

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist that demonstrates Changez's intercultural relations with non-Muslim characters such as Erica, her father, his co-workers at Underwood Samson. The non-Muslim employees at Underwood Samson suspect Changez because of his beard as the American society has a mindset of beard. Erica—Changez's beloved, and her father stereotype Changez based on his dress and beard. The beard reminds Americans of the 9/11 perpetrators. Their suspicion leads to detachment between Changez and non-Muslim characters in the aftermath. I employ John W. Berry's models of acculturation—assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization—to analyze the intercultural communication. Integration as the most appropriate model of acculturation is the finding as the approach allows minorities to adapt to the dominant culture by retaining their native culture. The article refutes assimilation as a model of acculturation since it seeks the minority groups to adapt to mainstream culture by forgetting their culture of origin. Although Muslim protagonists struggle to integrate, they fail because of racial supremacy and religious extremism. The intercultural communication can be eased through reconciliation and coming together between minority Muslims and mainstream Americans.

Key Words: Intercultural Communication, Multiculturalism, Othering, Changez, Erica

Introduction

The article underlines intercultural communication in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that shows the fault-lines reemerged in the post-9/11 situation and cultural nuances among ethnic groups and their reluctance in accepting differences. The intercultural relations between Changez—representative of Muslim minorities—and the non-Muslim characters reveal the culture of othering that weakens the multicultural ethos. However, the integrative model of acculturation can help Changez and mainstream Americans such as Erica and her father to have an intercultural communication.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist published in 2007 centers on the main character, Changez who is unable to assimilate to his host country, the US. The key problem lies on his failed romance with an American girl, Erica, whose father treats Changez to be a Pakistani man without any right in the US. The dramatic monologue of Changez with an American in Lahore unfolds the account of his memory of his graduation from Princeton, his lucrative job at Underwood Samson and affair with Erica. His experience as a Pakistani immigrant in the US reveals the intercultural relations of the minority Muslims with the mainstream Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks. The novel shows the protagonist's ambivalence as explored by Mohan G. Ramanan (125). Ramanan's analysis of the novel points out that Changez who endeavors to adapt to American culture also seeks to retain his culture of origin. Although Ramanan's reading reveals the protagonist's cultural dilemma, my

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exploration shows that Changez is a guest and Erica, her father, and colleagues at Underwood Samson are the representatives of the host country who need to welcome him as he struggles to be accepted as an American. Contrarily, they treat him as an outsider. Changez's conversation with Erica's father reveals that the latter is unwilling to accept him. On the one hand, Changez cannot extricate himself from the lure of American prosperity. On the other, he falls back to a more stable identity of a Pakistani man. Since Erica belonging to the upper middle class American society, she can be taken as the representative of the dominant culture. Contrary to her status, Changez struggles for American identity. His portrayal exemplifies the condition of Muslim immigrants in the post-9/11 American diversity.

Analysis

The paper undertakes *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to explore the intercultural communication between the protagonist Changez, a Pakistani immigrant graduated from Princeton who represents educated Muslim immigrants and his beloved Erica and her father. The author shows a bit special picture of otherness that Changez's culturally marginalized position in the US is similar to that of the American in the remote part of Pakistan. Nevertheless, Changez's experience of otherness in the American society is different from the Pakistanis are hospitable, whereas the Americans are not as exemplified in the case of Changez's meeting with Erica's father. The narrative details the conflict between two cultures: western and Islamic. The narrator compares and contrasts these two cultures:

But my cultural reference has fallen on deaf ears! You appear distracted, sir; those pretty girls from the National College of Arts have clearly recaptured your attention. Or are you watching that man, the one with the beard far longer than mine, who has stopped to stand beside them? You think he will scold them for the inappropriateness of their dress-their T-shirts and jeans? I suspect not; those girls seem comfortable in this area and place. . . if a woman is harassed by a man, she has the right to appeal to the brotherly instincts of the mob, and the mob is known to beat men who annoy their sisters. (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 22-3)

The American may be distracted because girls from the National College of Arts are dressed in T-shirts and jeans, which counter the stereotyped dresses of female Muslims. Changez clarifies that not all Muslim girls wear *hijabs* and veils as generally perceived by the Westerners. Therefore, the dresses of college girls may shock the interlocutor. Changez asks the American to look at the man with longer beard than that of Changez in order to make sure that beard is a cultural property. It does not have any connection with terrorism. Besides, Changez emphasizes the honor and social security endowed to women in the East by pointing out the brotherly instincts. When men publicly disturb girls, the group punishes the culprits. These minute details are the attributes of the eastern culture. His intent is to correct the misconceptions and prejudiced mindset of the Westerners through this imaginary character. In contrary to the eastern culture, Changez narrates some images of the westerners:

But that is neither here nor there. I was telling you about the moment when I was forced to stare. We were lying on the beach, and many of the European women nearby were, as usual, sunbathing topless-a practice I wholeheartedly supported, but which the women among us Princetonians, unfortunately, had thus far failed to embrace-when I noticed Erica was untying the straps of her bikini. And then, as I watched, only an arm's length away, she bared her breasts to the sun. (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 23)

Changez admits that he felt annoyed when he had to experience topless European women lying on the beach. His Islamic upbringing did not allow him to stare at them. Indeed, Hamid is talking about the open, flexible, and independent America-that hides nothing. Baring her breasts, Erica could

express her assertiveness-the American assumption. The author is not negative about American culture. Rather he exposes how Pakistan and America stand opposite each other culturally, through the portrayals of Changez and Erica who tend to be likeminded people in the multicultural America. However, his all endeavors to integrate into a pluralistic culture failed in the post 9/11 America that began changing lens to observe Muslim immigrants.

Changez flashbacks and narrates how he became a reluctant fundamentalist. The aftermath of 9/11 transformed his attitude and belief system. The civilization dispute resulted into religious resurgence. He became aware of his ethnic identity. He experienced identity crisis and his beard turned annoying to westerners that conditioned him to associating himself with Muslims. In this regard, Changez adds:

I ignored as best I could the rumors I overheard at the Pak-Punjab Deli: Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people's houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse. I reasoned that these stories were mostly untrue; the few with some basis in fact were almost certainly being exaggerated. (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 94)

Changez had to survive the new but harsh and exclusionary United States in the aftermath. Previously, he did not trust rumors about the brutal behaviors, prejudices, vandalism, discriminations, and other racial attacks on Muslims. Rather he was in illusion that America, the most democratic nation that highly respects cultural diversity would not have such mishaps. In addition, he took the gossips and whispers as exaggerations. Unexpectedly, he regrets not being aware of cultural and religious prejudices and discriminations when his beard distracts his colleagues at Underwood Samson. He narrates, "More than once, travelling on the subway-where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in-I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares" (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 130). Changez was unaware of cultural discriminations in America that he experiences in the aftermath. His beard makes him the subject of abuse. The sense of cultural intolerance is creeping around him. His colleagues at Underwood Samson behave with him differently. The ramifications of the 9/11 attacks antagonize the Muslim Americans like Changez whose colleagues bully him psychologically at his workplace in New York. He is treated as if he is a representative of Islam and an ally of the perpetrators of the 9/11 tragedy. The intercultural communication is hampered because of the misconceptions about each other's culture.

The novelist portrays dialogues and possibilities of mutual communication between the East and the West. In this regard, Mohan G. Ramanan asserts that the 9/11 affects Hamid hung between his fascination for American prosperity and the terror attack of 9/11 that permeates Pakistani identity (125-6). Ramanan insists on the conceptual change that the portrayal of Pakistan and religious minorities, especially Muslims, has changed in the aftermath of 9/11. Americans demonstrate a negative image of Muslim minorities that reveals the prejudice of the parochial Americans. Pakistanis experience the negative portrayal of Muslims and South Asian identities (127). Ramanan's reading suggests that the negative representation of Muslims and South Asians is the continuation of the orientaling act in the aftermath of 9/11. The overgeneralization leads minority Muslims to identity crisis as exemplified in the case of Changez.

Azhar Hameed and Afrah Abd Al-Jabbar describe Changez's critical reading of American intervention in Muslim countries targeted to strengthen the democratic government and protect human rights. Changez is aggressive at the intervention of the US administration in the countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US has failed to integrate people with different backgrounds, ethnicities, and

religions (19). They point out the reason of Changez's comeback. Moderate Muslims like Changez may go back to their homelands if the US does not change its domestic and international policies toward Muslims and the Muslim World. Highly educated Muslims like Changez contributive to the economic development of the US may become radicals (20). They accuse the US of pushing American Muslims toward radicalization. For them, the US is accountable for the 9/11 attacks.

Tracing the status of immigrants, Nirjharini Tripathy points out the adverse plight of Muslim immigrants like Changez in the post-9/11 American society. The geographical mobility of Changez from the US to Pakistan is because of cultural intolerance in the aftermath of 9/11 (71). Changez finds the American society turning into a monolithic culture intolerant of the Islamic values. Material success fails to keep Changez in the American society—intolerant of cultural differences. The US does not remain multicultural and democratic, since it fails to protect rights of minorities. The 9/11 deteriorates the relations of the West with the East that needs re-assessing (72). In her idea, the conversation between Changez and the American in Lahore denotes the endeavor to negotiate with the differences for correcting misconceptions about the cultural differences. Changez and the American—the typical characters—make dialogues to understand each other. Their intercultural communication demonstrates the possibilities of improving the intercultural relations between Muslims and European Americans through mutual understanding.

Changez's journey from Princeton to Underwood Samson shows his endeavors to integrate in the US society. Along with Changez's professional success, his love for Erica justifies his devotion to the US. Changez has to confront his "ethno-tribal demons" after watching 9/11 on TV (57). The protagonist struggles against his aggression at the tragedy. Khawaja questions why Changez cannot become the part of the US despite his professional commitment and emotional attachment. Sheeba Himani Sharma focuses on Changez's relation with the American society suggestive of the intercultural relationship of minority Muslims in the West. Sharma asserts that media and other agencies portray Muslims as fanatics. In her view, Hamid's fiction challenges the negative depiction of Muslims (390-391). Sharma's analysis suggests that immigrants benefit both the host country and the homeland, as they contribute to the economic development of the host country, and their remittance becomes a regular source of income on the part of homeland. The immigrants' contribution continues as long as the host country respects them. When their existence is in crisis like that of Changez, they revolt against the host country.

On a different note, Humaira Tariq claims that religious affiliation and nationality form individuals' identity. Muslims' religious identity is cultural. Doctrines of Islam guide Muslim nations and individuals are bound to abide by the laws of their respective countries (237). Individuals in the Muslim World like in Pakistan can hardly detach them from the laws of Islam. Any attack on Islam directly affects their identity as exemplified in the case of Changez who took 9/11 attacks happily, since the West had assaulted Islam earlier. He felt delighted, as he took it as a revengeful act upon the US that had killed thousands of innocent civilians in Muslim countries like in Afghanistan and Iraq. Muslim immigrants torn between the culture of host country and their ethnic identity feel isolated. Cultural intolerance pushed Muslim immigrants like Changez toward orthodoxy in the aftermath of 9/11 (238). Raiding mosques, hate crimes, and prejudices with Muslims in the public places were the causes of Changez's displeasure and frustration that compelled him to become rigid. Shirin Zubair questions why Changez is a perpetual outsider in the American society. The culture of othering isolates Muslim immigrants like Changez. His reactions to the loss of both his love and job at Underwood Samson are the implications of the continued othering (65). Changez's relationship with Erica is "ambivalent" (72). The portrayal of Erica infers her belonging to the US upper middle class. Zubair's reading demonstrates the class disparity between the Pakistanis and Americans as exemplified in the case of Changez and Erica. The former represents deteriorating

economy of Pakistan and the latter symbolizes economic progress and prosperity of the US as she belongs to upper economic stratum, whereas Changez is an outsider and stays there for earning so that he can send money to his family.

Shibily Nuamanvz refutes the collective judgment of Muslims in the US, since it badly affects immigrants like Changez in the aftermath of 9/11. Changez's other categories of identity become secondary, whereas his ethnic and religious identity is taken primarily into account. His cultural identity leads Americans to suspecting Changez as a potential terrorist. Although Changez's profession has been to focus on the fundamentals of Underwood Samson when evaluating the finance of companies and enterprises, he has to shift his focus on the fundamentals of Islam (252). Ethnic intolerance is inherent in the US. The intolerant America leads Muslim immigrants like Changez to religious fundamentalism. Greta Olson asserts that Changez's beard is considered as an insignia of being a terrorist. Changez is suspected of being a potential terrorist because of his beard (1). Changez when torn between the US and Pakistan chooses his homeland because of the cultural intolerance in the American society. Changez's mobility toward Pakistani ethnicity is because of the continued otherness in the aftermath of 9/11 (9-11). Changez's cultural isolation leads him to homeland. The broadcasted images and discourse on terrorism and the attacks of 9/11 changed Americans' perspectives toward Muslim immigrants (12-3). Media implanted the seed of suspicion among the common people and accordingly they developed consciousness about Muslims.

Contrarily, Nath Aldalala 'a claims that radical Muslims are likely to cause terrorist attacks. In his idea, they may be the potential terrorists, although a bearded man like Changez may be a moderate Muslim. The image of a bearded man differentiated from that of a terrorist intensifies the tension as exemplified in the communication of Changez and the American. The narrator expresses his gratefulness and love for America, but the American does not have any affection for Pakistan equivalently (7) which shows that the West denies taking interest in the East. Americans retain the gap from the East. The narrative seeks to challenge stereotypes of Pakistan that America has been undermining the power of Pakistan and the notion that Pakistan is still surviving on filth and powerlessness. The strength of Pakistan is one of the fastest growing nuclear nations (9). Hamid deludes readers about the misrepresentations of both Pakistan and Islam. The narrative creates a dialogue between the West and the East through mutual understanding (9).

By exposing the conflict between the East and the West, Daryoosh Hayati elaborates the conflict reflected in the portrayal of Changez—a glocal figure who communicates on behalf of both the East and the West in the aftermath of 9/11 (31). Changez's confused personality is the amalgam of his Pakistani bringing-up and his American education. Hamid is critical of the terrorist label attributed to Muslims in terms of globalization maintained by the supremacy, "being interpreted as essentialism" (31-2). The novel challenges the label of terrorist ascribed to Muslims, as it is an essentialist concept. Besides, the Muslim immigrants lived in the US for economic prosperity and progress, but the 9/11 dismantled their dreams by reviving the cultural prejudice. A modern and professional immigrant portrayed as an anti-hero moved toward religious fanaticism and challenged the over-generalized image of Muslims as religious fanatics and backward enthusiasts (35). Hayati's proposition suggests that the cultural conflict shattered the dreams of many immigrants like that of Changez.

Avirup Ghosh asserts, "Changez's critique of American corporate fundamentalism stems from his lack of the sense of belongingness and from a feeling of problematized identity" (48). Changez fails to recognize his self in the beginning but later on, he inclines toward his ethnicity when he experienced cultural isolation. Consequently, he regrets for his association with Underwood Samson—American corporate world. Changez's romantic relationship with Erica shows that both Changez and Erica hesitate having sexual intercourse initially because Changez—symbolic of the

East—is not allowed to penetrate into American culture represented by Erica. She is interested in him because of his exotic personality, as Changez represents the orient—the subject of attraction for the occident (52). Although Changez and Erica seem to have been in love with each other since their graduation at Princeton, they retain the distance at some level. Thus, their relationship is analogous to that of American Muslims with the US, as the former are not accepted despite their long-time stay.

Countering the belief that Islam teaches violence, Isam Shihada claims that Hamid's literary work challenges the discourse of the mainstream American culture that Islam preaches violence and terror and Muslims are the probable terrorists. The novel is a counter literary response to dominant literary discourses of the post-9/11 about stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims. The ruthless treatment of Muslims, American authoritarian policies, and the blind 'War on Terror' compels many ordinary Muslims to abandon the American Dream, like Changez, and turn to fanaticism. The American perception of Muslims after the 9/11 has been canopy, random, and inconsistent to such an extent that the American notion of multiculturalism becomes questionable. America will suffer internal conflicts, divides if it does not accept the aliens as the Americans, and fails to discontinue generalizing Muslims based on the perpetrators of the 9/11 (451). The American media were responsible for fear and suspicion. Reese predicts that Islam will be acceptable to America when Muslims practice the Western values via ordering beers for them and allowing their girls to wear miniskirts (qtd. in Shihada 453).

Besides, Changez actively leads the conversation, whereas the American is silent, and just listens to the narrator's viewpoint. The East especially Muslims have to speak about themselves and their experiences, because they have ever been misrepresented, and their plights have been manipulated by the West. The American is, therefore, passive in the novel (Shihada455). A remarkable point in this analysis is her acute observation of multi-dimensions of the novel. Her reading includes from the political issue to the literary implication. However, she predicts that immigrants like Changez will be discouraged to leave the US if the misrepresentation and ill-treatment of Muslims do not stop. I refute her prediction that abandoning the US would become easier for the immigrant Muslims, but American Muslims who do not have other homelands other than the US for example the African American Muslims and European American Muslims would fail so doing.

José Manuel Estévez-Saá asserts that the narrative postulates a transcultural stance that respects difference and commonality, silence and dialogue as an unavoidable aspect of modern socio-cultural relationships and exchanges. The US is portrayed as a multicultural society in which young Pakistanis like Changez, are able to speak, and feel to be at home. Erica of high-class upbringing takes interests into Changez's culture and tradition of Pakistan and accordingly she seeks to know much about the exotic world far away from her homeland. Both Changez and Erica co-exist with each other by reciprocating cultures. The 9/11 disrupted the harmonious coexistence by intervening in the intercultural relations of the West with the East (4-7). The disrupted relationship between the West and the East could improve if they moved ahead with positive intentions reflected in the cordial relation between Changez and the American in Lahore. Mutual respect and hospitality for the American offered by Changez suggests that the immigrants in the US expect similar hospitality from the host community.

Joseph Darda undertakes *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a literary work that evokes "the idea that life is not bounded and isolated but always conditioned" (108) by social and material phenomena. Literary works challenge "the logic of the 'War on Terror' in the interest not of anti-American hostility but of international solidarity" (108). Hamid has contributed to the global literature that seeks for international harmony. In his idea, the logic of the 'War on Terror' may terrorize the global peace. Changez as the narrator retells experiences of the Muslim immigrants. The novel as literature evokes

and stages precarious life. A Filipino jeepney driver, a Chilean bookseller, Pakistani university students, and the American in Lahore, are leading insecure lives. The text as a "critical global fiction challenges the idea of the "other" and the alien "elsewhere" so that they could be imagined otherwise (121). Instead of challenging the idea of alienating the minorities and the powerless, the novel comments on different forms of othering pervasive in the aftermath not covered in Darda's analysis.

Focusing on the relationship between Erica and Changez, Ira Pande illustrates that on the one hand, it seems as if there is a physical attraction between opposite sexes. On the other, sicknesses of both Erica and Changez are as spheres that bring them together and eventually keep them apart from each other. Both of them have lost precious things in their lives. Erica has lost Chris, her long-time boy friend, Changez has lost his homeland, Pakistan, and both of them seek for (155). Erica compromises with her sickness, but Changez returns to his homeland.

Leerom Medovoi responds to the novel centering on the cause of 9/11. In his observation, the US prides in its militarism and economy and the novel demonstrates a frequent tension between the economic power of New York and merciless military force. "Changez tends to embody this distinction in the multiracial global city on the one hand, and the ultimately xenophobic national imperium on the other" (650). Changez has been for four and a half years in America, but he has never become an American. Changez instantly becomes a New Yorker after 9/11 (Medovoi 650). The American society has not accepted Changez solely because of his Pakistani ethnicity. Rather, he remains as a New Yorker. New York accommodates multi ethnicities. Despite long stay of Changez, the US fails to accommodate him that is resultant in his comeback. Changez has worked for American imperialism—an agent to expand American capitalism to accumulate capital from the world around (651). Changez shows no curiosity in the role assigned to him. Instead, he resists against American imperialism.

The portrayal of Changez's monologue with the interlocutor reveals perceptions and reactions of the former toward the American society as reflected in his intercultural communication with the American in Pakistan. Erica—an American girl—who seems to be in love with Changez, appreciates him, and expresses curiosity for his culture before the 9/11. She receives him warmly and endeavors to strengthen their bond by connecting him with her father. Contrarily, her father is suspicious of Changez's loyalty for the US and therefore he interrogates Changez about his Pakistani ethnicity. When communicating with Changez, Erica's father reminds him of poor economic condition of Pakistan and lets Changez know his marginal immigrant position in the US. The representation of their conversation reveals that although the immigrant Muslims struggle to integrate into the American society, the mainstream Americans do not accommodate them. The resurgence of cultural fissures in the forms of unacceptability, misconceptions, stereotypes, and intolerance leads Muslims to radicalization. The spacing of Changez from Erica's life also reveals the similar ramification of the tragic attacks in the post-9/11 American intercultural rubric.

The paper analyzes the continued otherness of minority Muslims that mars their intercultural relations with the mainstream Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. On a different note, my project examines the way othering reverses when the location of the narrator changes as exemplified in the case of Changez, who others the American in Lahore is analogous to Changez's experience of being othered in the US. Hamid, from the postcolonial location, portrays Changez and the American in such a way that Changez takes advantage of his location by controlling the voice of the interlocutor. He frightens the listener while communicating at *chaikhana* (teashop) in Lahore. Changez's ethnicity emboldens him to stay dominant during the conversation with the American. Their imbalanced role in conversation shows that the origin of discourse ascertains who others whom and who is being othered against whom. Since the vantage point of the narrator affects the literary discourse

ubiquitous in the 9/11 fiction, the study investigates into different forms of othering to assess the cultural position of both Muslim and non-Muslim characters. The communication between two cultures: Pakistani and American as portrayed through Changez and Erica in the novel becomes problematic due to prejudice and suspicion predominant in American society both before and after the 9/11 attacks.

Conclusion

The paper has explored that people from two cultures can communicate properly provided that they negotiate to accept differences. However, the characters portrayed in the novel do not show readiness for moving ahead. They become culturally rigid after 9/11 attacks in the US. The event leads them to refusing cultural differences. The refusal to accept cultural differences leads Changez to fundamentalism. Changez shows affinity toward the culture of origin more by detaching himself from the melting pot—a place where people from different backgrounds create a new identity by losing their previous identities. Changez is treated as a tolerated other in the post-9/11 American society because of his ethnicity. The finding of the reading is the more Americans isolate Muslims, the more the latter are discouraged from integrating into the US society. As a result, Muslims seem to stay separate from the dominant culture. Thus, cultural isolation hampers their intercultural communication.

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