



## Roots of Return: A study of Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist

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**Abstract:** *The present paper aims to explore how the protagonist Changez Khan becomes disillusioned with America and eventually returns home, highlighting the complicated and convoluted relationship between the immigrant and the host country as well as the dwindling chances of assimilation and integration in America. The novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid explores the impact of the post 9/11 world on south Asian communities in general and on Pakistani diasporic communities in particular and the struggle to find a sense of belonging in displacement. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were a defining event that fundamentally altered the relationship between the United States and South Asian migrants. While many first-generation immigrants had started to feel more integrated into society, a feeling of extreme detachment was brought about by the consequences of the 9/11 attacks and the resulting conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The rhetoric of the "war on terror" caused Asian Muslim diasporic subjects to re-examine their concepts of home and identity, as reflected in their writing. As a result, 9/11 played a significant role in shaping the theme of return to homeland in Hamid's novel.*

**Keywords:** *Disillusioned, Diasporic, Migrants, 9/11, Integration, Asian Muslims, Immigrants.*

### 1. Introduction:

"Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!"(Parmeshwaran 30)

For expatriates, cultural blending and geographic uprooting frequently result in traumatic experiences. This divide between "home", the host land, and "world," the adoptive land, is not always bridged by the diversity of "homes" which exist within conflictual bounds. Additionally, an uneasy immigrant who is "living in displacement" can see that these two cultures are growing more antagonistic against one another over time and space. Possibilities for work, trade, study, and discovery have frequently driven migration from the East to the West, both voluntarily and involuntarily, and have always come with the baggage of the memories of one's "homeland" and its past. Large-scale immigration has demonstrated considerable adaptability and flexibility since the early 1970s, especially from South Asia to America—a nation that has long prided itself on giving immigrants a bewildering array of options. But the geo-political scenario post 9/11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, however, changed the course of history and put the lives of Asian immigrants, particularly Muslims, in more danger than ever before. The identity of Pakistanis living abroad has become even more tenuous as a result, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her significant essay *Terror: A Speech After 9/11*, explains that "the traditional left in the U.S. and in Europe has, by and large, understood the events of September 11 as a battle between fundamentalism and the failure of democracy." (84) Many of those who attempted to flee the commotion but were unable to defend their own perspective were labeled "Pakis" and increasingly characterised as "possible terrorists".

On September 11, 2001, four terrorist attacks were carried out against the United States in a tragic event that is widely known as 9/11. The attacks involved hijacking two planes that were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, resulting in the collapse of the buildings. In addition, a third plane was flown into the Pentagon in Virginia, and a fourth plane was lead towards Washington D.C., but ultimately crashed in Pennsylvania. The attacks



killed almost 3000 people and injured thousands more. The event is widely considered one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in history and a defining moment in world history.

## 2. Literature Review :

Post-9/11 literature refers to a body of literature that deals explicitly with the effects of the September 11 attacks and reflects the ongoing debate about the meaning of the events of that day and their impact on American identity, national security, and foreign policy. This literature covers a broad spectrum of genres, including fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, and memoir. It explores themes such as trauma, loss, identity, patriotism, Islamophobia and the war on terror. Many writers have sought to grapple with the complexities of the post-9/11 world and to question the official narratives of the government and media. Some notable examples of post-9/11 literature are *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* by Lawrence Wright, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and many others. These works represent a diverse array of perspectives on the tragedy of 9/11 and the subsequent fallout, including personal accounts of survivors and witnesses, fictional explorations of the emotional aftermath and critical analyses of government and media responses to the events.

Since September 11, there has been a definite increase in xenophobia in public, leading to border closures and irrational mistrust of the "Other." The semi-autobiographical novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Pakistani diasporic writer Mohsin Hamid, which is about to explore the disorientation felt by an immigrant adjusting to a new environment after 9/11, and to investigate the disillusioned Muslim identity in the Western context, specifically analyzing themes related to return to homeland.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, identity politics and the blending of cultures have taken on a notable impact in the common arena of Western democracies in relation to their diasporic populations, specifically Muslim diasporas. In accordance with Robin Cohen, diasporas are created when a sizable population relocates to another country, either as a result of a humiliating event or in search of lucrative employment possibilities. Muslims from South Asia, especially Pakistan, who immigrated to the United States have had to balance two obligations: on the one hand, they must respond to global political crises like September 11th, the struggles in Afghanistan and Iraq, etc., while at the same time, they are categorized as having a South Asian diasporic identity.

## 3. Discussion :

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is often seen as a post-9/11 novel, as it addresses the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the impact they had on the Muslim world and its relationship with the West. The novel takes place in the months following the attacks and the protagonist Changez experiences firsthand the discrimination and suspicion that many Muslims faced in the United States in the wake of the attacks. The novel attempts to show how the protagonist Changez Khan returns from America post-9/11 attacks after getting disillusioned and disheartened to his homeland. The Pakistani critic A. Ahmed also views this struggle as a purposeful affirmation of the expatriate voice in Hamid's narrative:

The deceptively easygoing narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is about geo-political alliances and civilizational solidarity...For the first time in Pakistan's intricate and messy relationship with the United States of America, we have a scenario, though fictional, where the American listens to the Pakistani for such a long time. (3)

The narrative unfolds within a single day as the Pakistani protagonist Changez tells the blatant listener, an unknown American tourist, about his life in a tea store in Lahore's Old Anarkali quarter. Changez recalls in-depth his journey of living in the United States in a monologue. The novel portrays a character who has grown disillusioned with America and who eventually returns to his homeland of origin while also highlighting the complicated and convoluted interplay between discourse based on ethnic, religious, and geographic boundaries.

Changez, who comes from a wealthy Pakistani family, excels at Princeton University and then is hired as an analyst by the esteemed valuation company Underwood Samson, becoming "immediately a New Yorker." In the meantime, he stumbles into a romance with Erica, a fellow Princeton alumna who is captivated with the legend she has created around



her dead boyfriend. However, after the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing American war of Afghanistan, his sense of belonging to New York high society starts to wane. Ethnic slurs directed at him throughout the coming years eventually serve as a trigger to reveal Changez's "essential" self.

In the wake of 9/11, Hamid's novel uses the literary device of migration to depict a story of disintegration and "return to home," which serves as a platform for fresh insights as the nation is exalted. With relation to their diasporic population, particularly Muslim diasporas, Muslims from South Asia, especially Pakistan, who immigrated to the United States have had to balance two obligations: on the one hand, they must respond to global political crises like September 11th, the combat in Afghanistan and Iraq, etc., and on the other side, they are categorised as having a South Asian diasporic identity.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a story about the struggle the protagonist has to overcome in order to accept post-9/11 America and the "new identity" that has been thrust upon him. The fundamental tenet of the "melting-pot" hypothesis, which emphasises religious and racial homogeneity, is that newly coming immigrants will be assimilated into American culture. Changez integrates into the host culture despite his alien appearance, "merging with the crowd and achieving a new personalised type of social mobility" (Cohen: 24).

Changez has an advantage over others because of his "foreignness," which Jim (Underwood's managing director) and Erica both note in his attitude and gestures. Chris explains that it stems from feeling out of place. After 9/11, the initial excitement for a city lifestyle in New York was replaced with disappointment and skepticism due to subsequent events. Changez learns that suddenly a new identity—that of a terrorist-lookalike—is forced on him when he is first strip-searched and questioned at the airport upon arriving in America after seeing the Twin Towers attacks in his hotel room in Manila. He says: "It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins"(Hamid183).

His perception of himself as a member of his social context in New York City is suddenly altered when his foreign appearance is used as a marker of "otherness." Additionally, the nervous American society's scepticism about the allegiances of the Middle Eastern immigrant can be compared to Erica's neurosis and her unexpected alienation from Changez. This unanticipated "troubled relationship with the host society, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least" is what Cohen also identifies as one of the prominent "common features" of a diaspora (Cohen: 26), and it prompts the protagonist to take a closer look at his association with the country he was raised in. The events of September 11 have already unleashed new forces that are altering how immigrants relate to their country of origin, diaspora, and homeland. "I was a modern-day Janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine..." (Hamid, 66) observes Changez in a biting moment of self-knowledge.

Changez possesses a distinguishing quality in his identity quest that binds him to the post 9/11 era. His conscience is burdened by the knowledge that his work involves exploiting underdeveloped nations like Pakistan, his own country of origin, and he begins to wonder what it will be like to be a part of the elite meritocracy in the United States. He is forced to consider his background, which he wishes to keep, in the wake of 9/11. "Identity is a structured representation that achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative,"(228) says Stuart Hall.

#### **4. Conclusion :**

After returning to Pakistan, he felt that he is as 'normal' as anybody. He is just like any other person roaming in the streets, eating in public places and meeting people to discuss and execute his future plans. The eyes which were suspicious towards him, the minds which were busy framing interrogating questions and the hearts which turned antipathic towards him were nowhere to be seen after returning to his Home land. He realized that the world isn't that biased in general. It could only be felt in the host land. In contrast to this, home land is full of warmth- warmth of culture, of kinship and of soil which nurtured him for the initial two decades of his life. He got the ultimate realization of the fact that home is where your roots are. This paper urges readers to recognize and evaluate the significant impact of the tragic event on the relationship between America and its South Asian Muslim diaspora. Hamid's writing adds to the current conversation on migrant experiences by highlighting the importance of a narrative of returning to one's homeland and expanding the ways in which we depict migrants' assimilation and integration into their host country.



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