

Institutional and Cultural Bases of Ideology in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore cultural hegemony propounded by Antonio Gramsci in the light of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The common mentality of every human being is that, they do not value things originally possessed by them and this work also revolves around the same concept. Changez, a Pakistani, who has grown up in the conventional culture, gets attracted towards the western culture when he goes to study in the Princeton University. The perplexing effects of the cultural hegemony between the traditional Muslim community and the modern European culture created in the mind of the protagonist are pictured. His attempts to accept the culture of the West and the realisation of the value of his own culture is analysed in this paper.

Keywords: Cultural hegemony, Conventional culture, Culture of the West, Tradition, Modern.

Introduction

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a romantic-thriller which depicts the story of a young Pakistani Changez, former employee of an American company. This paper relates Mohsin Hamid's work with Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony with the experience of the protagonist in America. His dream of flying with colours in America fades as the days pass by. The story is given in first person narration, where the protagonist tells the story to an American stranger whom he meets unexpectedly in his own country.

The host and the guest

The story starts as a Pakistani bearded man sees an American stranger in his country, he turns nostalgic and he voluntarily helps him. Though there are many people around him who belongs to his own country, Changez chooses the stranger to share his feelings. He shows much care and attention to the stranger as giving a good hospitality to the guest is important in his culture. He reads the mind of the stranger and realises what he expects, and carefully offers things before the stranger asks. Changez gives the best for his guest such as Kashmiri green tea full fat milk and Punjabi food etc.

Changez, sees the stranger as an outlet to express his feeling of fondness in American culture and their treatment of foreigners, his crush towards Erica and the turning point that created bitterness towards the American culture. His narration is often interrupted by many things such as the power cut, traffic jam, encounter with beggars etc. which the stranger finds peculiar but according to Changez it is not so. He tries to give a feeling of comfort in every way possible.

While narrating his experience to the stranger he often addresses America as “your homeland”, which shows that, America no longer belongs to Changez. It is one among the other countries.

Eastern mind and Western mind

The mind-set of the stranger and Changez has various contradictions. This is evident when the stranger encounters a beggar who asks for money, he hesitates to give him as he does not want to get cheated by a beggar. The stranger’s idea is that it will be wise if the money is given to the charity but Changez gives money to the beggar as he cares for his blessing. He gives importance to human characters than money. The stranger shows his suspicion in the acts Changez. This is evident in the last chapter, though Changez shares his entire life story to the stranger, he thinks Changez as a fox, who is cleverly trying to cheat him and Changez disproves his idea about Easterners through his action. Though he is busy in narrating his life experience he is conscious in taking care of the needs of the stranger which the stranger admired.

Fanciness towards Western Culture

Changez enters America as student of Princeton University. Changez comes after succeeding various tests conducted by the University which is not faced by native students. He could crack the test only because of his knowledge with strong cultural background. Fundamentalism is a serious job in his country but in America, the condition is vice versa. The country provides everything such as freedom, loneliness, which he longs for years. He considers that western culture would make him to rule the world. “This dream comes true Princeton inspired in me the feelings that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible” (3).

Logical thinking, cross connecting and correlating the objects are the special qualities of Easterners, which Changez also has; this makes him to answer the question of Jim which the thousands of employees fails to answer. He relates finance with soccer and answers the question logically. This highlights him from the crowd of eight thousand people to get his job. He is greatly impressed by the duty consciousness of the people who gives preference to work than family but considers some practices of westerns such as partying, spending huge money for petty things and girls all time as useless. Complete freedom, very good salary, well settled life without any rules in America attracts Changez and considers western culture as the best culture in the world.

Erica

He remembers Erica when the stranger sees Eastern girls of The National College of Arts crossing with the Western outfit. Changez considers her as the most precious gift by god

to him and finds her as one of the reasons for loving New York but later he realises, that it is only infatuation. His first meeting with Erica is at Greece when he goes to the vacation with the group of friends. Erica loves the company of Changez, who tells his Pakistani stories that are different from her culture. Her interest towards his culture makes him to share his feeling about his home which creates more intimacy between them. Erica, as European girl finds it very common to move close with guy. This is not so simple in the case of Changez, who has grown up with the societal condition that women are not allowed to speak so freely to men as in western countries. Men will also not expect other women to move closely with them other than their wife or family members. He is modern in his dressing but the conventional mentality of his country still exists in the minds of changez. He thought that Erica speaks to him only because he loves him so he starts loving Erica blindly.

Cultural Shock

The contrast in culture between the girls of Eastern and Western world is given by Hamid through the character of Erica and other European girls Hamid. Erica and Changez go to beach, where he finds Erica and the other girls roaming carelessly on the seashore with bikini. Changez finds it shocking to see all these things. This creates a slight shaking in his opinion but he tries to console himself that it is the Western culture and there is nothing wrong in that. “Pakistan heightens one’s sensitivity to the sight of woman’s body”(26). “I had by the summer trip to Greece, spent four years in America already.....but still I remained acutely aware of visible female skin”(26).

Hamid also highlights the character quality of Easterners, through the judgement of Erica about the characters of Changez, that he is different from other men in the world who gives respect to women, who gives space for women. “Not boring polite respectful polite. You give people their space. I really like that. It’s unusual”

Cultural hegemony

The Hegemony happens in the mind of Changez, who fails to realise the value of his own tradition. He expresses his reluctance in following the customs of Muslims like avoiding alcohol, avoiding speaking with girls etc. As a young blood he always hates to follow the rules of experienced one, Changez stealthily drinks the liquor with the help of a Christian man. His hatred towards his own tradition is expresses strong when Chuck playfully asks about the wishes of everyone, where at his turn Changez expressed that he wants to be a dictator of Muslim community. “I hoped one day to be the dictator of Islamic republic with nuclear capability“(29).

The cultural hegemony that happens outside the mind of Changez is that his encounter with Erica’s parents who treats him as an unwelcomed guest and insulted him by mocking the fundamentalism of Pakistan. “You guys have got some serious problems with fundamendalism” (55). According to her father it is just a question, but for Changez, it is not that so simple. He gets anger when her father questions about fundamentalism but he controls himself for the sake of Erica and realises that the knowledge of Erica’s father about their country is very minimal. “His summary with some knowledge, much like the short news items on the front page of “The Wall Street Journal” which I had recently begun to read”(55).

Period of Transition

As days pass he wants to express his supremacy over Americans. His smart work gets him promotion and he enjoys pleasure in firing Americans. He feels ashamed to say that he was a non-American. He is surrounded by the people, but he feels alienated among Americans. He longs for a soul for his company, as Erica leaves him.

The Turning Point

The turning point in the life of Changez that made him to hate the Western Culture is the treatment of non-Americans by Americans after the destruction of New York's World Trade Centre especially in the airport. He realises that the news of bomb blast in America does not create much shock in him. He finds that he is still a Pakistani. The attack over the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan by Americans has worsened aftermath the war. Americans became ruthless. His own family in Pakistan also gets affected his heart aches for his own community.

His agitation towards the American culture is strong towards the end; he starts to go to his office with beard. He openly confesses them as "*Unsympathetic Americans*". He hates the partiality of Americans towards Pakistan who supports India. He hears Jaun- Bautista's story of janissaries and feels that he is also like a janissary. In addition to that Erica left him. All these factors depress him which reflects in his work as a result he gets fired from the job.

Conclusion

He realises that he has entered into the black road with colourful decorations. He came to the conclusion that Easterners get satisfied with content life and gives importance to human relationship but western world gives importance to duty, facts and figures. He leaves the hell and returns to Pakistan and starts a new life as University Professor and is busy in teaching the lessons he has learnt in America.

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