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Muslim as the 'Other': Undermining and Stereotyping of the Non-Western in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Ms. P.A. Francia

Assistant Professor, PG Department of English, NGM College, Pollachi,
Tamilnadu, India

Abstract

Literature reflects the way we look at the world. It plays a greater role in unmasking the hidden truths about the events that have shocked the world. Even in today's age of media, the above mentioned role of literature remains unaffected because, unlike media channels which prompt reflexive responses to reported events, literature generates deeper and more stable impacts in the form of lasting impressions. Indeed, the insights of literature into these historical events have decidedly altered cultures around the globe, effectively bringing in a whole new way of thinking into being. One such catastrophic event is the 9/11 attacks which led to major changes at global levels during the millennium. The 9/11 attacks is considered as a marker in human history because of the effect it had on the geopolitical and global scene and is considered the greatest and the most publicized tragedy in recent times. Western cultural production since 9/11 has remained deeply influenced by the events of that single fateful day. This research paper aims to focus on the impact and trauma felt especially by Muslims in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The novel selected for the research try to undermine the stereotypical picture of Muslims shown by the media, which was raised after 9/11, as bearded and extremist terrorists.

Keywords: 9/11 attacks, neo-colonialism, stereotypes, beard, terrorism, Muslims, media, etc.



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The September 11 attacks were a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group Al-Qaeda on the United States on the morning of September 11, 2001, the day that proved America was not immune to national threat and attacks. A total of 2,996 people, including the 19 hijackers, were killed and more than 6,000 others injured. It was the deadliest incident for firefighters and law enforcement officers in the history of the United States. The United States responded to the attacks by launching the War on Terror and invading Afghanistan to depose the Taliban, which had harbored al-Qaeda. The US government implemented a series of critical — and sometimes controversial — immigration policy measures to respond to future threats of terrorism. And because the hijackers were all Muslims, acute scrutiny in the immediate aftermath of the attacks was focused on Muslims or those who were perceived to be Muslims, with broader use of nationality-based screening and enforcement programs. It resulted in disproportionate impact on Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians. The policies focused on the programs like secret detentions and proceedings and tortures in the detention camps at Guantanamo bay. Soon the innocent Muslim immigrants living in US became the victims of Islamophobia.

A lot changed in the world after the 9/11 attacks. Global nations fight against terrorism ended up demolishing whole of Afghanistan, which was believed to be a safe haven, in the name of war on terror. While Afghanistan was torn apart by war in one side of the world, the life of Muslim immigrants in America was equally declining on the other side. The 9/11 attacks changed the lives of Muslims substantially. In the name of national security, almost overnight they became the target of various anti-terror efforts, religious intolerance, hate crimes, and media-hype.



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The attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 unleashed an almost unimaginable torrent of pain and destruction. Since that day many books, articles, books, edited volumes, and pieces of investigative journalism have dissected and analyzed the events leading up to and the consequences of the terrible calamities that forever marked that moment in history. Central focus of these books and volumes were on those people who were caught up in the extraordinary wave of hostility and backlash violence that followed the terrorist attacks. Specifically, they chronicled the exclusion that Muslim American men and women in the aftermath of 9/11.

The levels of anti-Muslim hatred across the globe rose instantly after 9/11. Commonly referred to as 'Islamophobia', the term is not without debate, as discussions abound with respect to its origins and definition. Thus Islamophobia can be defined as a range of negative feelings towards Muslims and their religion, from generalized bigotry, intolerance, and prejudice on the one hand to a morbid dread hatred on the other that might manifest itself in discrimination against Muslims, social exclusion, verbal and physical harassment, hate crimes, attacks on mosques, and vilification of Islam in the media.

Islamophobia did not arise in a vacuum. Anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment has a venerable history in Western culture. Since 9/11, a specific set of events helped to perpetuate the claims of the Islamophobia industry in the United States and Europe. While there are relevant contexts that have intensified Islamophobia in the United States, it is clear that they are exploited and exaggerated by individuals who are motivated by political considerations or are seeking self-enrichment and notoriety. The awareness of Islamophobia as a social problem in the United States and Western Europe was heightened in the

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academy with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. While Said did not use the term 'Islamophobia', he laid the groundwork for a greater awareness of the phenomenon. Although the term 'Islamophobia' is now widely accepted and used in academic as well as legal, political, and social contexts, it remains contested in certain discourses.

The Islamic faith has long been misunderstood, misrepresented, and viewed with suspicion in the United States and throughout much of the Western world. Yet nothing could have prepared Muslim Americans for the response that followed 9/11. Although some members of the public issued calls for tolerance and restraint, people in fear seemed to drown out the voices of reason. In the aftermath of 9/11, religious leaders, politicians, media pundits, and self-proclaimed terrorism experts exploited the feelings of an already-terrified citizenry by offering gross overgeneralizations and incorrect depictions of Muslims as monoliths of extremism and hatred.

Even before the 9/11 attacks, Muslim Americans faced an uphill battle in their quest to enlighten a mostly non-Muslim public. For decades, Americans have been bombarded with derogatory images of Muslims in film and television. On the big and the small screen, the Islamic faith is regularly linked with the oppression of women, holy war or jihad, and terrorist attacks. In many Hollywood movies whenever mosques are displayed onscreen, the camera inevitably cuts to men praying and then gunning down civilians. The Mainstream Western print and media also regularly and unapologetically showcase the worst stereotypes about Islam that it is a violent, primitive, and a hateful religion. The Americans' attitudes toward Islam and Muslims are undoubtedly shaped, at least in part, by their lack of familiarity with the faith and its followers. They lack a basic understanding of Islam. Many of those who



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report some knowledge of Islam actually hold incorrect beliefs. For example, many Americans think that Muslims worship a moon god, a notion that most Muslims would find not only false but also offensive.

Never before had Muslims been subject to such overt hostility from so many different corners of world like the backlash of 9/11. Violent outbursts and discriminatory actions followed the backlash. Civil-rights organizations recorded thousands of incidents of anti-Islamic and anti-Arab harassment, hate crimes, and vandalism in the months following 9/11. In addition to the attacks on Muslims and Arabs, public anger was directed at other religious and ethnic minorities who were mistakenly identified as Middle Eastern. Federal officers raided mosques and froze the assets of several major Islamic charities that regularly sent donations overseas. Arab and Muslim men were questioned and arrested. Some were deported without their family members' knowledge of their whereabouts. Others were detained indefinitely and denied access to legal counsel. Members of religious and ethnic minority communities were barred from boarding airplanes based solely on their names, appearances, or countries of origin. Muslim children were bullied by their peers, and adults were fired from their jobs.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* draws on the voices of Muslim Americans, through its protagonist Changez, to describe the range of discrimination they experienced, to explain the personal and collective impacts of the backlash, and to shed light on the ways in which Muslims adapted in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. It shows the ways that Muslim Americans have coped with and responded to assaults on their faith, families, and personal identities. The novels sociological insights tend to explain the struggles of young Muslim adults to establish community and to define their

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identities during a time of national crisis. Ultimately, the book explores how disasters and other crisis events impact the Muslim immigrant population of the American society.

Set in the years following 9/11, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows what it is to be a Pakistani living in the suspicious, terrorism-altered Western world through the story of Changez, a young Pakistani immigrant. The novel is brief, and the narration takes place during the course of one long evening in a Lahore café. The novel begins with young bearded Changez approaching an American stranger in the Lahore café in the old Anarkali district. The exact occupation and reason for the American's presence in Lahore is never made clear in the novel. He takes on the persona of an American businessman or CIA agent. Over the course of cups of tea, snacks and a delicious evening meal, Changez introduces himself to the American stranger and becomes a friend, describing his life during the years he lived in America.

As the evening draws to a close, Changez offers to walk back the American to his hotel. Along the way he explains that in Lahore he is a university lecturer, and has become something of a mentor for his more politically-minded students, some of whom have been implicated in recent political violence. It becomes apparent that a group of men, including the waiter from the café, are his radicalized students who are following them. The novel ends ambiguously with the American reaching into his jacket, perhaps for a business card, or as Changez suggests for a gun. The end of the novel is left to the reader to decide whether the American stranger was a tourist or a simple businessman or a CIA agent looking for Changez.

The story of Changez's life can be divided into two parts. The first part, where he embraces the American culture and enjoys carrying himself as a new



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Yorker, takes place before the 9/11 attacks. The second part, where he faces discrimination and disillusionment with the American dream finally leading him to find his new identity as a Pakistani Muslim immigrant in America, takes place after the 9/11 attacks.

When the World Trade Centre was attacked Changez was in Manila for his new project. He happened to come across the news of the attacks on television. He happened to come across the news of the attacks on television. At first he perceives it as a film, but on realizing the actuality of the events, he smiles to himself. "And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (Hamid 72). His reaction perplexes him but later he admits that it was the symbolism of the attacks that "someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (Hamid 73), he was pleased at. After the attacks, on his return from Manila, he is separated at the airport from his colleagues at the immigration desk. He is asked to join a queue for foreigners and while the rest of his team join the one for American citizens. He was the last passenger to board and on his entrance he is given looks of concern by many. "I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty; I tried therefore to be as nonchalant as possible; this naturally led my becoming stiff and self-conscious" (Hamid 74). It is after this incident that a slow transformation in him begins. He confronts and suffers many unpleasant changes in the attitude of the American public. He begins to grapple with finding his personal identity in between his social identity as a Pakistani and a citizen educated and employed in America.

Physical appearance plays a significant role in the novel. It is based on the physical appearance that most of the immigrants were humiliated in

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America. The same happens with Changez too in the novel. The very first line of the novel immediately sets a tone of suspicion and mistrust which follows throughout the text. "Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened of my beard. I am a lover of America" (Hamid 1). The opening line of the novel suggests that the American stranger was alarmed and frightened by the appearance of bearded Changez. Before 9/11 Changez's foreign outer appearance was not misemployed as a means of othering or exclusion by inferring a specific identity, but merely as a way to classify possible differing habits. After the 9/11 attacks, suddenly his outer appearance becomes a sign of otherness. His nationality and outer appearance becomes more important both for him and his environment in New York City. For other Americans his outer appearance becomes a symbol relating to terrorists.

Changez goes on a short visit to his home country of Pakistan, which is caught in the midst of war on terror, after 9/11. An important process in shaping his identity takes place at Pakistan. It is there that Changez finally realizes his true identity. As a symbol of his newly found Pakistani identity, Changez grows a beard just like his father and brother. He very well knows the problems that he would face at the immigration desk when he goes back to America, but he is determined to grow his beard. He explains his act of growing his beard as, "It was perhaps a form of protest on my part a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind" (Hamid 130). By growing his beard he allows his body to become a carrier for national identity. His new appearance subjected him to verbal abuse by total strangers on the subway, and at his workplace he becomes a subject of whispers and stares.



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The significance of the beard in the novel is of special importance as it plays a central role within it. Changez is well informed of the symbolism of his beard, especially with connection to 9/11, but still grows it despite of concerned warnings from his mother. In the case of Changez, by growing his beard he tries to dissociate himself from the US. and identify himself with Pakistan through his beard. The Prototype Approach could be applied to explain his behavior. According to the approach, a member from a group is identified as a prototype member in order to represent the group. People having similarity with the prototype member of a particular group are perceived to be members of that group. Changez picks his father and brother as prototypes for being a Pakistani and his new grown beard designates affiliation with Pakistan.

While Changez picked his father and brother as prototype images, the Americans took the face of Osama Bin Laden, which was continuously flashed in the media after the 9/11 attacks, as a prototype image of the terrorists. Thus, a person resembling Bin Laden with a beard and occasionally a turban is associated with the group of terrorists. Correspondingly, as Changez's outer appearance, his foreign look and his beard, is in some way conforming to the image of the stereotypical terrorist in the minds of Americans. In the western media the beard is often misrepresented as an outer feature of Islamic fundamentalists. However, the beard is worn in the Islam in emulation of the Prophet, to demonstrate wisdom and authority or masculinity. Therefore, the beard by no means exclusively expresses resistance to the West or Islamic fundamentalism.

Changez's relationship with Erica represents the most prominent symbol of his exclusion from America. For Changez, Erica represents his attraction to America and its power. Erica represents America that changed after 9/11.



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Erica's grief of losing her childhood lover which left her with profound and enduring grief symbolizes America's grief of losing a nation once powerful, mighty and secured "*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*'s nuanced treatment of Erica parallels its presentation of America as endlessly attractive and self-absorbed rather than willfully destructive of self or others" (Eads).

The final catalytic incident that made Changez to fully embrace his Pakistani identity takes place on his last Underwood Samson assignment to Chile. He meets Juan Bautista there who tells him the story of the Janissaries, young Christian boys who were made slaves as children in the Ottoman Empire and who became the best and most faithful elite soldiers because they had no memory of ever belonging to another culture. But Changez who was already eighteen when he came America was much older compared to the Christian boys who had no memory of their past. Bautista ends his story saying "The janissaries were always taken in childhood. It would have been far more difficult to devote themselves to their adopted empire, you see, if they had no memories they could not forget" (Hamid, 151). Changez immediately realizes that he had become a servant of the American empire, a modern day janissary. He immediately quits his job and leaves America.

The western media for a long time has portrayed Islam and Muslims in a darker side. It has created a stereotype that Islam is a fundamentalist religion and all those who follow it are fundamentalists and terrorists. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* breaks this stereotype created by the western media. It is the American government and the western media that named the 9/11 terrorist attack as an act of Islamic Fundamentalism. "No sooner had it transpired than the US, with the world following in tow, called the act of terror "Islamic Fundamentalism"" (Lal 186).



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In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Changez is neither a terrorist nor an Islamic fundamentalist. He is an ordinary citizen of Pakistan who immigrates to America for a better future. In an interview with the Book forum Hamid says that, "Well, there's nothing particularly religious about him [Changez]. He doesn't quote scripture or envision his life in any particularly Muslim way". It is the American society's tendencies towards him after 9/11 that turned him into a radical. In the title of the novel, Changez is characterized as a reluctant fundamentalist because, he believed in the American society and even in its exploitive corporate values for a certain period of time. As Changez narrates his story it becomes evident that the fundamentals suggested in the title of the story are in fact the fundamentals of American society. He is taught and trained in his company to focus on the fundamentals. This makes the reader to think of the American society as a fundamentalist society. He begins to question the fundamentals of the aggressive capitalism in which he participates, and thus becomes ambiguously, a reluctant fundamentalist.

Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* clearly shows the struggles faced by the Muslim immigrant population in the after math of 9/11 terrorist attacks. "One of the novel's notable achievements is the seamless manner in which ideology and emotion, politics and the personal are brought together into a vivid picture of an individual's globalised revolt" (Anthony). The US foreign policy after 9/11 has hardened the lives of refugees and immigrants, making it even more difficult to survive in America. The Western media, the US government, the US immigrant policy, and their own physical appearance and religion of the Muslims have become a threat to their own existence in the post - 9/11 worlds.

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The world today has become inured to the presence of violence. Its omnipresence in the news and, for some of us, in our own neighborhoods has numbed us to the shock of this largely preventable condition. The various statistics of increasing chaos around the world offer a sobering reminder of the reality of the costs of violence—financial, physical and emotional. Behind every statistic there is a human being who struggle to survive in this chaotic violence filled world. The amount of deaths, killings, attacks, tortures, coercion, and abuse all over the world is overwhelming these days. The idea that violence is inevitable is normalized through depressing media narratives which teach us to accept coercion, authority and competition. A global society that is more peaceful and secured, and where children are not raised to believe that war is inevitable is the one that world nations must try to create.

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