



The Crisis of Communitarianism in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

Mohsin Hamid's novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) has been critically examined from many different angles and with as many different assessments. The inevitable perspectives of socio-political affiliations; gender-related issues; religious persuasions; and terrorism are the usual benchmarks adopted by critics. All the standpoints mentioned in the preceding sentence proceed from ideological and theological positions. Any discussion along these lines tends to be subject to strong centrifugal forces resulting in stalemated debate. The need of the hour is to discuss such matters under the auspices of centripetal influences which bring differing viewpoints together rather than pull them asunder. Consequently, this study utilizes the lens of Communitarianism derived from the work Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts (2002) by Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick. This concept proceeds from the premise that the functioning norms of any community dictate its ethical standards. Since the notion of community itself is an arbitrary construct, it can be adjusted to become more and more all-encompassing with empathy, understanding, and effort. However, as this study concludes, unexpected traumatic events can disrupt this delicate social development and result in a Crisis of Communitarianism.

Keywords: communitarianism, community, culture, country, fundamentalist



Introduction

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) is the narrative of Changez, a young, Princeton-educated Pakistani who goes on to work at Underwood Samson, a prominent financial analysis firm in New York City. During his student days at Princeton, he falls in love with Erica, a girl from the upper social strata of New York society. He appears to have achieved the American dream right up till the time of the disastrous events of 9/11 which traumatize not only New York but the whole of the United States of America. It would not be out of place to say that the events of that day have proved to be a watershed moment in world history. Changez discovers that his place in society has shifted as the woman and city, both of whom he loves, suffer from new wounds and old scars. Changez becomes uneasy about his life in America as the War on Terror is waged between America and terrorist-sponsoring countries such as Pakistan. He returns to America after a brief visit to Lahore and discovers that Erica has been committed to a clinic. His unease as a Pakistani in post-9/11 America begins to step up. From Juan Bautista, a thinker of sorts in Chile, Changez learns about the Janissaries, young Christian men whose identities were erased when they were forced to serve in a Muslim army. Changez immediately sees a parallel between him and the Janissaries. He abandons the project in Chile after further reflection on the subject and his unease in New York. Changez decides to return home to Pakistan. However, he tries to visit Erica at the clinic before leaving, but is told she is unavailable for a meeting. On a visit to her apartment, he receives a copy of Erica's unpublished book from her mother. Changez returns to his hometown of Lahore, where the novel actually begins when he meets an American visitor at a roadside restaurant in Old Anarkali. As the evening winds down, Changez offers to accompany the stranger back to his hotel. During their walk, Changez explains that he is a university lecturer who guides a group of politically motivated students. One of these students happens to be involved in an assassination attempt against an American. As the novel concludes, the stranger reaches into his jacket, as he did earlier in the café. This time, Changez says he might be looking for a business card. The implication is that the stranger is reaching for a gun. In any case, it is left to the reader to reach any conclusion that suggests itself.

Despite the deliberately ambiguous ending, it is extremely important to note the existential quandary Changez faces when, with the world crashing down around him, he must decide where his true allegiances lie—whether he should sympathize with his adopted country or affirm his natural attachment to his homeland. His decision is not one which the author holds in suspense and is not the focus of this study. It is the opposing influences forcing Changez to



make life-changing decisions with extreme reluctance. which constitutes the Crisis of Communitarianism in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Communitarianism

The concept of Communitarianism holds that the only sources of what is ethically or politically correct are the norms that operate in any given cultural community (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002, p. 57). In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, there are extremely divergent functioning norms that come to the attention of the protagonist Changez as he goes through various phases of the narrative. His early life in Pakistan is one of typical conventionalism and familial decorum. He is descended from an aristocratic family that finds itself in financial decline because of various economic challenges and matters of inheritance which are a common social phenomenon in such settings. Furthermore, such families are always eager to send their children, especially, the males to Western countries for higher education and also hopefully for gainful employment.

Statement of the problem

In a world where globalization and transnationalism are much vaunted and acclaimed, there is a disturbing element of fear, distrust, marginalization, and estrangement especially where Muslim migrants to the West are concerned. The word “fundamentalist” has become almost synonymous with “Muslim extremist”. Whereas it stands to reason that not every Muslim is an extremist, it must also be considered that religious extremism of any kind may be a reaction against victimization and marginalization. At their core, transnational Muslim identities experience a different world—a world of displaced identities, alienation, and foreignness in a post-9/11 world. The roots of this predicament lie in the communitarian discord that arises between the natives and Muslim migrants in the West.

Significance of the study

This study takes cognizance of the relentlessly changing demographic scenario all around the globe. Such a situation raises serious issues of Communitarianism as different communities and cultures are brought into close proximity to one another. Since most migratory and recreational movement is from Southeast Asia toward the Western Hemisphere, Eastern and Western cultures tend to mix and overlap resulting in crises of Communitarianism. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* provides an apposite subject for research into this phenomenon thereby endeavoring to provide a template for such studies by future researchers.



Objectives Of the Study

- To highlight the personality traits of the various characters which provide fertile ground for the Crisis of Communitarianism to grow.
- To identify the socio-political mores of the host society that cause Changez to feel marginalized and alienated.
- To distinguish Changez's social and familial training, which prevents him from integrating seamlessly into American society.

Research Questions

1. What personal attributes of the main characters contribute to the Crisis of Communitarianism in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*?
2. Which social and political practices of his American hosts does Changez see which occasions the depiction of the Crisis of Communitarianism in the novel?
3. In what ways does Changez's own social and familial training have a bearing on his experience of the Crisis of Communitarianism?

Theoretical Framework

The concept of Communitarianism derived from *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts* (2002) by Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick serves as a theoretical reference for this study. Communitarianism, one of the key concepts of Cultural Theory, may explain that the practices that dictate the values in a specific cultural community are the only standards for judging what is morally or civically acceptable.

Literature Review

The most recent article concerning the topic in hand is by (Ara & Gul Tabinda, 2022) who point out that there are numerous examples of cultural differences between Pakistan and America in this novel. Pakistani and American cultures are diametrically opposed. The two cultures are at odds with one another. They further maintain that Changez is heavily influenced by American culture throughout the novel. He even attempts to minimize his own cultural identity in order to be accepted by America. He prepares to assume Chris' identity. Despite this, some critics have declared Changez to be an Islamic and cultural fundamentalist, but throughout the novel, he is seen drinking and indulging in activities one would not expect from an Islamic or cultural fundamentalist (Ahmad et al., 2020). In an article titled *Deconstructing Issues of Identity In "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" by Mohsin Hamid*, Akhtar S. et al. maintain that, after the disaster of 9/11, Changez finds a substantial negative swing in the attitudes of white Americans towards non-white foreigners in that he



faces the partial bearing of the white against the non-white (Akhtar et al., 2021). It must be noted that, in view of the said disaster, this negativity, or partiality, is not directed towards the black community in America. Therefore, the binary distinction between white and non-white, as claimed in this article, is not tenable. However, the authors go on to state that with Changez, loss of identity causes distances between communities (Akhtar et al., 2021). This observation is more germane to the study in hand.

In *Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's "The Reluctant Fundamentalist"*, Joseph Darda analyses *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to show how it challenges the logic of the War on Terror in the interest of international solidarity rather than anti-American hostility. (Darda, 2014). He is careful to clarify that his contesting the rationale of the War on Terror is not from an anti-American point of view. Rather, he addresses the matter of harmony among the comity of nations. This is an obvious, though oblique, move towards foregrounding the Crisis of Communitarianism. Narrowing down his focus to both America and Pakistan he states that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a work of fiction that places the United States and Pakistan in a global network of cultural and economic interconnectedness. (Darda, 2014). This interconnectedness is both the cause of and the cure for the Crisis of Communitarianism. The paradoxical situation is further elaborated by him: "Moving among Americans, Filipinos, Pakistanis, and Chileans, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* advances a different order of solidarity that struggles against and so together" (Darda, 2014, p. 120). Changez's range of imagination expands in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to include the precarious lives of Pakistani university students a Filipino rickshaw driver, a bookseller in Chile, and an American visitor in Lahore. This critical global fiction questions the concept of the 'other' and the alien 'elsewhere,' leading us to believe in the concept of a global community (Darda, 2014). The banishment of the concepts of 'alien' and 'other' is vital to the solution of the Crisis of Communitarianism.

Dasgupta and Mukherjee trace the roots of the Crisis of Communitarianism in the genesis of the nation-state. In an article titled *Violently yours: Nation and its other in Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, they declare that nation-states are conceived and validated on the principle of inclusion and exclusion, where the lexica of culture, race, history, politics, and ideology create what Anderson refers to as a "elastic space" beyond which the abyss of the other lies." (Dasgupta & Mukherjee, 2018, p. 154). They further hold that nation-states frequently invent the concept of the other as a way to define themselves. As a result, the nation-state and its 'other' are bound together in a deadly paradox of difference and



resemblance (Dasgupta & Mukherjee, 2018). They compare the resulting epistemic violence to a lover's quarrel which is reciprocal in nature. After experiencing this in America, Changez himself becomes a perpetrator when while sitting in a Lahore café and recounting his 'substantial' experience in the United States, the tension between the 'other' and the nation is highlighted." (Dasgupta & Mukherjee, 2018). Sobia Khan, in her article *Alienated Muslim Identity in the Post-9/11 America: A Transnational Study of The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, proclaims that Changez's perspective on the world changes dramatically after the World Trade Center attack, as he becomes the face of the Muslim terrorist (Khan, 2015). Even before 9/11, Changez begins to feel himself an interloper among his American classmates especially during the vacation to Greece. There, he sees their surprisingly autocratic attitude towards the working classes in the restaurants. But, after the terrorist attack, Changez feels isolated. He faces his Otherness at various points throughout the novel, but his sense of estrangement becomes more prominent after 9/11 because he looks like the terrorists, is a Muslim like them, and belongs to a foreign country (Khan, 2015). After this, Mohsin Hamid reveals the inner conflict that Changez experiences as he struggles to find his own place in a world suddenly turned upside down. In doing so, the author reveals the complexity of Changez's struggle to belong in the United States while retaining his Pakistani identity. (Khan, 2015). Khan further observes that this idea of appearance and the face of the terrorist/American/Changez is brought up in Hamid's story as Changez grapples with his sense of belonging and identity indicators (Khan, 2015).

Research Methodology

The ontological orientation of this study is an interpretive one therefore the methodology adopted is qualitative. Consequently, the epistemological focus remains on the various manifestations of Communitarianism evinced in the characters, events, and implications of the narrative. The method adopted is hermeneutic in nature as data is collected solely from the text of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the theoretical framework, and the various research articles reviewed. The aforementioned parameters also constitute the delimitation of the study.

Analysis/Discussion

The issue of Communitarianism rears its head in the very first few sentences of the novel when the narrator Changez notices that his own appearance has disconcerted the American at Old Anarkali Lahore: "Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am



a lover of America” (Hamid, 2007, p.5). Under normal conditions, the beard on a man’s face would never be alarming for an American. But, on the communitarian level, the post-9/11 American sensibility has come to associate the beard on a Muslim man’s face as an apprehension of religious extremism, and even terrorism. This misgiving is heightened by the fact that the American is not only a visitor to a Pakistan but is also quite evidently on a mission. Changez’s mention of the word ‘mission’ can only exacerbate the American’s anxiety. However, it must be noted that, despite all his unease, the American has an imposing bearing which Changez mentions with an emphasis which threatens to annoy the visitor. The communitarian aspect lies in the fact that the American, despite being a visitor, naturally carries the swagger of his imperialistic country. Furthermore, the deceptively soft-spoken host Changez is perspicacious enough to notice this fact. These two different communitarian attitudes result in chess-like moves from both the contenders as the narrative progresses. Changez also levels soft sarcasm when he inquires as to what business brings the American to Old Anarkali. His explanation of the name ‘Anarkali’ “a courtesan immured for loving a prince” (Hamid, 2007, p.5) is heavy with innuendo as it refers to the imperialistic system once prevalent in India, and which now seems to have swung towards the United States of America. This little jibe ends with Changez suggesting that the American is here in quest for the perfect cup of tea. The choice of beverage is more British than American, but the expression makes it clear that the visitor is here on a hunting expedition. This is also an indication of how communitarian values change dramatically over time and can also become mixed up in the present world scenario.

The hunter can also be the hunted as is evinced by the American’s insistence to sit with his back to the wall. Such a preference is a sure sign of heightened alertness. Changez carries on in the communitarian vein when he says: “And will you not remove your jacket? So formal! Now *that* is not typical of Americans, at least not in my experience” (Hamid, 2007, p.6, emphasis in original). The removal of outer clothing in informal circumstances, though not of vital ethical or social proprietary importance, is still an American trait and has significance as it points to a departure from communitarian norms on the visitor’s part. Further on in the text, it is seen that the jacket most probably covers a concealed weapon. When Changez gets into the details of his monologue, he relates the selection process at Princeton University when he applied for admission as a foreign student. In hindsight, he reports that the American system of subjecting foreign students to rigorous academic standards while being quite lax with their Americans was a brilliant and powerful ploy: “We international students were sourced from



around the globe, sifted not only by well-honed standardized tests but by painstakingly customized evaluations—interviews, essays, recommendations—until the best and the brightest of us had been identified” (Hamid, 2007, p.7). There is a rather incongruent statement from Changez while describing his distinction as a student at Princeton: “I was something special. I was a perfect breast, if you will—tan, succulent, seemingly defiant of gravity—and I was confident of getting any job I wanted” (Hamid, 2007, p.7). This is a typical locker-room simile more at home in a players' or soldiers' changing room than in a conversation between two complete strangers of different nationalities and ethnicities. It might be assumed that Changez wants to put the American at ease or off guard under the circumstances. In any case, there is a crossover of communitarian values from one end of the spectrum to the other.

The communitarian values of aggressive business institutions and their predatory ventures are uncannily described by Changez when he relates how he met Jim during his job interview at Underwood Samson: “When my turn came, I entered and found a man physically not unlike yourself: he, too, had the look of a seasoned army officer” (Hamid, 2007, p.8). Note that Changez manages to strike two targets whereby he comments on the belligerent tactics of big business while declaring his own knowledge of the stranger’s professional affiliations. It is also noteworthy that Changez is continuously maintaining the Eastern communitarian principle of using subtle insinuations instead of bluntly direct statements. He also tries to point out some significant communitarian similarities between his own family and “the old European aristocracy in the nineteenth century, confronted by the ascendance of the bourgeoisie” (Hamid, 2007, p.11). This may very well be an unconscious move on his part but it does point to a certain desire to bridge the communitarian gaps between him and the stranger. This view is further reinforced soon, he offers to exchange his cup of tea with that of the stranger. Of course, it can also be an attempt to set the American’s mind at rest concerning the danger of being poisoned by his adversaries. But it also points towards an Eastern touch of informality which is a communitarian norm in South-east Asia. In another display of Eastern subtlety, Changez describes his feelings at being given a challenging business assignment at Underwood Samson while hinting darkly at the confrontational situation developing between him and the American: “Possibly ancient warriors did something similar before they went into battle, ritualistically accepting their impending death so they could function unencumbered by fear” (Hamid, 2007, p.12). In this way, he contrives to create the communitarian comradeship of warriors between himself and his antagonist.



This seems to be a fatalistic stance considering direction which the story is taking at this stage. It is ironic to note that the camaraderie, however forced, between the two adversaries is in sharp contrast to what Changez feels for the university where he was a star student in America: “Princeton made everything possible for me. But it did not, *could* not, make me forget such things as how much I enjoy the tea in this, the city of my birth” (Hamid, 2007, p.13, emphasis in original). It bears mentioning that tea, introduced by the British in India, has been a bona fide ritual object in the communitarian mores of the Southeast Asian subcontinent for at least over a century.

Love has a propensity to transcend all communitarian boundaries. In fact, it may be seen as the creator of new and hitherto unforeseen communitarian mores. This is obvious when, after disparaging the attraction of Princeton, Changez has this admission to make to the American: “I did leave behind a love, and her name was Erica” (Hamid, 2007, p.15). Love for an ethnically different woman carries its own synergetic connotations. But these connotations attain epic proportions when, seen from the perspective of certain commentators, Erica the woman is to be perceived as an allegorical representation of America the country. In fact, during a major part of his stay in America, Changez liked to consider himself a New Yorker if not an American. And, while in Manila, he went further and actually considered himself to be an American. Regarding this, Sobia Khan observes: “His idea of being an American and his loyalty to America is tied to his relationship with Erica.” (Khan, 2015, p. 148). Even his description of her as ‘regal’ has connotations beyond just the personal because it could be interpreted as a conscious or unconscious reference to the imperialistic trends of the United States of America. The description of Erica’s appearance is complicated by the fact that she was wearing a T-shirt with an image of Chairman Mao on it. The regal bearing and the contrasting sartorial statement are a fitting depiction of the intellectual ferment agitating the American mind before the 9/11 attacks. It was a time when the intelligentsia were reaching out to wider horizons of socio-political thought. The fact that 9/11 happened during this formative epoch can be used as a reference point to gauge the immensity of the Crisis of Communitarianism that the American people had to face. Suddenly, every Muslim-looking male begins to look like a terrorist. This plunges Changez into his own personal Crisis of Communitarianism: “Later in the story, when perceptions about brown, Arab-looking people change, Changez is singled out and questioned because of his beard and where he comes from...” (Khan, 2015, p. 145). Sobia Khan also observes that Changez finds it as difficult to adjust to life in America as he does at home in Pakistan.



Conclusion and Recommendation

It would be pertinent to recall that, in the pre-9/11 era, Erica had once said to Changez: “You give off this strong sense of home... You know that? This I’m-from-a-big-family vibe. It’s nice. It makes you feel solid” (Hamid, 2007, p.17). This statement is symbolic of the genesis of pervasive and universal communitarianism which was doomed to die a premature death because of terrorism. The world could once dream of being a ‘big family’. But, this dream was destined to be shattered resulting in a global Crisis of Communitarianism. This study concludes with the recommendation that the aforementioned Crisis of Communitarianism should be considered an ongoing one and literary research should be geared toward highlighting this fact so that the best minds engage with and address this manifest humanitarian predicament.

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