

Exploring History-Fiction Interface And The Idea Of Alternate Political Reality In Mohsin Hamid's Novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist

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Abstract:

The writings on Pakistan or the Muslim world especially in the post 9/11 scenario have generally tended to be monolithic, orientalist and self-righteous. Such narratives often indulge in the fallacy of simplistic and patronizing descriptions that create a sort of racial, cultural and religious divide. This ignores many integral aspects of Pakistani or Muslim political, social and cultural life, which are as diverse and heterogeneous as any other culture. The interest in the Muslim world has grown manifold in the post 9/11 world that we inhabit and with growing Islamophobia and the claims of so-called clash of civilisations. There is an ever more need to intervene and critically engage with these questions in a scholarly framework. This proposed research entitled “Exploring History-Fiction interface and the idea of Alternate Political Reality in Mohsin Hamid's novel, The Reluctant Fundamentalist” focuses on Mohsin Hamid's much acclaimed novel written about varied themes but more specifically about the situation of his country and the so-called Third World's relationship with the West, thereby touching issues of identity, race, belonging, immigration, class, stereotypes borne out of media profiling, Empire, Neo-colonialism et al. This novel in general deals with various themes like political issues, Fundamentalism, dangers of Capitalism and Nationalism. It also deals with the post 9/11 stereotyping of Muslims and the gap between the East and the West, identity crises or rootlessness. Mohsin Hamid through this novel wants to present a clear picture of Muslims that are otherwise considered as terrorists in the eyes of the West, when Changez in the novel, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, says, “Do not be frightened by my beard, I am a lover of America”.

Keywords: islamophobia, historical fiction, postcolonialism, globalisation, fundamentalism.

Introduction

The complex interplay between literature and history, more specifically between history and historical fiction has always been a fascinating domain of interest for scholars. In their 1963 guide to historical fiction, David McGarry and Sarah Harriman White came up with a significant proclamation that sees historical fiction as an introduction to history. They go on to elaborate

upon the special characteristics of the genre of historical and political fiction in how it is valuable for the reader for both entertainment and instruction. Reading such a genre makes us aware of the past and present, even if we are engaging with the medium of fiction and imagination. This not only enables us to obtain an account of history and reality but also gives us clues about the perspectives of reality itself.

It is pertinent to mention here that the literary artist does not merely portray historical facts as a historian or a journalist does. Infact a literary artist delves beneath the surface of a text to reveal underlying assumptions. Therefore an event that might be of mere statistical significance for a journalist or a historian, could reveal multiple meanings in a literary text. A simple historical episode could reveal the intricate and subtle play of events for a literary artist. In an Article published in 1984, titled "Outside the Whale", Salman Rushdie says that modern day writer could not remain insulated from history and politics.

The writings on Pakistan or the Muslim world especially in the post 9/11 scenario have generally tended to be monolithic, orientalisng and self-righteous. Such narratives often indulge in the fallacy of simplistic and patronizing descriptions that create a sort of racial, cultural and religious divide. This ignores many integral aspects of Pakistani or Muslim political, social and cultural life which are as diverse and heterogeneous as any other culture. But unfortunately in the contemporary era much of the mainstream narratives whether academic or journalistic either look at Pakistan or much of the Muslim world in monolithic terms by categorising it as 'retrograde', 'backward' or 'violent'. However, it has to be said that the orthodox narratives emanating from the Muslim world also distort the diversity or pluralism of these societies in the same vein as the Western mainstream narratives do. The interest in the Muslim world has grown manifold in the post 9/11 world that we inhabit and with growing Islamophobia and the claims of the so-called clash of civilisations. There is an ever more need to intervene and critically engage with these questions in a scholarly framework. There is little critical material available on how this aspect has been fictionalised and it calls for a close study of how fiction historicizes reality. As Edward Said

reminds us in his well-known work *Culture and Imperialism*, "Neither Imperialism nor Colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. But both are supported and even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination" (1991, p. 8-9). We live in an age where Empire, Neo-colonialism and Authoritarian Expansionism are still in vogue in their various shades and are being backed by both repressive and ideological formations. Hence, again there is a greater need to look at the hegemonic forms of knowledge and domination which is what will be looked at in this proposal by analysing this Text.

Mohsin Hamid's novels deal with various themes like political issues, dangers of Capitalism and Nationalism, refugee crises and the gulf between the rich and the poor. They also deal with the post 9/11 stereotyping of Muslims and the gap between the East and the West, identity crises or rootlessness, the passion for wealth and women, immigration, social mobility and Neo-liberalism. Mohsin Hamid through his works wants to subvert the notion of feminine mystique as in *Exit West* through the bold Pakistani female character i.e. Nadia. He wants to present a clear picture of Muslims that are considered terrorists in the eyes of the West, when Changez in the novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* says, "Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America" (Hamid, 2007, p. 1).

The works of Mohsin Hamid have a political background as *Moth Smoke* takes place during the summer of 1998 as tensions between India and Pakistan rise i.e within the context of the broader nuclear rivalries between India and Pakistan. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* deals mostly with the post 9/11 scenario and the evolving political relationship of the East with the West. The novel *Exit West* typically portrays the

destruction unleashed by the militants in a city, where two lovers happen to be the first-hand witnesses of this destruction. When the people migrate to safer places they found that the First World is as inhospitable as the home is now.

Globalisation imposed social, cultural and economic interconnectivity like never before. It caused dismantling of the rigid notions of boundaries and nations, which led to the transnational movement of social and cultural relationships. The movement of people, goods and services across the borders was made much easier and frequent. The rise of Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) made sure that social and cultural capital flows through a network of interconnected channels across the globe. This interdependence has reorganised the social and cultural life of people throughout the world. New political and social interpretations have emerged in the light of emerging global scenario due to globalisation. The emphasis has been on cohesion, rather than on difference. The works of Mohsin Hamid tend to display these underlying narratives of empathy, coexistence and mutual interdependence. His works portray that access to monetary and material resources is much more important than racial and ethnic concerns. The people of the world would mutually co-exist in harmony by providing them access to material and cultural resources.

The writings of Mohsin Hamid represent a broader canvass of Pakistani literature. The issues and concerns highlighted by him in this novel reflect a wider engagement of a Muslim man with the western world, and at the same time refusing to be jingoistic or monolithic. The novel gained popularity as it was written in the backdrop of 9/11, when the whole world seemed to be interested in the idea of 'Clash of civilisation', 'Terrorism' and 'War on terror'. These concepts revived interest in the Muslim world and this re-engagement of a Muslim man with the post 9/11 Western world posed a difficult

situation. Hamid reflects this somewhat problematic and evolved situation of a Muslim man in this novel.

In an article entitled, "Globalisation, US Imperialism and Fundamentalism: A study of Mohsin Hamid's, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*", the Author Nishat Haider seems to suggest that the novel serves as a counter-history to the post 9/11 Islamophobia and contests common notions of terror as an unreasonable ideology of retribution and redemption by exposing the trajectories of imperialism. The novel reflects Hamid's engagement of a Muslim protagonist with the Western world in light of the renewed ideological formulations and a need to present the 'Alternate perspective' of the Muslim world. The protagonist of the novel promises entry into a world, where in the words of Peter Morey, "Conclusive lessons about Islamic radicalisation (would) be forthcoming". The character of Changez in the novel is interesting in the sense that he behaves in a way that his real intentions could not be gauged. He is a believer in American ideals and at the same time, feels an urgency to explain to the American in a positive sense things about himself and his country. This has been echoed by Claudia Perner also in her Article, "Tracing the Fundamentalist in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*", wherein she says that Mohsin Hamid through this novel seems to willingly accept the ambitious task of 'explaining' his country to his readers. Changez does have a beard but wants the reader not to take him too literally based on his appearance. Hamid wants to present a real picture of Muslims here, who are otherwise considered as terrorists in the eyes of the West, when Changez in the novel says, "Do not be frightened by my beard, I am a lover of America" (Hamid, 2007, p. 1).

The character of Changez evoked much interest among the English readers. The dubious nature of his character presenting an alternate point of view of the reality especially in the context of growing islamophobia post 9/11, fascinated the western reader. In his analysis of *Integration and Alienation* in the novel, Avirup Ghosh writes, "The fact that changez tells his story in real time makes it more compelling. There is a continuous parallelism between the events taking place in tea shop in Lahore in the present and the US of Changez's past" (2013, p-49). The novel is obsessed with the image of a Muslim man and his beard, and how could this image represent a latent threat of radicalisation. Hamid's first novel, *Moth Smoke* deals with a similar theme. The main character of the novel, "Daru" is sitting alone in the cinema, when a man approaches him, which prompts the protagonist to notice his beard. The man turned out to be 'Fundo' as Daru had expected. Fundo stands for Fundamentalist, which is an important category used by Pakistan's elite class to describe a person with deep or radically held religious beliefs.

Islam is presented in Hamid's novels in relation to western ideals. The resultant tensions that are produced as a result of this comparison are highlighted in his works. The ideals of liberty and individualism are especially foregrounded as a result of this comparison. At the same time, Hamid seems to highlight other issues like capitalism and globalisation which seem to have been subtly associated with the ideas like 'war on terror' and 'clash of civilisations.' Hamid considers Capitalism as another form of Fundamentalism.

The idea of Fundamentalism is closely associated with the idea of 'cultural purity' –an assumed ideological uniqueness. In essence, all Fundamentalism revolves around a mythological and fixed idea of 'cultural purity' which is built upon some golden age idea. The Oxford Dictionary defines Fundamentalism as "strict

adherence to ancient or Fundamental Doctrines with no concessions to modern developments in thoughts or customs". Fundamentalism seeks to redefine and glorify one's own cultural values with a serious prejudice to others in order to lend them authenticity. Fundamentalism tends to reject the global power structures.

In her examination of Fundamentalism in the novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalism*, Claudia Perner writes, that the novel "offers insight into the motivations and sentiments of a person who in the West might all too easily be dismissed as a fundamentalist." (2011, p. 29). But the path chosen by Changez is more clear and comprehensive as compared to the more murky ones chosen by others.

During an interview with Akhil Sharma, Mohsin Hamid said that his characters somehow represent the "what if" versions of the paths he could have chosen in his life. Speaking of Changez, he says that "walking through with Changez was an alternative to walking through that journey myself, which I didn't want to do in my own life, but which I felt impulses toward" (Hamid, 2010). He further says:

"Changez is someone who by nature tends to think that the way to resolve a conflicted identity or soul is to take one aspect, and attempt to inhabit that aspect to the fullest; whereas I think, personally, that that's a road to disaster....It's a lot better to admit that you're completely confused, and have multiple competing claims as you are as a person than to say that after [years] in America or Pakistan that [you're] either American or Pakistani." (Hamid, 2010)

Changez's desire is to be associated with the global elite class. He desperately attempts to win the approval of the American from the very beginning by projecting himself as liberal and

much different from the traditional Pakistani inhabitant. Further, he wants to reassure the American about his affluent roots and his wealthy lineage, when he says, “I am not poor, far from it” (Hamid, 2007, p. 3). He boasts of his family’s previous wealth, status and about his grandfather, “attending university in England”, and he further says that “we employ several servants, including a driver and a gardener-which would, in America, imply that we were a family of great wealth” (Hamid, 2007, p. 9-10). Changez seems to communicate with the American in a manner that would describe him as someone not radical but a dignified and illuminated one. But the Author Valerie Kennedy says, “Ironically however, when Changez attempts to assert his pride in being a Pakistani or to compare the cultural achievements of America and Pakistan, he sometimes falls into another orientalist stereotype, the tendency to associate the orient with glory in the past, but decline and degeneration and possibly terrorism in the present” (2018, p-10).

The Reluctant Fundamentalist challenges the notions of Geographical boundaries and identities which are based on nationalistic ideas and propaganda. The novel challenges the ways we construct our national, cultural and political ideas and harbour differences that separate us from others. This is further corroborated by Arnab Dasgupta and Rupayan Mukherjee in an article, when they write, “9-11 serves as an essential point of rupture within the plot of the novel, within changez’s psychic subjectivity and also in the homogenous time of the nation state” (2018, p-157). Hamid speaks of equality, but equality in the sense of everyone being equal and not just some. In the novel, both the American and the Changez seem to enter in a world, where all visible borders are becoming meaningless.

The character of Changez represents an antithesis to the ideals of Fundamentalism. Fundamentalism seeks to reinvent a supposedly

golden era of time which according to it is ideal, pure and utopian. As the author, Renato Constantino writes in *Neocolonial Identity and Counter Consciousness*, “a policy based on the present as past and not on the present as future is backward, for it is premised not on evolving conditions but on conditions that are already dying away” (1978, p-42).

Hamid’s another novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, focuses on the emerging issues of the global city in the era of globalisation. The global city is an outcome of capitalism and industrialisation. Although Hamid has tried to be ambivalent in dealing with the issues arising out of globalisation, yet he highlights issues like corruption, population growth and alienation as being the major concerns of the modern-day world. At the same time, Hamid tries his best not to take sides and be an advocate of any such issues. The novel reveals that the problems of global capitalism are not based on racial and ethnic divides, but access to social and economic concerns. Access to monetary and cultural capital determines the position of the individual in the globalised world order. Similarly, the novel *Moth Smoke* refuses to foreground the ethnic and pre-industrial characters, but rather focuses on economic divisions to which ethnicity is subservient.

Hamid’s works question the functioning of globalisation and how it has influenced contemporary life by providing unequal opportunities to the people living in different regions. As a result, one group of people manage to take control of resources and therefore manipulate political and social relations. The resultant political and cultural hegemony of one group of people over another has created divisions in people and society, thereby creating binaries in ideas and politics. The two key terms that Hamid repeatedly wants to emphasise in his works are ‘Fate’ and ‘Chance’. Both Fate and Chance play an important role in the lives of the

characters of his novels and determine their social and cultural positions. Not only does fate and chance impact the social and cultural position of characters, they also influence the ideological formulations. The works of Mohsin Hamid fall in the category of such postcolonial works which expose and challenge the subtle workings of the 'status quo' and seek to reorient them to reveal the underlying reality.

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