



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Traversing the Third Space: Hybridity, Alienation, and Non-Assimilation in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

<sup>1</sup>Syed Faisal Sajjad Shah\*, <sup>2</sup>Muhammad Ibrahim Khokhar and <sup>3</sup>Waqar Ul Haq

1. MPhil Scholar (English Literature), Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, NUML Islamabad, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Institute of English, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan
3. MPhil Scholar (English Literature), Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, NUML Islamabad, Pakistan

\*Corresponding Author | [mike@salu.edu.pk](mailto:mike@salu.edu.pk)

## ABSTRACT

The present study aims at exploring the issues of third space, hybridity, and the identity crisis of Pakistani people living in the West, especially in the United States of America, in light of the analysis of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Homi K. Bhabha's idea of the third space has been used as the theoretical framework to analyse the text. According to the study of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the greatest hindrance to natural and mutually beneficial connections across many nations and cultures is American society's hatred and lack of acceptance for individuals from other cultures. Moreover, the study underscores the stark truth that Pakistani citizens, notwithstanding their sincere efforts, ultimately find themselves trapped in a liminal space that exists between their native culture and the host culture, rendering those aliens in both. This heightened degree of alienation is manifested in the characters' hardships, which illustrate the enormous obstacles they face when attempting to assimilate into a culture that frequently sustains feelings of estrangement and exclusion.

**KEYWORDS** Alienation, Assimilation, Hybridity, Identity Crisis, Mohsin Hamid, Third Space

## Introduction

The phenomenon of human migrations and the resulting changes in cultural boundaries and identity formation are as old as human history itself. However, migrations, both voluntary and involuntary, have grown significantly in recent decades. Following such migrations, one of the most pressing challenges that arise is the issue of immigrants' identities. Without a doubt, the twenty-first century is the age of science and innovation. All nations throughout the world are reaping the benefits of modernity. Still, at the same time, this modernization and globalization have created a slew of complex issues for people to deal with, such as diaspora, xenophobia, hybridity, alienation, and identity crisis, among others. The ideas of home/exile, assimilation, and hybridity have surpassed the previous forms of group identity.

Several Pakistani writers have addressed these problems in their works. Zulfiqar Ghose, Hanif Kureshi, Bapsi Sidhwa, Nadeem Aslam, and Mohsin Hamid are among them. This study will focus on Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* examines numerous themes concerning America's connection with the Islamic world in the aftermath of 9/11. Changez, the protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is trying to figure out who he is in Western civilization. Changez is a

Pakistani who studies at Princeton University and subsequently works for a valuation firm. In Lahore, Changez meets an American guest and tells him about how he sacrificed his girlfriend, job, identity, and sense of belongingness. Since 9/11, the world has changed, which has aggravated his problems. He is forced to stop at airports for security checks because of his Muslim identity. For Changez, being a Pakistani and a Muslim has become a caricature and a label with far-reaching meanings rather than a relation to his beliefs and culture.

This research aims to delve into the experiences of Pakistanis living in the West, with a particular focus on the portrayal of their plight in Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This paper discusses how Changez's story sheds light on the plight of Pakistani people residing in the West. It seeks to understand how Pakistani people living in the United States perceive and respond to prejudice in the host community, which can shed light on wider aspects of othering, third space, hybridity, alienation, and assimilation.

The word "third space" refers to the transition zone of clashing cultures. This liminal territory gives rise to something new and unfamiliar, a new realm for the negotiation of meaning and representation. Diverse cultural identities are produced, reconstructed, and continually in the process of being in this "in-between" space (Bhabha, 2012, pp. 37,38). Assimilation is the process by which a minor community or group adapts to the dominant groups in a culture or acquires the ideas, practices, and conventions of another group, either completely or partly (Spielberger, 2004, p. 590). Hybridity is the result of the merger of two or more forms of identities that are much more likely to emerge in a multifaceted global society with a free exchange of ideas and people. These new hybrid identities are flexible rather than set, and they are deliberately exploited to navigate life in diverse and multicultural communities (Marotta, 2011, p. 3). The term "alienation" refers to a person's detachment or dissociation from a significant aspect of their nature or culture, which commonly leads to feelings of powerlessness or helplessness.

Through an analysis of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, this research explores the profound challenges faced by Pakistani people living in the West, particularly their struggle with identity crisis and the challenges they encounter in assimilating into the host culture. This research attempts to understand the various factors that contribute to the identity crisis, which gives rise to a more difficult life in host countries where they struggle to adjust to the culture and beliefs that are diametrically opposed to those to which they adhere in Pakistan.

## Literature Review

Literature review estimates the previous literatures linked to the particular theme and provides basis to think about the possible results of the study. Moreover, literature review is explicit indication of the employed sources in structured formula; and its function is to not merely to evaluate but also review the previous writings related to the theme of existing study (Cheema et al., 2023; Jevan et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2024). Mohsin Hamid's work portrays the narrative of a brilliant young Pakistani's life experiences and final disappointment. Several researchers and critics have shared their points of view about Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Awan (2013) in his article argues that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the tale of a conflict exemplified by the personal dilemma of its central character to find a way to deal with post-9/11 America and the new identity forced upon him. As the racial landscape shifts in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Hamid's protagonist is subjected to demeaning prejudices based on religious beliefs and race. Jajja (2013) states that Hamid portrays American society as being full of ethnic

and cultural bigotries against individuals from non-European nations. He demonstrates how Changez's racial and ethnic othering by American society affects him and drives him to seek his identity. He is not recognized as an equal part of the US society, and he is always forced to feel like an alien in that society.

Khan (2015) argues that the story of Changez is one of movement and dislocation, survival and worldly achievement, and a search for genuine belonging in the world. The concept of host ethics, as well as what it entails to be disconnected emotionally, are also at risk. Changez displaces his feeling of belonging in numerous settings, but he eventually becomes caught in the edges and voids between national, religious, racial, and socioeconomic barriers. Salmeen (2019) is of the view that since Changez is experienced with acculturation, he is aware of both civilizations' and perceives both points of view. He is more aware of his surroundings and more reluctant to assimilate. It enables him to see the injustice and racism hurled against him and his country. Changez's acculturation permits him to perceive the same problems from both an American and a Pakistani standpoint.

While the literature reviews mentioned above offer valuable insights into *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the broader issues of identity and migration, they primarily focus on the experiences of the novel's protagonist and the broader implications for marginalized communities. However, there exists a research gap concerning the specific experiences of Pakistani people living in the West and the challenges they face in assimilating into the host culture. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive exploration of the unique challenges encountered by Pakistani people in the West, such as prejudice, discrimination, othering, and identity crises. By focusing on this specific group, the study will uncover the factors that hinder their assimilation into the host culture and contribute to their confinement in the "third space."

### **Theoretical Framework**

The principal theory used to conduct this research is Homie K. Bhabha's idea of the third space. Homi K. Bhabha describes the concept of third space in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). He says that when a person migrates to a new place with a new culture, his own self-identity is challenged by the norms and values of this new culture. He can neither follow his home culture nor can he come to terms with adopting the host culture. This results in the emergence of an in-between space known as the third space, which gives rise to a hybrid identity. Bhabha says in his book that this third space conveys part of the perplexing sensation of the displacement of home and world. In that dislocation, the boundaries between home and the outside realm get blurred, and the domestic and communal become inextricably linked, imposing a picture that is as split as it is unsettling on us (Bhabha, 1994, p.9). He goes on to add that immigrants' relationships with the culture of their host nation are ambiguous, as they alternate between wanting to reside there and relocating to their home country. For a foreign culture, it is a complex combination of appeal and aversion. The connection is ambiguous since an immigrant is never fully opposed to his host country (Bhabha, 1994, pp.37, 38). So, the protagonist of Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* will be analysed in this third space that he is living in, which isn't permitting him to integrate into the host culture.

### **Material and Method**

This research is qualitative in nature, method is adopted by the research of Maitelo et al (2023) used this method. The researchers have collected the primary data from Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and secondary data from various books and research

articles. The researchers have employed textual analysis as the research method for this study. Textual analysis is a sort of qualitative analysis that looks at the text's fundamental cultural and ideological notions. It deals with comprehending and analyzing the language and symbols found in texts to gather information and make sense of the text. Thus, the goal of textual analysis is not to reveal the text's core, underlying meaning but to allow the researcher to study the text for many alternative readings by situating it within its ideological and cultural context. These are some of the steps of textual analysis by Catherine Belsey (2014) that are being adapted to perform the analysis of the data. Choose a text that supports your research. Looking for different signifiers within the text and examining their relationship. Looking for extra-textual details that you can find about the text, for example, the historical, biographical, and cultural context of the work under study. Analyzing the text from different perspectives and points of view to reach different interpretations. Performing the analysis of the protagonist and other supporting characters. And finally look for the interpretation that relates to your research and elaborate it further to make a case for your findings.

## Discussion

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* depicts the inner conflict that occurs anytime a passionate Eastern person moves to any Western country, particularly the United States of America, either in quest of higher education or better future possibilities. In terms of enticing young souls like Changez to relocate to its exotic nation for greater chances, the United States has retained its dominance over other Western nations. This movement from the East to the West results in cultural hybridity. This fusion of cultural forms and cultural viewpoints results in the formation of a third or in-between space in which a person loses his identity and must seek a new one. Changez, the protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, acquires a mixed identity when he goes to the United States in search of the "American Dream." There, he alternates between the home and the host identities, living contentedly in neither.

Changez's academic credentials, skillset, and potential helped him gain a job at the high-end valuation business 'Samson Underwood' after graduating from Princeton University. Moving to New York – a city of multiple ethnicities – for employment is like a homecoming for him, as he acknowledges, "I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker" (Hamid, 2007, p.18). He believes he has discovered a new life and identity after reaching such a significant milestone. However, after witnessing the racial and cultural prejudices of American culture towards non-Europeans, particularly Muslims, Changez quickly understands that he would never be welcomed as an equal member among them. A foreigner is always evaluated in reference to his own country. His boss, Jim, iterates this point, too, when he says, "I know what it's like to be an outsider" (Hamid, 2007, p. 55).

Changez's sense of belonging stretches to his hometown. On his visit to Pakistan, he begins to evaluate everything through a Western gaze. Not only does he feel estranged from American society, but he also feels out of place in his birthplace of Lahore. He begins to see how shabby and poorly kept his home is. But he quickly discovers that everything else remains the same; it is only something within him that has altered. He says, "I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic.

American..." (Hamid, 2007, p. 56). The American way of life has a bad effect on his thoughts, and he is unable to return to his previous existence. The same is true for Pakistani people who return home after staying in the West. They begin to see everything through a

Western gaze, which causes them to question the basic norms and values of their society, which they had never criticized. This is where the hybrid identity manifests itself, and they feel out of place in their own surroundings.

Changez's ambition of moving abroad becomes a reality when he encounters Erica and falls passionately in love with her. However, Erica is unable to let go of her affection for her ex-boyfriend, who died of cancer, and this proves to be a significant barrier to their coming together and beginning a new life. Despite Changez's fascination with her, their connection remains superficial and mechanical. She withholds her body and soul from Changez, denying his identity. Hamid demonstrates that Changez and Erica's love does not develop because their ethnic origins and cultural identities keep them apart. To tackle the difficulty of her problematic love, he gives up his name, identity, and ideals one day and pretends to be Chris to make love to her. The underlying point is that non-Europeans are only appropriate for America and its society if they abandon their individuality and identity and "marry" the dominant culture of America. Although he has moments of happiness and ecstasy when he learns that he has had to assume the persona of Chris to make love to Erica, he is sickened with himself, and a permanent mark is left on his identity. Erica metaphorically represents America. Her attractiveness, appeal, and glamour represent America's global stature and might. A closer look reveals that Erica not only rhymes with America but is also a component of its name. Just as Erica does not embrace him for who he is, he is not welcomed in American culture because of who he is and where he comes from. As seen by the chapter in which he attends an art gallery inauguration with her, he never fits in her world. He feels as if he is "being ushered into an insider's world-the chic heart of this city-to which [he] would otherwise have had no access" (Hamid, 2007, p. 28).

Ghose (1965) also has shed light on the formation of a hybrid identity, where people's recognizable selves are disturbed and divided in the host culture, resulting in a state of constant worry. Thus, they seek stability by establishing new hybrid personas that adhere to the norms of the dominant society as a prerequisite of acceptability. Under the influence of dominant influences that lead to identity modification, the absence of a sustainable identity and the search for a new identity persists.

The 9/11 attacks call Changez's dual identities into question. When he sees the Twin Towers crumble, his reaction to the news of the 9/11 events encapsulates his inner turmoil. His smile reflects his mixed sense of belonging to any location. His allegiance is torn between the two places he inhabits. He says, "I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (Hamid, 2007, p. 35). As the West's perception of Muslims shifts, so does his identity. On cultural and racial grounds, the American government begins to demonstrate intolerance and prejudice toward non-Europeans. Changez is halted at the New York airport after returning from Manila. His colleagues are permitted to go, but after examining his credentials, he is directed to the queue for 'foreigners,' and then to the investigation room. He is requested to strip after being questioned for quite some time. He feels as though his American identity, which he had taken for so long, has been torn from him the instant he is undressed. Changez says, "I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty; I tried therefore to be as nonchalant as possible; this naturally led to my becoming stiff and self-conscious" (Hamid, 2007, p. 36). This humiliation convinces him that he does not belong here. The way Changez is handled at the airport reveals a lot about biases against Pakistani people in the Western world. People of Pakistani origin who travel to the United States are often exposed to such humiliating scrutiny at airports. This comes as a surprise to many people, particularly those who believe that only Western countries honour universal values. But this is not the case. They

are humiliated just because of their cultural and religious background and the 'terrorist' label they have been tagged with.

Changez is mistreated because of his faith and the nation he was born in. The public perception creates his new image. When a white man calls him a "Fucking Arab" in the parking lot, it's clear that people despise him. He is also classified as a "Terrorist," "Outsider," and "Muslim," but not "American." Following 9/11, practically all Muslims faced comparable humiliation as the American administration demonstrated condescension and discrimination on cultural and racial grounds. Following 9/11, America begins bombing Afghanistan, and Changez feels as if his family is being killed. The battle within him has reached a climax. He knows that he belongs here, not in America; these are his people, and this is his land. In response to the humiliation and persecution he has experienced at the hands of Americans, he grows a beard. He says, "It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind" (Hamid, 2007, p. 59). He grows a beard in protest as a mark of his Pakistani and Muslim character, but it is used as an external identifying trait for terrorists at the airport and among his coworkers. As a result of all of this, he appears divided between two identities: his birthplace and the location that shaped him into the man he is. He sums up his identity crisis in these words, "I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged- in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither" (Hamid, 2007, p. 66). This is the predicament of most Pakistani people living in the United States. They move back and forth between the home and host identities, residing comfortably in none.

When Changez travels to Chile and meets Juan Bautista, whose firm Changez is going to evaluate, he has a breakthrough in his quest for identity. Juan discusses the janissary worldview with him over lunch. Janissaries were young Christian lads enlisted by the Ottomans to serve in the Muslim military. The first task they were assigned was to wipe out their own families and "to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to" (Hamid, 2007, p. 67). Juan makes a connection to Changez's plight, claiming that he, too, has become a janissary, taking part in the fight for the destruction of his own culture (alludes to America's post-9/11 airstrikes of Afghanistan).

Changez worries that people will not accept him with his new look after returning to America for the final time. He believes that his facial hair, which he grew to maintain his Pakistani identity, is being misinterpreted as a mark of a terrorist, especially a Muslim terrorist. The expressions on people's faces while he's around make him feel alone. In the increasingly tense climate in the United States, Hamid's migrant protagonist is just estranged. The only realistic reaction he has is to rediscover and re-invent his lost self and ethnic origins. The war on terror and the debate around it have muddled the problem of identification for refugees living in exile even more. Pakistani migrants, in particular, have been associated with terrorism and held accountable for the acts of a few.

Regardless of the fact that Changez has fully merged and assimilated into American society, he has not been immune to the fallout from 9/11. The same goes for most of the people residing there; they never feel at home there. After suffering so much, contemplating his identity for so long, and losing the one person he loved the most, 'Erica,' Changez eventually makes the audacious conclusion that he doesn't belong here. So, he quits his job and returns to Pakistan.

Changez rejects American society and places importance on his Pakistani identity. However, it appears that his link with America has not ceased. He tells the American, "My inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased" (Hamid, 2007, p. 76). He has lost something valuable there that he is unable to restore. He relocates to Lahore and gets work

at the University of Lahore. He creates a new identity for himself, mounded by radical ideas, yet he still bears the burden of his American identity. He can't decide where he fits because his identity is still a question mark. He admits this, saying, "Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us" (Hamid, 2007, p. 76). Even though he is now living among his own family and compatriots, he cannot decide where he belongs. As a result, he appears to be stuck between two worlds, attempting to integrate himself into the neighboring social and cultural fabric. This is the fate of most of the Pakistani people living in the West, especially the United States. They are always torn between the two identities, negotiating their way between the two but settling in none.

### **Conclusion**

In the face of global engagement of persons and civilizations, cultural and identity acculturation is inescapable. According to the study of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the largest impediment to a natural and mutually beneficial connection among diverse nations and their cultures is contempt and lack of tolerance by the American society of people from other civilizations. People stuck between two worlds frequently wind up as aliens in both realms despite their greatest efforts to integrate into their surroundings. Pakistani people typically feel the need to show their integrity to members of the host society in the wake of the Debate on the War on Terror, and they are constantly confronting negative perceptions of terrorism around their national identities.

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