CONCEPTUALIZING THE POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MOHSIN HAMID’S THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial literature is an assertion of cultural nationalism, of voices unheard so long, the voice of people who were formerly underdogs and about the aftermath of colonialism. It is about the painstaking struggle of being independent. The society is no longer being oppressed; they are independent, free to be themselves again. However as they have changed, their culture has changed now, so they need to figure out who they really are. After so much change has taken place, they cannot go back to their original culture as it has been dismantled by the colonizers. The question of their true identity haunts every postcolonial subject. The present paper will present a Postcolonial study of how Eastern identity and Western identity clash in the Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist. Present novel is a reaction to the discourse of Colonization from the South Asian side and question the colonial stereotypes which came into existence after 9/11 in America.

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial Literature, Crisis of Identity and Representation, Americanization, Effects of 9/11 on Literature, Western Stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial literature is an assertion of cultural nationalism, of voices unheard so long, the voice of people who were formerly underdogs and about the aftermath of colonialism. It is about the painstaking struggle of being independent. The society is no longer being oppressed; they are independent, free to be themselves again. However as they have changed, their culture has changed now, so they need to figure out who they really are. After so much change has taken place, they cannot go back to their original culture as it has been dismantled by the colonizers. The question of their true identity haunts every postcolonial subject. The present paper will present a Postcolonial study of how Eastern identity and Western identity clash in the Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist. Ten years after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, 9/11 and connected concepts such as terrorism, Islamism and the war on terror are still present in the media all over the world. Undeniably, 9/11 represented a clear cut in world history and attacked the U.S. as superpower at her deepest. The events have been of great importance for the world’s development in the last ten years and affected people in their everyday life. Being such a decisive event, a lot of people found in music, writing or other creative works an important means to process their feelings. Mohsin Hamid hence joins numerous narrative representations of 9/11 with his novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist. Mohsin Hamid, a postcolonial Pakistani writer, has tackled the issues of identity in The Reluctant Fundamentalist. These result from the interaction among Erica, a white American woman, Changez, a Pakistani Muslim and Chris, an ex-boyfriend of Erica in the background, and also due to larger political and cultural factors.

Present novel is a reaction to the discourse of Colonization from the South Asian side and question the colonial
stereotypes which came into existence after 9/11 in America. So the novel become a major literary work in the aftermath of 9/11 massacre. It has explicit repercussions of racial prejudices against Islam, and has been highly instrumental in effacing the stereotypes of Muslims. In so doing, the novel dismantles the Western religious bias against the Muslims. The narrative structure of the novel is that of a first-person narrator a Pakistani man named Changez, who tells the story of his life in America, before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks, to a complete stranger. The narrator makes implications that the stranger, who is said to be an American, takes part in the conversion. However, the American’s voice is never heard and his identity never truly revealed. These two men meet on a street in Lahore and Changez invites the unknown American to have a tea with him a nearby restaurant. There Changez starts telling the story of how he ended up in America, graduated from Princeton, and got a job at the evaluating firm Underwood Samson. Most importantly he tells how his life was affected by the attacks on the World Trade Center.

The Novel written in the backdrop of 9/11 is a continuation of post-colonial narratives that have undertaken to write back to the empire about the misery and suffering, death and destruction that America has caused to Eastern Countries. It is a quietly described and cleverly framed infatuation and dis-enchantment with America, build on the treacherous fault lines of East-West relations. The novel is a finely portrayed misrepresentation of East by the West and the prejudice of the American setup. This is a story of shattered dreams and reluctant fundamentalism. It is a story about change with a lot of dynamism in the novel both in the settings as well as in the thoughts. The Western control of the empire, the strategies of their Eastern manipulation, and the fermentation of fundamentalism is perceived in this novel in terms of extremism and violence. Hamid presents a character in this novel who is familiar with the American setup. The protagonist is a Pakistani who grows up in his native place, moves for higher studies to the prestigious American University of Princeton and gets a job as an analyst in the most institutionalized of the American Companies which is outsourcing its ideas and his abilities to materialize into their own concrete progress. The protagonist Changez is attracted by the American dream and adopts its life-style. The setting of this novel is truly global. The setting of this novel changes from Lahore to New York, then to Manila, to Valparaíso and finally back to Lahore. The settings of the narrator also transform from the old Anarkali road to the modern Piazza in the course of description of this novel. Hamid links Lahore to the idea of empire in several ways. He describes this city which has withstood many invasions and occupations, giving it a diverse history and an implied strength. He describes Lahore as the capital of the fallen empire and the New York as the capital of the expanding empire.

The stereotypes explored in the story have their roots in old colonial ways of thinking, where the colonizer American white man is superior one and a Muslim man from Pakistan who is colonized Other is the inferior. Today the colonies might not be a reality, but imperialism certainly is. The relationship between the inferior and superior still exists within imperialism, with or without colonies, and this power relation is what the novel explores. The novel creates a discussion where the colonial distinctions between us and them, civilized and savage are exposed and challenged. 9/11 attacks brings up lot of questions. Every changes that occurs in the novel is tied to 9/11 and characters of the novel were affected by the attacks. Changez becomes aware of how his nationalities collide in the world after 9/11, just as everybody else suddenly start noticing his “Otherness”, which they previously almost did not see. Changez’s identity struggle arises when he realizes that he is acting more American than Pakistani. His struggle together with the reader’s own ideas explore the prejudices and stereotypes that reappeared in the world after 9/11. The novel starts a discussion about the perceptions that exists of right and wrong, East and West, terrorist and non-terrorist. These difference will be discussed from the backdrop of post colonialism. The character Changez represent a constant battle between the two sides of the world i.e East
and West. So the novel questions the stereotypes of East and West. As Changez represents the suppressed voice of the colonies, the novel simultaneously brings forth the same question of identity and battle within the reader. The novel explores via the identity struggle of Changez the story of a man that was not born into the orientalistic stereotypes but instead was shaped by prejudice and stereotypes.

This novel in short presents the views of a tormented character of Changez to the Americans in detail, who has fallen out of love with two, one with a woman and other with a nation. It illustrates to Americans the paradigm of writing that has been witnessed since 9/11. Featuring economy and power, shift in dress and culture, family and social fabric, on human nature and relations, on geography and geo-politics, on beard and religion, on national uprisings and corruptions, on opportunities and hatred, on fear and anger, on life and death, on foundations and fundamentalism, on belief and culture, on attitude and etiquettes; it is a plain talk to Americans to invite them to see both sides of the coin, in short to introspect. Fundamentalist a new harsh term, is used to describe not only the Muslims but also a form of label used to describe fundamentalist Christians and economic fundamentalists. Although religious fundamentalism makes Americans weary, it is the same fundamentals they prescribe for measuring the fundamentals of the subject as concerned to their companies. Fundamentalism is an extreme commitment to fundamental tenets and articles of faith, conservative moral foundations and ways of seeing the world — the opposite of diversity, accommodation and flexibility — but is far off from the thought of violence. Although the novel leads to a series of conflicting doubts and dilemmas with steps of self introspection while resisting the mechanism of violence. On the other hand, fundamentalism for Changez is a path of success in life while he perceives his career in economic valuation. The novel’s significance within a body of fiction that addresses the contingencies of 9/11 lies in how its engagement with contemporary political and ideological tensions re-positions the dynamics of the encounter.

Hamid’s novel takes a rather pessimistic view of global affairs and of the relationship between the two opposing positions it sets out: within the text America and the Islamic world seem caught up in a pervasive mood that mobilises a re-consideration of national and cultural boundaries. The attacks on the Twin Towers prompted America to construct its own de-territorialised ‘other’, thus replacing an inherited or recycled figure of European imperialist discourse. The escalation in aggression towards strangers marks a sinister turn in America’s foreign policies and in its posturing of national protection. The novel demonstrates how, in a globalised world of late capitalism and transnational movement, the mechanisms and reproductions of the West’s others cannot be seen to merely reinvigorate the preceding centuries of colonialism. Though the novel presents a dialogue between the first person Pakistani narrator/speaker and the unnamed American listener, the novel explores, simultaneously, the parameters and contradictions of global politics and the conflicted voice of modernity. The novel explores the possibility of unsettling the traditional power dynamic through the return of Changez to Pakistan, and also in its departure from the conventions of post 9/11 fiction.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* breaks the stereotypes and misconceptions that promote prejudiced and biased view against the people who are considered as ‘Others’. Other denotes inferiority of people due to differences in colour, religion and nation. As the novel’s protagonist, Changez, comes to the USA as a young adult to be educated at Princeton and later works for a prestigious valuation firm in New York City, but after 9/11, Changez’ personal American Dream crumbles as his US-American environment is poisoned by an atmosphere of patriotic nostalgia and xenophobic hostility. The novel thus chronicles a migrant’s pursuit of the American Dream, his hopes and aspirations, and their subsequent disappointment in front of the backdrop of the political and social climate brought about by the events of 11 September 2001. All of this
might be considered fairly predictable features of a post-9/11 migrant novel. The novel does not only describe the outward movement of US-American political and economic power but simultaneously that of a foreigner who appeared to have been naturalized into the US-American meritocratic system. At the same time, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* displays an intent awareness of the fact that intercultural misperceptions contribute to and shape social and political realities.

Postcolonial Hamid blames America for its persistence to live in the past and continue to pursue imperialistic policies. He is also critical of America for its refusal to accept the cultural, political realities of the present day world. He shows that America has failed to take into account the national and cultural aspirations and identities of other people. Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows that America conducts its affairs around the world like a neo-colonial power. This conduct is marked by constant interferences, interventions and even occupation of other countries. This has alienated Changez from America, in spite of the fact that he was the product of American system. Hamid portrays the American neo-colonial conduct and its interference in Muslim countries like Afghanistan (59). Hamid further blames America for its assumptions of superiority and its insistence to treat cultures and people as “others” with their own cultural and political identities. “Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own” (101). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a microcosm reflecting the malaise, American culture and society suffers from and its negative and reactionary impact upon the identities of people like Changez. Changez regrets that even after all the sacrifices and services of Pakistan, America has never treated Pakistan as its ally or friend. The novel portrays the impact of politics and culture on individual identities. Hamid has dealt with the issues of colonialist ideology, neo-colonialist “bearing” the internalization of this ideology, the mimicry and the resultant hybridity and its impact upon the identity of the people from the so called developing cultures.

Hamid has shown that unlike the contention of white American culture to perfection, it has very serious problems. He shows that the white American culture is as extremist, as intolerant of the racial, cultural and ideological differences as any so called Third World culture. The intolerant American culture is having its negative impact upon the Non-Europeans and is also breeding contempt and resistance against American policies around the world. Hamid rejects the contention that only the so called developing cultures produce and breed extremism. He points his finger at America and its culture for producing extremism, hatred and global tensions and confrontations. Hamid shows that disrespect and lack of acceptance by American culture of the people from other cultures is the biggest barrier in the way of natural and mutually beneficial interaction among various cultures and countries. The discriminatory and insulting attitude of America and its culture makes people reactionary and extremist like was the case with Changez who inspite of his education from Princeton, his love for a white American girl, his job and status in America becomes the fundamentalist. Changez, like a postcolonial subject reject every kind of identity imposed by West, he rejects all these benefits along with American culture and comes back to the culture of his origin, discards his hybrid identity and invents his new identity which is shaped by extremist ideology. Similarly, Hamid has portrayed that American interference and intervention in the internal affairs of other countries is neither in the interest of America nor in the interest of international peace and cooperation, because it breeds ill will and encourages people from developing cultures like Pakistan to embrace extremist ideologies.

The novels written in response to 9/11 have broadly concentrated on the themes of terrorism and the propagation of extremism. In this regard Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* offers a postcolonial form of politics that retrieves the specificity of local Muslim life in Pakistan.
REFERENCES


