

**THE 'HOLY' CONFLICT IN OUR TIMES : A STUDY OF MOHSIN HAMID'S
*THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST***

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Abstract

In the background of relentless destruction by the lone super power, my paper analyzes Mohsin Hamid's novel, The Reluctant Fundamentalist from insights infused by Marxism to understand the emergence of reluctant fundamentalism in the ideological vacuum after the 'collapse' of communism and the manipulation of the media to portray private violence as unwarranted and indefensible and state violence as legitimate and inevitable. The end of cold war hasn't ended either history or war between ideas but only projected 'manufactured consent' by capitalism and its media as the genuine consent to the established order. But the weapon of criticism has not been blunted thanks to the work of thinkers like Edward Said or Noam Chomsky. The need of the hour is not market fundamentalism or religious fundamentalism but finding humanity crushed in between.

Key words: *Fundamentalist, Ideological, Religious, Reluctant, Human*

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Mohsin Hamid's novel shows how Changez, A Pakistani professional experiences transformation from being a conformist to the status- quo to a reluctant opponent of the super power . 'Reluctance' means not willing but change takes place and the relation between the East and the West Changes. The white man's burden has not gone notwithstanding the native's attempt to mould himself in the crucible of his ex-master. Education, refinement of manners and any amount of effort to build the bridge between the East and the West comes to nothing as the old relationship of mistrust and suspicion grows. The lure of the western culture and technology do not remove age old unequal relationship between them. The colonizer wonders what might have caused this ingratitude in the native whereas the latter wonders when will the former realize the cause of alienation between them. He stops short of saying, 'leave us to our selves'. But to those subjects who believe that history has not ended and the masters who are hell bent on civilizing the savage, there is no respite from violent conflict. But the noose is tight round the neck of the both as globalization brought them together and their bond is deadly but inextricable. Bilgrami writes that

It is the utter and deliberate sleight of hand and willful deception in the use of the term "clash," knowing perfectly well that for some centuries now and for the foreseeable future "conquest" is the more apt description or the Islam and the West, that is the deepest flaw in Huntington's paper. (271)

The novel portrays the relationship between Changez and Erika which progresses towards marriage but suddenly the parting takes place. Changez who has been consumed by ennui and skepticism towards the system which he has been serving gives up his project midway. Erica experiences depression and ends up in a sanatorium meant for the mentally ill. Back in his country , Changez meets a visitor and recounts his story of alienation from being a willing employee of global capitalism to an ideological jihadist. He offers reasons for his metamorphosis and tries to pay back the colonial in his own coin.

The narrator reveals the story in a refined manner expressing feelings of one educated in Princeton University. He refers to the visitor's suspicion towards the waiter of another man with beard in a restaurant. The feeling of alienation has become mutual and Changez shows the ambivalent feeling towards the West- a fascination for its education but a repulsion regarding its cultural and political hegemony. The killing of civilians breeds a sort of hatred towards the Western irrationality that wants to dominate other cultures which goes against cultural diversity and true spirit of globalization. Democracy is imposed,

freedom is extolled , equality derided , diversity rejected, religion seen as obscurantist , crusading spirit resurrected and the other is worth annihilating.

The narrator Changez expresses how he felt strange on the occasion of holidaying in Greece along with Erica and other friends. When she exposed her breast while going for a swim, he became curious and self-conscious and his future dream of turning into the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability shocked his friends except Erica who seemed understanding. The disparity between the most advanced and the ancient civilization makes him feel ashamed.

The ironical tone is subdued but comes out in every observation the narrator makes. He was exhilarated to receive a credit card, looking at a mobile but when he offers card for payment ,the man at the counter asks him to pay later in cash. At the end of training as a business analyst, he gets praised for his warrior instinct and asked to nurture it. Back in Lahore, he gives an explanation that the scar on his forearm has not been from training camp as a jihadist but a small injury which he suffered from molten wax falling on his hand in Pakistan.

The development of intimacy between the narrator and Erica shows how understanding can build the bridges between the East and the West. She understands his temperament, what makes him touchy , invites him to her home. When her father refers to corruption and fundamentalism in Pakistan, that makes him somewhat irritable. Erica's father refers to Pakistan negatively says,

Economy's falling apart though, no? Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers. Solid people. Don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some problems with fundamentalism.
(Hamid 55)

But he subdues his feelings and doesn't talk to the cab driver, his fellow Pakistani when both of them are going in the cab but Erica understands his mental condition. Through out the novel we come across such encounters and consciousness of contradictions between two cultures. Although love and education act as connectors, the awareness of the economic disparity and cultural differences widen the alienation.

The novel is not without camaraderie between the Easterns and the Westerns. The relation between Changez- Erica and Changez-Jim brings out a like-mindedness . Jim, his immediate boss who has come the poor understands Changez's sense of not belongingness that comes out occasionally.

The entire novel is an attempt to understand and bring out the reason for love-hatred relationship which Changez, the product of American University, the earner of American salary and the obsessed with American woman Erica experiences. The rendering of the entire novel in a conversation and polite tone reveals what went wrong or what could have gone wrong. The narrator who is sympathetic to others' sufferings feels 'remarkably pleased' on seeing the fall of the twin towers and confesses that death on television moves him when it is fictitious and in relation to the familiar. He tells the listener

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 structures of your enemies. (Hamid 71)

The media brings reality as the virtual one before us and sympathy is not generated when the dead belong to other cultures or ideology. The mayhem in the Middle East and American napalm bombing of Vietnam or carpet bombing in Iraq and Afghanistan testify to this. It also offers a cuisine palatable to the spectators who watch mayhem on TV as merely fictional. To them the destruction of a country is a mere virtual reality to give aesthetic pleasure in an anesthetic era. The spectators are passive as the cold war ended with the collapse of communism in Russia. The media by its constant coverage develops immunity in the people towards violence and turns people as mere consumers of violence. The ability of people to actively change history has been undermined by projecting the superiority of machine vis-à-vis others. The market fundamentalism is counterpoised to religious fundamentalism, the very product of neo-imperialism that abetted it in its desire to dismantle communism. It is the media which shapes perception of reality and distorts the facts to the advantage of the establishment and projects the stereotypical images of the others manufacturing consent for the hegemony of the Powerful. The other point of view is neglected, vilified and constantly undermines to offer one side of the story, the story of perpetuation of the status-quo.

Edward Said writes as follows:

In news reels or news photos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent mass rage and misery, or irrational hence hopelessly eccentric gestures. Lurking behind all these images is the menace of *Jihad*. Consequence: a fear that Muslims or Arabs will take over the world. (287)

The novel shows how a young techie has gradually alienated himself from the mainstream and turns into an apologist for religious fundamentalism. The uncritical attitude towards the doings of America in the name of safeguarding the world order and the propagation of Western culture as the sole culture wounds the already historically vanquished cultures of the East. For the latter, materialistic culture seems far from desirable and unethical, hence rallying of all the marginalized in the name of religious fundamentals. Even in the middle ages many peasant rebellions had taken place in the garb of religion. Today it seems that the same thing is happening and the West needs to stop its exploitation and saga of domination and negotiate to usher in world order of equity and true globalization in which cultural and linguistic diversity. Until this is done either democratically or in a revolutionary way, 'the reluctant world police' (the word used by Obama regarding America in his autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*) and the reluctant fundamentalists go on playing the war game that destroys human civilization steadily, consciously and unwisely. Bilgrami writes that 'the acute consciousness of and obsession with the historical cause of their commitment has made them incapable of critical

reflection' and 'destroyed their capacity for clear-headed , unreactive political thought and action.'(233)

How does suspicion of others' motives affect the innocent or common people? When Changez and his team comes back from Manila, he is detained at the airport for questioning. A woman officer asks him repeatedly, 'What is the *purpose* of your trip to the United States?' (Hamid 75) The western man's visit to Lahore is for tourist purpose whereas the purpose of Changez's coming back to a place where he has been working is 'suspicious' that needs an interrogation which makes him feel lonely.

When he finds the tributes offered to the victims of the world Trade centre in the form of flowers, words and bouquets, they brought him back his own 'uncharitable –indeed, inhumane –response to the tragedy.' (Hamid 79)The surprising thing is that we are not aware of such introspection or remorse at feelings on the part of Americans in relation to their attacks on Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan.

While describing the love of Changez and Erica, the narrator symbolizes how her body rejects him as America rejects him in spite of her love for him. She hasn't been able to love him intimately as her dead past comes to the fore as a hindrance to her love making. Later on he describes how in the aftermath of alienation Erica became distant for awhile and when they came together to reassure and make love , Changez could do so only after he told her to imagine himself as Chris, her dead boy friend. This denial of personal identity causes him satisfaction and shame at the same time.

Changez , the reluctant fundamentalist points out that in their own narrative Pakistan had not been always dependent on foreign aid, they were not 'the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels but rather saints and poets and –yes-conquering kings.' The Royal Mosque, the Shalimar gardens and the Lahore fort testify to that when America was still 'a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent.' (Hamid 103)

It is an interesting thing to note how sub-continental favourite quality of singing paean to their glorious history in contrast with their miserable and ugly present explains away their post-independent failure to build their countries. Why have these countries and their political elite not raised themselves to become prosperous countries? While neo-colonialism has reemerged in a gradual but ferocious form, the culpability of the ruling elite of the newly independent countries can't be brushed aside.

Bilgrami refers to Islamic revivalism as

a defensive reaction caused not only by the scars and memories of Western colonial rule but by the failure of successive governments to break out of the models of development imposed by a dominating neo-colonial , neo-liberal presence of Western corporate interests in their region, and even more so now with American and European interests more entrenched than ever in the Middle East , after successive humiliating wars.(228)

For the issue of appeal of terrorism to the young , Chomsky traces it to 'conditions of repression and humiliation, with little hope and little opportunity , and who seek some goal in life that offers dignity and self- realization.' (28) He also points out how Britain and the US which preferred radical Islamism to secular nationalism which they 'regarded as more threatening to their goals of domination and control.'(Chomsky 77)

This coupled with the loss of self-confidence on the part of the people or masses who lost their secular or Marxist ideology to counter the machinations of the ruling classes have resulted in the present state of affairs. Sudipta Kaviraj writes citing the example of Iran and some other third world countries 'for it is possible for religious consciousness to acquire a modern ideological form , that is, become a historically stable formation of consciousness.' (182) If the people started the rebellion in the idiom of religion, it has become easier for the imperialists to portray the rivals as an obscurantist force challenging the modern civilization and all its cherished values. It is not the fault of technology that has been aiding both the factions which are waging this war rather 'reluctantly' but of the lack of new tools of rationalism and practice of modern democracy. In a modern democracy there ought not to be any room for carpet bombing or the use of drones by the Western powers or slitting the throats of the hostages and journalists by the fundamentalists.

The narrator also reveals how Erica has gone mad , perhaps due to nostalgia regarding her life with Chris, or condition of the country or their intimacy. Changez has been advised by her mother not to visit her unless asked and also faces racial abuse and near assault by a White man in the parking lot. Jim, his colleague understands his alienation and offers help if required as he also feels alienation due to his poor background or sexual orientation.

The narrator finds himself back in Lahore as the conflict situation develops between India and Pakistan. He initially thinks that his house has changed but later realizes that he himself has changed and becomes aware of the richness of history. Now the attention of the narrator shifts towards historical enmity between India and Pakistan. He has been advised by his family to go back to America and Changez feels self-contempt for leaving for well- paying job and sick Erica's Love. Changez in his newly grown beard raises alarm in his office in America and occasional abuse outside and he wonders how America could create a war in Afghanistan and cause a near war between nuclear neighbours such as India and Pakistan.

Changez assignment in Valparaiso makes him realize his lack of stable core in his financial striving that ignores critical personal and political issues. He goes to Chile on an assignment of valuation and Jean-Bautista , the chief of publishing company make him aware of his position as 'modern-day janissary, a servant of American empire.' While historically janissaries were Christians who were captives and fought against their own armies , modern day professionals who became oblivious of their role and joined the

firms which preferred profits to people. This self-knowledge makes Changez give up his job and reflect as follows: ,

Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan; in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role. Moreover I knew from my experience as a Pakistani- of alternating periods of American aid and sanctions –that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power.(Hamid 156)

Changez also remarks to the anonymous American visitor to Lahore regarding Americans' failure 'to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you.' (Hamid 168) He also confesses that in a world of porous borders, "we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us." (Hamid 174) The former supporter of America now becomes a university lecturer and starts advising students on personal and professional issues. His students turn political and one of his students goes missing as a detainee .

The issue of identity has assumed an important place in the lives and actions of people. It is more so in the case of the dominated as the latter need some ideology to develop their unity in facing the exploitation by the dominant. By assuming the tone of politeness and adopting the casual conversational mode, the novel succeeds in showing a mirror to the Western civilization in general , and American culture in particular . It also calls for introspection and cultural transformation on the part of America known for Philosophers like Thoreau and Emerson. By running parallel the stories of his individual love and the story of the modern world's power relations, the writer suggests that real love unites the two hemispheres of the world whereas financial nexus alone can't be a gateway to a new relationship. The novel ends on the hopeful note of amity. Changez reassures the suspicious visitor, 'You should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists , just as we should not imagine that You Americans are all undercover assassins.'¹⁸³ Thus Hamid tries to know the American heart of darkness in Conradian manner and says, 'I have felt rather like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlow.' (Hamid 183)

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