

The Fictionalization of the Traumatic Horror and Suspicion in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalism*

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Abstract: The cataclysmic attacks of 9/11 have triggered a new trend in both history and literature, a trend that is represented through the dichotomy of 'before and after' 9/11. In reality, the identity crisis of Arab-Americans in the US existed before the 9/11 attacks, however, the trauma of that tragic day and its aftermaths has had a strong impact not only on the US but on the world community. This study explores the fictionalization of the traumatic horror and suspicion in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalism* (2007), a novel that displays the 9/11 attacks and their repercussions on the identity of Arab/Muslim immigrants in the US. The study also highlights the way Hamid uses the 'dramatic monologue' to depict the eclipse of American Dream and the post 9/11 binary opposition of "us versus them." Most importantly, the study investigates the new implications in Hamid's use of the term 'fundamentalism' in the novel where he has challenged the prevailing perception of the alleged Arabs/Muslims as fundamentalists.

Keywords: Post 9/11 novel, Trauma, Crisis of Identity, Dramatic Monologue, the American Dream, "us versus them", 'Fundamentalism', Trumpism.

Introduction

The Reluctant of the Fundamentalist is Mohsin Hamid's magnum opus novel which was published in 2007 and straight away became a million-copy international bookseller and shortlist for the Man Booker Prize in 2007. It is indeed an important addition to the aftermath of the post 9/11 literature. In 2008, it was shortlisted for the 2008 Commonwealth Writers Prize. *The Reluctant of the Fundamentalist* is of much appeal worldwide and is translated into over 25 languages. *The Guardian* selected it as one of the books that fittingly defined the decade. Hamid's narrative presents a new and innovative outlook through which the post-9/11 Western-Eastern relationships can be re-examined. Written in the form of a 'dramatic monologue', the novel is a mesmerizing narrative of fascination and repulsion towards America. As an identity narrative, it can be seen as a 'cultural write back' which attempts to capsize diverse stereotypical narratives of hegemony.

Trauma fiction is habitually based on the recollections of undergoing a personal collective traumatic experience – the narratives of collective or shared traumas examine both individual and collective aspects. Thus, a trauma narrative incorporates both the reader, who may play a role of a person in whom the wound/narrator reveals or one with whom the wound/narrator shares the traumatic experience. The term 'trauma novel' copes with a work of fiction that embodies a heartrending reaction to deep loss, calamity, disorder, or destructions on the personal or communal level.

Based on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and the post 9/11 theory of Richard Gray, this study traces the traumatic experience of the Arab/Muslim immigrants in Mohsin Hamid's post 9/11 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Based on the accident which generates the making of trauma narratives, Caruth states that the accident "[...] does not simply represent violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility" (6). The traumatized protagonists become historical symbols of horrifying experience and bring to perception the specificity of personal trauma that is immensely linked to social aspects and cultural values. Laurie Vickroy argues that the trauma narratives "[...] sharpen victims' pain with readers, shifting between what can and cannot be revealed" (2). Thus a trauma novel exemplifies the victim's trauma, shares it with the reader, shows an unequivocal realistic and chronological dimension, and is often derived from documents and evidences. Caruth contemplates that psychic trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind that ruptures the victim's 'traumatic experience' (4), self and the world, and that brings an immensely upsetting suffering to the individual.

Trauma fiction stresses the role of 'place' which renders traumatic experience through metaphorical and material spectrums. Put differently, portrayals of the environmental place of traumatic experiences may convey a greater literary context, while the physical surroundings tender an opportunity to take a look at both the individual and the cultural history pertaining to the depicted scenery.

The cataclysmic attacks of 9/11 have triggered a new trend in both history and literature, a trend that is represented through the dichotomy of 'before and after' 9/11. In reality, the identity crisis of Arab-Americans in the US existed before the 9/11 attacks. However, the 9/11 trauma and its

aftermaths have had a strong impact not only on the US but also on the world community at large.

Providing the reader with a chance to question the reasons behind 9/11 terrorist attacks, writers of post 9/11 fiction seek to unravel the veracity of the post-9/11 US without any decoration. Besides, they make one experience the magnitude of the tragedy or even identify oneself with the victims. In his seminal book *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, Gray argues that narratives, which "[...] present post-9/11 America as a transcultural space in which different cultures reflect and refract, confront and bleed into another" (55), are definitely "fictions that get it right" (17). Gray adds that one of the distinctive features of the post-9/11 fiction is to "[...] resist the challenge of silence by deploying forms of speech that are genuinely crossbred and transitional, subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – us and them, West and East, Christian and Muslim" (17).

Michael Rothberg, a professor of English and director of the unit for criticism and interpretive theory at the university of Illinois, pays heed to the fact that 9/11 can be understood both as a psychic/individual trauma and a cultural/collective one whose impacts not only exacerbate in the mind of those directly affected by the tragedy but also in the identity of the nation en bloc. Rothberg makes it clear that "American writers must direct their gaze outward to produce "a centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality." And in response to 9/11, the American novel must offer a "cognitive map" to imagine "how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others (qtd. in Catherine Morley, "How Do We Write About This?" 719). Adam Kirsch, a contemporary American poet and critic, argues that "The most powerful novels about September 11, 2001, in fact, may be those that treat the entire event in terms of parable, never mentioning the World Trade Center or Al Qaeda at all" ('Demons Inner and Outer').

People experienced 9/11 as both individual and collective trauma in the aftermath of which the difference between two sorts of trauma was fuzzy.

The Crisis of Identity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Throughout the story Changez, the protagonist, challenges the idea of the prevailing narrative of the post-9/11 US – that the US policy towards the Eastern countries via *military actions was guiltless and upright*. The structure of the novel is really interesting where Hamid invents a story, a narrative form that is similar to the Chinese box or the Russian doll and narration goes on through flashbacks. The narrative takes the shape of one-sided dialogue between Changez and an unnamed American who may be sent on a military "mission." Hamid brilliantly employs extensive but attention-grabbing dramatic monologue of the protagonist, Changez. Changez is a Pakistani who gets the opportunity of joining the Princeton University and gets a job in a big company named Underwood Samson. Working in the US always becomes his future and he strives unflinchingly to fulfill it.

The story begins with Changez encountering an American stranger in one of the restaurants in Lahore. Changez invites the American guy to his favorite café and begins narrating his story about his experience in the US. He tells the unnamed American about his life in the US, his love for America, and his job at the Underwood Samson Company. Most frequently, Changez talks

about the circumstances which compels him to come back home. Changez begins his 'monologue' with a formal and apparently kind offer of assistance to the unnamed American, who steadily settles into the role of a silent dialogist and whose nationality is narrated by Changez as follows:

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a mission, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services. (1)

changez assures the American not to be alarmed by his "beard." The Arab/Muslim immigrants in terms of the beard as a self-definition of a Muslim terrorist. Not only does Changez declare himself as a peaceful bearded guy but rather someone who loves America. Doing so, he attempts to root up the distrust and suspicion from the mind of the American guy. Hamid subtly employs the 'dramatic monologue' of Changez to show to America the exiting neo-colonial superiority – that everything is not perfect as far as its culture and cause of actions are concerned. Gray argues that *The Reluctant of the Fundamentalist* is "a half-conversation, a half-story" because the reader is "asked to provide the other half of the novel's meaning" (58). Changez properly identifies the man as an American by his "bearing" : "it was your bearing that allowed me to identify you" (2) not by the colour of the skin or the stylish appearance. After a while, it seems to Changez that the American guy is on a "mission". Both of these words – "bearing" and "mission" – signify extreme nationalistic connotations as the study proceeds.

From the story's outset, Changez appears as a man whose lucid cosmopolitanism masks an overwhelming narcissism, fascination with status, and a feeling of superiority to almost everyone around him. He believes in his American dreams and strives unflinchingly to fulfill it. The novel elucidates Changez at the apogee of his American dream, "This is a dream come true. 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[...] Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid" (3-4). Remarkably, Changez buys into the spirit of his American dream when he joins the Princeton University "I was something special [...] and I was confident of getting any job I wanted" (5).

The crisis of identity in *The Reluctant of the Fundamentalist* is of paramount importance. The issue of cultural identity is obviously shown in the suspicious relationship between characters. In the aftermath of 9/11, everything has been turned against Changez and despondently feels, "I didn't know where I stood on so many issues of consequences; I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged – in New York, in Lahore, in both, in either [...] I did grow up with a poor boy's sense of belonging" (8). Interestingly, Changez feels pleased when seeing the planes crashing into the Twin Towers and believes that "[...] someone had so visibly brought America to her knees. Ah, I see I am only compounding your pleasure" (83-84). Hamid portrays Changez's smile at the 9/11 terrorist attacks and his feeling of uneasiness towards America: "I realized that it was not fiction but 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" (82-83). But after a short while, Changez severely regrets his 'smile' and tries to justify his attitude saying: "I do so with a profound sense of perplexity" (83). Otherwise, how would it be possible for Changez to be pleased as he was "the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman [Erica, Changez's beloved]. So why did part of me [Changez himself] desire to see America harmed? I did not know" (84). One really gets surprised of how would Changez find America's destruction and attacks appealing to except that he "was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone has so visibly brought America to her knees [...] I was not at war with America" (83-84). Changez here reassures his love to America, shares her same pain, and distinguishes between the symbolic brutality and the real calamity. I think that Changez's weird attitude of being "pleased" to watch the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsing shows the state of traumatic rupture, confusion and perplexity accompanying the attacks.

Haunted by the trauma of the attacks, Changez starts looking for his beloved Am- Erica(1) who thinks of her as a 'New Yorker'. He admits that "hearing them [American people looking for their relatives among the debris of the twin towers] speak of their beloved ones, my thoughts turned to Erica" (84). The traumatic experiences of the post-9/11 events negatively affect Changez and everything is turned against him. "Certainly, I wanted to believe [...] the crumbling around me and the impending of my personal American dream" (106). He despondently shows his self-confusion, "I didn't know where I stood on so many issues of consequences; I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged – in New York, in Lahore, in both; in either [...] my own identity was fragile" (168). Changez is pulled back to his past self in terms of belonging which shows the crisis of identity through which he is going, "I did grow up with a poor boy's sense of belonging" (81). Hamid further blames America for its ego of superiority and persistence to deal with non-American cultures and people as "others".

(1) The invention of this term *Am-Erica* is coined by Robert Adams in his *Big Ideas on The Reluctant of the Fundamentalist*. <http://podcast/big-ideas/robert-adams-on-the-reluctant-fundamentalist/>

In *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible subjects*, Amaney Jamal argues that "The dichotomies of 'white or non-white,' 'us or them', 'American or enemy', 'with us or against us' [...] are some of the binaries that construct Arab Americans within existing "racial" hierarchies in the United States" (32). At his return from Manila, Changez tells the story of ill-treatment that he has received, because he has been treated as a criminal and is made to sever insults in the New York airport: "I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty [...] this naturally led to my becoming stiff and self-conscious" (112). As a result, these instances of injustice and disgrace in the US have made Changez aware of being an 'Other' in the American society and illustrate how the sceneries of suspicion of one's appearance are dominating the post-9/11 America.

At the aftermath of 9/11, Changez thinks of New York as a terrain that is separate from the US as the latter has taken on a new meaning. Unfortunately, the US is no longer the "land of opportunities" and the cutting-edge of civilization but a dangerously authoritative beast obsessed

with building racial walls. To my mind, a great writer is a prophet and is bestowed with a third eye with which the future can be foreseen. Hamid is such a prophet-writer and his novel is closer to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984* in terms of predicting the traumatic future of America and the world which is run today by Trumpism. Trump's most recent action of building a wall between the US and Mexico is a case in point.

Changez grows a "beard" as a sign of protest against the discrimination, demonizing, and stereotypes of the Arabs/Muslims in the post-9/11 America, "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; I do not now recall my precise motivations" (154). This is a protest against American "bearing" and political strategies. The undercurrent of the moment when Changez starts growing his beard is simultaneously the moment he declares a war on his "American self". It is a sign of a collective identity meant to arouse strong reactions and irk those who are suspicious about the Arab/ Muslim immigrants in the post-9/11 US.

Changez tries to forge an imaginary identity as an American citizen. Regrettably, his dream got shattered in the post-9/11 America which is pervaded by the encroaching supremacy of American neo-imperialism. Irfan Khawaja puts rightly the crisis of Changez's identity and distracted psyche as follows:

Changez, then, is not just the victim of a notional identity, but of multiple and conflicting ones. As he moves through life, when he does move, he cannot help but think of himself as a member of some 'we' – but he cannot, for that, seem to settle on one 'we' to adopt, even a consistent set of them. He is, at different times in the novel, a Third Worlder, a Muslim [...] a New Yorker, and a Princetonian. (59).

Hamid poignantly depicts Changez's final days in the US where his personal American dream turns out to be a 'nightmare,' "my final days in New York passed in a state of enlightened depressions" (189). Upon losing his job at the Underwood Samson, Changez's traumatic experience worsens as he admits, "I was in a state of shock similar to that which one undergoes when one has witnessed one's knee twist impossibly but has yet to feel any pain [...] I was, in other words, confused" (179-180). Changez's traumatic experience in the aftermath of 9/11 sounds similar to Hamid's.

Hamid also depicts the growing anxiety and feelings of suspicion which are manifest consequences of the terrorist attacks.

Changez's Mutual Suspicion towards "Am-Erica": The Personal is the Political

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is seemingly more symbolic than historical, so some readers may find it complicated and confusing. That is, symbolism and ambiguity are particularly evident in Hamid's selection of the main characters' names. Changez may symbolize changes but Hamid denies it and says that it is an Urdu name for Genghis Khan who was a bold warrior just like Changez in his job at Underwood Samson. Gray asserts Hamid's intention about Changez's

name, "Changez might be a pun on "changes" or "Genghis Khan" – reviewers have suggested the first, Hamid himself has referred to the second" (58). Genghis waged war which posed a threat to the Arab Muslim civilization of his era, so the way Hamid names his protagonist Changez would be a weird choice of name for a Muslim fundamentalist. In other words, fundamentalism, for Hamid, is more of tribal than religious nature. Significantly, Hamid may entail that Changez's fundamentalism is not linked with religion but has something to do with tribal identity. Similarly, the parallel is drawn between Erica and America. Tellingly, Gray further says: "The personal is equally the political in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*" (58). Based on Gray's assumption, there are a number of similarities between Changez and Genghis Khan *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Erica and America – the personal is the political, which adds to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a compelling work for its readers. The unhinged relationship between Changez and Erica stands for the confusing relationship that is present nowadays between Arab/Muslim countries and the American government.

Motivated by his love for "Am-Erica", Changez tries to assimilate himself fully into the American way of life. The novel elucidates Changez's assimilation process as follows:

I attended 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. (74)

Changez compromises his identity in order to be accepted by his beloved [Erica] and thus belonging to the American community. In doing so, he gives up his identity, his religion and culture, and becomes Chris [Erica's ex-lover]. Consequently, I argue that Erica's acceptance of Changez's proposal is only because she thinks that non-Americans are welcome in America once they relinquish their identity and culture and "marry" the American prevailing and hegemonic culture. In this way, Changez's attempt to be an American who is exacerbated because he can never be like a white American – like that of Erica's ex-boyfriend.

Like Changez's traumatic experience in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, Erica is also increasingly traumatized by the memory of her dead ex-boyfriend and she tries to find Chris in Changez. Changez wonders "was it the trauma of the attack on her city?" (129). Here it becomes clear that traumatic experience of the post-9/11 terrorist attacks does not only affect the American people but also the world community as a whole. Changez's and Erica's initial hesitation in having sex metaphorically implies Changez's failure to "penetrate" an ethnicity that is not his and nostalgic past that Erica is trapped into. Gray states that "The end of the love affair with Erica coincides with the end of the love affair with Am-Erica" (61). Changez recalls the post-9/11 America, "America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia" (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 114). Hamid may deliver the message that the relationship of mutual suspicion between Changez and Erica is, then, symbolic of the breakdown between the West and East cultures.

Clash of Fundamentalists in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Hamid clearly challenges the meaning of heatedly debated words especially 'Fundamentalism.' He critiques the American financial institutions that monopolize human ideals and civil rights. Through the monologue of Changez, Hamid shows that the American sole slogan is to beef up their economic control regardless of the impact it may have on the lives of the individuals. The novel portrays the greedy American society which is breeding financial fundamentalism through organizations like that of Underwood Samson. Jim, Changez's interviewer for the profession at Underwood Samson Company, wonders how come that a man from South Asia could be that eligible and gifted. Jim represents the American arrogance and superiority towards the "other":

Economy's falling apart though, no? corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers. Solid people don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism. (62-63)

changez is portrayed as a "reluctant fundamentalist" once he believes in the rapaciousness of the American economic interest and even in its exploitative financial values during his work at the Underwood Samson Company. At the beginning of his dramatic monologue, Changez believes in the "American Dream" and introduces himself as "a lover of America" (1). But, the stereotype of racism, hatred and othering of the post-9/11 US have changed Changez against the land he says he had been in love once.

Apparently, Hamid's narrative indirectly addresses America to change its views of the Arab and Muslims. From the cover page of the novel, many might think that Hamid's protagonist, Changez, is a fundamentalist Muslim with fanatic beliefs and extreme thoughts. But, as the narrative progresses, it shows the opposite – Changez is an outstanding liberal American Muslim and a graduate of the Princeton University, a prestigious university in the US. He reached his senior year "without having received a single B" (4). The name of the protagonist is ironical as it criticizes the Western outlook and expression of the Muslim identity.

As far as Changez's viewpoint of "fundamentalists" is concerned, fundamentalism is human desire that is not only religious but also political or economic. Changez develops certain reasoning about fundamentalism as a result of the inhuman, exploitative experience that he is going through at work. For him, whatever threatens the peaceful life of any human being comes under the rubric of fundamentalism. Changez recalls:

Just remember your [Changez'a] deals would go ahead whether you on them or not [...] focus on the 'fundamentalist'. This is Underwood Samson's guiding principle, drilled into us since our first day at work. It mandated a single-minded attention to financial details, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value. And that was certainly what I continued to do. (112)

Changez understands that his profession at the US economic empire is like that of 'janissary' who also works in terms of his master's ideology of "focus on the fundamentalist" and confesses : "I

was a modern-day janissary," he admits, "a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine ... " (152). Like the Christian Turkish the janissaries who were instructed to fight their own civilization, Changez is also being brainwashed to fight his own people and deeply indulges in the American economic empire. Hamid's witty use of the word "janissary" in his narrative, I argue, is meant to mock the Arab/Muslim ruling elite who cooperate with the American empire by waging wars on their own countries and monopolizing their revenues. In reality, for example, the war which has been waged against Yemen by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

At the end of the day, Changez becomes gradually more "reluctant" and I think that "focusing on the fundamentals" helps him to forget his "traumatic situation" and serves as a sanctuary where he can hide. But later on, Changez's conscience comes closer to the human values in Underwood Samson (or Hamid may mean the neo-imperialism of the US, who knows!) and tries to free himself from it: "Al I knew was that my days of focusing on fundamentalist were done" (175).

Summing Up

The Reluctant Fundamentalist presents a new and innovative outlook through which the post-9/11 Western /Eastern relationships can be re-examined. Hamid excels in creating a kind of narrative that helps to destabilize the Western strategy of stereotyping the Arab/Muslim as demons in the post-9/11 US. Reading is the meaning which includes and does not exclude other meanings and readings. This novel seems to me like that of a 'dialogue' in that can be read from different perspectives. What is interesting in it is the author's statute narrative which does not give any space or mention to any of Al-Qaeda as opposed to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Frederic Beigbede's *Windows on the World* (2003), Lila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), Alia Yunis's *The Night Counter* (2009), etc. Rather, Hamid personalizes the traumatic events in his novel and explores the characters' fear and suspicion, confusion and uneasiness in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Rather than focusing on controversial issues like terrorism and the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* traces the impact of transforming cultural forces in the 9/11 US along with its existing consequences for immigrants from Arab/Muslim countries. The novel ends without narrating any fighting incidents or murder victims – the scenario of fear and doubt is prevailing in it.

Changez's secular character enables him to criticize the American policy towards the East with a new progressive unexpected from a Muslim character. In other words, Changez's intermingling of the personal with the political makes the novel significant. I argue that the novel is more of a window than a mirror and replete with frustrating stories of what it is to be an American Muslim in the post-9/11 US.

The protagonist is not the notorious, primitive Changez Khan of the past; rather, he is a progressive Changez, a product of the American culture. Despite Changez's quandary of his identity, he is still in love with his beloved Am/Erica. Regrettably, he is unfairly charged with his ant-American stand. He has left Am/Erica but he has not able to forget her and his boundaries have been distorted to the extent that it is not possible for him to maintain a single perception or a single identity.

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