

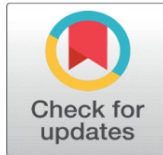
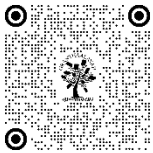


OTHERED AND EXILED: NAVIGATING THE IN-BETWEEN IN *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the thematic intersections of identity, belonging, and alienation in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, situating the protagonist, Changez, within the broader socio-political landscape of post-9/11 America. Through a critical analysis of Changez's trajectory from an aspiring immigrant embodying the ideals of the American Dream to a disillusioned critic disavowing its tenets, this paper interrogates the processes of systemic othering and cultural exclusion exacerbated by the post-9/11 "War on Terror." The research recontextualises the concept of "fundamentalism," moving beyond its conventional association with religious extremism to encompass ideological and economic rigidities intrinsic to late capitalism and Western imperial hegemony. The study reveals the enduring impact of cultural alienation and identity fragmentation by foregrounding Changez's navigation of liminal spaces between his Pakistani heritage and American aspirations. This paper argues that Hamid's narrative functions as a critique of the fragility of multiculturalism and a cautionary reflection on the global implications of exclusionary policies and attitudes. Ultimately, the analysis contributes to discourses on identity politics, transnationalism, and the ethics of coexistence in a polarised global order.

Keywords: Post-9/11, Alienation, Multiculturalism, Hybrid Identity, Othering

1. INTRODUCTION

The attacks of September 11, 2001, on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in the United States catalysed a transformation in global relations, particularly between the Western and Islamic worlds. These events intensified existing tensions rooted in a history of imperialism, colonisation, and exploitation. The resulting "War on Terror" reshaped political landscapes and profoundly impacted individual lives, particularly those of Muslim immigrants pursuing the American Dream. This backdrop forms the core of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a narrative that examines identity, belonging, and alienation through the experiences of Changez, a Pakistani immigrant.

Changez's journey reflects the complexities of navigating two worlds: the aspirational allure of American multiculturalism and the rootedness of his Pakistani heritage. As Changez transitions from an eager participant in the American capitalist system to a disillusioned critic, Hamid critiques post-9/11 societal attitudes, exposing the fragility of inclusion and the dangers of "othering." This paper explores how Changez embodies the "outsider within" and how his story serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of alienation.

2. THE PURSUIT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

The concept of the American Dream has long been emblematic of opportunity, prosperity, and self-determination, promising that anyone, regardless of their background, can achieve success through hard work and perseverance. Rooted in the ideals of democracy and individualism, the American Dream has served as a beacon for immigrants seeking a better life and the chance to redefine their futures. However, the narrative surrounding the American Dream is not without complexities, particularly when examined through the lens of race, ethnicity, and post-9/11 geopolitics. For many, the promise of equality and acceptance within this framework remains elusive, as systemic barriers and cultural biases often undermine the ideal. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid interrogates this concept, exploring its limitations and the dissonance experienced by those, like the protagonist Changez, who find themselves caught between aspiration and alienation in pursuit of this dream. By juxtaposing the allure of the American Dream with the realities of cultural exclusion and identity fragmentation, Hamid critiques its fragility and the broader societal structures that uphold it.

From the outset, Changez represents the ideal immigrant success story. Having earned a scholarship to Princeton University, one of America's most prestigious institutions, he excels academically and professionally. He gains employment at Underwood Samson, a top valuation firm in Manhattan, and begins a romantic relationship with Erica, a quintessentially American woman. His admission to this elite world affirms his merit and ability to assimilate into American culture. However, Changez's success is underpinned by a desire to give back to the country that has offered him opportunities. He performs his role as a corporate analyst with diligence, embodying the values of efficiency and excellence that Underwood Samson promotes. In Manila, he even adopts American mannerisms to gain respect, admitting, "I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an American" (Hamid, 2007, p. 65). His assimilation seems complete, and he epitomises the American Dream—until the events of 9/11 shatter this illusion.

3. THE IMPACT OF 9/11 ON CHANGEZ'S IDENTITY

The Reluctant Fundamentalist delves into the intricate psychological, social, cultural, and moral challenges faced by Muslims navigating post-9/11 America, particularly those straddling dual identities like Changez, the novel's protagonist. The September 11 attacks marked a turning point for Changez and his perception of his place in America and disrupted the multicultural ideal he had embraced, revealing underlying prejudices and systemic inequalities. As a Pakistani immigrant who had comfortably integrated into American society before the attacks, he finds his position irreversibly altered in their wake. The once seamless assimilation into American culture is disrupted by new anxieties over divided loyalties, especially concerning Pakistan. Changez's prestigious academic achievements and professional success, symbolic of his embrace of the American Dream, now prompt him to question whether such affiliations leave room for authentic expressions of his cultural identity or allegiance to his homeland. These internal and external conflicts force Changez to reevaluate his place within a society increasingly suspicious of his dual existence.

Changez's reaction to the 9/11 attacks while on a business trip in Manila is inexplicable. Watching the events unfold on television, his initial response is one of disturbing satisfaction:

The following evening was supposed to be our last in Manila. I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television and saw what, at first, I took to be a film. However, as I continued to watch, I realised that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one and then the other of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased. (Hamid, 2007, p. 83).

Changez's reaction to the attacks on the Twin Towers is both unexpected and unsettling, especially for someone who appears to be fully immersed in the American Dream. His response—a smile upon witnessing the tragedy—feels shocking and even incomprehensible, raising questions about his self-awareness and the implications of his actions. It starkly contrasts with the life he has built for himself, a life aligned with the ideals of success in America. Until now, Changez has shown no overt conflict with his American identity or resentment toward the country. This reaction underscores a significant turning point in his journey, forcing readers to confront his evolving perspective on power, identity, and his place within a global framework shaped by control and exploitation.

So, what could provoke such a response to the devastation of his adopted homeland? This moment reveals a deep and previously unrecognised division within Changez. A significant part of him is entirely assimilated into American

values, representing the ambitious and driven immigrant who has embraced the opportunities afforded to him. However, the attacks seem to awaken another dormant part of his psyche. This unconscious side, long suppressed, exults in the sight of America—often perceived as a dominant and unassailable power—being humbled. As Changez reflects, “Someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (Hamid, 2007, p.83). This paradox unsettles him, forcing him to confront a conflict he did not consciously recognise before. He is disturbed by the realisation that his subconscious harboured resentment or resistance toward the country he had worked so hard to embrace. This internal awakening marks a turning point, compelling him to grapple with the duality of his identity and the values he has unconsciously absorbed or rejected. It is a moment of profound self-discovery, revealing the complexities of being an immigrant caught between two worlds, each exerting its own influence on his sense of self.

The Twin Towers, as targets of the 9/11 attacks, carried profound symbolic weight. As Peek (2011) observes, “The violent assaults were designed to be spectacular in their destruction of symbols of U.S. economic, military, and political power” (p.22). This act of symbolic destruction resonates deeply with Changez, reflecting his conflicted and ambivalent feelings toward America. His attitude—characterised by a “reluctant animosity”—parallels the broader impact of 9/11 on many Muslims, who faced heightened suspicion and systemic discrimination in its aftermath. The sweeping security measures that followed targeted Muslims, fostering an environment of fear and alienation. For Changez, these societal changes exacerbate his estrangement from America, further widening the divide between his immigrant identity and the hostility he increasingly encounters.

Changez's return to America after his business trip to Manila is a jarring experience that starkly contrasts with the country he had left behind. The reality of a post-9/11 America confronts him immediately, with profound implications for his sense of belonging. At the airport, Changez undergoes a humiliating and dehumanising ordeal, being interrogated and subjected to invasive security measures that culminate in being asked to strip down to his undergarments. In stark contrast, his American colleagues pass through immigration seamlessly, unburdened by the extra scrutiny. This experience leaves Changez feeling alienated and painfully aware that, despite his accomplishments and life in America, he is not truly regarded as an American:

“When we arrived, I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners. The officer who inspected my passport was a solidly built woman with a pistol at her hip and a mastery of English inferior to mine; I attempted to disarm her with a smile”. “What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?” she asked me.

“I live here,” I replied.

“That is not what I asked you, sir,” she said. “What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?” (Hamid, 2007, p.86).

As Changez observes the fervent patriotism engulfing post-9/11 New York, he begins to feel alienated and out of place, as though he no longer belongs to the United States. To him, the atmosphere “was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War” (Hamid, 2007, pp. 130-131). This growing sense of estrangement marks a significant shift in Changez's perception of his place within American culture. His once-strong connection to the American Dream begins to falter as he grapples with his identity, torn between his Pakistani roots and his life as an immigrant educated and employed in America.

Mohan Ramanan aptly captures this transformation in his analysis, *The West and its Other: Literary Responses to 9/11*, noting, “9/11 also manufactured a new American nationalism, which enabled the US to see itself as innocent in relation to the demonic other, but this was after all only a variation of the old theme of American exceptionalism” (Ramanan, 2008, p.126). Changez's experience embodies the dissonance created by this new nationalism, illustrating how the post-9/11 narrative alienated those who were once welcomed as part of the American dream but were now marked as outsiders. This shift is central to Changez's growing disillusionment with America and his reassessment of his place within its society.

Changez's outward persona, cultivated during his time at Princeton, reflects his early efforts to assimilate. He embraced the image of a self-reliant and liberal young man, juggling multiple jobs to sustain an external identity that, by his admission, he performed effectively. Most people he encountered were captivated by this projected persona. However, Changez's performance of American identity was not without its struggles. In Manila, he reveals an instance of attempting to adapt further:

I had never done this 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, accepting them almost instinctively as members of the officer class of global business– and I wanted my share of that respect as well. (Hamid, 2007, p.65).

This effort underscores Changez's desire to fit into the global business elite and the cultural hegemony represented by his American colleagues. Yet, this adaptation comes at the cost of a deeper internal conflict that grows more pronounced after 9/11. Changez begins to wrestle with the dissonance between his public and private identities, the persona he constructed, and the reality of his experience as a Pakistani Muslim in post-9/11 America.

The novel's framing device—Changez's dramatic monologue to his silent American listener—intensifies this internal conflict. The silent, watchful presence of the American listener highlights the gulf between the two characters, drawing attention to Changez's loss of voice and agency in post-9/11 America. His narration, filled with layers of reflection and subtext, suggests that Changez is trying to communicate his personal journey and the broader experience of voicelessness endured by "American outsiders" like him. This loss of voice mirrors the alienation and marginalisation he felt in America after 9/11. Whether the American listener's silence stems from distrust, enmity, or passive attentiveness, it underscores the disconnect. Changez, perhaps, seeks to reverse this dynamic by placing his listener in the same position he found himself—stripped of voice, power, and belonging. The silent void left by his audience reflects the profound emptiness and disillusionment Changez experiences as he comes to terms with his fractured identity and the cost of his dreams.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid draws inspiration from Albert Camus's *The Fall*, employing a similar dramatic monologue structure to explore themes of identity, assimilation, and cultural dislocation. Hamid acknowledges this influence, noting that "*The Fall* is very clearly a model for this novel" (Hamid, 2007, as cited in Book Critics, 2007). The parallels between the two works are evident, particularly in their exploration of a protagonist's "fall"—a descent marked by the loss of identity, security, assimilation, and deeper connection to cultural and religious roots. For Changez, this fall is a multifaceted unravelling: his disintegration as a part of the American Dream, his estrangement from his adopted home, and his realisation of the cultural and religious alienation that 9/11 amplifies (Hamid, 2007).

In the wake of September 11, Changez begins to feel a growing connection to Afghanistan, a nation caught in the crosshairs of the Bush administration's "War on Terror." As Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbour and cultural ally is drawn into the conflict by providing support to American military operations, this geopolitical entanglement profoundly alters Changez's self-perception and worldview. Reflecting on his internal shift, he acknowledges:

"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, 2007, p.100).

This moment marks a turning point in Changez's journey, as his disillusionment with American policies begins to challenge the identity he has constructed for himself as a participant in its economic and cultural systems. The events of post-9/11 America and its foreign policies leave Changez disillusioned with the country and the values he once admired. The novel's narrative weaves the inseparability of the personal and the political elements together, illustrating how global events ripple into individual lives. For Changez, politics becomes deeply personal, affecting his understanding of his identity, values, and aspirations. This interconnectedness is vividly portrayed as he rides home and witnesses the pervasive display of American flags, symbols of national grief, fear, and anger. Amid this atmosphere, Changez feels a profound sense of dissonance: "The crumbling of the world around and the impending destruction of the American dream" (Hamid, 2007, p.106).

This imagery encapsulates Changez's growing awareness of the fragility of the ideals he once pursued. The American dream, which he had worked so diligently to achieve, now feels irreparably damaged. The cultural and political turmoil around him only amplifies his alienation and disillusionment. While Changez once thrived in America, he now feels disillusioned, suspecting he has betrayed his roots by serving American interests. This inner conflict culminates in his comparison of himself to a "Janissary," a Christian soldier who served the Ottoman Empire, fighting against their own people. Similarly, Changez sees himself as a modern-day "Muslim Janissary," working for an empire that exploits and oppresses his own culture and religion.

Changez begins to reflect critically on his role within the American capitalist machine, particularly during a business trip to Chile. Sent to evaluate the worth of an unprofitable publishing company owned by the elderly Juan Bautista, Changez becomes acutely aware of the dehumanising effects of the economic system he represents. The potential buyer's disinterest in preserving the firm's literary division underscores the purely profit-driven motives of the enterprise. Changez realises that he has been complicit in perpetuating a system that disregards human lives and values for monetary gain.

The turning point arrives when Juan Bautista prompts Changez to confront his identity and purpose. During a conversation, Bautista draws a parallel between Changez and the Janissaries, exposing the moral compromise inherent in his position. This analogy resonates deeply with Changez, awakening in him feelings of shame, rage, and regret. Bautista's insights strip away Changez's rationalisations and force him to see himself as a willing participant in a system that monetarily dominates the Muslim world and other vulnerable regions. Changez reflects:

"I had thrown in my lot with the officers of the empire, when all along I was disposed to feel compassion for those ... whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gains" (Hamid, 2007, p.152).

This revelation transforms Changez, prompting a rejection of the "self-deception" that previously allowed him to reconcile his work with his values. He can no longer ignore the exploitative nature of aggressive capitalism or its alignment with America's imperial ambitions. His disillusionment extends to broader critiques of American foreign policy. Speaking to the American listener, Changez unleashes his suppressed political frustrations, condemning the United States' interference in global conflicts:

"I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role" (Hamid, 2007, p.177).

Changez's outburst is a culmination of his transformed identity and worldview. He no longer sees himself as an immigrant striving for success in America but as someone deeply connected to the broader struggles of his culture and religion. This shift reflects his rejection of the American Dream and his growing disdain for the policies perpetuating inequality and conflict. Hamid uses this moment to illustrate the intertwined nature of personal and political struggles, showing how global events reshape individual identities and loyalties. Changez's journey underscores the difficulty of navigating a world divided by power, culture, and ideology, leaving him a "reluctant fundamentalist" questioning the very foundations of the life he once pursued.

Changez's journey of re-acclimatization reflects a broader theme in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: the struggle to reconcile disparate identities. His experience underscores the difficulty of navigating the space between two distinct cultures, each with its own values and expectations. By embracing an alternate way of understanding his surroundings, Changez ultimately reclaims a sense of belonging and identity rooted in his origins while rejecting the structures of domination and alienation he encountered in America. This transformation is emblematic of his broader resistance to the imperialist and exclusionary tendencies of post-9/11 America.

Through Changez's journey, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* interrogates the construction of identity, the dynamics of power, and the moral compromises inherent in global politics. By the novel's conclusion, Changez has become a reluctant fundamentalist—not in the religious sense, but in his principled opposition to the fundamentals of an imperialist and exploitative system. His transformation reflects a broader reckoning with the political and cultural forces that define and constrain individual agency in a polarised world.

Changez's narrative underscores his disillusionment with America's imperialistic tendencies and his own complicity in its economic domination during his time with Underwood Samson. He reflects with regret on the realisation of his role in perpetuating the very system he now opposes: "It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision" (Hamid, 2007, p.177). This self-awareness grows alongside a nostalgic longing for Pakistan, which becomes a counterpoint to the "impending destruction of the American dream" (Hamid, 2007, p.92). Despite criticising nostalgia's distortions, Changez uses his story as a counter-narrative to challenge dominant American discourses. He tells his listener:

"I am, after all, telling you a history but, as an American especially, should understand it is the thrust of one's narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one's details" (Hamid, 2007, p.118).

This statement reflects the novel's layered narrative, which invites the reader to question the nature of truth and perspective in global relations. Hamid himself has noted that 9/11 transformed the novel from a personal migrant story into a broader exploration of the geopolitics governing the relationship between the West and its "others."

Hamid's novel concludes with unresolved tension, reflecting the broader uncertainties of post-9/11 geopolitics. Changez's transformation from a young immigrant pursuing the American Dream to a self-aware critic of American hegemony embodies the complex interplay of personal and political identities. The ambiguous ending reinforces the novel's exploration of narrative, perception, and the impossibility of fully disentangling oneself from the cultural and historical forces that shape one's identity. In the concluding exploration of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid delves into the lasting impact of post-9/11 dynamics on individuals like Changez, highlighting the impossibility of reconciliation between his American dream and his Pakistani identity. The "rationale of his misfortune" lies in its permanence, where the chasm between his imagined future and reality cannot be bridged. Language becomes Changez's medium to express his acceptance of this inconceivability, with a reflective tone revealing his regret for the rigidity of cultural boundaries.

Changez's nostalgic envisioning of an alternative reality with Erica—a world where cultural and personal differences dissolve—underscores the novel's thematic preoccupation with the possible and the impossible:

"We would have woken in my bedroom and breakfasted with my parents...we would have sat on our scooter and driven to campus...and I would have been both amused and annoyed by the stares she received" (Hamid, 2007, pp. 172-73).

This vision of an imagined future contrasts sharply with the narrative's reality. As a metaphor for the unattainable American dream, Erica becomes unapproachable, reflecting the cultural and personal dissonance Changez experiences. The novel traces a trajectory of self-exile from the promised land of America, a return to his homeland, and reflections on a life that might have been.

4. EDWARD SAID'S "OTHERING" AND CHANGEZ'S TRANSFORMATION

Mohsin Hamid intricately weaves Changez's experiences in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* with Edward Said's theory of "othering," wherein identity is constructed by defining and opposing the "other." In the post-9/11 landscape, Muslims became the dominant "other," with their identities shaped by reimagined and exaggerated differences. Changez's transformation from a starry-eyed immigrant pursuing the American Dream to a "reluctant anti-American" reflects the pervasive social and cultural hostilities he endures. As suspicion, humiliation, and alienation infiltrate his life, Changez's dormant "Muslim-ness" resurfaces in reaction to the attacks on his faith and identity. This awakening compels him to embrace his heritage and critique the system he once admired.

Hamid uses Changez's journey as a cautionary tale, warning against the dangers of policies rooted in indiscriminate "othering" and systemic Islamophobia. The "War on Terror," coupled with the reactionary targeting of Muslims, not only fosters resentment among those directly affected but also reverberates across the broader Islamic world. Hamid cautions that such practices alienate even those who initially view America favourably, undermining its strategic interests and eroding the multicultural foundation of its society.

The novel critiques the reduction of identity to oversimplified external markers, such as a beard, turban, or Muslim dress, which are often equated with fundamentalism and fanaticism. These identity markers become lightning rods for discrimination, transforming individuals like Changez into perpetual outsiders, irrespective of their abilities or contributions. Despite his professional success and intellect, Changez is treated as inferior and perceived as a potential threat, reinforcing his alienation. Changez's beard becomes a central symbol of his "otherness," marking him as distinct and thus a target for prejudice. This external signifier of identity underscores a broader societal failure to engage with the complexities of individuality. In this context, Changez's experiences are not just personal but representative of a larger systemic issue: the tendency to stereotype and marginalise based on superficial traits rather than engaging with the person beneath the surface.

Hamid illustrates how the paranoia and Islamophobia of post-9/11 policies have deeply detrimental effects on multiculturalism. These measures, driven by fear and suspicion, indiscriminately target Muslims, eroding the social fabric of American society. The rhetoric and policies of exclusion undermine the principles of equality and justice that form the bedrock of American identity. By alienating a significant segment of its population, America isolates communities that could otherwise contribute meaningfully to its cultural and societal enrichment.

Changez's transformation demonstrates the consequences of alienation from exclusionary policies and societal prejudice. Despite initially being a loyal advocate of American values, Changez becomes disillusioned as he confronts the stark realities of systemic bias and discrimination. His experiences suggest that policies rooted in suspicion and exclusion can turn even the most loyal immigrants into critics of the system. Hamid underscores the importance of fostering understanding and embracing the "other" to maintain the strength and diversity of multicultural societies. Through Changez, Hamid reveals that many Muslims seek peace and prosperity in their adopted countries, but reactionary policies create a cycle of alienation and hostility, undermining the ideals that nations like America claim to uphold.

Edward Said's concept of "othering" resonates throughout the novel, shaping the trajectory of Changez's life and identity (Said, 1978). His journey encapsulates the tension between inclusion and exclusion, loyalty and alienation. The process of being "othered" forces Changez to confront his evolving identity and the societal structures that have marginalised him. The narrative reveals how external markers of difference, reinforced by systemic bias, can erode a person's sense of belonging (Peek, 2011). By blending personal transformation with broader geopolitical critique, Hamid expands on Said's insights, showing how constructing the "other" is a tool for maintaining dominance and justifying exclusion (Hamid, 2007). Changez's ultimate rejection of America is not due to inherent animosity but accumulated experiences that expose the contradictions between America's ideals and actions. By intertwining Changez's personal journey with the broader implications of America's post-9/11 policies, Hamid emphasises the need for societies to embrace complexity and reject simplistic binaries.

5. RETHINKING FUNDAMENTALISM: CHANGEZ'S JOURNEY THROUGH ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL PARADIGMS

The title *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* prompts readers to rethink the meaning of "fundamentalism," challenging its common association with religious extremism. Changez's fundamentalism is not rooted in Islam; he is neither a devout Muslim nor an advocate of Islamic fanaticism. Instead, his early allegiance is to the principles of American capitalism. Initially, Changez exemplifies the ideals of meritocracy, ambition, and the efficiency-driven ethos of Underwood Samson, a financial firm whose guiding principle is to "focus on the fundamentals." This economic fundamentalism aligns with his pursuit of the American Dream, shaping his identity as a successful immigrant striving to thrive within the framework of global capitalism.

However, as the novel progresses, Changez becomes increasingly disillusioned with these values. He begins to see how the unyielding pursuit of profit and efficiency perpetuates global inequalities and contributes to violence and exploitation. His "reluctance" grows as he distances himself from this economic fundamentalism, recognising its complicity in imperialistic endeavours and the erosion of cultural authenticity. This shift suggests that Changez's new fundamentalism may be rooted in anti-imperialist sentiment and a deeper connection to his cultural identity as he questions the foundations of the system he once embraced.

Changez's reluctance manifests in multiple dimensions, reflecting his complex and evolving identity. As a *reluctant American*, he initially embraces the American Dream, eager to assimilate and succeed. Yet, post-9/11, he becomes disenchanted with America, witnessing its cultural chauvinism, imperialist policies, and intolerance toward "others." His growing awareness of America's exploitative global role and its treatment of Muslims and immigrants leads him to reject the values he once held dear. Simultaneously, he emerges as a *reluctant Pakistani*. Upon returning to Lahore, he does not adopt an uncritical nationalist stance. Instead, he assumes the role of a nuanced critic, challenging both American policies and the failures of Pakistan's own political and social systems. His patriotism is rooted in a thoughtful engagement with his country's challenges rather than blind allegiance.

Furthermore, Changez can be understood as a *reluctant Muslim*. His religiosity is understated throughout the novel; he does not define himself through faith in a traditional or doctrinal sense. Instead, his critique of America and alignment with anti-imperialist sentiments are framed in broader cultural and political terms rather than overtly Islamic rhetoric. This nuanced depiction complicates any simplistic labelling of Changez as a fundamentalist in the religious sense, steering the narrative toward a broader critique of ideological fundamentalisms.

The novel expands the concept of fundamentalism beyond its typical association with religion, engaging with the insights of thinkers like Susan Buck-Morss, who argue that fundamentalism applies to any rigid adherence to foundational principles, whether economic, political, or cultural (Buck-Morss, 2003). Changez's journey critiques American capitalist fundamentalism, particularly its relentless focus on profit and power and the violent zealotry that

often accompanies such ideological rigidity. His personal transformation invites readers to consider how these fundamentalisms interact, shaping individual identities and broader global dynamics.

Through Changez's story, Mohsin Hamid challenges readers to move beyond simplistic binaries. The novel does not merely pit America against its Muslim "other," nor does it frame fundamentalism solely as a religious issue. Instead, it explores how economic, political, and cultural fundamentalisms intersect, often with destructive consequences. Changez's evolution from a believer in the American Dream to a critic of its imperialist underpinnings exemplifies how external forces and personal reflections shape identity. His journey underscores the need to question religious extremism and the economic and political dogmas that drive inequality and conflict in the modern world. By doing so, Hamid compels readers to examine the foundations of their beliefs and the systems that sustain them, ultimately revealing the complexities of identity in an increasingly interconnected and divided world.

6. CONCLUSION

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid masterfully weaves a narrative that reflects the complexities of identity, cultural conflict, and the global repercussions of 9/11. Changez's journey encapsulates the personal and political ramifications of the post-9/11 world, revealing the dangers of "othering" and systemic Islamophobia. Hamid's cautionary tale warns against policies that alienate those who might otherwise embrace the values of their adopted societies. Instead, he advocates for an inclusive approach that acknowledges and values the diversity of all its citizens. Changez's story, ultimately, is one of lost dreams but also a call for greater understanding and humanity in an increasingly divided world.

The novel's exploration of "othering" and identity politics has significant implications for contemporary discourse. Treating the "other" remains critical in an increasingly interconnected yet polarised world. Hamid's narrative calls for reevaluating rigid nationalistic and cultural boundaries, urging societies to embrace inclusivity and empathy. The systemic exclusion and suspicion that Changez experiences are a microcosm of the challenges marginalised communities face globally. His transformation from an advocate of the American Dream to a critic of imperialist hegemony reflects the unintended consequences of alienation, offering a poignant reminder of the human cost of prejudice and discrimination.

Furthermore, Hamid's novel encourages dialogue on the ethics of coexistence in a world marked by cultural and political asymmetries. Changez's journey highlights the complexities of hybrid identities and the tensions that arise when individuals navigate between competing cultural, religious, and national allegiances. As globalisation continues to blur traditional boundaries, the need to foster mutual understanding and respect among diverse groups becomes increasingly urgent. Hamid's work is a critical intervention, advocating for a global ethos prioritising inclusion over division and coexistence over domination.

Considering the implications of Hamid's narrative for future discourse, it becomes clear that the challenges addressed in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are far from resolved. The novel's themes underscore the importance of resisting simplistic binaries, whether between the West and the Islamic world, the individual and the collective, or tradition and modernity. Instead, Hamid invites readers to reflect on the fluidity of identity and the shared humanity that transcends these constructed divisions.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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