

Beyond Borders: A Critical Study of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

This paper explores the crossing of borders in Mohsin Hamid's award-winning novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. It is an effort to showcase the way Hamid breaks the set ideals and constructions that have been reigning in literature for decades. It attempts to show the transnational journey of the protagonist, Changez from Lahore to the US and his return to his country. The paper depicts the failure of American society to stick to its moral values. Moreover, it portrays the mistreatment Muslims go through after September 11.

Keywords: Crossing, Marginalisation, Transnational, Borders, Geography

Mohsin Hamid is a Pakistani novelist, writer and brand consultant. He is the author of four novels. His novels are *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), and *Exit West* (2017). Mohsin Hamid went to America at the age of 18 to pursue his education. In 1993 he graduated from Princeton University and studied under writers like Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison. He wrote a draft for a fiction workshop which was taught by Toni Morrison. He then went to Pakistan to continue to work on it.

In 2001, Hamid went to London intending to stay for just one year. During this time he used to return to Pakistan frequently, but he lived in London continuously and became a dual citizen of the United Kingdom UK in the year 2004. He joined Wolff Olins, a brand consultancy, in 2004. He worked only three days a week so as to devote his time to writing.

He then served as a managing director of Wolff Olins' London office and was appointed its first ever Chief Storytelling Officer in 2015.

Mohsin Hamid's second novel titled *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and it became one of the best sellers, reaching No. 4 on the New York Times Best Seller List. This novel tells the story of Changez who is a Pakistani and lives his high flying life in America. The novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won several awards including the Anisfield Wolf Book Award and Asian American Literary Award. The novel was translated into more than 25 languages. It was selected by *The Guardian* as one of the books that defined the decade.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist begins at the cafe in Lahore Pakistan where Changez, the protagonist, observes an American stranger's actions and his apprehensive behaviour. He realises that he possesses a sophisticated satellite phone and is repetitively messaging. Changez believes he might have a gun under the clothing that bulges out. He decides to walk towards the hotel in order to avert any untoward incident and as they walk, the American becomes highly suspicious thinking that his life might be in danger. The American stranger puts his hand into his pocket which Changez says that he trusts as it may be his business card. The novel ends without letting the readers know what was in the pocket of the American stranger which leaves the readers to wonder whether the American was a CIA agent possibly with an aim to kill Changez or Changez was there to harm the American stranger.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist was inspired by Hamid's own experience of living as a Pakistani American in a post-September 11. Hamid through this novel forces his readers to have trust in their guts and decide the principal character of the novel, Changez.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is an indication of two things: the frustration and 'confusion' that comes from his shattered desires and his idea that his appearance is not 'antithetical' to Americaness (Khan 196). Brian Behnken and Simon Wendt in *Crossing Boundaries* emphasise that up until the transnational turn of transnationalism took place over the last three decades, it has more often been ignored that "ideologies, movements, people, or goods rarely stop at national borders." Rather, they claim, "they transcend these borders and influence every country or region that is involved in the process of their dissemination and diffusion" (5). With time and space, Changez had evolved with multiple-selves.

Hamid compares the decision of his reader with the decisions every human must make as they face the world. He considers that decisions be made with 'incomplete information'. Hamid said it is through these decisions that we find our 'true self and identity. In other words, Hamid further examined his transnational experience through this novel and is marked by what Vertovec writes 'dual' identities' (6). But his world changed drastically after Sept.11 as he witnessed the reassertion of tribalism in his country. Being Pakistani American was no longer accepted at all. It was as though he was forced to pick one side like America or Pakistan. Changez tells him, "I am both a native of the city and a speaker of your language" (Hamid 1). And "Will you not remove your jacket? So formal! Now that is not typical of Americans, at least not in my experience" (2-3). Changez knew that he became suspected right after September 11 took place. He witnessed the bias and prejudice of the society that once welcomed him. He transitioned dramatically from a lover of America to an Anti-American activist. In other words, 'space of place becomes space of flows' (qtd. in Yeoh and Willis 5). While narrating his story to the American stranger, he knew he does not trust him because he has grown a beard which to the stranger is a sign of fundamentalism. He could see the smooth travel of both goods and services but to Muslims, it became increasingly difficult to live in a multiculturalist society like America. In a world where space has been annihilated by globalisation, Changez finds it hard to live outside the home (Adnan 3). Changez witnesses a conflicted self that belongs neither to America, which became prejudicial to him because of who he is, nor to Pakistan that he left long ago. His return to Pakistan does not necessarily end his tragedy as it started before the incident of September 11 (Khan 156). His transnational journey taught him life lessons that expanded his radius of vision beyond physical geography. Changez says, "Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us." (174). He tries to reshape space through travel. He realized how cities like Manila glitter better than the cities of Lahore and how imperialistic enterprises can benefit one and let other cities be left behind. Changez creates a link or a connection between two metropolis cities like Lahore and New York by telling his American counterpart as to how he left Pakistan and tried to fulfil his American dream. After post-September 11, Changez experiences marginalization and exclusion by his colleagues which he had never thought of. He was suspected by his teammates. Changez from chasing

an American dream ends with a complete disillusionment with it. He becomes critical of the policies of the United States against his country.

Conclusion

The Reluctant Fundamentalist documents geographical crossing from Lahore to America following the return of its protagonist, Changez to his native land, Pakistan. The journey shows Changez's disillusionment with American society and his involvement as a transnational individual. It reveals how he was marginalised and mistreated in the multicultural American society because of his Muslim identity. His return to Pakistan displays his return to his roots or fundamentals. The novel exposes the biases and prejudices unleashed against Changez in particular and Muslims in general.

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