



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST –A NOVEL HIGHLIGHTING THE ELEMENTS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7119.231>



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ABSTRACT

The extreme prejudice against Muslims all around the world and in the west particularly is known as Islamophobia. Although a familiar issue since decades, the term gained much currency and the incidence of Islamophobic nature witnessed an upsurge after September 2001 (9/11) when twin towers of world trade centre were attacked. The issue has, since then, generated ripples of unfathomable repercussions for Muslims all around the globe as they are facing both verbal and physical and fictional attacks. This has also resulted in a discourse which partakes of a whole spectrum of writing - both literary and non-literary. Owing to many contending discourses, most of the writings have come up with their own subjective perspectives regarding this issue (Islamophobia), especially in terms of experience and reality. Written from various positions, both hegemonic and participatory.

Key Words: Islamophobia/bic, Islam, 9/11, Muslims, prejudice, discourse, hegemonic

Introduction

In modern day multicultural societies Muslims almost in entire world are harassed, molested, murdered and abused due to increased immigration and their religious and ethnic belonging. For instance, in Sweden during 2007, there were about 200 filed police reports with Islamophobic motives. Islamophobia is a complex phenomenon that engrosses many different features and expressions. These features and expressions must be understood from a perspective where the West stands in contrast to the East (the Occident versus the Orient). Stereotypifications, myths and images of the other are perceptible constructions of this relationship. Muslims are in these conducts seen as a homogeneous group that share the same religious interpretation.

Islamophobia has also a legacy from the past, in which, power structures produce challenges and difficulties today. Hence, existing laws become insufficient, because present legal framework does not deal with Islamophobia directly. Therefore, strategies against Islamophobia must be undertaken as the need for more cooperation and amplified integration must be considered.

Since media and political apparatus of West and of East to a great extent leaving no stone unturned in bolstering Islamophobia, thereby concretizing the issue in the minds of general populace. Muslims in general are at the receiving end and women in particular bear the lion's share. Women are being fined to wear Hijab in some countries. In South Asia Islamophobia is practised in a more subtle way. Majority of South Asian

countries barring Pakistan and Bangladesh have negligible Muslim populations where antagonism against Muslims is not so much on religious lines but a political gimmick. One of the draconian tragedies of South Asia currently unfolding is the crises of Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar. The problem has gone on uninhabited and resulted into terrible loss of life and caused migration of hundreds and thousands of persecuted Rohingyas. State armies abetting with Buddhist monks rallying in support of repression of Rohingyas, has led to the world's largest exodus from Myanmar. The problem of Islamophobia has become so much insipid that once George Bush was hosting a party of world leaders and a journalist caught him talking to someone in a corner, and asked him as to what they were talking about, to which George Bush replied. "We are planning world war three. The journalist asked; who is this war gonna involve? Bush replied: "We are going to kill three million Muslims and a dentist". Journalist: a dentist. Because no one would ask about Muslims, such is the apathy towards Muslim plight following Islamophobia. No one really asks about Muslims. Even movies are made with stories of Muslims in a negative perspective. That is why shahrukh khan had to rely on the refrain "my name is khan and I am not a terrorist".

However, the events of September 11 should not be taken as determinant for such anti-Muslim/Islam animosity, the idea of Islam as a hostile, inferior and a strange culture was already deeply ingrained in the minds of Americans and Europeans. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* argues that friction between the East and the West cultures prevailed since the time of the Crusades, when the East were advancing towards West and later when the European forces started colonizing the West. This friction between East and West led to a formation to an Anti- Islamic discourse which exists till the present day. According to Said,

...the principal dogmas of Orientalism exist in their purest form today in studies of Arabs and Islam...one is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is

that abstractions about the Orient particularly this based on texts representing a "classical" Oriental civilization are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third Dogma is the Oriental is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself: therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically "objective." A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared or to be controlled. (Said, 300-301)

These misconceptions about the East or in particular– the Islamic culture, is viewed as highly problematic and this situation has only been intensified since the 9/11 attacks. Every Muslim is viewed as a potential terrorist, fanatical and violent, giving rise to what is known today as 'Islamophobia'.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is the second novel of Mohsin Hamid, a novel which at several levels defines the relationship between America and the Islamic World pre and post 9/11. As a post 9/11 novel by a Muslim immigrant writer, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* succeeds in bringing out the disillusionment felt by the Islamic immigrant population after the event.

However, while reading the novel *Reluctant Fundamentalist* Mohsin Hamid throughout his novel uses the dramatic monologue as a narrative style which gives a voice to the Muslim protagonist and in turn silencing the dominant rhetoric of the West triggered by 9/11. The entire text is narrated by Changez who is a Pakistani, to a supposed American tourist in a tea stall in Lahore. The opening lines of the novel immediately sets a tone of suspicion and mistrust which follows through the entire text–

'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 very first line of the novel suggests that the American listener was 'alarmed' and 'frightened' by the narrator, or at least the appearance of the

bearded narrator. From the very beginning and throughout the novel, the wariness of the silenced listener is pointed out at many occasions. Changez's voice hoodwinks perusers deducing it his identity. The other self of changez is mute signifying void and chasm in his world of dreams. American strangers are drawn voiceless reflecting Changez's deprivation of voice. Dramatic monologue a befitting symbol, highlights voice and voiceless. Whether American stranger, out of animosity or out of suspicion, falters to reply or pretends to listen, in both the cases he is epitome of bias and backlash to the speaker. As argued Hamid "the Fall" by Camus being the inspiration for him to scribe this phenomenal novel, it might be analyzed as the implication to the fall of changez, his culture and his religion. The novel, under study, suggests evanescent subtleties which get missed. So said Hamid I'd rather like people read my book twice than only half way through. Changez is mongrel like Hamid enmeshed between two cultures one his root and another his dream. The novel is Hamed's self-solacing for the split dreams of unity. His protagonist witnesses an abrupt and abominating growth of Islamophobia among Americans towards all Muslims particularly Pakistani Muslims. He is divided and alienated from his deep cultural and religious roots. Hamid argues 'A novel can often be a divided man's conversation with himself'. America established her own hegemonic parameters for rest of the world to declare them inferior and herself superior and dominating. Changez fails to seduce Erica. She is willing only to have sex with changez when she fantasizes him as Chris signifying the gap between changez and Chris consequently the gap between Americans and Muslims. Changez could not erase the incongruity between the two cultures. Although third world people dream to align and fit themselves into American culture, they are not permitted to adjust in this new culture. There is so strong disparity between the two cultures that even the sexual unison of changez and Erica does not bind them together. After this act, they disperse forever. Suspicion and fright gained ground In Americans. Like changez, other people have to corroborate their identity and made them believe that they are trustworthy and innocuous to them. Changez

assures the stranger that he does not intend harm to him but the stranger is preoccupied by suspicion and terrorism.

Since Americans alienate others by skin but Muslims are alienated not only by their skin but by their beard as well. In western literature and politics beard has become another word for terrorism and fundamentalism. The identity of Muslims is distorted. Their fundamental traditions like dress, beard and turban are matched to radicalism. Americans relish bombardment on other countries. They rapture to watch the devastation of their other on Television. Changez is forced to strip down to his underwear and is verbally harassed by border officials for his dark skin .Erica's father Curses Pakistan when changez visits Erica. After the tragedy of 9/11, Changez is harassed at Airport. He is taken as a threat to America. And after the Indian parliament attack, Pakistan has entered into the stage of untouchability.

Islamophobia ravaged the fantasized superiority of western world. They spread venom in Muslim world foray to America is nightmarish. Threat, risk and harassment have entered into the imagination of Muslims. They harbour horror and fright when visit to America is spoken to them. Muslims expect feats from working in America but their dreams are razed down to earth. Muslims feel bifurcated in America. Changez visited America to realize his dreams but his dreams are dispersed. Changez is forsaken. His love does not solace him. He is bitten between America and Pakistan .One culture does not receive him and the other does not leave him. Erica has become the symbol of American dream but changez exposes the hollowness of this dream. Their union is quite short. They are one once to be aloof forever. After 9/11 changez is considered terrorist. His self dignity is molested. His identity is hollowed. America has constructed a superiority wall for rest of the world particularly for Muslims. Shaving beard has become the symbol of civilization and keeping beard a mark of backwardness and terrorism. The paradigm offered is meritocracy but it is nominal for natives. Nativism is preferred to competence and intelligence. In West Muslims are not treated equal in business. Changez is very skilled but he does not reap the fruits of his efforts. He

faces discrimination. He is treated inferior to other workers. America wove hallucinations about Muslims. They are considered lethal to American peace and security. Changez is treated as a threat to America. He is molested everywhere. He is compelled to question his own identity. Finally ousted from the country and return to his own land, the one and last recognition for him.

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 begins to question the fundamentals of aggressive capitalism in which he participates, and thus becomes ambiguously, a reluctant fundamentalist.' (Aldalala'a, 5) In the post 9/11 world Changez begins to identify with Afghanistan, a country which becomes a victim in the War of Terror. Pakistan is made to support American troops in launching attacks on their neighbor and friend, a fellow Muslim nation. The War on Terror causes him to change his self-understanding and he reveals-

I was no longer capable of so thorough a self-deception. I did, however, tell myself that I had overreacted, that there was nothing I could do, and that all these world events were playing out on a stage of no relevance to my personal life. But I remained aware of the embers glowing within me, and that day I found it difficult to concentrate on the pursuit- at which I was normally so capable- of fundamentals. (Hamid, 100)

In his discovery of Self as a Pakistani Changez admits to his American listener that he had always resented how America conducted itself in the world, constantly interfering with other countries' affairs and finance was the main means to exercise its power. (Hamid, 156) Realizing that he too played a part in this „project of domination“ when he was an employee of Underwood Samson he confesses how it surprised him that he required so much time to arrive at his decision to quit.

Said in Orientalism stated that

The construction of identity- while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, is finally a construction- involves establishing opposites and "others" whose actuality is always a subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us". Each age and society recreates its "Others". (Said, 332)

Hence, keeping in mind Said's ideas on the construction of identity, if we look at Changez's character his identity is in fact a recreation of the society which became hostile towards him after 9/11. His social experiences are responsible for the feeling of hostility which he has developed for America- a country which he once loved. Changez becomes victim of the "re-interpretation of differences" and while bearing the brunt of the War on Terror and sudden social animosity by the Americans towards his religion and race, he devises a conception of his Self which is a 'reluctant anti-American'- despite his admiration for America as a land of opportunity. All the experiences he faced in America after the events of 9/11 and the persecution he went through for being a Muslim resulted in a reinforced identity thus the idea of him assimilating into an American society becomes a complete impossibility. (Said, 335) The latent Muslim-ness in him surfaces as a result of the aftershocks of 9/11 and he develops a confident sense of identity, embracing his own 'Otherness'.

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