

**‘It is the *gist* that matters’: Xenophobia, Identity Crisis and Reverse
Stereotyping in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

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Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is to analyse Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) in light of some of the pressing post-9/11 issues that plague the world today. The paper attempts to reveal how xenophobia, Islamophobia, identity crisis and ethnic mistrust are all problems that Hamid blends in the novel to re-create a post-9/11 world where Muslims are persecuted for being who they are. It has also been attempted to trace the biographical elements of Hamid and how it mirrors the trajectory of Changez’s life and career in the United States of America. Above all, the paper endeavours to highlight upon the major themes of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, keeping in mind the ethnic tensions that characterize the dealings between the characters. Any work of art or literature is enmeshed in the political landscape of its times and Hamid’s novel is no different. This paper also attempts to locate the novel in a socio-political context that has given its views an added thrust.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Islamophobia, history versus reality, identity crisis, hybridity, cultural mimicry, reverse-stereotyping

All quotes from the novel are taken from The Reluctant Fundamentalist,

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Mohsin Hamid's second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, published in 2007, offers a cornucopia of issues that need to be dealt with thoroughly. The novel raises many important questions, and like all good works of art, does little to answer them. In many ways, Hamid's book is a timely rejoinder to the cant and prejudice that is prevalent against Muslims in the world today. The evolution of the protagonist, Changez, is one of the major highlights of the novel. In the beginning, he is in love with America, living the American Dream as an employee of Underwood Samson and Company. Nevertheless, his world begins to crumble after the September 11 attacks on the world Trade Center. But even before this event, we can trace his reservations towards America. In Changez's conversation with the American (indeed the whole novel is one long dramatic monologue), we can clearly see Changez's doubts about America beginning early: 'What did I think of Princeton? Well, the answer to that question requires a story. When I first arrived, I looked around me at the Gothic buildings- younger, I later learned, than many mosques of this city, but made through acid treatment and ingenious stone masonry to look older' (Pg. 3)

What Changez implies here is that Americans have no history; they have to artificially carve out history by making the Princeton University buildings look older and befitting of heritage sites. In other words, the fact that the mosques of the city are older than the Princeton buildings does not really matter as long as they are made to 'appear' old and historic. Changez here is essentially raising the issue of history and reality. He takes a dig at the American later in the novel when he cannot accurately remember certain details about his narrative, and so he tells the American: 'I cannot now recall many of the details of the events I have been relating to you. But surely it is the *gist* that matters; I am, after all, telling you a history, and in history, as I suspect you- an American- will agree, it is the thrust of one's narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one's details.' (Pg. 118)

By focusing on the 'thrust' of 'narrative' and ignoring the 'accuracy' of the events recounted, Changez covertly criticizes the West for its selective portraiture of history, and manipulating facts and events to meet its own ends. As Salman Rushdie observed in *Imaginary Homelands*: 'History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings.'

Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge' (Rushdie).

The Oxford English Dictionary describes xenophobia as a *noun*, meaning 'hatred or fear of foreigners.' In case of Changez and his American listener, both fear and hatred are applicable. It is important to mention here that xenophobia or xenophobic tendencies can be seen in the novel from both sides. The American's xenophobia is externally manifested in the nervous and jittery manner in which he conducts himself. The opening

lines of the novel, the most remarkable in Hamid's oeuvre, shows a classic case of xenophobia and ethnic mistrust:

'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' (Pg. 1).

Throughout the novel, the American feels oddly ill at ease with his surroundings. He feels very out of place amongst the Pakistanis. The fact that Changez thinks his beard has frightened the foreigner is a result of the American cultural production since 9/11 where Muslims are depicted as bearded terrorists holding AKM rifles. Muslim communities throughout the world, and especially in the United States, are marginalized for who they are, how they look, how they dress and where they come from. Since the time of the Crusades, Islam was represented negatively in the West, which has fostered xenophobia in their psyche. There is a negative feeling about Islam at large. Edward Said captures this brilliantly in *Covering Islam*:

'During the past few years, especially since events in Iran caught European and American attention so strongly, the media have therefore covered Islam: they have portrayed it, characterized it, analysed it, given instant courses on it, and consequently they have made it 'known'' (Said).

The 9/11 attacks have been heavily politicized, leading to a distinct version of Islam where its most abiding picture is that of an old fashioned, female-oppressive, terrorist-fostering religion. David Holloway observes in his book *9/11 and the War on Terror*: 'From the very beginning, '9/11' and the 'war on terror' were so appropriated by storytelling and mythmaking that the events themselves became more or less indivisible from their representations, or simulations, in political rhetoric, mass media spectacle and the panoply of other representational forms...' (Holloway).

Tabish Khair, in his anthology of essays, informs us that 'Islamophobia, the term, was first coined by the American periodical, *Insight*, in 1991' (Khair, *Muslim Modernities: Tabish Khair's Essays on Moderation and Mayhem*). In Hamid's novel, the American evidently displays multiple instances of Islamophobia and ethnic mistrust. He is suspicious about the tea that he is served, the food, and even about the waiter. Changez has to continually reassure him that everything is fine:

'Ah, our tea has arrived! Do not look so suspicious. I assure you, sir, nothing untoward will happen to you, not even a runny stomach. After all, it is not as if it has been *poisoned*. Come, if it makes you more comfortable, let me switch my cup with yours.' (Pg. 11)

This is not the only time when Changez switches his food with that of the American's. Later, when their dinner arrives, he takes literally Changez's words, 'For your own safety, I would suggest that you avoid this yoghurt and those chopped vegetables.' What was meant as a helpful suggestion is oddly misinterpreted by the American as to be a threat to his life. Changez reassures the visitor that he 'meant nothing sinister', that the American's 'stomach might be upset by uncooked foods, that is all'. Again, Changez suggests that he eat the food samples first, 'to reassure [him] that there is nothing to fear' (Pg. 122).

The American constantly looks over his shoulder in a jittery fashion that clearly demonstrates his doubts about the Old Anarkali marketplace and the people around him. With his gestures, he implies overtly and covertly, that he is too good for place he finds himself in. The bazaars of Lahore, albeit having a special charm of their own, have evidently failed to address the American's greatest fear- that of security. He has to be reassured during a power cut that nobody would pick his pocket in the darkness. There are always elements of doubt, fear, suspicion and mistrust in him about the people and the culture of the place. One wonders why he came to visit Lahore in the first

place. There is little to suggest that he has a deep interest in Pakistani culture, or in any other culture for that matter. One of the best moves by Hamid in the novel is that he leaves the character of the American wholly ambiguous. We learn nothing about his background, his motives or his experiences apart from whatever little we can infer from Changez's remarks about him.

The American's xenophobia continues right through the end of the novel, when he misinterprets the 'misfiring exhaust of a passing rickshaw' to that of 'the report of a pistol' (Pg. 176). He is so afraid that he seems ready to run away in panic. This confirms all the negative stereotypes that the American has in mind about Pakistanis. From everything that he does in the novel, we can guess that for him, people in Pakistan are potential pickpockets, thieves, murderers or gun-trotting criminals. With all these xenophobic misconceptions in mind, it is little wonder as to why he feels so ill at ease in the presence of Changez. Hamid attempts to break this negative stereotyping when Changez tells the American perhaps the most important lines in the novel:

'... they mean you no harm, I assure you. It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all under-cover assassins' (Pg. 183).

This is perhaps the most striking indictment of xenophobia where mistrust can operate from both sides. The word 'imagine' is important here because all the American's doubts

about Pakistan are imaginary and in his head. Despite all his attempts to dispel the American's doubts, the latter never feels reassured. In his book *The New Xenophobia*, Tabish Khair observes that in the 'New Xenophobia', 'the stranger remains a stranger but is not allowed to exhibit their sign of difference' (*Khair*). In other words, when a Muslim man keeps a beard or a woman wears a hijab, they are exhibiting their 'sign' of difference. This differentiation in appearance, colour and cultural practices gives way to prejudice amongst communities. In an interview with Akhil Sharma, organised by *The Paris Review*, Mohsin Hamid stressed on how our judgements are based on people's appearance and our need as readers to appreciate cultural differences:

'The stakes, for you the reader, is higher in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*... you are much more likely to be called upon to judge a man like Changez who is a man with a beard saying some things

that sound very angry. And in our world today, men like that are present to you in millions of different forms and your decision of how you relate to those men, and your participation in your society; how you vote; what newspapers you buy; what you say to your friends, depends on those judgements to a certain extent' (Hamid, *I Don't Believe in Reality*).

Xenophobia, however, is not one-sided in the novel. Changez also exhibits xenophobic tendencies which manifests itself in his attitudes towards the West. In the beginning, Changez is bursting with friendliness and good cheer. Yet as he proceeds to narrate his tale, we can locate traces of xenophobic sentiments in his persona. Changez's subconscious hatred of Americans is clearly revealed when he hears about the World Trade Center bombings in the news on television. Hamid brilliantly captures Changez's reactions when he discovers that America had been brought 'to her knees':

'But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack... no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees' (Pg. 73).

Changez's hatred for America is deeply ingrained in him, rooted deep in his psyche. But he also questions the universal human nature in which xenophobia is deeply situated. He questions the American that he too must surely have 'gloated' at the sight of Afghan structures in ruins:

'I understand, of course; it is hateful to hear another person gloat over one's country's misfortune. But surely you cannot be completely innocent of such feelings yourself. Do you feel no joy at the video clips- so prevalent these days- of American munitions laying

waste the structure of your enemies?’ (Pg. 73)

Hamid also criticizes the media’s projection of the 9/11 attacks in a sensationalist fashion that collapses the boundaries between fact and fiction. When Changez switches on the television in Manila, he is confused whether he is watching a film or the news: ‘I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realised it was not fiction but news’ (Pg.72). This again brings us to the aforementioned insight from David Holloway where the media seems to have ‘defined’ the event called ‘9/11’ into a household cultural reference through its continual mythmaking.

It becomes clear at this section of the novel that Changez exhibits xenophobia even when there was no reason for him to do so. He tells the American of his ‘desire to see America harmed’. Changez’s xenophobia towards America is paradoxical given the fact that he owed everything (materially) to American education and employment. What he does know is that seeing the ravages of the World Trade Center filled him with a cool sense of happiness. He wonders aloud:

‘Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased... I was not at war with America. Far from it: I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed? I did not know...’ (Pg. 72-73)

Changez’s hatred for America is rooted in a socio-political context. However, before we analyse that, we must locate Changez as a person; we must look at his status as an American-Pakistani citizen. Changez is the ultimate hybrid product. He embraces the best of both worlds and evolves in a new global citizen, albeit to his discomfort. He retains his Pakistani spirit throughout his Princeton days and beyond. During his courtship days with Erica, he is the polite, soft spoken, cultured individual, a hallmark no doubt of his Asian upbringing. During a trip to Greece, Changez is disgusted by the rude behaviour of the young Americans to ‘Greeks twice their age’. Changez, on the other hand, had retained his ‘traditional sense of deference to one’s seniors’, a practice well known in the Indian subcontinent (Pg. 21).

With the passage of time however, Changez starts the act of cultural mimicry. Living the American Dream, the act of imitating Americans is of endless delight to him:

‘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' (Pg. 65).

In his desire to depict himself American, Changez 'learned to tell executives of [his] father's age, 'I need it now''. As he begins to immerse himself into his American persona, he gradually forgets his own culture. He becomes what Hamid describes as a 'mongrel'. When asked by an interviewer what Hamid meant by 'being a mongrel', the novelist cited his own experiences of growing up in multiple nations:

'...along the way, I've become a mixture of things. So, I can't think of myself as just Pakistani or just British or just American. I am a mixed-up kind of creature, hybrid, and that's what I mean by mongrel' (*Hamid, HARDtalk*).

According to Homi Bhabha, hybridity can be social, political, linguistic or religious, for it can be contentious and disruptive in its experience. Changez is an ideal example of a hybrid citizen as he undergoes all these psycho-social changes. It has also been a disruptive experience for him. It reminds us of Bhabha's Third Space where 'The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation' (Rutherford). After the 9/11 attacks, while Changez is in Manila, he seems aware of being 'an-Other' (Soja), a person whose identity is plural.

Changez's lack of stability, his doubt about his own persona, gives rise to his identity crisis. He suffers as a consequence in his love affair with Erica as well. She could never recover from the grief that engulfed her after the death of her boyfriend, Chris. Changez changes his identity to become a different person. In the persona of Changez he could never win Erica. But as Chris, she begins to accept him as a lover:

'It was as though we were under a spell, transported to a world where I was Chris and she was with Chris, and we made love with a physical intimacy that Erica and I had never enjoyed' (Pg.105).

This co-mingling of personalities damages Changez's self-esteem, although he does not yet realize it. Unbeknownst to himself, he has conceded his own identity to an American; the dead American boyfriend of her lover:

'I felt both *satiated* and *ashamed*... Perhaps, by taking on the persona of another, I had diminished myself in my own eyes; perhaps I was humiliated by the continuing dominance, in the strange romantic triangle of which I found myself a part, of my dead rival' (Pg. 106)

It is only later that Changez identifies his failure as a lover as relative to his lack of a core, stable identity:

‘I lacked a stable *core*. I was not certain where I belonged- in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither- and for this reason...I had nothing of substance to give [Erica]. Probably this was why I had been willing to try to take on the persona of Chris, because my own identity was so fragile’ (Pg. 148).

When asked by an interviewer in France 24, ‘Where is your home then?’ Mohsin Hamid replied: ‘I live in Lahore, I have a strong tie to London, to New York, to California; I feel a bit unsettled everywhere. But I can kind of make my way in many places, but I suppose I’m adrift internally even if at the moment grounded in Lahore to my family’ (*Hamid, The Magic of the Migrant Crisis*). The author’s feeling of being ‘adrift internally’ is exactly what haunts his protagonist Changez throughout the novel. This is a feeling that a global citizen experiences; a multiplicity of identities where a single identity never dominates. After returning to his home in Lahore for a short break, Changez, having practiced cultural mimicry in America, cannot now acclimatize to his seemingly impoverished ancestral home. He tells the American:

‘I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country’s elite’ (Pg. 124).

With great effort, he has to re-adjust himself to his own home and learn to appreciate the beauty of the place where he grew up as a child:

‘I saw my house properly again, appreciating its enduring grandeur, its unmistakable personality and idiosyncratic charm... It was far from impoverished; indeed, it was rich with history. I wondered how I could ever have been so ungenerous- and so blind’ (Pg. 125).

Feeling ashamed and hurt, he calls himself ‘a man lacking in substance.’ Lacking in a core-self, he feels that all his life he had been simply ‘play-acting.’ Comparing himself with an American colleague, Changez is struck by the difference between the two of them for the first time:

‘I looked at him- at his fair hair and light eyes... and thought, you are so foreign... I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside’ (Pg. 67).

Although Changez attempts to reach his ‘home’ in New York, he never feels at home anywhere in his heart. Indeed, his rootlessness finds a firm basis in reality in Hamid’s own life-journey. In the interview with Akhil Sharma, Hamid elucidates on Changez’s life path:

‘The direction that Changez goes on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is one that I wanted to explore. So, for me, walking with Changez through that journey was an alternative to walking the journey myself which I didn’t want to do...but for which I felt impulses towards.’

Changez’s disillusionment with the American Dream is a combination of his identity crisis and the Islamophobic/xenophobic tendencies directed at Muslims after 9/11. He compares American foreign policy with that of the European colonial enterprise. Changez’s conversation with the Chilean Juan-Bautista in Valparaiso provided him with ‘the final catalyst’ as he was ‘clearly on the threshold of great change’ (Pg. 150). He feels like a traitor for abandoning his family at the time when his neighbour country Afghanistan was on the verge of being invaded by 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 to mine and was perhaps colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war...I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire’ (Pg. 152).

For the first time in his life, Changez feels a strong spiritual kinship with the people of the Third World. He confesses that he began ‘to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of over-turning for its own gain.’ (Pg. 155). The enormity of the change which Changez has undergone can be fully appreciated when we realize it is the same man who had once felt that the abuse towards other Muslims ‘were unlikely ever to affect [him] because such things invariably happened, in America as in all countries, to the hapless poor, not to Princeton graduates earning eighty thousand dollars a year.’ (Pg. 95)

The problem with Changez’s line of thinking is that he is unable to accept his role as a dual citizen; he feels overwhelmed with the multiplicity of his identities and circumstances; he feels an enormous pressure to choose any one side. Hamid throws light on Changez’s dilemma at feeling torn between two ‘states’, both mentally and literally in an interview:

‘Changez is someone who by nature tends to think that the way to resolve a conflicted identity or soul is to pick one aspect and attempt to inhabit that aspect to the fullest. Whereas I think personally that’s the road to disaster when you start to do that. It’s a lot better to admit that you are completely confused and have multiple competing claims to who you are as a person.’ (Hamid)

As Changez visits Underwood Samson and Company one last time for his ‘exit conversation’, he is led to Jim, his boss, who wished to speak to him. In a highly symbolic scene, Jim ‘was wearing a dark suit and a dark tie,’ which Changez ‘thought’ were ‘funeral colors’ (Pg. 159). The death of Changez’s American persona had taken place. He has picked his side and decided to show his allegiance to Pakistan and the Muslim community by quitting his job. Jim’s clothes function as an external manifestation of Changez’s internal condition. It is an objective correlative of Changez’s American life and identity. Earlier, he had mentally thanked Juan-Bautista, *‘for helping [him] to push back the veil behind which all this had been concealed!’* He resolved that he no longer needed ‘the continued benevolence of [his] employers.’ He frees himself from his role as an ‘indentured servant’ of the American empire.

Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can also be categorized as the literature of resistance, where he counters negative stereotyping against Muslims with the strategy of reverse stereotyping. In *Covering Islam*, Edward Said calls it a reactive counter-response. When the West portrays Islam in a negative light, the Muslim community, or the *Ummah*, is further motivated and propelled into the activity of defending the faith. Such writings are ‘more or less forced into the apologetic form of a statement about Islam’s humanism, its contribution to civilization, development and moral righteousness’ (Said).

However, Hamid adopts a different strategy. Far from being apologetic about the virtues and the goodness of Islam, and why it should exist, he blames America for its foreign policies and points out its snobbishness towards other communities. The strategy that Hamid adopts here is simple enough: every time the American tourist in the novel points out something he dislikes about Pakistani food, culture or his surroundings, Changez is ready with his own rebuttals. For example, when evening comes and the Old Anarkali marketplace is illuminated with decorative lights, the American finds it ‘A little gaudy’. In response, Changez nonchalantly remarks upon the emotional effect that artificial light has on humans and then says:

‘Think of the expressive beauty of the Empire State Building, illuminated green for St. Patrick’s Day, or pale blue on the evening of Frank Sinatra’s death. Surely, New York by night must be one of the greatest sights in the world’ (Pg. 48).

What Changez attempts to convey here to the American is that the illuminative beauty of decorative lights in the evening is the same everywhere, and if the American finds the marketplace lights of Lahore gaudy, then surely, he must also have the same aversion towards the use of artificial light in his own country. Next, as a gesture of good faith, Changez orders a traditional Lahori dessert for the American. However, he finds it 'Too sweet' (Pg. 147). In response, Changez reminds him of 'the ubiquitous soda fountains and ice-cream bars of [his] motherland' (Pg. 147). He also tells the American that both Pakistan and the United States of America share a similar intensity in 'its national desire for sweetness' (Pg. 147). What is interesting is that every time the American expresses something that he does not like about Lahore, its food or customs, Changez finds an American equivalent to it which counters the American's stereotype.

Moving on from the seemingly inconsequential takes on light and food, the novel is also laden with heavy accusations against American politics. These accusations are socio-politically charged and would make any American politician uncomfortable. Changez heavily criticizes America's invasion of Afghanistan in its bid to fight terror: 'I wondered how it was that America was able to wreak such havoc in the world- orchestrating an entire war in Afghanistan, say, and legitimizing through its actions the invasion of weaker states by more powerful ones' (Pg. 131). Changez also criticizes how the American media broadcast the whole issue in 'the partisan and sports-event-like coverage given to the mismatch between the American bombers with their twenty-first century weaponry and the ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesmen below'. During the course of the novel, Hamid criticizes Americans' negative stereotyping of bearded people (Pg. 130); the 'discrimination of Muslims' in jobs and the business world (Pg. 120); the racial profiling and interrogation of coloured people in American airports (Pg. 75).

The thing that hurt Changez the most, and presumably Hamid, is that America is so immersed in its imperial hubris that it does not realize the mistakes in its politics. Changez tells the American, 'As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into the myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority' (Pg. 168). Hamid implies that America's sense of superiority has made it blind to the atrocities that it has been committing around the world. Its agenda to wage 'war on terror' has made it susceptible to pride and arrogance. Jacques Derrida in *Fichus* (2002) had warned against the consequences of neglecting the causes of terrorism. Derrida criticizes America's hunt for "infinite justice": '...to not exonerate oneself from one's own wrongs and the mistakes of one's own politics, even when one has just paid the most horrific and disproportionate price for it' (Pgs. 51-52).

Derrida observes that despite the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, America has still not learnt from its mistakes or has rectified its politics. Hamid seems to stress upon the very same point in the novel. He puts America on trial and elaborates on

its wrongs. It is his policy of reverse-stereotyping Americans as snobbish, selfish, arrogant, proud, boastful and a nation full of war-mongering politicians. However, it must be kept in mind that in the novel, Hamid ‘hints’ at certain aspects of American politics which may be criticized and condemned. He does not use the novel to expound his own views on the US foreign policy. In a talk, Hamid clarified his position in the socio-political context of the novel: ‘I don’t intend *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to be ‘this is my point of view on US-Pakistan relationship’...I wanted to write a novel which instead allowed the reader’s feelings, the reader’s suspicions, the reader’s sense of dread or stereotype to emerge on its own. I wanted to create a mirror for the reader, not a megaphone for myself’ (*Hamid, I Don't Believe in Reality*).

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the novel’s versatility. Hamid has thrown multiple questions at the reader without answering any of them. Like all great works of art, the novel forces us to think about the world in which we are living today.

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