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Introspective Gaze of a Pakistani-American: An Exploration of the Echoes of Nostalgia, Nationality and Nationhood in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a transcription of the traumas of 9/11 attack on innocent Pakistanis. Hamid took an attempt in this novel to show how millions of people's lives are affected by this attack, what inconsistencies are there in the so called American Dream, and how the virtual 'melting pot' concept gets vivaciously affected by it. At the same time the author has portrayed a love story between Changez and Erica, mingled up with the pertinent issues like nationhood, nationality and patriotism. This novel is a type of bildungsroman narrative, where at the end the protagonist finds his true identity, and preaches the message that terrorism is the dealings of a few Pakistanis and Afgans and it is utterly wrong to mark them all as 'terrorists'. In this way, the novel is a scripted

answer on the Muslim responsibilities of the 9/11 attack on the twin towers of Manhattan.

Keywords

Nostalgia; Nationality; Diaspora; Mohsin Hamid; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007), Mohsin Hamid's second best-selling Booker nominated novel, is set against the backdrop of September 9/11 attack on the twin towers of America and focuses on various burning contemporary issues like racism, nationalism, rootedness as well as uprootedness, and the frustrated love between the representatives of two distinct cultures: Erica, a white American girl and Changez, a black non-residential Pakistani youth. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can well be called a re-writing of the clash between the Islam and the Secular west. The novel consists of a long dramatic monologues by Changez, a Pakistani graduate of Princeton University, while, a silent American CIA agent is constantly evoked as the novel's silent interlocutor, yet never allowed to speak directly. That the American is silent is much of the novel's point, for as the author noted to Deborah Solomon, "in the world of...the American media, it's almost always the other way around"; representatives of the Islamic world "mostly seem to be speaking in grainy videos from caves" (Solomon 16). Hamid cites Albert Camus's *La Chute* as the model for his narrative, for as Changez himself remarks, "the confession that implicates its audience...is a devilishly difficult ball to play" (70). But how far his story is to be believed truly posits a question.

Hamid's protagonist, Changez, tells a stranger the story of his life over a meal in Lahore's famous Anarkali Bazar. Yet, although Changez speaks and his companion and readers listen, the person who Changez actually addresses is himself. It is as if two broken halves of his personality is in dialogue. He lays bare his life before and after 9/11. He describes it evocatively in the book, 'it is the scent of jasmine mixed with the smell of roasting meat' (14). Briefly, his story

is that, a brilliant student, Changez is the topper of his class in Princeton and is picked up by a leading financial company in New York. He soon becomes the company's best troubleshooter. His eyes are fixed on the final goal and on the bonus that he will get from a deal. Yet, beneath his ruthless and cold brain beats a warm-blooded Pakistani heart. Changez bows as he enters rooms, speaks most politely to his colleagues and in an overly gentle, old-fashioned way. Changez meets Erica, a beautiful blonde while on holiday in Greece and is instantly attracted to her. To complicate matters, Erica confesses that she is still in love with her dead boyfriend and that she cannot get herself to forget him. Her illness is more than just a nervous breakdown. She is sick in her spirit. They have sexual encounters too, but in spite of bringing them together it distances them apart. The past memory of the dead lover overpowers Erica and benumbs her senses. She commits suicide, leaving Changez utterly destitute. Erica's longing for a dead lover parallels Changez's longing for a lost land and the novel manages to capture these parallel universes in a sensitive and tender tone.

The sublimated content of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a political manifestation of older European colonialism under the repression of an 'American empire' after 9/11. Against this milieu, Hamid's protagonist is not only an alienated being in an isolated country, but an exception, who, unlike his fellow employees, questions the very issue of America's hovering over Afghanistan, namely, as a resisting force against terrorism. 9/11, a deeply ambivalent sign of trans-nationalism and globalization, has re-framed older debates about American multiculturalism and 'melting pot' concept. Arundhati Roy too echoes as follows:

America's grief at what happened has been immense and immensely public. It would be grotesque to expect it to calibrate or modulate its anguish. However, it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try to understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own. Because then it falls to

the rest of us to ask the hard questions and say the harsh things. And for our pains, for our bad timing, we will be disliked, ignored and perhaps eventually silenced. (Roy 223)

The novel's more obvious symbolism is reflected in a firm named "Underwood Samson", the initials of which recall the nation while American nationalism is personified by a woman named Erica. On graduation, Changez is hired at Underwood Samson (US), a firm with offices in midtown Manhattan that analyzes businesses' plans and project profits. Changez is too pleased to get included in that domineering powerful force. "*Focus on the fundamentals*" is Underwood Samson's "guiding principle...single-minded attention to financial details, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value" (98), and when Changez quits, he reflects that his "days of focusing on fundamentals were done" (154). He is in the Philippines when he sees the first televised images of the World Trade Center, and his response shocks him. As the twin towers collapse, he smiles; and is "remarkably pleased" (72). When he tells this story, the nameless American clenches his fist, but Changez rushes to assure him that he recognizes it as "hateful", that he was "caught up in the '*symbolism*' of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (73). Naturally, Changez conceals this repugnant emotion from his colleagues, but when he recollects that Erica is in Manhattan too, he no longer needs to feign anxiety. As soon as Changez returns to the United States he sees that September 11 has turned him from a successful immigrant into a terrorist suspect. Stories begin to emerge of Pakistani cabdrivers beaten, of FBI raids on mosques, of "Muslim men...disappearing...into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse" (94). The sight of American forces dropping into Afghanistan enrages him, for Afghans are Pakistan's neighbors and fellow Muslims. But American television announcers share none of his qualms, and he cannot bear to watch "the partisan and sport-event-like coverage given to the mismatch between...American bombers...and ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesmen" (99). Moreover, Erica disappears "into a powerful *nostalgia*" from which he

cannot retrieve her; she enters a secluded clinic, but then vanishes altogether, having apparently committed suicide, though her body is never found. America similarly breaks down; the nation committed to progress is determined to “look back”; and Changez suspects that no part has been written for someone like him. Only at work Changez finds relief from this yearning for a “classical period that had come and gone, if it had ever existed at all” (117). Increasingly alienated from his colleagues, Changez accepts Jim’s offer, a last chance really, to value a book publisher in Valparaiso, Chile. The Valparaiso assignment puts him directly in conflict with his cultural pride. He not only values his own academic success, but his uncle’s fame as a Punjabi poet; “books are loved in my family” (142). Moreover, the firm’s old patriarch, Juan-Bautista, cultivates Changez’s discontent, comparing him to the janissaries who, serving the Ottomans, “fought to erase their own civilizations” (157). Paralyzed, Changez surfs the Web when he should be working, watching the build-up to a nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, and sensed that the United States, even while building military bases in Pakistan, refuses to side with her against India. Changez resigns, ashamed that he “had thrown in his lot...with the officers of the empire, when all along I was disposed to feel compassion for those...whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain” (152). So Changez returned to Pakistan, as he tells his silent American auditor. He is fed-up with America’s failure to “reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you” (168). “America”, he concludes, “had to be stopped” (168). In the circumstances, as lights go out, as mysterious bearded men pause in shadows, and a sound like a pistol shot rings out, Changez’s words sound ominous. No wonder his auditor, looking “ready to bolt”, reaches for his cell phone under his jacket. It is in fact a classic ‘cliff-hanger’, with Changez asking a final question: “Why are you reaching in your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal.” (184)

One of the most troubling questions in this novel is the formation of ‘Nationhood’. Diana Muir has rightly argued that Nationhood is a pre-condition of liberal democratic government. It is not the only pre-condition for liberal

democracy, but it is a basic pre-fundamental described by political theorists as a presumed condition or a tacit assumption in all discussions of liberal democracy. The shared culture that we call nationhood has the apparently unique capacity to create a degree of social trust that makes it possible for large populations to enjoy civil liberties and participatory government. She further asserts that nationalism is, of course, a notoriously double-edged sword. It has the power to incorporate diverse groups into a single nation to produce a democratic government, but, like other political systems, it can also create the conditions that produce imperialism, tyranny, militarism, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Nationhood, this sense of a people whose lot is cast together, enables large populations to act in unity to achieve such difficult goals as maintaining a decent and effective government, and producing those functional, expensive and delightful aspects of civilization that are inseparable from the specific culture that produced them: literature, law, philosophy, art and most crucially facilitates economic prosperity. The central character, a Pakistani youth, from the very beginning is pre-occupied by the question of nationality. He feels pangs for his family, left behind in Lahore, but still carries on his duty well. Problems start after the attack of 9/11 on the twin towers at Manhattan. America's bitter treatment towards Muslim youths seem unbearable to him. He himself becomes victimized as well as harassed for sporting beard and suspected as a terrorist at the Air-port. He comes back to Pakistan. Becoming a University Lecturer, he adopts the role of a leader, preaching about how America is colonizing in an improvised way by brain-draining and thereby making the natives themselves unfaithful patriots involving them as tools in setting up a fundamental egalitarianism.

His times are mostly engaged in meetings, political discussions, University lectures and imprisonment. But none of these could curb his spirit, he remains engrossed in reveries with Erica, effecting a kind of 'pull a tug' at his moods. In his words,

'I had returned to Pakistan, but...I remained emotionally entwined with Erica, and I bought something of her with me to Lahore... waves of mourning washed over me, sadness and regret prompted at times by an external stimulus, and at others by an internal cycle that was almost *tidal*, for want of a better word. I responded to the gravity of an invisible moon at my core, and I undertook journeys I had not expected to take.' (172)

An imminent concept that is intertwined in the concept of nation-hood and patriotism, is his unfulfilled love for Erica. Though from the beginning, he is keenly attracted towards her beautiful bodily charms, he makes no such overtures to seduce her, instead Erica finds him 'polite' enough, giving 'people their space' (26). Even after knowing about Chris, her dead ex-boyfriend, he makes several attempts to pick her out of that trauma, though he fails. They had several talks on 'What's Pakistan like?' and she often points out that he misses home, though he is content enough where he presently is. She also confesses that she misses 'home' too, but her concept of home 'was a guy with long, skinny fingers' (28). Her dream of becoming a novelist was never realised, therefore, she lives the world unknown, unheard and unread. Often times, under psychological turbulence he compares both the countries alike,

'Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed'. (34)

Nonetheless, Erica's father, when asking him how things were back at home, points to the question of fundamentality, 'Economy is falling apart... Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else

suffers...But the elite has raped the place well and good, right? And fundamentalism' (54). Changez was the only non-American in their group, but he carefully hides his 'Pakistaniness' under his cloak and suit, by his expense account, and his companions. When he smiles at the fall of the twin towers of Manhattan, it suggests his patriotism, that the all-encompassing American strength gets somehow diminished by this attack. But he is no sadist, the deaths of thousands innocents makes him sad too. New York, which resembled 'home' to him earlier, undergoes a change, as American flag invades New York everywhere. It was Erica who somehow guesses the agonized state of Changez, she often tells him, "I love it when you talk about where you come from...you become so *alive*" (81). Hamid has successfully chosen to discard the bond between the lovers showing the age-old Orientalist concept that East and West can never be brought together under the same Sun. In *A Passage to India*, E. M. Foster too, attempted several times to make these bipolar regions coming closer through the friendship between Aziz and Fielding, but he too, disappointed in bridging the socio-cultural gap between them.

Changez, in spite of showering affection on his sickly beloved, finds dead Chris to be an evident rival, and in their second sexual intimacy, his presenting himself pretending to be Chris in Erica's imagination, to arouse her dormant sensuality, cuts the chord of their relationship finally. Though, repelled by the death and destruction caused to the thousands in Manhattan, he ultimately remains sympathetic towards his fellow Muslims, newly termed as 'terrorists' and America's unquestioned dominance becomes too much for him to bear. His nostalgic memories at Lahore, concern for family compels him to return to his own land. His revisiting Lahore through an American gaze annoys him, he decides to keep beard as a sign of being a Muslim citizen, which 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...for multiple reasons, I was deeply angry" (130). He comes to this realization, as he was the hardest man to upset Erica most, probably, America has now ventured on to avenge against

Pakistan in a likely way. His preoccupation with Erica and home finally settles him to create a new identity. He resents acting like a janissary, a missionary tool to erase his own civilization, and set his fundamentals against America's neo-colonizing project:

'I reflected that I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role. Moreover I knew from my experience as a Pakistani—of alternating periods of American aid and sanctions—that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power. 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'. (156)

He also realises that Erica deliberately avoids him choosing to be a part of her story, he therefore remains an outsider, an 'other' at the conclusion. His returning to Lahore was a new beginning of his Pakistani nationalist zeal. His effort was now to show false American interests in the guise of fight against terrorism, bringing so many deaths to Afganistan and Iraq. He becomes a mentor to the common people showing the exact interest of America in clear eyes, to issue a firefly's glow bright enough to transcend the boundaries of continents and civilizations.

Thus, to be too simple, this novel is a protest against America after the 9/11 attack to generalize all Muslims being 'terrorists', and avenging against them causing deaths and destruction to many. Hamid's primary concern behind writing this novel is to prove that America herself has brought about this injury to herself; Osama Bin Laden is none other than a product of America herself;

and that, not all Muslims are terrorists, majority of Pakistanis are fun loving peaceful people, totally ignorant of the political scenario of the then world.

The constant diversion in narration creates a kind of Brechtian effect continuously reminding the readers that they are told a story, and all that is told, presented and depicted, are designed for a greater purpose, showing the protagonist's metamorphoses from 'innocence to experience'. Rightly thus one can conclude with A. Roy, "Terrorism has no country. It's transnational, as global an enterprise as Coke or Pepsi or Nike. At the first sign of trouble, terrorists can pull up stakes and move their "factories" from country to country in search of a better deal. Just like the multinationals, terrorism as a phenomenon may never go away. But if it is to be contained, the first step is for America to at least acknowledge that it shares the planet with other nations, with other human beings, who, even if they are not on TV, have loves and grieves and stories and songs and sorrows and, for heaven's sake, rights." (Roy 233).

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