29. Identity at Stake: Mohsin Hamid’s “The Reluctant Fundamentalist”

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ABSTRACT
Pakistan, being an unfortunate land, due to destructive wars and incompetent leadership is witness to the constant efflux of its privileged people into lands promising better opportunities. Although the overseas may seem very attractive and promising for those who aspire, the ground realities are not always very pleasant. Mohsin Hamid’s “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” is a text that explores the world and thinking of a Pakistani immigrant living in America. Among many immigrant issues that the book highlights, one particular issue is of paramount importance and is the topic of heated debate in the intellectual circles. That issue is identity crisis. The identity attained and maintained by the immigrant in his homeland is found to create problems for him in a new environment where the culture, traditions and life style is altogether different. This issue is all the more poignant for Muslim immigrants who immigrate to non-Muslim countries as their Islamic code of life clashes with the secular and more liberal ideas of the west. Keeping in view 9/11 as a major catalyst, I have endeavored to analyze and discuss the factors and reasons that contribute to the protagonist’s identity crisis in Hamid’s work. Bringing together Erik Erikson’s theory of identity crisis and the works of other eminent scholars on the subject, this paper aims to propose a better understanding of the issue with special emphasis on Muslim immigrants.

Key words: Immigrant, Identity crisis, America, Muslim, 9/11

Introduction
The famous psychologist, Erik Erikson who is attributed to have coined the term ‘identity crisis’, defines identity as,

"...a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given—that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals—with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters." (Erikson, 1970)

As is apparent from Erikson’s description, identity has many factors contributing to its development and these factors differ from individual to individual. Identity crisis on the other hand, originates for an immigrant when his original identity obtained from his homeland, clashes with demands of a new identity in the new land. With the second generation immigrants the identity crisis comprises of them not being aware of who they are. As most of them have never been to their homelands so their original identity becomes the one shaped in the new land. While, majority of them become misfits everywhere i.e.in their own people as well as in the natives. Kwaku Adu-Gyamfi a Ghanaian social activist in US writes, “Torn between cultures and continents, our children do not really know where they belong… By and large as immigrants, we’ve lost the sense of belonging and identity, but can our children ever truly understand what their immigrant parents have lost?” (Adu-Gyamfi 2007)

A Muslim Pakistani’s identity is shaped by two factors, one is his religious affiliation and the other is citizenship of Pakistan. A Muslim’s life is governed by Islamic rules and regulations. He is bound to follow the code of conduct prescribed by his religion. So religion is an integral part of a Muslim’s identity. Prema Kurien’s article carries a good analysis of the role of religion and religious
organizations in multiculturalism and nationalism among immigrants. Kurien’s research is helpful in understanding the role of religion as an anti-assimilation force shaping the consciousness of many immigrants. She writes in her article, “It is now well understood that religion and religious institutions often play a central role in the process of ethnic formation, particularly for immigrants to the United States.” (Kurien 2004) Secondly, the customs and traditions of the Pakistani nation are part and parcel of the lives of all Pakistanis. Pakistanis are recognized in the world due to their peculiar customs and traditions.

The very title of Hamid’s novel, “Reluctant Fundamentalist” making use of both words “fundamentalist” and “reluctant” together, stands evidence to the phenomenon of identity crisis being the main story of the novel. As fundamentalist is the one who believes in fundamentalism i.e. he understands every word of his sacred book to be the literal truth and reluctant shows the reluctance in achieving the position of a fundamentalist. The cover page of the book in the Oxford paper back edition is also very telling. It shows two different halves of one face. It is the face of a Pakistani that wears traditional tribal garb at one side and has a long beard with the picture of a mosque in the background. On the other side is a clean shaven face with sunglasses, cars and sky scrapers making up the background. This cover design gives the reader a glimpse of what to expect in the novel. Although different cover designs compliment the novel in different countries, yet they all convey more or less the same idea.

The novel presents an account of a Pakistani-born Princeton-educated management consultant (Changez) and his gradual transformation into a ‘reluctant fundamentalist' after al-Qaeda's attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. “The novel pinpoints an immigrant’s identity torn between his native, pre-given self and his American, much coveted self.” (Yousaf 2009) writes Zunaira Yousaf in her article, “American Dream: From Utopia to Nightmare.” The story deals with the immigrant’s consciousness and traces the shift of his thinking from one pole to the other, molding in the furnace of the circumstances. He is shown to be a high riser in the novel but he gradually undergoes a dilemma having to do with his identity, which marks his gradual downfall. The novel is shaped in such a way that we find Changez justifying his actions in the West which led to his state of fanaticism, to an American. The identity crisis faced by Muslims in the west resulting in fanaticism, is also commented on by Francis Fukuyama in his article. He writes,

“Europe has become and will continue to be a critical breeding ground and battlefront in the struggle between radical Islamism and liberal democracy.” (Fukuyama 2006)

Talking about his brilliance in academics at Princeton, Changez tells the American, ‘I knew in my senior year I was something special. I was a perfect breast, if you will --- tan, succulent, seemingly defiant of gravity – and I was confident of getting any job I wanted.” (3) This description gives the reader the image of this young man Changez and his exceptional attributes. He further tells the unnamed American that out of many hundreds in the US, applying for a job at ‘Underwood Samson & Company’ a high ranking evaluating firm, he was one of the only eight selected to be interviewed and he finally landed the job. The identity crisis is revealed from the first chapter when Changez remembers his Preston days and says, “Princeton made everything possible for me. But it did not, could not, make me forget such things as how much I enjoy the tea in this, the city of my birth” (9) The emphasis on could not exposes the defiance in him for Western culture which is openly present in him now, but when he was in the US, graduating from Princeton, his mental position was not so defined. This is clear from his expression of views in front of the American, “Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited to the ranks of meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. And for the most part, we were happy to do so. I certainly was, at least at first.” (3) “At least at first” is very telling here as his joy at the beginning, on landing the Underwood Samson job, slowly disintegrates and converts into bitter regret predating his forthcoming identity crisis.

As mentioned earlier, he appears to have a very liberal attitude towards Islamic religion in the beginning. As he says, “European women nearby were, as usual sunbathing topless – a practice I
wholeheartedly supported.” (13) The act mentioned here is that of public nudity and thus strictly prohibited in Islam but Changez does not appear to have any objection on it, in fact he is in favor of it. This is, of the time, in the novel when Changez tries to submerge his identity into Western identity. His entire affair with the American woman, Erica, shows his liberalism. His intimacy with her, given in the chapters of the novel, shows his loose principles in regard to religion. He recounts his experience with Western woman in these words, “I had by the summer of my trip to Greece spent four years in America already—and had experienced all the intimacies college students commonly experience.” (16) He celebrates his induction into Underwood Samson by drinking champagne. In this way he is introduced in the novel as a non-practicing Muslim( a Muslim only by name). At this time Changez is in Moratorium state of identity. Researcher James Marcia has expanded upon Erikson's initial theory and has described four statuses of identity. Moratorium is one of them, where the individual is involved in “the active exploration of alternatives” (Marcia 1966) for his original identity, as we find Changez open to the differences he encounters in the west.

When he tells the American about moving to New York, for training for job, he tells him that he felt very comfortable, due to the presence of a large number of Indians and Pakistanis there, “I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker.” (20) But at this time he also feels ashamed of his past and roots. When he compares America to Pakistan he sees the vast disparity and it hurts him, “Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed.” (20) And the reader senses the desire in him to assimilate in the Western culture. His shame on being a Pakistani becomes more poignant with time. When he is sent to Manila on his first Underwood Samson assignment he compares manila to Pakistan and sees that even a developing country like the Philippines is much more advanced and modern as compared to Pakistan. His humiliation is so intense that he admits to his humble listener, “I did something in Manila I had never done before: I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an American. The Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues...and I wanted my share of that respect as well.” (38) He reveals to the American that he had felt a little guilty and embarrassed inside for acting like an American but he had done his best to hide his guilt. On his first day at training his thoughts are, “On that day, I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee.” (21) He confesses later on, “I was the only non-American on our group, but I suspected my Pakistaniness was invisible, cloaked by my suit, by my expensive account, and --- most of all---by my companions.” (42) In this way we see his identity shifting from a Pakistani to the employee of a Western firm acting and behaving as if he is one of them. His compliments such as, “I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet” (27) show the identity crisis within him. His original identity is being overcome by the new assumed identity in the West.

No matter how hard he tries to assimilate, there is a hidden force pulling him back to his roots. In Manila his conflicting thoughts become apparent. Riding in limousine with his American colleagues, he sees a Filipino from the car window, driving another car. There is hostility in the Filipino’s eyes that makes Changez uncomfortable. At that moment his colleague talks to him and Changez looks at him, what happens next is described by the speaker in these words,

“Something rather strange took place. I looked at him—at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work—and thought, you are so foreign. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt I was play-acting.” (40)

Thus the seed of dissatisfaction with his role and position in an American firm was present in Changez and was slowly growing to be a small plant. The situation aggravates with the 9/11 event and his reaction to the attack on America. Jim, who had interviewed Changez for job at Underwood Samson, meets him at his hotel in Manila and referring to is new lifestyle and job, he says, “getting used to all this?” (41) Although Changez answers Jim in affirmation but he lets the reader peep into his heart as he says, “I never let on that I felt like I didn’t belong to this world.” (41) Changez’s conflict reaches its extreme when the Twin Towers in America are attacked. His reaction is recorded in these words, “I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade
Centre collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased.” (43) He does not know the reason of his pleasure at this time and tries to hide his true emotions from his colleagues who are genuinely shocked. The author of the novel, Mohsin Hamid, also explores what he has described as the 'feeling of pleasure' felt by Changez when U.S. was attacked,

"Resentment towards America exists in lots of places around the world. Some people, I think, thought of September 11 more in symbolic terms -- as a slap in the face of America -- than in human terms -- as 3000 people being slaughtered. And I think that was the basis of that sense of pleasure that some people had," (Reuters 2007) Hamid told Reuters in London. Changez’s resentment towards America becomes apparent from his pleasure at America’s misfortune.

But again he is found attempting to fit in. The oscillation between fundamentalism and liberalism continues and Changez appears to be divided between them. At this time his love for Erica also becomes strong. She takes him to different parties and fund raisers for victims of 9/11 attacks. Changez bares his thoughts to the reader in these words, “I was presumptuous enough to think that this was how my life was meant to be, that it had in some way been inevitable that I should end up rubbing shoulders with the truly wealthy in such exalted settings.” (50) Here again we see the desire of assimilation in Changez. He wants to be one of the rich and famous of America but soon enough he questions his motives and is unsure of what he wants. He tells the American,

“I wonder now, sir, whether I believed at all in the firmness of the foundations of the new life I was attempting to construct for myself in New York. Certainly I wanted to believe; at least I wanted to disbelieve with such an intensity that I prevented myself from making the obvious connection between the crumbling of the world around me and the impending destruction of my personal American dream.” (56)

So strong is Changez’s desire of assimilation that he takes up the persona of Chris (Erica’s dead boyfriend) in order to win over his lady love. This act of pretending to be Chris shows the extent to which Changez’s identity is challenged in the foreign setting. Assuming Chris’s identity, Changez makes love to Erica. His sentiments after this are, “I felt at once both satiated and ashamed. My satiation was undesirable to me; my shame was more confusing. Perhaps by taking on the persona of another, I had diminished myself in my own eyes.” (63-64)

At this point in the novel, we find Changez trying his best to become a part of the American society but he gets unsettled once again by the post 9/11 actions of the US government. The discriminating treatment of Muslims in the US (raiding mosques, beating Muslims) and the US pledge to wage war against Taliban, pressurizing Pakistan in consequence, all amount to his dissatisfaction and displeasure. At this time the truth of his earlier words is revealed, “How quickly my sense of self satisfaction would later disappear.”(38) The US attacks on Afghanistan cause Changez to, “tremble with fury” (60). As he knows that Afghanistan is Pakistan’s neighboring country and Muslim brothers live there. At this point Changez is no longer attempting to maintain self deception. The sparks of discontentment that were seething in him from the beginning, start burning with a furious intensity and the identity crisis, disturbing him for a long time, takes up a critical stage.

With the expectation of war between Pakistan and India, where the US was not supporting Pakistan, Changez decides to pay his parents a visit back in Lahore. His mental state at this point is similar to that of many exiles as is written in introduction of the book, “Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile.” It is stated there, “Few exiles, no matter how fully they assimilate into new societies, ever succeed in muffling their own persistent questions about what is going on ‘back home’, and what it would feel like to see for themselves.” (Robinson 1994) The heightening nationalism in Changez does not let him relax when he comes to Pakistan. He finds out about the worsening condition and feels worried and guilty, “Indeed, I would soon be gone, leaving my family and my home behind, and this made me a kind of coward in my own eyes, a traitor. What sort of man abandons his people in such circumstances?” (77) As a result of his parents’ insistence, Changez goes back to US unwillingly but his internal struggle and disturbance increases. His actions complement his internal aggression. As he says,
“I had not shaved my two-week old beard. It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity….I know only that I did not wish to blend in with the army of clean-shaven youngsters who were my coworkers, and that inside me, for multiple reasons, I was deeply angry.” (78)

From the above quote, it is clear that his desire for assimilation has lost its fervor. He no longer wishes to ‘blend in’. The feelings of Changez at this time can better be understood through Alejandro Portes, Samuel A. McLeod, Jr. and Robert N. Parker’s article, “Immigrant Aspirations.” As they write,

“The problems, situation, and orientations of newly arrived immigrants represent a unique area of concern because, in contrast to the case of ethnic minorities, they are decisively influenced not only by events in the United States but by experiences of a whole life in a different country.” (Portes, McLeod, Parker 1978)

His colleagues become suspicious of him due to his new appearance and people outside no longer welcome him. His friend Wainwright tries to discourage him from keeping his beard but Changez sticks to it and his hatred for America increases. He questions American motives in waging war against Afghanistan and causing destruction there. This is commented on in an article in these words, “The Novel traces the inner state of Changez transcribed by the Americans’ attacks on the country adjacent to his own homeland.” (Yousaf 2009) Along with this crisis in his professional life, Changez’s personal life also becomes disturbing. Erica abandons him and does not respond to his attempts of getting back together. This further airs his internal conflict and revulsion towards America. His liberalism goes away and he refuses alcohol and other forms of pleasures prohibited in Islam. He loses concentration on work. His mental state can best be summarized in his own words,

“My blinders were coming off, and I was dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of my arc of vision.” (87)

He blames his identity crisis for the failure of his relationship with Erica. He states the reason to be, “I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged—in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither—and for this reason, when she reached out to me for help, I had nothing of substance to give her. Probably this was why I had been willing to try to take on the persona of Chris, because my own identity was so fragile.” (89) Erica who was facing a psychological problem tried to find solace in Changez but Changez was himself psychologically disturbed and therefore could not help her.

The main turn point in Changez’s thinking comes with the post 9/11 events. The threat on Pakistan and US strategy of taking a back seat hurts him the most. He feels himself to be a modern day janissary. He is ashamed of his own actions and considers himself to be, “a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war.” (91) This bitter realization tears him inside. And consequently brings an end to his career in Underwood Samson and he comes back to his homeland.

On returning to Pakistan, Changez strives to put his identity crisis at rest and reclaim his original identity while inclining towards fundamentalism. He gets a job as a university lecturer and there he tells the American, “I made it my mission to advocate a disengagement from your country by mine.” (108) He becomes famous among his students. When some international television news people come to his campus to interview him he tells them, “No country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America.” (110)

Thus the novel embodies the transformation that Changez goes through. Towards the end of the novel, Changez appears to be threatening the American who wants to flee from his company quickly. But as we have witnessed his transformation, the threatening is in keeping with his objectives as an extremist fundamentalist.

The protagonist Changez of Hamid’s novel, passing through the gradual transformation from a liberal minded person to a staunch Muslim fundamentalist bears an excellent example of identity crisis that is not uncommon among Pakistani Muslim immigrants.
References:

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