



RESEARCH PAPER

Hybridity and Resistance: Exploring Cultural Identity in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines the complex interplay of hybridity, identity, and resistance in Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Through the protagonist Changez, the narrative explores the dichotomy between traditional Pakistani culture and Western modernity. The analysis delves into Changez's struggle with his dual identity, shaped by his Pakistani roots and American education. The novel highlights the tension between cultural assimilation and resistance as Changez navigates the stereotypes and expectations imposed by both societies. His journey underscores the impact of colonial education and the lingering effects of colonialism on identity formation. The article also addresses the broader implications of cultural hybridity, emphasizing the challenges of maintaining a cohesive identity amidst conflicting cultural influences. This study contributes to the understanding of post-colonial identity and the ongoing struggle for self-definition in a globalized world. Future research should explore similar themes in other contemporary works to further elucidate the dynamics of cultural hybridity and resistance.

KEYWORDS Cultural Conflict, Hybridity, Identity, Post-colonialism, Resistance

Introduction

The presence of literature has been integral to human life since the dawn of civilization and culture. Literature encompasses various forms of artistic expression, including poetry, prose, short stories, fiction, plays, and novels (Walker, 2002). The novel, a significant literary form, typically falls into the category of narrative fiction. The term "novel" often denotes something new – novelty. Early novels written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries exemplified this novelty. Modern novels, however, have evolved in definition. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a novel is a fictitious narrative prose or tale that presents a depiction of real life, particularly focusing on emotional crises in the lives of its characters (Hornby, 1995). Similarly, the Longman Dictionary defines a novel as an imaginative prose story about imaginary people, long enough to constitute a book (Longman, 1987). Cross (1997) describes a novel as a lengthy fictitious prose narrative that portrays characters, actions, and scenes representative of real life within a plot of varying intrigue. Readers generally adopt two primary attitudes when studying a novel. First, they may focus on the content and world created by the author, responding to characters, settings, and events as if they were real (Cross, 1997). Alternatively, readers might approach the novel as a "text" – a crafted work of art – and analyze it more critically and detachedly. In this view, characters are seen as devices manipulated by the author to achieve specific effects (Cross, 1997). Studying fiction involves understanding its intrinsic elements, such as theme, plot, character, setting, and narrative point of view, which are essential for bringing a story to life. Additionally, knowledge of the author's background and the social context in which the story was created, known as extrinsic elements, is

crucial. Mohsin Hamid, born in 1971 in Lahore, Pakistan, is a notable author who has explored these elements. He attended Princeton University and Harvard Law School and worked as a management consultant before becoming a full-time writer. His novels, including *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), reflect his diverse experiences and insights.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the protagonist, Changez, a Pakistani, seeks a new life in America. After graduating from Princeton University with top honors, he secures a job at a Manhattan financial firm. However, America's response to the 9/11 attacks gradually radicalizes him. The novel, narrated in a monologue style, depicts Changez recounting his experiences to an American in Lahore, reflecting his inner turmoil and identity crisis. Changez's struggle between staying in America or returning to Pakistan illustrates a profound identity crisis. This theme can be analyzed using postcolonial theory, which examines the power dynamics and continued dominance of Western ways of knowing (Loomba, 1998). Nyoman (2002) argues that domination inherently invites resistance, as seen in the construction of non-European identities as subordinate to European superiority. Postcolonial literature often reacts against such representations, with native writers reclaiming their identity and culture (Ratna, 2005).

This research focuses on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to analyze the identity crisis experienced by Changez, who is torn between his love for America and Pakistan. This study employs a postcolonial approach to understand the novel's depiction of the reconstruction of native identity after colonization. By delving into Changez's internal conflict and the broader cultural and political implications, the research aims to uncover the complexities of identity formation in a postcolonial context and the resistance against Western hegemony that defines much of postcolonial literature.

Postmodern literature often addresses identity crises and their various dimensions. Writers in the 21st century, influenced by their cultural exposure and diverse subject matters, transcend local boundaries. This study examines how postcolonial literature maintains national identity and dignity while fostering egalitarian cultural interactions. Through a detailed analysis of characters, themes, narrative techniques, and linguistic modes in Mohsin Hamid's novels, this study explores how these literary features contribute to understanding the text's roots and global contexts.

Literature Review

The literature review for this article establishes a framework for understanding Mohsin Hamid's thematic exploration of identity in his novels by delving into the complex nature of identity as a psychological and sociological construct. Identity, as a concept, encompasses an individual's personal and group affiliations, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others within various social contexts (Jenkins, 2014). Derived from the Latin term "identitas," identity reflects both unique personal attributes and shared characteristics of social groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Erik Erikson's seminal work on identity crises introduces the idea of identity formation as a dynamic process involving exploration and self-reflection during pivotal life stages (Erikson, 1968). This exploration of identity is both relational and contextual, shifting across personal, social, and self-identity dimensions, as illustrated by scholars such as Katzenstein (1996), who emphasizes the role of societal influences in shaping one's sense of self.

Recent scholarship further expands on these foundational ideas by exploring identity through various theoretical lenses, revealing its multifaceted nature. Scholars such

as Hogg and Abrams (1988) and Jenkins (2014) highlight that identity is a complex interplay of personal attributes, social roles, and national symbols. This view is supported by Bloom (1990) and Wendt (1994), who recognize that identity is not a fixed essence but a construct continuously shaped by interactions with others and societal expectations. Ernesto Laclau (1990) differentiates between identity as a stable essence and the process of identification shaped by external influences, while Diana Fuss (1995) explores how relational dynamics both construct and challenge identity. These perspectives underscore that identity is a fluid and evolving construct, influenced by historical, socio-political, and cultural contexts.

The depiction of identity crises in literature serves as a reflective exploration of personal and societal conflicts, as seen in classical and modern texts. Works such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (Fagles, 1984), E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (Forster, 1924), and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1902) explore the tensions between individual identities and societal expectations. Similarly, Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* presents characters grappling with their identities amidst personal and societal challenges (Pinter, 1960). Edward Said's exploration of cultural identity in *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) offers a critical perspective on how identities are shaped and contested in a globalized world. Erikson's theories on identity formation (Erikson, 1968) and Said's insights into cultural identity highlight that literary characterizations serve as vehicles for expressing and examining the complexities of identity crises. This review demonstrates that Mohsin Hamid's work, influenced by these theoretical frameworks, offers a rich narrative terrain for analyzing identity as a dynamic, multifaceted construct influenced by personal experiences and societal interactions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research employs postcolonial theory to investigate the cultural legacies and human impacts of colonialism and imperialism as reflected in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Emerging from postmodern thought, postcolonial theory critically examines the ways in which colonial powers have established and maintained control over colonized nations and peoples. This theory focuses on the politics of knowledge creation, control, and distribution, exploring how social and political power structures perpetuate colonial and neocolonial regimes. As Fischer-Tiné (2011) notes, postcolonialism reexamines cultural perceptions and human relations shaped by colonial dominance, questioning established narratives and seeking to uncover the experiences of subaltern peoples exploited under colonial rule. The theory provides a lens through which the ideologies and practices of neocolonialism can be explored, drawing on diverse fields such as history, political science, philosophy, Marxist theory, sociology, anthropology, and literature.

Historically, colonialism was justified by the belief in Western superiority over non-Western cultures, which was seen as a moral and intellectual mission to reform so-called inferior races. This justification, as articulated by Joseph-Ernest Renan in his 1871 work *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (Renan, 1871), underpinned the 19th-century imperial projects in regions like the Far East and Africa. European powers claimed to bring civilization to the "benighted" peoples, but this mission was fundamentally about economic exploitation and geopolitical dominance (Fischer-Tiné, 2011). This historical context frames the postcolonial critique, which aims to reveal how such ideologies justified colonial control and to challenge the residual effects of colonialism through a more nuanced understanding of global cultures and histories.

Postcolonial theory also addresses the formation of identity through the interactions of cultural, national, and ethnic identities within colonial contexts. Postcolonial literature often features anti-conquest narratives that highlight resistance to colonial oppression and the complexities of identity formation under colonial rule (Spivak, 1988). This critique involves examining how decolonized peoples and cultures are homogenized into broad categories like “the Third World,” which oversimplify and misrepresent the diversity of these regions (Said, 1978). Postcolonial theory seeks to replace these inaccurate representations with a more detailed and respectful understanding of the world’s diverse cultures, challenging the binary power dynamics of colonizers and the colonized and advocating for a more equitable global dialogue.

Furthermore, postcolonial theory destabilizes traditional Western intellectual and linguistic frameworks that have historically supported colonial domination. By creating intellectual spaces for subaltern voices, the theory seeks to challenge and deconstruct dominant narratives (Bhabha, 1994). Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and the “third space” offers a framework for exploring how cultural interactions generate new forms of identity and community beyond colonial binaries (Bhabha, 1994). Edward Said’s *Orientalism* critiques the Western scholarly disregard for Eastern perspectives (Said, 1978), while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s advocacy for “strategic essentialism” emphasizes the importance of representing marginalized groups to challenge dominant ideologies (Spivak, 1988). Together, these postcolonial approaches encourage a critical examination of colonial knowledge and literature, aiming to foster a future of mutual respect and understanding through the reclamation and celebration of diverse cultural identities.

Material and Methods

This study employs a qualitative, analytic-descriptive method to analyze the major character and the identity crisis in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* using postcolonial theory. The research involves examining references related to the study and analyzing the novel, quoting relevant passages to support the analysis. This study aims to illuminate the penetration of identity into literary works, especially in an era that introduced identity crises in published literature. The findings will help literature students interpret hidden meanings within literary works, considering the author's background, societal context, and literary era influences. Specifically, this research focuses on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, exploring its postcolonial themes and contributions to contemporary literature.

Results and Discussion

Changez, a Pakistani narrator from Lahore, was 22 years old when he graduated from Princeton University in 2001. He is the main character of the novel, embodying the complex interplay of cultural and personal identity. Changez proudly notes his academic achievements, stating that he never received a single B and graduated summa cum laude. “In my case I reached my senior year without having received a single B... I myself had among the top exam results in Pakistan... I was on the track to graduate summa cum laude” (Hamid, 2007, pp. 4-6). This pride extends to his gratitude for the scholarship and financial aid that enabled his education. “Students like me were given visas and scholarship, complete financial aid...” (Hamid, 2007, p. 4). At Underwood Samson and Company, a prestigious evaluation firm in New York, Changez excelled, ranking as the best among his peers. “I... was once again ranked number one” (Hamid, 2007, p. 121). This academic and professional success illustrates Changez’s adaptation to Western meritocratic ideals and his initial embrace of American values.

Changez's self-confidence is evident in his ability to adapt to new environments, such as his campus life. "But even among all that skin, I knew in my senior year that I was something special" (Hamid, 2007, p. 5). His confidence also translates into a high sense of creativity and problem-solving. "There was much for me to be proud of: My genuine aptitude for our work..." (Hamid, 2007, p. 65). Changez's physical appearance, described as attractive and well-groomed, further aids his social mobility and interactions. His attractiveness is noted during a summer holiday in Greece, where he meets Erica, a girl who takes an interest in him, and Jim, an interviewer from Underwood Samson, who praises his polished appearance. "You are polished, well-dressed" (Hamid, 2007, p. 38). This external validation reinforces Changez's confidence, although he later faces significant personal and professional challenges.

Despite his self-assurance, Changez exhibits patience and restraint in difficult situations. During an interview, when Jim inquires about his financial aid, Changez feels uncomfortable but maintains his composure. "I knew moreover that I ought to remain calm, but I was getting annoyed" (Hamid, 2007, p. 8). Similarly, when he encounters hostility while valuing a cable operator in New Jersey, he remains calm despite bad treatment from employees and vandalism to his car. "I also found myself better equipped to regard as misguided – or at least myopic – the resentment which seethed around us as we went..." (Hamid, 2007, p. 41). However, Changez's patience has limits, and he occasionally responds emotionally, as when he confronts an employee who calls him a derogatory term. "Say it to my face, coward, not as you run and hide" (Hamid, 2007, pp. 116-117).

Changez's hardworking and ambitious nature is evident throughout his time at Princeton University and Underwood Samson, where he skillfully balances multiple on-campus jobs while excelling academically. This dedication reflects his drive and determination, as illustrated by his statement, "I held down three on-campus jobs..." (Hamid, 2007, p. 11). His strong work ethic not only supports his professional success but also shapes his complex identity as he navigates the differing cultural expectations of his new environment. In addition to his diligence, Changez's sense of humor emerges as a significant aspect of his personality, enabling him to connect with others and adapt to his surroundings. During a gathering in Greece, Changez lightens the mood by joking about wanting to be a dictator, showcasing his ability to maintain his humor amidst the serious atmosphere of training sessions at Underwood Samson (Hamid, 2007, p. 11). This humor helps Changez cope with the pressures of his new life and further defines his identity as he balances his cultural heritage with his professional ambitions.

As Changez's experiences unfold, his rebellious nature becomes increasingly apparent, particularly after the 9/11 attacks. This pivotal moment marks a significant shift in his identity and his relationship with America, as he chooses to keep his beard as a form of protest. He reflects on this decision, saying, "I had not shaved my two-week-old beard. It was perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity" (Hamid, 2007, p. 130). This act of defiance symbolizes Changez's growing disillusionment with American society and his desire to assert his Pakistani identity against a backdrop of increasing hostility. His rebellious stance highlights the tension between his cultural heritage and the American values he initially embraced, illustrating a profound crisis of identity and a shift from acceptance to resistance.

Changez's character embodies the concept of hybrid identity as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha, reflecting the ongoing process of cultural integration and identity formation in a post-colonial context. Changez's experiences demonstrate his navigation between Pakistani heritage and American culture, capturing the duality of his identity as

he struggles to reconcile these often conflicting cultural influences. The novel contrasts Changez's dynamic, sophisticated character with the static, impoverished representation of Pakistan often portrayed through Western lenses, as seen in the depiction of Lahore as a city stuck in time (Hamid, 2007, p. 5). Changez defies these stereotypes by showcasing his intelligence, ambition, and deep knowledge of both Eastern and Western cultures, which enable him to succeed academically at Princeton and professionally at Underwood Samson (Hamid, 2007, p. 11; p. 121). His ability to navigate American society while maintaining his cultural identity underscores his resistance to imposed stereotypes and reflects the complexities of cultural integration and the lingering effects of colonization.

Changez's resistance to cultural stereotypes and his initial attempts to escape his background are evident through his personal choices and actions. For instance, he engages in behaviors such as drinking alcohol, which is strictly prohibited in many Eastern cultures, and forms a romantic relationship with Erica in Greece, defying traditional norms that emphasize marriage over relationships (Hamid, 2007, p. 38). These actions reflect Changez's early efforts to integrate into American society by distancing himself from the cultural constraints of his Pakistani heritage. His behavior underscores his willingness to embrace Western ideals as a means of personal and professional advancement, while also highlighting the cultural divide between his background and his new environment.

The novel also vividly portrays the physical and cultural distinctions between Changez and the stereotypical Eastern image through visual contrasts and cultural representations. Native Pakistanis in the novel are depicted in traditional attire such as beards, shalwar kameez, and turbans, which starkly contrasts with the Western dress of Europeans (Hamid, 2007, p. 38). This distinction accentuates the perceived cultural superiority of the West and the European civilizing mission that seeks to impose Western ideals upon the East. Changez's initial efforts to assimilate into American culture reflect this mission's influence, yet they also expose the superficiality of the Western ideal of cultural transformation.

Despite his initial assimilation efforts, Changez ultimately uses his experiences to challenge the notion of European cultural superiority and assert his own identity. The civilizing mission of European culture, which sought to transform native cultures into Western ideals, fails to create a true replication of the original (Loomba, 1998). Changez's decision to return to Pakistan and become a university lecturer represents a strategic move to reclaim his identity and advocate for resistance against American dominance. He reflects on this shift, stating, "I had in the meanwhile gotten a job as a university lecturer, and I made it my mission on campus to advocate a disengagement from your country by mine" (Hamid, 2007, p. 179). This final stage of his journey illustrates the concept of hybridity as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha, where Changez's evolving identity represents a blend of Pakistani heritage and American experience, characterized by both acceptance and resistance (Bhabha, 1994). His transformation from an admirer of American culture to a critic of its exploitation of Pakistan exemplifies the complexities of navigating and challenging colonial legacies in a post-colonial world (Hamid, 2007, p. 179).

Changez's education in both Pakistani and American cultures highlights the dual nature of his identity, shaped by the traditions of his homeland and the influences of Western culture. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid explores how the colonial encounter leads to the collapse of indigenous identities, with European civilizing missions imposing new cultural norms that create a sense of inferiority among the colonized (Hamid, 2007, p. 41-42). Initially, Changez is driven by the belief that American success signifies personal worth and achievement, reflecting a desire to assimilate into American society as a means of validation. However, this assimilation reveals itself as a form of

alienation rather than integration. Despite adopting Western dress codes and practices, Changez remains an outsider among his American colleagues, experiencing estrangement from both American and Pakistani cultures. His reflections on the superficial nature of his interactions with Americans highlight the limitations of cultural mimicry in bridging the divide between East and West (Hamid, 2007, p. 44; p. 72).

The concept of "between spaces" is crucial to understanding Changez's position in the novel. This metaphorical space represents the conflict between his Pakistani identity and his American experiences, embodying the negotiation of cultural identities that can both challenge and reinforce existing power structures (Bhabha, 1994). Changez's experiences underscore how cultural hybridity operates as a site of conflict, where his thoughts and background serve as a counterpoint to the dominant American narrative. The September 11 attacks serve as a dramatic symbol of the cultural boundaries between East and West, highlighting how global events can reassert cultural divides and intensify personal alienation (Hamid, 2007, p. 72). This period of Changez's life illustrates how the pressures of cultural assimilation can reveal deeper issues of identity and belonging.

Ultimately, Changez's decision to return to Pakistan represents a reclaiming of his cultural roots and a form of political resistance. His role as a lecturer symbolizes his commitment to challenging Western hegemony and fostering a new generation of Pakistanis aware of global inequalities (Hamid, 2007, p. 179). This return is not a retreat but a deliberate act of cultural and political resistance against American dominance, driven by a nuanced understanding of his own identity and the complexities of cultural hybridity. Changez's nostalgia for his past and his critique of American imperialism reflect the ongoing negotiation of cultural and political boundaries in a postcolonial context. Through Changez's journey from admiration of American culture to a vocal critic of its policies, the novel explores how hybrid identities can challenge colonial legacies and redefine personal and collective identities (Bhabha, 1994; Loomba, 1998).

Conclusion

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid crafts a nuanced exploration of cultural identity and resistance through the character of Changez, who embodies the complexities of a hybrid identity. Changez's experience as a native Pakistani educated in American schools places him at a crossroads between two conflicting cultural realms, reflecting Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space," where new identities emerge from colonial and postcolonial interactions. The narrative reveals the superficiality of Changez's American identity and the deep-seated prejudices he faces, especially after the September 11 attacks, which symbolize the cultural and political boundaries between East and West. This event catalyzes Changez's realization of his outsider status and his decision to return to Pakistan, signifying a conscious act of cultural reclamation and resistance. As a lecturer in Pakistan, Changez aims to foster a new generation aware of and resistant to Western hegemony, redefining his identity in the process. The novel contributes to postcolonial discourse by showing that hybrid identities are not just products of cultural exchange but also of resistance and critique. Changez's journey from an admirer of American culture to a critic of its imperialist practices highlights the complexities of identity formation in a globalized world. Future research could explore similar themes in other contemporary works, revealing broader patterns of cultural negotiation and identity formation in response to Western hegemony, and examining the novel's impact on contemporary discussions of terrorism and cultural diplomacy. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* challenges readers to reconsider simplistic dichotomies of East versus West, recognizing the complexities of hybrid identities in a globalized context.

Recommendations

Future research could explore similar themes of cultural identity and resistance in other contemporary works, revealing broader patterns of negotiation and identity formation in response to Western hegemony. Additionally, examining *The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* impact on contemporary discussions of terrorism, cultural diplomacy, and postcolonial studies could provide deeper insights into the ongoing complexities of global cultural interactions. Researchers might also investigate the portrayal of hybrid identities in other literary genres and media to understand their influence on public perceptions and policy-making in a globalized world.

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