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Resetting borders: Transnationalism, identity and home in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

Transnationalism refers to the heightened interconnectivity between people and the receding economic and social boundaries among nations. Is the effect of creation of multicultural societies formed as a result of increased immigration and new global economic policies. America often celebrated the transnational nature of its society which invited talents from all over the world and helped them in becoming the most powerful nation. America was home for a lot of immigrants irrespective of their national, racial, religious or ethnic backgrounds. But things suddenly changed with the 9/11 attacks which rebuilt the imaginary borders of nation and nationality. There was increased hostility towards the "Others", especially the Muslim Other. Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid portrays this sudden change in the attitude of America and the identity crisis and trauma experienced by the Muslim immigrants in the Post 9/11 scenario in his renowned novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This paper analyses the portrayal of ideas of Transnationalism, identity and home in the novel with reference to the protagonist Changez.

Keywords: Transnationalism, America, post 9/11 scenario, the Muslim other, identity crisis, belongingness, home

Introduction

Transnationalism, popularized in the Twentieth Century by the American writer Randolph Bourne, introduced a new way of thinking about relationship between cultures. It speaks about the heightened interconnectivity between people and the receding economic and social significance of boundaries among nations. Multicultural societies created as a result of increased immigration caused by new global economic policies, resulted in receding importance of nation and nationality. Randolph Bourne in his renowned essay titled "Transnational America" rejected the then popular idea of America as a "melting pot" where in immigrants from all over the world was expected to assimilate into the so called American culture and tradition. Bourne argued instead that America offers a unique liberty of opportunity and traditional isolation for people from different cultures to hold on to their native ideals, which he believed would lead to a cosmopolitan enterprise. This idea of America as a transnational community surpassing all national, cultural, racial, religious and ethnic differences was very popular and promoted by the country to bring in talent from different parts of the world and thereby become the most powerful country in the world. But things suddenly changed with the attack on the World Trade Center which caused massive destruction and created immense traumatic experiences for the citizens of the country.

After the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 there was a great shift in the attitude of American society towards its immigrants, especially the Muslim Others. It revealed then cracks and fissures in the grand narrative of globalization. The ideas of nation and nationality were suddenly reestablished with vigour and there was a general hostility towards the Muslim immigrant in the US. It also officially triggered the war against terror which went on to create massive destruction in Middle East and South West Asian Countries. The post 9/11 scenario has been a subject of discussion in literature for a long time. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* provides a different take on the issue narrating the story through the "Other" and represents the tension between the dominant forces and the minorities in the neo avatar of colonization.

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Mohsin Hamid himself was born in Pakistan and later lived in America and London, and then returned to Pakistan. His experiences as an immigrant in the globalised world created Changez, the protagonist's experiences. As Peter Morey writes "Hamid's novel tells the story of the life experiences and eventual disillusionment of a gifted young Pakistani, who moves from fully interpellated capitalist "fundamentalist" and post political transnational subject to racially profiled and possibly hunted anti American firebrand".

The novel has the structure of a frame story and the dialogic narrative takes place at a coffee shop in the Old Anarkali district of Lahore, Pakistan at an evening. Changez, the protagonist of the novel meets an American at the Old Anarkali District in Lahore, Pakistan and invites him for tea. He tells the American about the years he had spent in America as a student and an employee during the 9/11 and post 9/11 years and how it influenced his life. Changez tells the American all about his years at Princeton, about his investment banking firm, Underwood Sampson & Company, and about his American girlfriend, Erica.

Changez's relationship with America is the central theme of the novel and as the plot progress, we decipher a significant shift in his perspective and his engagement with his adopted homeland. As he sits at the Lahore café and narrates his substantial experience at the US, the anxiety between the "Other" and the nation is foregrounded. The American is always watchful and reacts at the slightest movement as if he expects an attack any moment. Changez consoles the American by introducing himself as a "lover of America" which turns out to be ironic as the story progress

Changez comes from a respected but declining Pakistani family. He manages to get into and attends Princeton University, where he was an excellent student and played the part of the exotic foreigner. He was one of the few privileged foreigners selected after rigorous processes of analysis. He secretly engaged in multiple jobs to support himself even though he was this exotic Prince from the East in Public. He later realises how Princeton indoctrinated a Pro American mindset teaching him to use his skills to help American companies and how happy he was in the beginning to do so. "In return we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining...And for the most part we were happy to do so. I certainly was, at least at first" (Hamid 4)

Even though subtle, the discriminatory attitude of the Americans towards the East is clear through Erica's father's attitude towards him, frequent allusion to political instability in Pakistan, fundamentalism and obsession with religion, which upsets Changez. A sense of neo colonial domination continues to function in the West irrespective of the borderless societies they boast of. The immigrants from the East are constantly reminded of their homeland in a negative way and that they do not belong here. Changez takes a lot of pride in his homeland and feels affected when it is looked down upon.

Often, during my stay in your country such comparisons troubled me. In fact, they did more than trouble; they made me resentful. Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus river basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonise America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were

largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this disparity was, for me to be ashamed. (36)

Changez always tried hard to hide his Pakistani identity under the mask of American. He tried to completely assimilate into American culture and he even felt like "a New Yorker with the world at his feet" (1) He nurtured his own "American Dream" of becoming successful and rich so that he could change the situation of himself and his family. When he went to Philippines he hides his "Pakistaniness" and act more American as he feels he is respected by the Filipinos only then. When he went to meet Erica at her home he wears a kurta and mentions that he really felt happy as no one noticed him in the busy streets of New York even though he was wearing very unconventional dress in American standards. That was the way American society was, encompassing all the differences. Pre 9/11 he felt home at America. But at the same time he had a strong sense of home with Pakistan which he always missed. As Erica suggests all through the novel he is very excited to talk about his land. But the sense of home and belonging experienced by Changez are complicated with the sudden political events which lead him to a deep reexamination of his relationship with his adopted home and its position in the world.

Post 9/11 scenario disillusioned him. The attack on the World Trade Center happens when Changez was in Philippines and in fact his first reaction was happiness which he himself finds difficult to understand.

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... I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees. (72-73)

The increasing hostility he experiences at America on his return fuels up his feeling of non-belongingness. He underwent severe examinations at airports even after his colleagues moved on without any. People started to look at him with suspicion. There was suddenly a sense of American nationalism created among the people. The American flag was found everywhere like a symbol used to enunciate the sense of a nation. "They all seemed to proclaim; We are America – not New York, which, in my opinion, means something quite different – the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath"(79). And Changez cannot be part of this "nation" as he was a Muslim who belonged to Pakistan. Suddenly he became the "other" which was essential to create the the national unity of "us". He is confused with the image he was given by the public and the hatred he faced. He was lost in this suddenly prejudiced world as he faced an identity crisis in the absence of all sense of belongingness. "I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged – in New York, in Lahore, in both, in either."(168) Changez explains the changed situations in America as "I was struck by how traditional your empire appeared" (178), reviving the the colonial period which always preserved the difference of the colonizer and the colonized or the self and the "Other". Edward Said in his *Orientalism* suggest the

orient is the occident's "cultural contestant, and one of the deepest and most recurring images of the other" (said 2). The Muslim world was looked as the other - a hub of terrorism which is to be controlled and saved by America through its War on Terror. "The relationship between occident and orient is relationship of power, of domination of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 5)

Changez goes home to Pakistan as his country was on the verge of war with India on the crisis created by the Indian Parliament attacks and he was severely disturbed by the attitude of America towards the issue. America's invasion on Afghanistan, the neighbor and friend of Pakistan in the name of War on Terror too irritated him and he began to lose all love he had had for America. "I reflected that 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 that ringed my mother continent Asia, America played a central role."(156)

On his return he kept his beard on as a symbol of protest and everyone, even his colleagues looked at him with increased hostility as if he was a terrorist: "I had not shaved my two week old beard. It was perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity. (148)"

It was his journey to Chile on an Underwood Samson assignment that finally makes him face his identity crisis. Juan Batista, the President of the Publishing Company at Chile, compares Changez to a Janissary, a reference to Crusades era Christian warriors who were kidnapped from their own culture and then forced to fight against it. Changez suddenly realizes this was true, that he was doing harm to Pakistan by working for Underwood Samson. "I was a janissary a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with kinship to mine."(173) He refuse to complete his assignment and on his return is dismissed by the company. He felt that it was the right thing to do even though it meant his "American Dream" crumbling down. "It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision"(177)

Changez felt that as a country America failed to understand the feelings and pain of its immigrants who were suddenly ostracized inspite of the fact that they have contributed their lives and skills for the development of the country. His growing resentment made him return home to Pakistan. As Sobia Kiran has quoted Saeed ur Rahman in his article suggests "Changez doesn't withdraw from his Western life because he has found religion as a zone of ultimate comfort but because he is not happy serving a civilization which does not respect his culture of origin and because USA is a shallow country".

After his return to Pakistan Changez becomes a University Professor with anti Imperialist affiliations and persuades his students to participate in demonstrations for greater independence in Pakistan's domestic and international affairs. These activities were later labeled as anti-American by the foreign press along with an interview of Changez, after which he was under constant threat. He always felt being watched and considers the American to be possibly a CIA undercover agent, which he seems to be towards the end with his hidden revolver. Anyone who questions the

empire seems to be under threat in this neo colonial structure.

The post 9/11 scenario in America witnessed a dismissal of the highly proclaimed concept of transnational America inclusive of all differences. Suddenly there was a resetting of the ideas of nation and nationality within the American society, placing the existence of its large immigrant population, especially the Muslims, in great dilemma. The sense of national unity was enforced by the marginalization of the Muslim Other which resulted in the increased hostility and hatred towards them. Changez, who felt at home and wanted to be identified as American in Pre 9/11 period was taken aback by the change in attitude towards him from his adopted homeland. He loses his sense of belonging and falls into an identity crisis. He had always loved America and is happy to identify with it. At the same time he feels a tribal sense of belongingness to Pakistan. This tribal unity he feels makes him happy in the fall of America. The resentment he feels in the attitude of America towards his homeland makes him leave the country and he becomes an anti-imperialist activist back home.

Mohsin Hamid, in one of his interviews, calls himself a "mongrel". By which he refers to a hybrid. He had lived in Pakistan, America and London and identifies with each of these places. A part of each country lives in him and therefore he cannot claim himself to be completely a Pakistani or an American or a citizen of London. It is this same hybrid identity which puts Changez in dilemma as the societal norms expects you to identify with and be loyal to one country. After his return to Pakistan, Changez claims that a part of Erica always lives in him even after her death. In the same way a part of America continues to live in him even after he returns home and becomes an anti-American activist.

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