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"I was not certain where I belonged": Integration and Alienation in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

The article will focus on the contrary impulses of alienation and integration in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that the central character and narrator Changez goes through in America while working as an employee at Underwood Samson, a "valuation" firm and his subsequent return to his native Pakistan where he assumes what appears to be an ultra-nationalistic political stance. This is to argue that Changez's desperate attempt at assuming this stance has its roots not only in the cultural alienation and racism that he is subjected to in America, especially in a post-9/11 America, but also in his futile effort to naturally integrate with a Pakistani way of life. By uncovering certain ambiguities in Changez's ideological rhetoric, the paper tries to show how Changez's critique of American corporate fundamentalism stems from his lack of a sense of belonging and from a feeling of problematized identity.

[**Keywords:** Mohsin Hamid, *Reluctant Fundamentalist*; post-9/11 America; Pakistan, alienation, fundamentalism, identity, ideology]

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a perfect instance of how an author writing in the first-person narrative mode can create an inescapable situation of aesthetic dread and verbal domination. It is also an admirable example of how a constant tension between twin polarities of sympathy and alienation can be sustained across 180-odd pages by adjusting the narrative voice in terms of its tone, texture and reliability. The novel is wholly occupied by the overpowering voice of Changez, its narrator and primary character whose appearance at a Lahore *chai khana* is sudden, unsolicited but apparently not unintentional. The disarming candour of his person and the Oriental charm of his demeanour ensure a riveting though artfully one-sided exchange. His monologue starts with a formal and seemingly kind offer to be of assistance to an American, who gradually settles into the role of a silent interlocutor and whose nationality is brought into the equation within the first three lines of the novel: "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" (1). A set of assumptions, which involves ethnic stereotypes widespread in a post-9/11 world, is elided in a space of a few sentences. Changez correctly identifies the man as an American by his "bearing", not by the colour of his skin or his sartorial preferences. The latter, it seems to Changez, is on a "mission". Both of these words – "bearing" and "mission" – assume intense nationalistic connotations as the novel progresses. In a literary approach which is highly reminiscent of Camus' *The Fall*, Changez meets the American stranger at a tea shop in Lahore and takes him on a mythic ride to Changez's past and tells him about his stint at Princeton, his job at Underwood

Samson, a valuation farm, his trip with friends to Greece, his love affair with Erica, about Erica's dead lover Chris, his eventual disenchantment with his job in particular and America in general, his return to Pakistan and subsequent role as an university lecturer and a stern advocate of disengagement from America.

The opposite impulses of integration and alienation constitute the crux of the novel. Towards the beginning of his American experience, Changez's desire to integrate with America is evident but this aspiration is fused with an individualistic motivation to stand out; to conspicuously assert his bearing with an air of formal propriety. He reports, "At Princeton, I conducted myself in public like a young prince, generous and carefree" (11). He claims with a certain degree of pride and smugness: "I have never, to the best of my knowledge, had any fear of solitude" (19). His self-contented delight at having received well by people at Princeton is manifest: "Most people I met were taken in by my public persona" (11). All of this, however, changes and the rest of the novel follows the story of Changez's increasing solitude in a number of spheres of life.

To begin with, Changez' inner-directed narrative makes it clear that he is diligent, hardworking, courteous, generally accepted. Changez as a narrator may not be reliable: he might have made it all up but that is not important. Since his is the sole voice, we are compelled to listen to it. We are drawn to the swerve of his rhetoric, its youthful dissidence and ratification, not to the question of veracity of his experiences and positions. While describing his interview at Underwood Samson to the American listener, he makes a digression which is mildly hubristic and laced with nostalgia. He says:

It is worth, if you will permit me, my indulging in a minor digression at this point. I am not poor; far from it: my great-grandfather, for example, was a barrister with the means to endow a school for the Muslims of the Punjab. Like him, my grandfather and father both attended university in England. Our family home sits on an acre of land in the middle of Gulberg, one of the most expensive districts of this city. We employ several servants, including a driver and a gardener—which would, in America, imply that we were a family of great wealth. (9-10)

The fact that Changez tells his story in real time makes it more compelling. There is a continuous parallelism between the events taking place in the tea shop in Lahore in the present and the US of Changez's past. This gives the narrative a feeling of seamless perpetuity. The atmospheric way Changez describes the city of Lahore, in little vignettes, with the impressionistic arrivals and departures of nameless, faceless figures is endearing and expresses very well his familiarity with the place. On the other hand there is a cool detachment in how he describes America, with the possible exception of New York perhaps – a city with which he seems to be still sentimentally connected – and even his brief stay at Greece. His excitement at getting the job at Underwood Samson and the freedom and financial abandon it offers is accompanied by a nagging sense of dislocation: "In a subway car, my skin would typically fall in the middle of the color spectrum. On street corners, tourists would ask me for directions. I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker" (33).

And soon it gives way to dissatisfaction with the gross difference in scientific and industrial advancement between America and Pakistan. This makes him evoke, with certain degree of sentimental nostalgia, the past glories of the land that would be Pakistan. Interestingly, the ancient Indus Valley civilization is made to contest with the present-day America:

Often, during my stay in your country, such comparisons troubled me. In fact, they did more than trouble me: they made me resentful. 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)

Irfan Khawaja points out that there is absolutely no reason to think that the contemporary citizens of Lahore are the same people who once occupied the 'Indus River basin'. What Changez, then, does is, he generalizes and tries to forge an imaginary identity. Confronted with what he increasingly perceives as the encroaching power of American neo-imperialism, he must affiliate himself with another paradigm in order to be able to stand up to it. Khawaja sums up the disjunctions that are generated between integration and alienation in Changez's psyche:

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, or even a consistent set of them. He is, at different times in the novel, a Third Worlder, a Muslim, a Pakistani, a member of the Indus River Basin Civilization, a New Yorker, and a Princetonian. (59)

He may not be afraid of solitude, as he claims, but he certainly is not comfortable with it, unable as he is to move ahead in life alone. His later acts of protest, such as growing a beard for example, are also a sign of a collective identity. While working at Underwood Samson, he gains appreciation and is generally loved. But he seems to be alienated gradually by the way the firm functioned and the fundamentals upon which its philosophy stood. Perhaps he begins to find latent traits of imperialism in Underwood Samson (or U.Sa) and tries to disengage himself from it. And therefore when he says "I could, if I desired, take my colleagues out for an after-work drink—an activity classified as "new hire cultivation"—and with impunity spend in an hour more than my father earned in a day!" (Hamid 37) he does so not only with youthful exuberance but also with a feeling of mild remorse. The cultural divide is further widened when he is sent on a project to Manila. He finds himself torn between a desire to be perceived by the Filipinos as one of the "members of the officer class of global business" (65) and a reluctance to customarily tell Filipino executives of his father's age: "I need it *now*" (65). His cultural alienation – he is neither perceived as an American nor an Asian – makes him reflect on the differences

in the ways in which a deferential address is made to an elderly person in English and Urdu. He clearly expresses his desire to treat the elderly workers with a little bit more respect: “If English had a respectful form of the word you—as we do in Urdu—I would have used it to address them without the slightest hesitation” (98). But the guiding principal of Underwood Samson – “Focus on the fundamentals” (98) – makes the necessity of such etiquette look banal.

Changez’s feeling of alienation is enhanced by the American “invasion” of Afghanistan that same year in the latter part of October. He is initially evasive, “preferring not to watch the partisan and sports-event-like coverage given to the mismatch between the American bombers with their twentyfirst-century weaponry and the ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesmen below” (99). His avoidance implies his unwillingness to take a position in regard to this political event. More deeply, it expresses his agony at having to choose between America and Afghanistan – a country he sympathetically calls “Pakistan’s neighbor, our friend, and a fellow Muslim nation” (100). This is the moment from which he begins to dismantle the American side of his identity. It is interesting that, even while watching a newscast on American troops dropping into Afghanistan, he finds a cinematic metaphor that is American in origin: “I was reminded of the film Terminator, but with the roles reversed so that the machines were cast as heroes” (99).

The fury accelerates the process of dismantling of Changez’s American identity and this process culminates in a response to the 9/11 event that surprises Changez as much as it shocks the reader. This response alienates Changez in the reader’s – especially an American reader – view. The climactic passage deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

The following evening was supposed to be our last in Manila. I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, 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. (72)

What is important here is the directness and candour with which he says this to an American listener. He mentions his own surprise at the thought of being “pleased”: “So when I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity” (73). But soon he confesses that he was taken up with the symbolism of the event – his pleasure derived from the notion that “someone had so visibly brought America to her knees (73). The failure to separate the real from the symbolic is another trait that characterises Changez’s emotionalism. Nevertheless, the author builds up the narrative up to this point in such a way that the reader, although having lost his/her sympathy with Changez, does not find him inconsistent as a character. In the wake of 9/11, his relationship with Erica also changes.

To a great extent, Changez feels attracted to Erica because of her elusiveness, impenetrability and subtle resistance. Nostalgia, something that they both suffer from, provide them with a subconscious basis for mutual identification which eventually leads

to friendship but it is precisely nostalgia that destroy any possibility of a stable relationship. Both Erica and Changez become trapped in their own past. Changez claims that he grew up "with a poor boy's sense of *longing*" (71) and the refuge that nostalgia offers him can be seen as an evocation of "imagined memories" (71) that he had seen some of his relatives clinging on to while he was growing up. In retrospect, Changez says, "Nostalgia was their crack cocaine, if you will, and my childhood was littered with the consequences of their addiction..." (71).

Their initial difficulty in having sex metaphorically suggests Changez's inability to "penetrate" a culture that is not his and an inscrutable past that Erica is trapped into. Her attraction toward him partly results from his charming demeanour and his exotic otherness. He embodies for him all that is past, distant, remote, glorious and lastly nostalgic. Yet there is a sort of membrane that divides them: it may be the difference in their cultural backgrounds; it may also be the difference in their own private nostalgia. Changez as the novel progresses, is more and more drawn into a nostalgic evocation of the country where he came from, its glorious past and cultural richness.¹

Erica is increasingly haunted by the memory of his dead lover², Chris. These are the contrary impulses that alienate them. Interestingly, it is these factors that brought them together. Erica found, or at least tried to find, Chris in Changez. Changez searched for "Am-erica" in Erica³. It is not only Changez whose vision is crippled by nostalgia but possibly Erica's too – in this regard her collapse is highly symbolic and symptomatic. Changez feels "that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time" (114-115). The gradual dissolution of their relationship is, then, symptomatic of the breakdown between two cultures, two worldviews. But of course, as Hamid cautions us, things cannot be generalised that easily and Changez and Erica should not be seen as representing cultures which are diverse and variegated.

Erica's obsessive identification with Chris increases as the novel advances and she misses him with an intensity that borders on a severe form of homesickness. As a result, her difficulty in communicating with the external world increases and she spirals down into a depression. Changez finds her frigid and unresponsive. Death of Chris has resulted in the death of her sexuality: "Her sexuality, she said, had been mostly dormant since his death. She had only once achieved orgasm, and that, too, by fantasizing of him" (90). She attempts to compensate the lack of sexuality with energetic creative activity. Her novel is "no tortured, obviously autobiographical affair. It was simply a tale of adventure, of a girl on an island who learns to make do. The narrative shimmered with hope,..." (166). Even Erica's manuscript for her novel offers no clue as to her condition and Changez is unable to "locate Erica in the rhythms or sounds of what she had written" (166).

On a vacation in Greece, on the beach, Erica is wearing a shirt that belonged Chris. The symbolism is unmistakable. She refuses to believe that Chris is dead and therefore feels the constant urge to resurrect him, metaphysically, symbolically, even sartorially. She metamorphoses into Chris and in this metamorphosis her own identity is subsumed: "Suffice it to say that theirs had been an unusual love, with such a degree of commingling

of identities that when Chris died, Erica felt she had lost herself; even now, she said, she did not know if she could be found” (91). According to Erica, Chris was “a good-looking boy with what she described as an *Old World* appeal” (27). It is very clear from this why Changez comes to temporarily occupy the void created by Chris’ death in Erica’s life. For Changez whose faith in the ‘fundamentals’ of Underwood Samson has been waning steadily, finds himself doubly-alienated at having to play the role of a dead lover. The realisation that Erica, after all, has her own set of nostalgic evocations that are either in close conflict with or indifferent to Changez’s historical makeup takes place after Changez reads Erica’s novel. When he had begun reading it, he had been apprehensive that this might be the last time he was hearing Erica’s voice – which explained why he deferred reading it. Erica’s voice, which gives a better and more reliable image of her imagined vision of normalcy and of the cathartic energy of her creative pursuit, provides no solace to Changez. He does not feature anywhere in Erica’s narrative. He has already been uncomfortably transformed into a relic of the past by Erica, loosely fitting the role abandoned by Chris. Changez’s natural response is anger. With weary resignation he accepts: “I had begun to understand that she had chosen not to be part of my story; her own had proven too compelling, and she was—at that moment and in her own way—following it to its conclusion, passing through places I could not reach” (167). Changez’s (hi)story is not that of Erica. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is therefore not only a story about an unrequited love affair but on a broader level, a tale of communication breakdown which makes us interrogate the structures that govern our lives and separate us from the people who might be different from us in terms of culture, ethnicity and economy.

It is not until Changez goes to Chile to evaluate a publishing firm and meets Juan Bautista (the name is meant to remind us of John the Baptist and Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the “judge-penitent of Camus’ *The Fall*) that he begins to see things clearly. Juan Bautista analyses Changez’s condition and tells him about janissaries – “Christian boys (who were) captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to” (151). Changez reflects on his status of a modern day janissary and eventually this revelation drives him to leave everything associated with what he perceived as American fundamentalism. But whether that triggers a different kind of fundamentalism in Changez is left for the reader to interpret. Does he turn into a Muslim fundamentalist? Does his anti-American position lead him to assume an ultra-nationalistic political stance in the end? Or is his resistance oriented more along cultural lines?⁴

These questions assume urgency at the novel’s sinister end where there is a veiled death threat; the reader is led to think one of the characters is in grave danger. Changez’s Kurtz has found his Marlowe and narrated his story of Conradian themes – guilt, suffering and atonement. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the story of Changez. But who exactly is Changez? A large part of the answer to that question lies in the following remark made by Mohsin Hamid at the BBC World Book Club interview:

I remember being 22 quite well. And I think the industrious Changez...gives way to something which you see all over the world: it's the desire of young men who are about 22 to slay dragons...that Romantic quest which is very difficult to explain reasonably or rationally. You see people doing it since the beginning of time. And whether they do that by joining a sports team, siding up to serve in their nations' army, strapping on explosives and blowing themselves up in the middle of a group of innocent families around them or as Changez does, dropping out of some of this corporate system and going back to Pakistan agitating in his own way - that's a very real thing. (Hamid interview)

Notes

¹Interestingly he harkens back to the time of the Indus Valley civilisation and the glories of the Mughal Empire and these were times when the concept of a Pakistani nationhood was yet to be formed. Such is his overleaping nostalgia.

² This reminds us of Michael Furey, Gretta Conroy's dead lover in Joyce's *The Dead*.

³ This interpretation comes up in the BBC World Book Club episode featuring Mohsin Hamid. It has been also suggested by Robert Adams in his Big Ideas podcast on the novel.

⁴ Recurrent references to Pakistani culture and cuisine reveal not only Changez's preference but also pride in these matters. Changez's deliberately sardonic and stilted hospitality and his mock-serious attempts to introduce the American to Pakistani cuisine/beverages are perhaps a strategic effort to alternately seduce and alienate him.

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