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Post 9/11 Islamic Identity in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* **Ms. Hoineikip Haolai**

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Gauhati University, Guwahati, India

Abstract

*The events that unfolded on what is now referred to as '9/11' have led to a stereotyping of the Islamic community as 'terrorist' and antithetical to the American way of life. The Muslim culture has been sought to be projected as fundamentalist and barbaric, fostering extreme reactions like terrorism as a counter response to western attitudes. This stereotyping has led to a sense of insecurity among Muslims especially amongst those living in the United States of America. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the protagonist Changez is a Pakistani who has lived and studied in America, looking forward to a successful career in the corporate world. His notion of identity takes a turn after 9/11, when he starts to feel misjudged, misunderstood and alienated in his adopted country. In my paper I would like to explore how the idea of 'self' developed in Changez after 9/11 when Western society began to adopt an anti-Islamic stance. The hostile attitude of the Americans towards Islamic society has steered Changez to embrace his roots as a Pakistani and his true identity as a Muslim. I would also like to explore how the transformation of the concept of the 'Other' in the post-9/11 world came about and how this alteration has affected the notion of the Self.*

Key Words: Identity, Self and Other, 9/11, stereotyping, counter-narrative.

September 11, 2001 has become a marker in world history. The day that proved America was not immune to national threat and attacks resulting in the loss of hundreds of lives. Noam Chomsky describes this act of terror as "something quite new in world affairs" because of its target. (41) This 'external' threat to the nation was bold and took the entire nation by surprise. This event is considered as a marker in human history because of the effect it had on the geopolitical and global scene and is considered the greatest and the most publicised tragedy in recent times. Western cultural production since September 11 has remained deeply influenced by the events of that single fateful day.

Soon after, there followed a vast body of literature which solely aimed at representing the impact of this traumatic act be it political, cultural or social. Many critics and thinkers have tried to understand the event as a politically and culturally constructed one while fiction dealt with the trauma experienced by victims presenting an "ideologically informed narratives of tragedy." Writers dealing with 9/11, attempt to make sense of it in both personal and public levels.

The impact of this tragedy was greatly felt by the Islamic community worldwide, and more on the Muslim immigrants in America. There has been a dramatic change in the world's focus on them, both in nature and in magnitude." (Khalis, 87) Islamic writers have also tried to narrate their side of the story, voicing "emotional truths" as their way of coping with discrimination and social

exclusion. In the post 9/11 world there has been a stark change in the attitude and approach towards the Muslim community. This change in outlook has led to a renewed awareness among the Muslims regarding their identity and true self, especially the Muslims living in America.

However, it should be noted that even before the events of September 11 took place, the idea of Islam as a hostile, inferior and a strange culture was already deeply entrenched in the minds of Americans and Europeans. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* argues that friction between the East and the West cultures prevailed since the time of the Crusades, when the East were advancing towards West and later when the European forces started colonizing the West. This friction between East and West led to a formation to an Anti- Islamic discourse which exists till the present day. According to Said,

...the principal dogmas of Orientalism exist in their purest form today in studies of Arabs and Islam...one is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient particularly this based on texts representing a “classical” Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third Dogma is the Oriental is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself: therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically “objective.” A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared or to be controlled. (Said, 300-301)

These misconceptions about the East or in particular– the Islamic culture, is viewed as highly problematic and this situation has only been intensified since the 9/11 attacks. Every Muslim is viewed as a potential terrorist, fanatical and violent, giving rise to what is known today as ‘Islamophobia’.

The notion adopted by a group of Western intellectuals is that there is a ‘clash of civilizations’, beliefs, ideologies and cultures between the East and West. “Known as Clash Theory, it purports that entire groups of people who share the same religion or geography also share the same consciousness and beliefs.” (Raynor,1) Samuel P Huntington one of the main ideologues of the Clash theory, in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* gives an account of the issues of global politics in relation to pre and post 9/11. He explains how clashes between civilizations are main causes of global unrest, posing a big threat to world peace. While Huntington’s Clash Theory may provide some explanation for the ongoing conflict, his account is however biased to a certain extent. He opines that –

Muslims fear and resent Western power and the threat which this poses to their society and beliefs. They see Western culture as materialistic, corrupt, decadent and immoral. They also see it as seductive, and hence stress all the more the need to resist its impact on their way of life. Increasingly, Muslims attack the West for not adhering to an imperfect, erroneous religion, which is nonetheless a “religion of the book”, but not for adhering to any religion at all. (Huntington, 213)

Huntington claims that the incompatibility between East and West cultures is because of the Muslim’s inability to accept Western ideologies of secularism, freedom and modernity. He also provides a certain number of factors that increased conflict between the opposing cultures in a pre 9/11 era. According to him the first factor was the “Muslim population growth” which resulted in a large number of unemployed Muslim youths who became “recruits to Islamic causes” and migrated

to the West looking for better opportunities. Secondly “the Islamic resurgence has given Muslims renewed confidence in the distinctive character and worth of their civilization and values compared to those of the West.” Thirdly “the West’s simultaneous efforts to universalize its values and institutions, to maintain its military and economic superiority, and to intervene in conflicts in the Muslim World generated intense resentment among the Muslims.” Fourthly “the collapse of Communism removed a common enemy of the West and Islam and left each the perceived major threat to the other.” Fifth “the increasing contact between and intermingling of Muslims and Westerners stimulate in each a new sense of their own identity and how it differs from that of the other.” (211) Huntington in his description of reasons for the decrease in tolerance between East and West societies raises a “fundamental question of power and culture ...Who is to rule? Who is to be ruled?” According to him the relation between East and West is defined by this conflict and the contest of which civilization is the superior and will continue to do so in the future “even as it had defined them for the past fourteen centuries.” (212)

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is the second novel of Mohsin Hamid, a novel which at many levels defines the relationship between America and the Islamic World pre and post 9/11. As a post 9/11 novel by a Muslim immigrant writer, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* succeeds in bringing out the disillusionment felt by the Islamic immigrant population after the event. The novel’s significance also lies in its representation of “contemporary political and ideological tensions” and how it critiques the global political affairs in its narrative. The novel deals with the interior emotional world as well as the exterior political world by shifting the perspective from the white American to the Muslim immigrant American. Instead of focusing on the tragedy of the event and its aftermath, Hamid concentrates more on America’s ‘other’- its Muslim counterpart and the reaction of a Muslim individual towards the event. Before *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, there were not many Muslim writers who came up to voice their grievances against stereotyping and social exclusion. This novel is one of the initial works of fiction which contradicts the culturally structured notions and stereotyping by white Americans. This act of writing back a defying narrative is a part of what Edward Said calls “a constant struggle to re-represent Islam” and “a reactive counter response.”

Mohsin Hamid throughout his novel uses the dramatic monologue as a narrative style which gives a voice to the Muslim protagonist and in turn silencing the dominant rhetoric of the West triggered by 9/11. The entire text is narrated by Changez who is a Pakistani, to a supposed American tourist in a tea stall in Lahore. The opening lines of the novel immediately sets a tone of suspicion and mistrust which follows through the entire text–

“Excuse me sir but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened of my beard. I am a lover of America.” (Hamid,1).

The very first line of the novel suggests that the American listener was ‘alarmed’ and ‘frightened’ by the narrator, or at least the appearance of the bearded narrator. From the very beginning and throughout the novel, the wariness of the silenced listener is pointed out at many occasions. The narrator then embarks upon a storytelling session about his life in America which goes on till night fall. The protagonist narrator Changez, is a Princeton graduate who lives in New York, he scores a job in the prestigious valuation firm, Underwood Samson. He does well at work and falls in love with a troubled fellow Princeton Graduate named Erica. His life seems comfortable and satisfying until the horrible events of 9/11, after which his position as an outsider becomes highlighted. He decides to give up his American dream after he watches the attacks on television, it evokes in him a

sense of joy, and seeing the twin towers collapse he explains that he was “caught up in the *symbolism* of it all” (Hamid, 73). Hamid in his novel depicts how the events of 9/11 played a major role in distancing Changez from his adopted country and from his idea of American fundamentalism. He undergoes a transition when it becomes clear to him that he can never fully give up his identity after he faces social discrimination because of his ethnicity. He returns to his homeland and serves as a lecturer in a University and becomes an activist for “greater independence in Pakistan’s domestic and international affairs” (Hamid, 179). Taking part in many protests and meetings he becomes a popular figure and is soon under suspicion when a plot to murder an official, employed by America, was unravelled. He discloses that America might send an emissary to ‘intimidate him or worse’. The story ends on a note of suspense when the narrator offers a handshake to the American who reaches the inside of his jacket and on noticing a glint of metal, he says “[g]iven that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards.” (Hamid, 184) The vague ending leaves room for the reader to speculate the possibilities of what could have happened and to judge on his/her own terms and understanding.

Mohsin Hamid uses the dramatic monologue as a narrative technique to assert an individual identity over the dominant American rhetoric, whereby completely silencing the listener– “the author presents the text as a form of ‘writing back’ to the dominant discourse.” The character of Changez, in his monologue explores “the parameters and contradictions of global politics and the conflicted voice of modernity.” (Nath Aldalala’a, 3) Changez in narrating his story in flashback recalls the fateful day of September 11 2001. During his stay in Manila he happens to come across the news of the attacks on television. At first he perceives the images as fictitious, but on realising the actuality of the events smiles to himself. His reaction perplexes him but later admits that it was the ‘symbolism’ of the attacks that he was focusing on.

After the attacks, on his return from Manila, he is separated at the airport from his colleagues at the immigration desk. He is asked to join a queue for foreigners and while the rest of his team join the one for American citizens. He was the last passenger to board and on his entrance he is given looks of concern by many. “I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty; I tried therefore to be as nonchalant as possible; this naturally led my becoming stiff and self-conscious.” (Hamid, 74) It is after this incident that a slow transformation in him begins. He confronts and suffers many unpleasant changes in the attitude of the American public. “Affronts were everywhere; the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment in history- not just from the government, but from the media and supposedly critical journalists as well- provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger.” (Hamid, 167) Changez’s sense of belonging and awareness of Self in association with the American society undergoes a transformation. He begins to grapple with finding his personal identity in between his social identities as a Pakistani and a citizen educated and employed in America. As a student in Princeton, he conducted himself in public like “a young prince, generous and carefree” working three jobs to keep up with the outer persona which he admits he conducted successfully– “most people I met were taken in by my public persona.” In many occasions Changez made an attempt to fit in with the American outward persona he wanted to project.

I did something in Manila I had never done before: I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an *American*. The Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues, accepting them almost instinctively as members of the officer class of global business– and I wanted my share of that respect as well. (Hamid, 65)

Even in his relationship with Erica, Changez takes on the persona of her deceased boyfriend Chris to be able to make love to her. He later realises it was his own lack of a “stable *core*” which disabled him from connecting with Erica. It dawned upon him that he lacked identity and was not certain where he belonged— “in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither.” (Hamid, 148) He is torn between his original homeland Pakistan, and adopted country America. “His American dream dies along with Erica, as he realises that the country and the character had become consumed by a narrative which could not include him.” (Andrews, 45) His relationship with Erica represents the most prominent symbol of Changez’s exclusion from America. After the events of 9/11 Changez feels the need to be more Pakistani than before. When he visits Pakistan he admits that he was actually hiding his true identity in America and everything he projected was false. After accepting his identity as a Pakistani and fully embracing it, he grows his beard which is of significance in the narrative. Changez explains “It was perhaps a form of protest on my part a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind”. He allows his body to “become a carrier for national identity” (Andrews, 113). Changez’s new appearance subjected him to verbal abuse by total strangers on the subway, and at his workplace Underwood Samson, he became a subject of whispers and stares. The incident that acts as a “final catalyst” to the embracing of his Pakistani identity takes place on his last Underwood Samson assignment to Chile. There he meets Juan Bautista who tells him the story of the Janissaries, young Christian boys who were made slaves as children in the Ottoman Empire and who became the best and most faithful elite soldiers because they had no memory of ever belonging to another culture. But Changez who was already eighteen when he came America was much older compared to the Christian boys who had no prior memory whatsoever. Juan Bautista challenges him when he ends his story saying “The janissaries were always taken in childhood. It would have been far more difficult to devote themselves to their adopted empire, you see, if they had no memories they could not forget.” (Hamid, 151) That night Changez in introspection admits that he had become “a modern day janissary, a servant of the American empire”. He immediately quits his job and leaves America for good.

As Changez narrates his story it becomes evident that the fundamentals suggested in the title of the story are in fact the fundamentals of American society- “He begins to question the fundamentals of aggressive capitalism in which he participates, and thus becomes ambiguously, a reluctant fundamentalist.”(Aldalala’a, 5) In the post 9/11 world Changez begins to identify with Afghanistan, a country which becomes a victim in the War of Terror. Pakistan is made to support American troops in launching attacks on their neighbour and friend, a fellow Muslim nation. The War on Terror causes him to change his self-understanding and he reveals—

I was no longer capable of so thorough a self-deception. I did, however, tell myself that I had overreacted, that there was nothing I could do, and that all these world events were playing out on a stage of no relevance to my personal life. But I remained aware of the embers glowing within me, and that day I found it difficult to concentrate on the pursuit— at which I was normally so capable— of fundamentals. (Hamid, 100)

In his discovery of Self as a Pakistani Changez admits to his American listener that he had always resented how America conducted itself in the world, constantly interfering with other countries’ affairs and finance was the main means to exercise its power. (Hamid, 156) Realising that he too played a part in this ‘project of domination’ when he was an employee of Underwood Samson he confesses how it surprised him that he required so much time to arrive at his decision to quit.

Said in *Orientalism* stated that

The construction of identity— while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, is finally a construction— involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always a subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us”. Each age and society recreates its “Others”. (Said, 332)

Therefore keeping in mind Said’s views on the construction of identity, if we look at Changez’s character his identity is in fact a recreation of the society which became hostile towards him after 9/11. His social experiences are responsible for the feeling of animosity which he has developed for America— a country which he once loved. Changez becomes victim of the “re-interpretation of differences” and while bearing the brunt of the War on Terror and sudden social hostility by the Americans towards his religion and race, he devises a conception of his Self which is a “reluctant anti-American”— despite his admiration for America as a land of opportunity. All the experiences he faced in America after the events of 9/11 and the persecution he went through for being a Muslim resulted in a reinforced identity thus the idea of him assimilating into an American society becomes a complete impossibility. (Said, 335) The latent Muslim-ness in him surfaces as a result of the aftershocks of 9/11 and he develops a confident sense of identity, embracing his own ‘Otherness’.

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