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9/11 Counter-Narrative: Challenging Islamophobia and Defying the notion of Singular American Tragedy

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Abstract:

*This paper intends to shed light on one of the most relevant issues of today's world crisis that is Islamophobia: an exaggerated fear and inexplicable distrust towards Islam and Muslims woven into western society. Though Islamophobia existed in the western premise prior to the September 11 episode, it gained much notoriety in the repercussion of the carnage that is proliferated by popular 9/11 discourse which essentially demonized the race of Muslims. Muslims started to be misconstrued and alleged to be terrorists and fanatics in opposition to the White Americans who are acclaimed to be the sole victims of the catastrophe whereas Muslims are no fewer sufferers in their personal, social and political domains. During this suppressive period of Islamophobic rhetoric, a group of writers raised their voices by the dint of 9/11 counter narratives to re-present Muslims, deconstruct stereotypes and to clarify the misconstructions of Islam and its doctrines. 9/11 counter narratives such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid is extensively discussed in this paper with the help of Edward Said's Orientalist theory to illustrate how the writer counteracted the accession of Muslims as terrorists. Along with counter-response to challenge Islamophobia, Hamid strove to defy the notion that 9/11 is a singular American tragedy and attempted to illuminate the fact that 9/11 equally offended the ordinary Muslims residing in America. Furthermore, this paper vehemently investigates the process of resistance adopted by the victimized Muslims at the face of mounting sentiments of institutionalized Islamophobia and its associated hate crimes.*

Keywords: Islamophobia, Exaggerated fear of Muslims, 9/11 counter narrative, represent and deconstruct stereotypes.

Introduction: The financial heart of the United States, the world's sole super power was shaken off with an explosion. The explosion is none other than the September 11, 2001 catastrophic ruin of the World Trade Centre in New York. As a consequence of this cataclysmic disaster, the United States formed its new notion of Islam- the religion which until then had been a marginal faith in the U.S. In the aftermath of the September 11 episode, Islam became associated with violence, fanaticism, and anti-Western sentiment. As

a result of this association, Islam has become widely understood as a promoter of terrorism and a sense of fear of the religion Islam and the Muslims—the followers of Islam—became rampant in the U.S.A. This terror, namely Islamophobia, is manipulated as a validation of acceptable hatred and racism against Muslims in the aftereffects of 9/11. Islamophobia or Muslim-phobia has been, in fact, the consequence of how the state, media and literature have constructed and perpetuated the myth of Muslims to be terrorists.

The connection of terrorism with Muslims and hence the presence of fear in the American mind is further strengthened by the mainstream fictional works based on 9/11 catastrophe. To be specific, a new genre in literary canon emerged with literary pieces like short stories, novels, and prose analyses which illustrated September 11 as a catalyst of global transformation. Such a vicious image of Islam was fortified by the post-9/11 narratives composed by some renowned American authors like *The Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, *Terrorist* by John Updike, and *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* by Martin Amis and so on. In these 9/11 rhetorics, Muslims are manifested and stereotyped as radical suicide bombers, harsh, hostile, troubled and audacious personalities who constantly harbor animosity for America and the Western civilization. Thus, the Islamic world is negatively portrayed and the East is mythologized to consider as a safe haven for terrorists.

During this suppressive period of Islamophobic discourse, a number of Muslims and also some American writers raised their voice to clarify the negative representation of Muslims in media and literature which Edward Said terms as re-representation and a counter-response. Hence, the aim of my paper is to illuminate how the writers of the 9/11 counter narratives responded to the mainstream Islamophobic rhetoric by deconstructing stereotypes and eliminating misconceptions about Muslims. Through the extensive discussion of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, this paper shows how he counteracts the accession of Muslims as terrorists. Hamid endeavored to delineate the damages and the consequences encountered by the innocent Muslims in general and defy the notion of 9/11 to be a singular American tragedy as well as tried to bring to light the fact that 9/11 equally victimized the ordinary Muslims residing in America. Thus, this paper, with the help of the Orientalist Theory by Edward Said, investigates how the post 9/11 atrocities turn the irreligious and American lover protagonist, Changes of Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, in the wake of Islamophobic bigotry, into obvious anti-America and being sheer tragic-stricken, how he reclaims his Muslim identity by becoming more religious.

Objective: The prime objective of this paper is to shed light on how in the repercussion of 9/11, the ordinary Muslims were held accountable of a crime which they were completely unaware of. Though they themselves had to lose many of their beloveds, their long-cherished societal stand, dignified lifestyle in America, still they were stigmatized being the scapegoats of hate crimes and thus suffered multifarious atrocities and miseries. Despite they grieved nothing less than the Whites did, yet they were ambushed with unfounded stereotyping and horrible profiling. Thus, the paper endeavors how the 9/11 counter narrative challenges Islamophobia, re-represents Muslims and clarifies the misjudgments

that swelled up against Muslims in the wake of 9/11 as well as how the protagonist resists America's Islamophobic bigotry.

Literature review: Mohsin Hamid, being a British Pakistani novelist, writer and brand consultant, penned a number of famous novels including *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *Exit West* and so on. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* delineates a well-oriented narrative of American Muslims who suffer immensely in America in the repercussion of 9/11 catastrophe. In one of his interviews with Deborah Solomon, Hamid vividly depicts the syncretical approaches of his delineation in the aforementioned novel. He explores the subtlety of his story, plot, characters and climax as the novel progresses. In line with it, myriads of researchers conducted meticulous studies to bring out the chronicle of miseries undergone by the immigrant Muslims and even American ones in the aftermath of 9/11. Lory peek vehemently sheds light on the immense hostility and heinous violence targeted to the innocent Muslims. Moreover, he talks about the several antagonistic policies adopted by the then Bush administration. Christopher Stonebanks again asserts that a Muslim fundamentalist is believed to be hostile to America and incompatible with Western civilization. Also, according to Yaser Ali, Muslim-looking immigrants were racialized as an entity that should be feared and guarded against. Ali claims that, the American government started to launch "war on terror" in Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Iraq under the umbrella of "national security policy" as these Muslim countries were constructed and represented to be the safe haven for terrorists.

But, the most significant insights regarding Muslim ostracization were accumulated from Edward Said's Orientalist theory which scrupulously detailed how literature and media feigned the notions and ideals to such an extent that they were manipulated to legitimize institutional violence against groups that manifestly threaten Western security. In spite of all these elephantine depictions of Islamophobic brutality, there seemed a gap in terms of portraying the mode of resistance adopted by the victimized Muslims of racial bigotry and this very notion is highlighted in this literary article

Methodology: The research is broadly carried upon in the qualitative method by the application of Edward Said's Orientalist theory followed by the extensive textual and thematic analysis of Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Moreover, it gathered insights and interpretive synthesis from other scholarly works based on the text, 9/11, Islamophobia and its aftereffects to turn the paper to be a credible one.

Discussion and Analyses: In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, by the portrayal of the protagonist, Changez, Hamid re-represents those American Muslims who are stigmatized, generalized and are alleged to be a part of deviant religious fundamentalists. Even though he does not embody any Muslim trait or ethic, he is constantly stereotyped and blamed to be radical Islamist. Thus, being singled out by the U. S.'s uncritical Islamoprejudice, Changez, the irreligious Muslim starts to counteract the tragedy of victimization by assuming some Muslim signs such as keeping beard. As a consequence of being subject to discriminatory strategies of American national security policy, he converts from a devout American to a

bold Anti-America. Therefore, by deconstructing stereotypes and negating the notion that 9/11 was a singular American tragedy; Hamid resists the U. S.'s Islamophobic bigotry. Hamid shows the act of resistance by making his nonreligious character, Changez leave America and move back to Pakistan.

From a Muslim viewpoint, Hamid sketches both the physical and psychological effects of 9/11 on Muslims through his protagonist Changez, a Muslim Pakistani migrant who lived in America for several years before leaving for Pakistan after the backlash of 9/11. The novel begins in the dramatic monologue form between the protagonist Changez and an anonymous American visitor at Lahore's old Anarakali bazar in Pakistan. It is noteworthy that the American tourist, who is suspected to be a CIA agent, hardly says anything throughout the whole novel except making some facial expressions and gestures. The introductory lines of the novel stated by Changez instantly sets a vibe of distrust and suspicion that lingers throughout the text entirely— "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 opening line of the novel denotes that the American listener was "alarmed" and "frightened" by the bearded speaker. In an interview with Deborah Solomon, Hamid details the fact why the American is mute throughout the novel. In Solomon's view, the American remains mostly quiet "because it's almost always the other way around" (Solomon). Hamid also asserts that he has selected his literary method as "a necessary reaction to the dominance of U.S.'s interests, media coverage and perspectives in the global war on terrorism". He further asserted that, "It was time to give the stage to the other perspective" (Lee 345). Thus, by making his central character, Changez, relay his entire story to the silent American visitor, Hamid metaphorically claims that it is the turn for Muslims to speak out their inner turmoil and humiliating experiences, which so far have been distorted and overshadowed by the dominant group's experiences of pain and suffering.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist mirrors the cruel reality of the immigrant Muslims whose lives have altered forever after the backlash of 9/11 attacks. In the novel, Changez represents the example of a successful Pakistani who has assimilated into American society. He studied in a very prominent and famous university Princeton, worked in one of the most prestigious financial companies in Manhattan, Samson Underwood and also had an American girlfriend named Erica. Moreover, Changez was highly accredited and valued by his employer for his loyal adherence to the capital fundamentalisms of American economy. Additionally, for his extra-ordinary performances as financial analyst Changez received multiple "Best Employee" awards from his company (Hamid 138). All these achievements made Changez exclaim in utter ecstasy, "This is a dream come true ... my life was a film in which I was the star and everything is possible ... I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet" (Hamid 3, 51). In fact, Changez struggled to embrace America as his own country and devoted his best efforts to make America embrace him in return. He tried his best to fulfil his dream of assimilating into the mainstream American society by adopting Americanness in his attires and attitudes as it is evident in many of his business assignments

to different countries where he tried to speak and act like an American as much as possible (Hamid 74). Such occasions reveal Changez's view of himself as an American.

But, at the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Changez and other Muslim immigrants' dream and perception of America shatter as their lives turn upside down. In the blink of an eye, Changez along with all other American Muslims start to be viewed as traitors and terrorists instead of loyal citizens. Muslims begin to suffer as L. Peek states, "a dramatic increase in the frequency and intensity of these hostile encounters such as verbal harassment; violent threats and intimidation; physical assault; religious profiling; and employment, educational, and housing discrimination" (16). Moreover, George W. Bush's administration adopts several official policies, like- the Patriot Act. 5 imprisonment, interrogation at American airports, surveillance, observing the movement and actions of Muslim American groups etc. (Peek 17). These antagonistic policies caused Muslims like Changez immeasurable harm in various ways. For example, right after the attacks of 9/11 when Changez arrives at the American airport after the business trip from Manila, he is taken aback to see a changed America. At the airport, Changez feels utterly embarrassed and humiliated when he is inquired about the purpose of his visit to America and is ordered to strip down to his boxers. While he is held for further query, his American colleagues are courteously requested to leave. This discrimination instantly makes Changez realize how he is considered a foreigner and not an American despite his contribution to American economy and his efforts to assimilate into American way of life. Moreover, Changez's American colleagues leave him at the airport without waiting for him. Thus, begins Changez's ostracisation which he very aptly articulates, "My team did not wait for me; by the time I entered the customs hall they had already collected their suitcases and left. As a consequence, I rode to Manhattan that evening very much alone" (Hamid 86). Many American Muslims like Changez start to be ostracized, oppressed and antagonized for the crime they literally had no connection to. Therefore, it can be said that the tragedy and victimization that Muslim Americans had to suffer after the 9/11 catastrophe is no less than the White Americans.

In the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attack, Changez's position changes drastically. From his colleagues to acquaintances, every American starts to cast an eye of suspicion upon him. He is bewildered at the baseless association that the Americans make of him with the criminals of the attacks. He is accused of being a Muslim fundamentalist, but in reality, Changez is far from being religious let alone being a fundamentalist. A Muslim fundamentalist is a hardline believer of Islam who strictly follows the basic Islamic principles that include praying, fasting, maintaining Islamic appearance bodily, abstaining from alcohol, refraining from physical relationship before marriage and so forth. Moreover, a Muslim fanatic is believed to be hostile to America and incompatible with Western civilization (Stonebanks 10); he abhors acclimatizing the Western style of living. Now, if we Analyze Changez from these perspectives, we will see that he did not adhere to any of these basic Muslim principles; rather his lifestyle and way of living were absolutely different from a staunch Muslim. He never prayed nor fasted. He went to the nude beach, used to drink alcohol, and even had physical relationship before marriage; all these are a

sharp contrast to Islamic doctrines. Moreover, he was a lover of America who happily dedicated himself to serve America's economy. Furthermore, in his attempt to be accepted as an American, he even went to the extent of sacrificing his identity for American Chris while making love with his girlfriend Erica. Therefore, due to these core dissimilarities with a religious extremist and Changez's endeavors to adopt America as his own country, the accusations become extremely intolerable to him.

America starts to implement a new set of discriminating agendas against the Muslim immigrants who are perceived as "threats" to America's national security. According to Yaser Ali, Muslim-looking immigrants were racialized as an entity who should be feared and guarded against (1049). At these deplorable circumstances, Changez realizes America merely embraces the immigrants as long as they seem beneficial to the interests of the country. No matter how dearly the immigrants devote themselves for the welfare of the country and uphold their American dream, they will remain as outsiders in their adopted land. Thus, Changez aptly feels the crumbling of the world around him and the impending destruction of his personal American dream (Hamid 106). Hence, the exasperation with surveillance and detention and prosecution policy against the Muslim immigrants were increasing Changez's disillusionment of America.

In addition to the victimization of American Muslims in private sphere, American government started to launch costly wars in Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of preventing further terrorist attacks on America. Ali claims that, this "war on terror" was launched under the umbrella of "national security policy" as these Muslim countries were constructed and represented to be the safe haven for terrorists (1045). Besides, Changez becomes highly concerned about the impending invasion of Afghanistan by America as it also signaled a subsequent invasion of its neighboring Muslim country Pakistan (Hamid 113). Finding his place of origin, Pakistan to be mercilessly vulnerable by the agenda of America's "war on terror", Changez suddenly feels betrayed. He realizes that regardless of his devotion to serve America's economy, America does not hesitate to wage war against his home country and its neighboring ones in the guise of battling terrorism. Moreover, with America's invasion of Afghanistan, the existing tensions between India and Pakistan start to deteriorate where America denies standing by Pakistan. At this crucial point, Changez realizes that if America refuses to back his country of origin at the time of emergency, then promoting America's economy to achieve its financial fundamentals at that time would be an injustice to his origin. Henceforth, worries start to preoccupy Changez's conscience which is aptly asserted by his American boss Jim, "Changez, you haven't been yourself lately, you're preoccupied. Something's eating at you. I'd say it's your Pakistani side. You're worried about what's going on in the world" (Hamid 136). Thus, America's "war on terror" policies upon Muslim nations and its denial to support Pakistan in the impending crisis between India and Pakistan, serve a sharp turning point in Changez's perception of America's loyalty towards him. Therefore, he starts to feel more of an outcast in his adopted land and strongly drawn to his native culture.

Subsequently, no longer able to maintain dual identity of being a Pakistani and an outcast in America who is devalued, objectified and stereotyped, Changez prioritizes his Pakistani identity and resolves to keep his beard. The beard, as the narrating voice claims, signifies not only his identity, but also a form of counteraction of what Changez disapproves of— his disapproval of the allegation that all Muslims are radicals and terrorists. Changez thus claims, “My two-week old beard is a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, I sought to remind myself of the reality I just left behind in Pakistan ... I did not wish to blend in with the army of clean-shaven youngsters for multiple reasons ... I was deeply angry” (Hamid 147- 148). Because of his beard which has made him easily identifiable as a Muslim, Changez becomes a subject of whispers and stares overnight (Hamid 148). He is constantly stigmatized with religious profiling and verbal abuse by complete strangers. Thereby Changez resentfully states:

I was approached by a man I did not know ... just then another man appeared; he, too, glared at me, but took his friend by the arm and tugged at him, saying it was not worth it. Reluctantly, the first allowed him to be led away. ‘Fucking Arab,’ he said. My blood throbbed in my temples, and I called out, ‘Say it to my face coward, not as you run and hide.’ (Hamid 134)

Likewise, Changez suffers series of hostility such as discovering his car’s tires punctured, telephone lines interrupted and so forth. He even feels vulnerable physically. Adding to it, the pervasive media discourse of distorted representations about Muslims aggravated Changez’s fury as he rightly expresses, “Affronts were everywhere; the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment of history- not just from the government, but from the media- provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger” (Hamid 190). In this regard, Ali emphasizes, “Islamophobic discourse after 9/11 construed the stereotypical Muslim male-personifying all the Orientalist tropes and characteristics as the primary threat to American security. As a consequence, the Muslim others get restricted” (1043). Hence, antagonism between American racial doctrines and Changez’s Muslim appearance prompts his resistance towards America’s bigoted conducts.

However, Changez’s social exile is accelerated as he decides to develop his exterior to equal the Western stereotype of an Islamist though he was not at all an orthodox religious practitioner before. Being alienated, he refuses to be part of a society he no longer idolizes. Pei- Chen Liao in his article, “The Post-9/11 ‘Return Home’ Novel: Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist” asserts that, “a man’s temperament is driven by his inner emotional turmoil and insolences of the people towards him” (130). Moreover, the changed relationship with his American colleagues paved the way of his consequent transformation from the lover of America to an activist who condemns the American policy and its blind operation of War on Terror against Islam and innocent Muslims in the excuse of democracy and advancement. Hence, Changez’s reclamation of Muslim identity is a sign of his resistance towards America’s Islamoprejudice.

Moreover, the story that Changez hears in Chile about janissaries persuades him of his beliefs about America and reinforces his desire to be apart from the U.S. Janissaries.

Janissaries, as Changez was told, were “Christian boys captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army... Always taken in childhood and indoctrinated to devote themselves to their adopted empire, these boys were ferocious and utterly loyal... They had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to return to” (Hamid 151). To his utter shock, Changez realizes that getting educated and having worked in the U.S for more than four years, he feels like a ‘modern-day janissary’ who has eventually adapted to elite Americanness. Looking at the U.S with an ex-janissary’s eyes, he perceives that, as a present-day empire, the U.S symbolizes not only ruthless capitalism but exultant militarism. At such a point, Changez realizes that if he carries on to serve Underwood Samson, he will be assisting American capitalism that has wreaked destruction upon the Third World Muslim countries and hence he will be operating as a “servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to [him] and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that [his] own country faced the threat of war” (Hamid 152). Eventually, Changez is on the verge of rejecting America and its biased fundamentals towards the East with firm belief that, “It was right for [him] to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that [he] had required so much time to arrive at [his] decision” (Hamid 177). Thus, Changez counteracts the Islamophobic conduct by refusing to be part of such atrocities.

Changez therefore, resolves to depart from the U.S. and return to his home country, Pakistan forever. Changez’s decision to leave New York and settle down in Lahore as a radical lecturer at a university indicates Changez’s complete conversion. There he advocates Pakistan’s disengagement from America in its domestic and international affairs and condemns the American foreign policy toward Pakistan particularly and the Muslim world broadly. Moreover, he states on a news channel boldly that “no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America” (Hamid 207). Along with his condemnation of America’s judgmental and shrewd strategies, Changez commands protests against America’s hypocritical foreign policies. When his protests start to be construed as threat to America’s interests and considered as terrorist acts, Changez guarantees that he is a disbeliever of violence and is no ally of killers that he is solely a university lecturer and nothing more or less (Hamid 206). Hence, Hamid counteracts the dominant 9/11 rhetoric and resists American Islamophobic conducts by making Changez leave America for Pakistan and reclaim his true identity as a Muslim. It is noteworthy that the outcome of Changez’s rejection of America does not make him a religious fundamentalist, as the paradoxical title *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* suggests, rather a Muslim nationalist.

Conclusion: Therefore, the study explored how Changez counteracted the Islamophobic bigotry by reinforcing his Muslim identity and resisting Islamophobia altogether by leaving America. His latent Muslim identity comes to the surface because of the mistreatment meted out to him for his religion. The accusations and blaming, on the contrary, make him conscious of his religion and his Muslim identity. Said has rightly said, “The construction of identity— while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, is finally a

construction which involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always a subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us” (332). Hence, Changez confidently reclaims his “otherness” as Hoineikip Haolai states, “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” (30). In fact, Changez’s transformation from dedicated American to anti-America and firm Muslim prove rather a boomerang for America’s Islamophobia.

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