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**CONSTRUCTING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: A STUDY OF
 THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST**

Rajesh Verma, Colombo Plan Lecturer, Yonphula Centenary College, Royal University of Bhutan

Abstract:

Identity is a social, cultural and religious construction which always takes place in a context. What happens when the context changes? Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist raises such issues through the character of Changez who is from Pakistan and has shifted to America for a better future. His initial success at Princeton University as a student and later with Underwood Samson as an employee makes him believe that America respects the multicultural construction of identities but is it the truth? In this paper, I will try to analyze the novel through some of the concepts of identities.

Keywords: *Hegemony, ideology, Identity, Culture, Globalization.*

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid is his second novel and it was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2007. The novel is about the traumatic experience of a man after 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre. Mohsin tests with the narrative techniques making the outcome of the story more outstanding and realistic. The account of action takes place at a café in the Old Anarkali district of Lahore on a single dusty evening. The protagonist, a bearded Pakistani called Changez, buttonholes an American traveler and offloads the story of his life. It is the story of an outburst of a man who could be any common man living on this planet. Mohsin foregrounds the psychological reasons for the reluctance of the “fundamentalist”. Changez, an outstanding intellectual, had to undergo through many hurdles in his life because of his being conscious of being a Muslim. He abandons his job and leaves US; once a dream place and returns to Pakistan. The stiffness formed between Pakistan and India also troubles his mind and he becomes more conscious about the security of his family and country. This paper explores the means to understand how Changez in the novel “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” experiences bitterness of being a Muslim resulting in how one feels when one is robbed of one's happiness on numerous levels after the attack of the World Trade Center on 9/11. The novel is about how a dream can differ and affirmative action in the form of reluctance can take place.

The Novel examines the various aspects that Changez underwent after the attack on the World Trade Center. The attack on the World Trade Center was an attack on the American people as a whole. America is a country where people of different colors lives and multicultural practiced is followed. The attack of 9/11 holds its chain of events that reveals a sequence of incidents interconnected and worsened by the capitalist and religious antagonistic mindset on a larger scale. Kurien (2004), states that, “It is now well understood that religion and religious institutions often play a central role in the process of ethnic formation, particularly for immigrants to the United States.” It includes Changez's failure at love, disappointment at workplace due to religious bias and tensions created because of the progression of the events happening. Changez who is with full grown beard declares at the beginning of the novel to the American listener that he loves America. This declaration is of course ironical but nevertheless in the course of incidents narrated in the novel, we come to know that Changez does not register any outrageous negative remark against the country, rather for him, America works as rescuer. “Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible. I have access to this beautiful campus, I thought, to professors who are titans in their fields and fellow students who are

philosopher kings in the making” (Hamid, 2007, p. 6). The lines clearly hold the view that Changez was having positive thoughts, despite having faced lots of trouble during the stay at America. But at the same time, it indicates the notions of revolt and its immediate target seems to be invisible and hence more complicated and painful. No matter how hard he tried to align with the American culture, there was a hidden force pulling him back to his roots. Being a Muslim was a feeling that gradually arose in his mind through certain gestures or behaviours. While in Manila, his differing thoughts become seeming. Riding in limousine with his American friend, he grasps a Filipino from the car window, driving another car. There was aggression in the Filipino's eyes that makes Changez painful. At that moment his friend talks to him and Changez looks at him, what happens next is described by Changez in these words:

Something rather strange took place. I looked at him at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work and thought, you are so foreign. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt I was playacting. (Hamid, 2007, p. 40)

Changez discusses about the time in the US, where he attended Princeton before working for a blue-chip financial firm in New York. Being a Muslim, he is singled out from the rest and the terrorist attack on 11 September proves to be a lethal reason. According to a dominant perspective within critical race theory, becoming an American is strongly linked to whiteness. The conception of whiteness has expanded over time from the limited notion of the American as a white Anglo-Saxon incorporate others such as the Italians and the Irish (Ignatiev, 2008).

Changez tries to conceal his Asian identity and attempts to introduce himself as a New Yorker. He tried behaving and speaking like American. It demonstrates an act of mimicry on the part of Changez. Not even his mimicry enables him recognition and egalitarianism in the American society. Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare (Lacan, 1997). Mohsin presents with the advantages of fiction writing work, an elaborated picture of the circumstances which took shape after the attack. Muslim community's marginalization indeed has become more painful and less discussed phenomenon owing to the variations in world politics and terrorism which was branded as Muslim religious creation. It explores Islamophobia with sensibility, documenting how Muslims “have been targeted, othered, and killed.” (Bharucha, 2014, p.71) He felt completely disheartened after 9/11. The welcoming nature of New York seemed to be a delusion and not a reality anymore. When the Twin Towers were attacked, a cultural divide slowly cracks open between Changez and Erica. Erica at the unconscious level holds back her body and soul from Changez, a kind of denial of the identity of Changez; because she feels that she belongs to her ex-boyfriend, Chris. Changez's dream rapidly begins to slip into nightmare, “At the airport, I was escorted by armed guards into a room where I was made to strip down to my boxer shorts I had.” (Hamid, 2007, p. 36) The above line symbolizes Changez being look down by the Americans. He is changed from a Wall Street star analyst to an apparent enemy. “I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners” (Hamid, 2007, p.36). The line infers how Changez was treated differently and hegemonized at different point of his stay at America. After September 11, scenario demanded peace and end of extremism, but the strategy adopted by America to secure peace was equally extremist such as, war on terror, aggravating the anxiety and antagonism. After the attacks, Al Qaida 'an ill-equipped and ill-fed' Afghan tribal group accepted the responsibility. Changez states, “I was struck by how traditional your empire appeared” (Hamid, 2007, p. 157). It clearly demonstrates Changez's condemnation of the act. The heinous act of tragedy of September 11, 2001 on World Trade Center has arguably fueled the American government and led the Bush administration to start War on Terror against 'evil dictators' of the world. It was just like restoration of the colonial period that strengthened the difference between the colonizer and the colonized, self and the other.

Said (1994), reveals that, Orient is occident's "cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other." September 11 attacks confirmed the negative image of the Orient. The Muslim world was looked at as the hub of terrorism. The already existing gulf was widened by this incident. Occident is civilized and pure, while Orient is uncivilized and corrupt. This notion of superiority paved way for colonialism. "The relationship between Occident and Orient is relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony." (Said, 1994) Whites being spared for inspection and Asian probed for a deeper inspection attributes more of a mind game. Hamid states that Changez after leaving Jim's office, he was marched to the elevator bank by the security and he realized his colleagues' suspicion towards him over past few resentful- weeks due to his beard. "...had I been convicted of plotting to kill them rather than of abandoning my post" (Hamid, 2007, p.71). The lines clearly emphasize how his colleagues suspect him. Others did not bother to look at him it was just Wainwright, another black American who too was marginalized, shook his hand.

Racism of Underwood is exposed through the action of the employers of the firm that believes in meritocracy. "Tell me something. Where are you from?" (Hamid, 2007, p.7). Even their evaluation of ailing firm and firms from developing countries reveals the company's embedded trait of racism. Similar to the firm's policy, America also shows its intolerance to other cultures which is hidden under its banner of multi-culture. American outlook on non- European especially Arab immigrants becomes hostile after the attack on World Trade Centre. Asians were looked at differently with suspicion at every level of society by the main stream. Changez's separation from his team at immigration center at the airport while returning from Manila and Erica's father giving derogatory remarks about Pakistan show and America's discrimination towards Muslims. "Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten... the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, even people's houses; Muslims were disappearing perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse" (Hamid, 2007, p. 94). Such acts by the people and law holding agencies highlight subjugation and discrimination of minorities. The law abiding good citizens were made scapegoat for the mistake of their tribesman from a distant land. These events lead to differentiation between the orient and the occident culture in a land where guiding action of the people contradicts the country's principles.

We can interpret the notion the dominance of Americanism through the concept of Gramsci's concept of hegemony and the racial discrimination is eminent in the American society, commercial firms and even the country itself. After 9/11 the social milieu of America changed entirely and sentiments and frustrations of Americans are portrayed through new dimension. The meritocracy is being given no importance and ultimately the old radical prejudice is visible in new form. The idea of multiculturalism and melting pot is put into question. Such changes result in Muslim community becoming vulnerable and exposing to violence and mockery. Ill treatment from the federal state and people created envy and loath in Changez towards America though his love for Erica offers him a hope to stay and identity with America belongs to America. This can be further substantiated by Shumaila Memon claims on Samuel Huntington's theory 'clash of civilization' which came into vogue and long-repressed term 'crusades' also reverberated in each section of socio-political arena, which paved the way for the post 9/11. As a result, every Muslim across the globe and especially in America was suspected as a potential threat and was treated with intensive suspicion, hatred and xenophobic feelings. Changez's feeling of not being American is encouraged after he meets Chilean publisher Juan-Bautista. Changez considers himself as a modern day janissary and illustrates his dislike towards America. "I was a modern day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship of mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war" (Hamid, 2007, p. 152). His returning to Pakistan is a decision concerned with the sense of identity instead of religious fundamentalism. His sense of belonging with American society gradually disappeared. The feeling of alienation was what had strongly pushed him back to Pakistan. Americans looked at him as an outcaste and a messenger of

attackers. He says, "I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged, in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither..." (Hamid, 2007, p. 168). Morey incorporates the points that an unavoidable theme running through the novel is that Changez is always *acting* roles – acting like an American, or a poor-boy-made-good, or an exotic acquaintance – because "he lives with the knowledge that his identity is constructed in the gaze of others" (Morey, 2011, p. 144). Changez's distinguishing voice, with its cultural associations of an upper-class background, is a re-orientalist voice, the voice of a character who has been Western-educated and is now accomplishing an identity for a Western audience. The act is not a wholly false or insincere portrayal, but is made furiously and angrily at being in a position of an exhibit, a spectacle. When Changez came back to New York from Lahore, he signifies this change of consciousness by maintaining bread which was two weeks old. "It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part," he recalls, "a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind" (Hamid, 2007, p. 59). Changez's beard intensified unease among his mates at Underwood Samson, who see it not as a "form of protest" but as a provocative gesture. Though, Changez's beard is not about harmony with terrorists but with those living in a time of precarity in South Asia. The idea that he is parting "reality" in Pakistan once again disparities the "play-acting" of finance with the world of precarious life. Preserving a beard is Changez's way of prompting himself of and thereby offsetting the American norms that confine his capacity to identify the lives of others. Changez does not characterize himself as a devout Muslim yet he sees this identity as a critical site of confrontation in the months after 9/11. The theory put forward by Butler on coalition-building advances does not "depend on the brokering of identitarian claims" (Frames, 162); it rather mobilizes against the forces that create precarity. In the years after the attacks on World Trade Centre, lives of many Muslims were threatened. Identifying and contesting this precarity therefore becomes a breakthrough to build an international coalition of the Left. (Butler, 2009)

Mohsin Hamid a post-colonial writer from Pakistan in this novella presents a plot using frame story method through narration technique of dramatic monologue. Through his character's protagonist Changez, he portrays challenges faced by a diasporic Muslim in the land of hope. The narrator criticizes America's post 9/11 policy towards Afghanistan, other Muslim nations and also its meddling in the global economy. The prejudice shown by Americans on Muslims develops hatred and division in the society which results in some men like Changez developing a feeling the America is not their home land. The character emerges as a Muslim hero at the end of the novel. It portrays the bitterness of being a Muslim hero, eventually resulting in how one feels when one is robbed of one's happiness on myriad levels after the attack of 9/11.

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