability to alienate or befriend the other. There is caution on both parts and none trusts the other completely, but there is also room for a future of understanding and coexistence. It all depends on how it plays out.

Cultural hybridity allows Changez to view both cultures side by side. However, it is distorted and affected by politics. Changez struggles to remain in-between, but his personal, social and political experiences cause him to take an extreme standing. It is of no concern whether his reaction is justifiable or not, right or wrong, but the process which leads to such a reaction and how to deal with it is worth contemplating.

References

[1] Hamid, Mohsen. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. London: Penguin Group, 2007. Print.

[2] Bertens, Hans. *Literary Theory*. USA: Routledge, 2008. Print.

[3] Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Singh, Amardeep. "Mimicry and Hybridity in Plain English." *Amardeep Singh*. N.p., 8 May 2009. Web. 28 Dec. 2016.

- [4]Cain, William E., Laurie A. Finke, Barbra E. Johnson, John McGowan, and Jeffery J. Williams. *The Northon Anthology Theory and Criticism*. USA: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. Print.
- [5]Darda, Joseph. "Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's the Reluctant Fundamentalist". *Mosaic: A Journal for Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. 47 (2014): 107-122. Web.
- [6]Ed. Stuart Hall, Stuart, Paul Du Gay .*Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: SAGE, 2003. Print
- [7]Rvaldy, PadelMuhamadRallie. "A Lover Who Didn't Fall in Love: Multiculturalism Study." N.p., 2015. Web.
- [8]Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- [9]Singh, Amardeep. "Mimicry and Hybridity in Plain English." *Amardeep Singh*. N.p. 8 May 2009. Web. 28 Dec. 2016.
- [10]Zindziuviene, IngridaEgle. "Rambling Confessional Narrative in Mohsin Hamid's Novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 158 (2014): 147-154. Web.