

THE EAST AND WEST TRUST DEFICIT IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*

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Abstract

After fourteen years of the September 11 attacks, the international political landscape is still occupied with suspicion, confrontation and distrust. This study intends to explore the trust deficit between east and west as depicted by Mohsin Hamid in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, and examine how far and how successfully he has portrayed the impact of 9/11 events on the Americans and the Muslims. By comparing the silent American (West) with Changez (East), Hamid has brilliantly discussed the relations between East and West. By revealing the conflicting viewpoints of the Americans and that of the Muslims, Hamid describes how East and West are similar or different in terms of the ideological meanings and sociopolitical situation. In order to make the comparison, I intend to apply the theoretical apparatus of Jean Baudrillard and investigate the extent to which Mohsin Hamid has portrayed the conflict between East and West in his novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Since the research method is qualitative, the most appropriate method is the Critical Discourse Analysis model by Fairclough. In addition to East and West rift, the author also throws light on the political milieu after September 11 attacks, including Pakistan-India issue and Afghanistan war as illustrated in the novel. This study, conducted as literary research, concludes that how successfully Hamid attempts to bridge the gap between east and west when he portrays them walking together in the same direction without any violation. However in the current political milieu the clash is between East and East when ISIS and the Taliban from East are attacking the eastern countries on a larger scale.

Keywords: Post 9/11 situation, Distrust, Political milieu and terrorism

Introduction

In order to combat terrorism and weapons of mass destruction after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government decided to form a new foreign policy.

President Bush made a speech to the joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001. He said,

We will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by United States as a hostile regime.

The Bush doctrine of 'Us and Them' after the 9/11 attacks fuels the rift between East and West. This paper intends to explore the 9/11 events, their aftermath in the form of suspicion and lack of trust between East and West as portrayed in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid. It also aims to examine how the non-Muslims and Muslims are simultaneously affected by the September 11 events, especially when he compares the silent American (West) with Changez (East) and brings them together in the end.

The students and researchers who want to conduct research in the genre of post 9/11 literature can use this study as a frame of reference. Further research can also be done contrasting the movies with the books to analyze alterations in the visual representation of the storyline.

Main Body

In order to analyze Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I need to first discuss the impact of the catastrophe of 9/11 attacks on literature, film and the geopolitical situation. Different movie-makers and writers from diverse religions and regions interpret the 9/11 events according to their own perceptions. Films like "Khuda Kay Liye" by the Pakistani director Shoaib Mansoor "My Name is Khan" by Indian director, Karan Johar, and "Fahrenheit 9/11" by Michael Moore, are filmed according to the discernments of the movie-makers. Similarly some writers, especially the American writers directly represent the catastrophe by portraying the images of the falling towers, falling people from the towers, dust and smoke in the streets of New York, hence the immediate effects of the attack are illustrated in their writings, whereas novels by Muslim writers portrays racial discrimination and prejudiced attitude towards Muslims. They indicate how living in America after 9/11 attacks becomes hard for anyone with a Muslim background.

The geopolitics of the world has changed and is changing soon after the events of September 11, 2001. With the intention of changing the international order, the global aims and priorities are also changing Douglas Kellner in an article titled, "September 11, Terror War, and the New Barbarism" states, "In the context of U.S. politics, September 11 was so far-reaching and catastrophic that it flipped the political world upside down, put

new issues on the agenda, and changed the political, cultural, and economic climate almost completely overnight.”

The United States formed new foreign policies against terrorism that lead America to attack Afghanistan in order to destroy al-Qaeda’s camps and Iraq to eradicate Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The 9/11 commission report states, “Secretary Powell said the United States had to make it clear to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Arab States that the time to act was now” (Kean, 2001, p.330).

Research Design

The research design for this study is qualitative and the focus is a novel written in the aftermath of 9/11, i.e. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, a Pakistani Muslim writer. The events of 9/11 engendered trauma throughout the world especially in the US, therefore trauma and terrorism are core topics in most post 9/11 novels.

Since I am working on the trust deficit between east and west, which is the repercussion of the 9/11 terrorists attack, I have referred to Jean Baudrillard, the French political theorist. Baudrillard, in his book, *Spirit of Terrorism* blames the United States (West) for the 9/11 attacks when he states, “By seizing all the cards for itself, it forced the Other to change the rules. And the new rules are fierce ones, because the stakes are fierce” He believes that the 9/11 terrorists have introduced a new kind of terrorism in which they have used all the latest technology and media networks of the Super Power, in combination with their own deaths, to which the dominant power cannot fight back.

Textual Analysis

Since my article deals with the events of 9/11 and its immediate aftermath in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Fairclough's model for Critical Discourse Analysis is used to analyze the novel. Norman Fairclough, in his book *Language and Power* provides three elements of discourse, i.e., “text, interaction and social context” to the three stages of discourse analysis – “description of the text, interpretation of the relationship between text and the interaction; and explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context” (1989, p.109). For this research, I shall be focusing only on interpretation and explanation stages, because the first stage is outside the parameters of my study.

A. Interpretation (of the text by the discourse participants)

In the interpretation of texts, Fairclough poses the following questions:

- 1) “What’s going on? (Topic, purpose)
- 2) Who’s involved?

- 3) In what relation?
- 4) What's the role of language?" (1989, p.146)

B. Explanation

According to Fairclough, this portion deals with the effect that discourse has on practices, whether they are changed or sustained. Thus, explanation deals with social determinants, ideologies and their effects (1989, p. 166).

The Reluctant Fundamentalist: An Analysis

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid portrays the world, after September 11 attacks, from two conflicting viewpoints; one is of the Muslims and the other is of Non-Muslim Americans. Hamid gives a metaphorical touch to his novel by associating Changez with East and the silent American with West. Although it is a post 9/11 novel, Hamid, through his narrator, Changez, discusses many things that are before the 9/11 events and even before the partition of India and Pakistan.

This monologue is narrated to an unnamed American by Changez, a bearded American returned Pakistani man, when the American by chance or by intention meets Changez in one of the restaurants of Anarkali, old market of Lahore. Changez tells him about his experience in America, his entry in an Ivy League school, his employment at Underwood Samson & Company, his pride for earning the handsome salary of eighty thousand dollars per annum. Changez also tells the unnamed American the circumstances in which he decided to come back.

Connotation of East and West in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

The events of 9/11 turn American dreams into American nightmares. Changez is in Manila when September 11 occurs, initially he thinks it is a fiction and then he realizes that it is not a movie but reality. Initially he is pleased to learn about the attacks since he believes that it is just that somebody has brought the super power "to her knees" (Hamid 43). He narrates the story to the American listener, however after seeing his hand tightening into a fist with the evident revulsion in his face, Changez tells him quickly that he is no sociopath who does not have any feelings to the sufferings of others. He admits his own sense of perplexity and pleasure at the slaughter of thousands of innocent people. Changez' reaction to 9/11 explores the personal and political side of Hamid: how Changez is pleased to hear about the attacks on American hegemony whereas he is so sensitive about the sufferings of others that even movies give him a twinge of pain.

On the other hand soon after the 9/11 attacks America reshuffled its foreign policy and decided to start War on Terror against all those nations who gave safe haven to the terrorists. The Taliban declined to hand over

Osama bin Laden to U.S without having any evidence of being involved in the September 11 attacks. In response to this the United States along with its allies decided to wage war against Afghanistan in October 2001, that disenchanted Changez from America who was shocked to see the footage of American troops landing in Afghanistan. Different incidents of sanctimonious rage of Americans and FBI's raiding mosques, shops and even houses make him more upset and retaliate against America.

“On a Mission”: Distrust against Each Other

EXCUSE ME, SIR, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services. (Hamid, 2007, p.1)

The very beginning lines of the novel reflect that Changez and the silent American do not trust each other. In fact they have doubts against each other, the words “alarmed you” that Changez uses while talking to an American reflect that the American startles to see Changez, while when Changez asks him about the purpose of his visit shows his concern. Yet Changez tries to comfort him by offering his services to him and showing him his affection for America.

On May 16, 2007, Aparita Bhandari inquired Hamid in an interview, “The changed man” that how he created a one-person narrative, to which he replied:

Well, it's this dramatic monologue where this Pakistani man is speaking to this American man [and they are suspicious of each other]. I like that frame, because it parallels the way the world looks at each other. Pakistan, or the Muslim world, looks at America and the West, and wonders exactly that: Are you out to get us? Are you a bunch of completely aggressive maniacs or are you people we see on *Seinfeld* and *Friends*? Similarly, America wonders that about the Muslim world: Are you a bunch of terrorists, or just regular people with families and kids? That sense of ambiguity, or not knowing, I think, is what the frame allows me to capture.

The American Policies breeds suspicions and misapprehensions between the individuals of the two countries, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan. When Taliban and al-Qaeda went into hiding in the northern areas of Pakistan, the U.S. Government had thrown thousands of missiles in these areas, in order to kill the militants and in retaliation there had been a

number of suicidal attacks in Pakistan killing thousands of innocent civilians, including children and women. Thus these U.S drone attacks in Pakistan build up resentment among the people of Pakistan at a larger scale.

“You Guys”: Transnational Politics

Although Changez realizes that Erica, his girlfriend, is still in love with Chris, her childhood boyfriend; he still is in love with her. The pointless love and frustrated efforts at intimacy of Changez for Erica reflects that how East and West can move together in parallel directions but cannot meet or intersect. Similarly America after providing a larger amount of financial aid to Pakistan, set up their air bases in different areas of Pakistan with overflight permission. Pakistan was also forced to provide information to FBI about the suspected terrorists and help the US government to arrest Taliban and al-Qaeda, who hide themselves in the northern parts of Pakistan.

Similarly Changez gets offended when Erica’s father gives negative comments about the political situation of Pakistan.

Economy’s falling apart though, no? Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers. Solid people don’t get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism.[Sic] (Hamid, 2007, p.33)

By saying “You guys” Erica’s father demarcates himself (West) from East. Changez does not like the discussion, however he controls his response and defends his country, “Yes, there are challenges, sir, but my family is there, and I can assure you it is not as bad as that” (Hamid, 2007, p. 33).

“Coterie’s concept of American interests”: Changez’ Reaction at War on Terror

As a reaction to 9/11 attacks America decided to attack Afghanistan. American fighter planes began their bombing in Afghanistan. The landing of American troops in Afghanistan shocked Changez, especially when the newscaster calls the intrusion of the U.S forces as a bold step to attack on the command post of Taliban. Changez does not like the American strategy of ‘War on Terror’ and said that instead of targeting the specific terrorist networks, America invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. He reasons:

A common strand appeared to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie’s concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers *not* wearing the uniforms of soldiers... This, I reasoned, was why America

felt justified in bringing so many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq, and why America felt justified in risking so many more deaths by tacitly using India to pressure Pakistan. (Hamid, 2007, p.108)

Changez believes that majority of the people in America did not want the killings of the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians, including women, men and children by attacking this region. Changez criticizes America for asserting its hegemony in the Middle East since WWII. The American supremacy, with its constant intervention in other nation's affairs, especially Asia, has drastically damaged the world. He also tells the American that America engenders all the major conflicts and confrontations in the Middle East, the straits of Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam and now Afghanistan (Hamid, 2007). This hegemonic attitude of the Super Power makes him happy when he watches the attacks on World Trade Center.

Baudrillard also believes that it is the hegemonic attitude of the Super Power that engenders 9/11 catastrophe. In his book, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, he states: "For it is that superpower which, by its unbearable power, has fomented all this violence which is endemic throughout the world, and hence that (unwittingly) terroristic imagination which dwells in all of us.[sic]" (2003, p. 4-5)

Changez also complains America for not being supportive of Pakistan in India-Pakistan issue, in spite of the fact that Pakistan had given assistance to America, in Afghanistan. He feels powerless at this point of the tension between India and Pakistan.

The post 9/11 America becomes a hard place to live in for the Muslims. Changez decides to go back to Pakistan and does not want to serve America anymore. He quits his job after telling the vice President that he does not want to work anymore for Underwood Samson and left. His colleagues start looking at him with suspicion when he leaves the post in mid assignment and consider him a terrorist, who wants to kill them,

I realized how deep was the suspicion I had engendered in my colleagues over these past few - bearded and resentful - weeks; only Wainwright came over to shake my hand and say farewell; the others if they bothered to look at me at all, did so with evident unease and in some cases, a fear which would not have been inappropriate had I been convicted of plotting to kill them rather than of abandoning my post in mid-assignment. (Hamid, 2007, p. 97)

Even the guards look at him with suspicion when he is leaving the office building with watering eyes. Here again West looks at East with suspicion and have complaints against each other. Hamid believes that Changez is in a challenging space between East and West where the

American capitalism and terrorist attacks reshuffle the international world order.

“Where I Belonged”: Nostalgia

Hamid portrays Changez as a confused personality who is filled with nostalgia for a ‘lost’ Pakistan when he is in New York and thinks about the happy moments he had spent in Pakistan; and for a ‘lost’ America when he comes back to Pakistan after the 9/11 catastrophe. He is also going through nostalgia when he describes his American attire to the American stranger that he looks like a true New Yorker. The exciting memories of Princeton and the Underwood Samson are unforgettable for him and fascinate him when he thinks about them. All these delightful memories filled him with nostalgia.

Changez' nostalgia for the New York City and his personality as a New Yorker is described at various pages in the novel since he still seems to be in love with the city,

I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was *immediately* a New Yorker. What? My voice is rising? You are right; I tend to become sentimental when I think of that city. It still occupies a place of great fondness in my heart, which is quite something, I must say, given the circumstances under which, after only eight months of residence, I would later depart. (Hamid, 2007, p.20)

When Changez is in Valparaiso for the evaluation of the company, the city reminds him of Lahore because it had been a lively hub of trade before becoming “peripheral” (Hamid 87).

Conclusion

This study, conducted as literary research, concludes that Hamid has brilliantly presented the rift between East and West when he portrays the American as West and Changez as East. In addition to it, Hamid illustrates how at different times, Changez had bitter experiences in post 9/11 America, such as intimacy with Erica, Erica’s father’s comments on Pakistan’s political situation, experience of prejudice at the airport and in a street and above all, his colleagues’ reaction when he leaves the job. It reflects that this country of the “Philosopher-Kings” (Hamid, 2007, p.2) is not perfect and it is as prejudiced towards the cultural and racial differences as any other society or culture.

Hamid’s description of the situation in America and then in Lahore when the American follows Changez either to assassinate him or arrest him to take him to the United States questions West’s response to the East in the post 9/11 era. Although according to Hamid they do not show trust on each

other, Changez gives a positive gesture, “You should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (Hamid, 2007, p. 111). He also shows his closeness towards the American when he tells him about a metal gleam in his pocket, “you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business card” (Hamid, 2007, p.11).

However I believe that when the two walk together in the same direction they show that they want peace and togetherness and not a rift between East and West. By the end of the story Hamid bridges the gap between East and West when he portrays them walking together in the same direction without any violation.

Since the novel leaves a lot of space for interpretation, it can also be said that East only speaks as shown in the character of Changez, whereas West believes in action on the name of War on Terror, such as Afghanistan War and Iraq War. However, in the current political milieu the clash is between East and East when ISIS and the Taliban are attacking the eastern countries on a larger scale. Now it is not the lack of trust on East or West, this distrust is hovering around our heads all the time when we, the Pakistanis, cannot move freely on our roads and have to pass through security checks when armed young men with alert, suspicious eyes after checking the car with a stick with sensors, looked into each car on the name of public’s security.

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