

Vol. 8, Issue-III (June 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Debunking the Dominant Narrative: A Study of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)

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Article History: Submitted-20/05/2017, Revised-21/06/2017, Accepted-24/06/2017, Published-05/07/2017.

Abstract:

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 that shook the foundations of the American Empire, altered the geopolitical landscape profoundly, deepened the trust deficit between East and west and Americas war on terror, which followed the deadly attacks, led to the victimisation and ugly “othering” of the Muslim community. This paper proposes to examine how Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* resists the dominant narrative that overtook the media and political rhetoric after 9/11 and how this novel creates a space for critical engagement with and responses to this widely publicised tragedy.

Keywords: Dissent, 9/11, Terrorism, America, Pakistan, Media, Narrative, Other

The September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States became a worldwide media event and resulted in the most casualties of any single recorded terrorist attack. The term ‘9/11’ is widely used to refer to the events that took place on that single day; specifically the impact of the planes hitting the Twin Towers and their subsequent collapse which has captured the imagination of writers across the globe and emphatically dealt with in many post-9/11 novels both American and non-American.

The devastating attacks proved that America was no longer immune to the external threat. The collapse of the towers, which symbolised American wealth/capitalism and hegemony, signified the vulnerability of a system that most of the Western world had assumed to be invincible. In spite of the fact that America suffered huge loss of life and significant trauma, the focus of media and government agencies was emphatically on the heroics of the day surrounding the event, trying to reaffirm the idea of ‘Brave America’. 9/11 was labelled as traumatic and that the losses caused to the nation irreparable and so those in power left no stone unturned to manipulate the national sentiment in order to focus on the heroic side of the event. Falling Man photograph taken by Richard Drew and other images and footages of the people who fell from the towers were removed from scene and replaced with victorious images of fire fighters and American flags across New York City.

George W. Bush the then president of the USA infamously stated—what Šalvoj Žižek describes as “double blackmail”—that “You are with us or you are with the terrorists.” This diktat ended the possibility of dissenting voices or of questioning the actions of the government as those who were critical of the government and the events that unfolded after

9/11 attacks were accused of being unpatriotic and un-American. Nonetheless, President Bush in his speech to the joint session of Congress on 20th September claimed that America was a “country called to defend freedom” (Americanrhetoric.com). One more thing that was part of the narrative was the sham idea of America as innocent victim and the terrorist as evil perpetrator. This refers to the refusal to acknowledge that America was in any way culpable for the attacks.

Jean Baudrillard in his book *Spirit of Terrorism* blames the United States (West) for 9/11 attacks: “By seizing all the cards for itself, it forced the other to change the rules. And the new rules are fierce ones, because the stakes are fierce” (Baudrillard 2003). Baudrillard asserts that the 9/11 terrorists have introduced a new kind of terrorism in which they have used all the latest technology and media networks of the Super Power, in combination with their deaths, to which the dominant power cannot fight back. According to Baudrillard it is the hegemonic attitude of the super power that engendered the 9/11 catastrophe: “For it is that super power which, by its unbearable power, has fomented all this violence which is endemic throughout the world and hence that (unwittingly) terrorist imagination which dwells in all of us” (Baudrillard 2003). Noam Chomsky describes 9/11 episode as “something quite new in world affairs” because of its targets (Freerepublic.com). Since September 11, Western cultural production has remained deeply influenced by the events of the day as Martin Amis points out that, “all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation” (theguardian.com). Commenting on the role of writers in post-9/11 scenario, Pankaj Mishra writes: “On September 11, terrorists from the Middle East who destroyed American immunity to a large-scale violence and chaos forced many American and British novelists to reconsider the value of their work and its relation to the history of the present” (theguardian.com). A host of critics agree that the key function of post-9/11 literature is the resistance to the dominant narrative. Many post-9/11 novels question the prescriptive nature of the dominant discourse and resist the tendency to follow the script provided by the media and political sources. In the dominant discourse the enemy had been swiftly identified and the battle lines hurriedly drawn; one was either for America or against it. In this connection Richard Gray, in his seminal book *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), points out that some 9/11 novels have resisted this simplification of world into black and white categories by subverting this oppositional language and “deterritorializing America”. The novel under discussion resists the dominant discourse’s desire for portmanteau closure and instead opens up space for re-consideration of and critical engagement with the entire 9/11 episode.

With the publication of his second novel *The Radical Fundamentalist* (2007), Mohsin Hamid has made a significant contribution to post-9/11 literature. The novel unfolds in the afternoon and ends in the evening in a market place in Lahore, Pakistan. The framing narrative of the novel takes the form of a monologue; a one-sided conversation between Changez (the protagonist) and an unidentified American, who may be an undercover agent or a spy. Whereas, the inner narrative of the novel tells the story of Changez’s life and times in New York; his work for a financial company and his relationship with Erica; a young American girl he meets during his stay at Princeton. With its non-American, non-Western perspective,

the narrative offers a critique of American policies and selfish designs especially its economic hegemony and the othering of the Muslim community after 9/11.

The conflict between Western world and Islamic civilization is not new. The idea of Islamic civilization as strange, inferior and hostile was already deep-rooted in the minds of Western people. Edward W Said, in his book *Orientalism*, points that the friction between East and West prevailed since the time of Crusades and this hostility led to the formation of an anti-Islamic discourse which exists till date. Samuel Huntington also argues that this clash of Eastern and Western civilizations has been going on in various forms over the last 1300 years. However, after 9/11 there was a considerable increase in the racially motivated attacks on Arab Americans, Muslims from other countries and on the members of ethnic groups (like Sikhs) mistaken for Muslims by “hostile Americans wanting to display their ostensible patriotism” (Hartnell 2011). In the aftermath of 9/11 media narrative and political rhetoric led to the representation of Islam as “a religion of violent fanatics” (Scanlan 2010). The message encoded in the dominant narrative is that terrorists are evil and uncivilized and the failure to support the United States in its war on terror is seen as an indirect support to terrorists. Such a narrative leaves no space for dissenting voices from within and without. The framing narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* turns this dominating American narrative on its head by giving Changez exclusive speaking rights and the American addressee is rendered silent throughout the novel. It is exclusively Changez’s prerogative to represent and interpret the American listener’s actions and gestures.

The opening lines of the novel introduce the reader to the trust deficit between Eastern and Western people, suspicion and misgivings: “Excuse me sir but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened of my beard. I am a lover of America” (Hamid 1). The reader is introduced to the American as someone guilty of racial profiling. Changez sets the stage for the following events and draws the American into what appears as informal chat between a friendly native and an uneasy foreigner. Hamid appropriates this framework as an uninterrupted monologue, in order to have Changez reveal his experiences in America. Changez employs the form of “reminiscences and flashbacks transporting the two participants in the exchange to the trajectories of Changez’s earlier American experiences” (Julia 2013). Changaze’s uninterrupted monologue affords him the opportunity to challenge one more aspect of dominant narrative: the construction of terrorist as an evil perpetrator and America as the innocent victim. Hamid rebuts the idea that the people and countries in the areas where the perpetrators of 9/11 originated are uncivilized and barbaric. Hamid lambasts the negative portrayal of his people by the Americans and provides an eloquent defense of Pakistan. He explains to the silent American listener that Pakistan was once prosperous and politically powerful, long before the nation of America even existed. Hamid overtly criticizes the behaviour and attitude of Americans vis-à-vis the rest of the world especially non-Western Muslim countries. Through Changez, Hamid offers his own version of Pakistan. He compares his city Lahore, the second largest in Pakistan, with New York: “Lahore is democratically *urban*. Indeed, in these places it is the man with four wheels who is forced to dismount and become part of the crowd...Like Manhattan? Yes, precisely!” (Hamid 32). Such comparisons help in building the argument that Pakistan is not a pitiable dusty place as

portrayed by biased media but similar to America in more than one way. Western people generally categorize Pakistani citizens as poor and uneducated. Changaze out rightly rejects this approach:

“I am not poor; far from it: my great-grandfather was a barrister with the means to endow a school for the Muslims of Punjab. Like him my grandfather and father attended university in England. Our family home sits on acre of land in the middle of Gulberg, one of the most expensive districts of this city. We employ several servants, including a driver and a gardener—which would in America, imply that we were a family of great wealth.” (Hamid 9)

Although Changez admits that presently Pakistan is going through tough times, but at the same time he reveals the glorious past of his people:

“Four thousand years ago, we, the people of Indus Basin had cities that were laid on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians”

(Hamid 34).

Changaze maintains that his ancestors were financially healthy and not “burdened by debt” the way Pakistan now is: “We built the Royal Mosque and the Shalimar Gardens in this city, and we built the Lahore Fort with its mighty walls and wide ramp for our battle elephants. And we did these things when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent” (Hamid 102). Hamid puts significant historical context to counter the dominant narrative’s ideas. Hamid’s narrative not only turns the idea of ‘America versus the uncivilized world’ within the American narrative upside down, but it succeeds in providing the historical context for the conflict between America and the Islamic civilization.

In contemporary geopolitical scenario, America plays the role of a neo-imperial empire and meddles and intervenes in the internal as well as external issues of independent, sovereign nations for its vested interests and political advantages. Changaze accuses America of “constant interference in the affairs of others” and that in the major conflicts and standoffs that entangle the Asian continent, “America played the central role”. 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” (Hamid 101). Ziauddin Sardar in his foreword to *Black Skin White Masks*, contends that the “war on terror” has become a license to violate international law and any concept of human values and rights (Fanon 2008). Hamid, while referring to economic fundamentalism, points out that finances were the “primary means by which American empire exercised its power” (Hamid 156). Hamid’s direct criticism of American policies questions its role as a world leader with the mandate to intervene in the business of other countries. Hamid asserts that the belief of uprightness and innocence that America holds, and propagates through its media, is a sham and appalling.

Changaze's narrative introduces us to the inner world, the psyche of an individual who has been cast as 'other' within the dominant narrative in the post-9/11 world. Changaze tells his listener about his experiences in America as an Ivy League graduate, his job with Underwood Samson, and his relationship with Erica; though he attempts to mimic the American identity, he remains an outsider, the colonial 'other'. Changaze and Erica's attempt at love making also fails (Hamid 54). Changez's passion for Erica does not let him give up his mimicry of the American culture. This reaches its culmination when he offers to become Chris, in his desperation to overcome the dilemma of dysfunctional love on the part of Erica. Hamid shows that Changez, who is regarded as a citizen of a subject/inferior culture, resorts to the ultimate mimicry of surrendering his identity, to be accepted by his American beloved. However, immediately after 9/11 he realizes that his assumed Americanness is of no use when he is separated from his American colleagues at the Manila airport. Hamid suggests that Changaze's mask is torn apart when he faces indignation and racial indiscrimination, on the basis of his origin/race, at the airport and immigration counters (Hamid 44).

Hamid manipulates the narrative structure by silencing the representative voice of the dominant American narrative, the American male, and contrarily gives pivotal position to the Pakistani male, Changaze—who, as a result of 9/11, changed overnight from a successful immigrant to a suspect in the country which he thought of as his second home—to voice his grievances with America, thus allowing for a space in which dissent has to be heard. The silencing of the American is a provocative move which turns the dominant narrative upside down and allows the reader to hear the dissenting voices through someone who not only understands American culture and politics, having studied and worked there, but also who is critical of this culture and its policies. As a counter narrative to the representation of 9/11 in the dominant narrative, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* creates space for dissent; for critical engagement with the representation of this event and by giving voice to someone who is considered a 'potential threat', the novel attempts to restore the principles of democracy.

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