

# Subalternity And Metanarrative In The Novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist By Mohsin Hamid

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## Abstract:

This study is going to explore the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid through the lens of metanarrative, a concept propounded by Jean Francois Lyotard and subalternity. Changez, a Pakistani boy is the protagonist of the novel who has come to live in America. But after 9/11 he becomes disillusioned and leaves America and moves back to Pakistan. This paper will investigate Changez's going against the metanarrative which is American Ideology. America's announcement of 'war on terror' which led Muslim immigrants in delimita. As they lived their best life in America but after 9/11 their life became miserable and they resisted it. This paper also studies the elements of subalternity found in the narrative which is told in a dramatic monologue wherein Changez keeps on talking to American Agent.

**Keywords:** The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Metanarrative, Subalternity, America, Ideology, Power, War on Terror, Post 9/11.

## Introduction

In 2013, Foreign Policy magazine named Hamid one of the world's '100 leading global thinkers' describing him as a master critic of the modern global condition (The Artists 2013, p. 122). Mohsin Hamid is a writer of four novels namely *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and *Exit West* (2017) and a non-fictional book of essays *Discontent and its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore*, New York and London (2014). All the four novels have been received well by the readers but the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* gained an enormous fame. It was considered as an International best seller, it was shortlisted for the 2007 Man Booker Prize. So, it is considered as the best of his books.

The term metanarrative is propounded by the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard in his 1979 book *The*

Postmodern Condition, in which he says "I define postmodern as the incredulity toward metanarratives". These metanarratives are the grandnarratives or grand stories which have the universal meaning. They are whole in itself. They give meaning to all other sub-narratives. But as Lyotard says "There are many language games-a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches-local determinism". Postmodern times are the times in which these subnarratives should also be brought to the surface.

Middleton and walsh suggest that the two problems with the metanarratives are that they are universal stories and they are totalizing or marginalizing. They argue that a metanarrative "purports to be not simply a local story (an ad hoc, first order account of a community's experience) but the universal story of the world from arche to telos, a grand narrative encompassing world history from beginning to

end” (p. 70). They also consider metanarratives as hegemonic in nature and violently exclude who is different.

Stanley Grenz in his book *Primer on Postmodernism* writes “what makes our condition “postmodern” is not only that people no longer cling to the myths of modernity. The postmodern outlook entails the end of the appeal to any central legitimating myth whatsoever. Not only have all the reigning master narratives lost their credibility, but the idea of a grand narrative is itself no longer credible. [...] Consequently, the postmodern outlook demands an attack on any claimant to universality-it demands, in fact, a “war on totality” (p. 45). The crux of the above statement is that the metanarratives have lost their importance and the way should be paved to the little and sub narratives in these postmodern situations.

In the postcolonial studies, subaltern are the ones who are not included in the socio-economic affairs of the society, they are marginalized and kept to the periphery. The term subaltern was first coined by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci by which he meant the people who are dominated by the hegemonic groups of the colonial society in order to identify the colonial power and how the voices of these subalterns are kept under control “Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense” (Gramsci, *Selections* 55). The term subaltern and subaltern studies entered in the post-colonial studies through the works of the Subaltern Studies Group who were the historians who explored the Indian history. Since 1970s, the term subaltern denoted the colonized people of the Indian subcontinent. The purpose of the subaltern studies was that history should be told by the colonized not by the colonizers from the west. Subalterns, who are the dominated class should be given the opportunity to present their truth. Ranajit Guha defined subalternity as the “general attribute of

subordination in South Asian society, whether that is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way” (Guha, ‘Preface’). So, subaltern are ones who are suppressed and controlled by the upper classes.

In case of the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the narrative is told in the narrative technique of the dramatic monologue in which the protagonist Changez is talking to the American agent who is supposed to be the CIA agent from America “Excuse Me, Sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, 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, ...” (Hamid, 1). He listens to Changez and doesn’t respond to him. He only keeps on giving some gestures like putting his hand in his pocket to take something out. Changez narrates his own story when he lived in America, his treatment there by the natives before and after 9/11. The American agent has obviously been following him to Pakistan. He doesn’t seem interested in his story “But why do you flinch? ... for we have not met before, and yet you seem to know at least something about me” (Hamid 75). Changez suspects something behind the purpose of his visit to Pakistan. As he narrates his truth of how comfortably he was living in America and after 9/11 and the war on terror all that changed and he became a subject of subalternity in the American society and had to come back to Pakistan.

Changez has himself felt as a subaltern in America as he was treated like that after 9/11. Before that he had made his position the Underwood Samson but after he became aware about his real identity he went back to his roots and started finding his real existence, where he belonged. Changez writes his history against the dominant and hegemonic American ideology of how the innocent Muslim Immigrants were treated after the 9/11 happened. The American Agent here represents the whole

American authority who are not interested to listen to the voices of the subalterns “It is impossible to tell, sir, given the gloom about us and the unexpressive cast of your face, but I suspect you are looking at me with a degree of revulsion; certainly I would look at you in such a manner if you had just told me what I have told you” (Hamid, 107). It shows the American is so furious while listening to Changez that he wants to do what he has come to do there “ But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal” (Hamid, 184), he has maybe a gun in his pocket and has come to kill Changez as he resists the American dominance as he puts demonstrations with his students whom he teaches.

After graduating from Princeton University he got a job in Underwood Samson, a valuation firm. He enjoyed a successful career in New York. But after 9/11, he felt his Muslim identity was being questioned and he felt resentment by Americans towards him. He grew a beard and finally left for Pakistan. There in Pakistan, he became a lecturer and started to teach the students about the Muslim values and Pakistani culture so that they become aware about their condition and doesn't face the same as Changez himself has faced while living in America.

In the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the protagonist of the novel Changez in the beginning of the novel is the lover of American Ideology towards immigrants. They chose the best for their own universities and provide jobs only to those persons who they feel fit for them. “Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of the meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. And for the most part, we were happy to do so. I certainly was, at least at first” (Hamid, 4). Changez being one of them, he was proud of his position in America until after 9\11 he realized his

real worth of being a Muslim immigrant in America. This is how the American ideology works in the global world, to choose the best for their own benefit. Hamid shows the naked truth about the Changez's reaction towards the attack when he saw the World Trade Centre fall “And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased” (Hamid 72). Changez, despite of his living in America still doesn't belong here as he has observed it that they are different. He is the other wherein he continuously tries to retain his Pakistaniness.

The announcement of War on Terror by the Bush Government left many Muslim immigrants as well as his position in America disillusioned and he was disheartened. Mahmood Mamdani in his book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* writes that “after 9/11, President Bush moved to distinguish between ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims.’... ‘Bad Muslims’ were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that ‘good Muslims’ . . . would undoubtedly support ‘us’ in a war against ‘them’ . . . But . . . unless proved to be ‘good’, every Muslim was presumed to be ‘bad’” (633). Being an American lover his hatred for America started growing after it. American ideology being a metanarrative, a grand narrative giving meaning to every little issue or providing solutions for every problem or having a universal and hegemonic hand on everything has been challenged here in this novel. As Changez after leaving America started to give lessons of his life experiences from America.

“I had heard tales of the discrimination Muslims were beginning to experience in the business world-stories of rescinded job offers and groundless dismissals-and I did not wish to have my position at Underwood Samson compromised.” (120) After 9/11, Changez observed the change around him,

Muslims were seen with the suspicious eyes. He was shocked and was unable to cope up with the situation. He had felt America as his home but now it was something different. He felt himself as an outsider. When 9/11 happened, he was in Manila. When he returned back to New York, at airport, he was singled out and was separated from his colleagues. "They joined the queue of for American citizens; and I joined the one for foreigners." (75) He was asked the purpose of his visit to United States. He answered "I live here" (75). But that was not the answer they wanted to hear from him. He was inspected there and at the end he reached Manhattan lonely as his colleagues had already left him.

Changez went to Lahore for some time and after coming back from there he didn't shave his beard as it was a sign of protest from his own side towards America. He wanted his identity to be revealed. He was abused because of his beard by some strangers and at Underwood Samson he became a subject of "whispers and stares" (130). So there was a change in the perception of people. These same people treated him well before but now when he revealed his Muslim identity he was ill-treated.

"I had not shaved my two-week-old beard. It was perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind; I do not now recall my precise motivations. I know only that I did not wish to blend in with the army of clean-shaven youngsters who were my coworkers, and that inside me, for multiple reasons, I was deeply angry." (130)

Changez became more conscious of his position in America when he went to Chile for assessing the value of a non-profitable publishing company. Its chief operating officer is an old man Jaun-Bautista who tells him about the janissaries "They were Christian boys," he explained, "captured by the

Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to" (151). It symbolized Changez's condition as he himself has become a modern day janissary as he has left his own country to work in the West for his own bright future but the West has left him desolate and disillusioned as it doesn't promise him anything what he had dreamt of. He is "a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with kinship to mine" (152). It shows the power which America was putting on the world nations especially the Muslim nations. They established their dominance over the world and changed the notions about the Muslim community (Islamophobia). Changez says:

I reflected that I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role... that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power. It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision (156).

America has been the central figure in the affairs of the world. It has always tried to control the nations with its power and dominance for its own benefits. America has been influencing the whole world through its policies. It has a universal hand in the making of the ideologies. In this novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez after feeling himself to be an outsider in America he finally leaves for Pakistan. In Pakistan he became a University lecturer and he says "I made it my mission on

campus to advocate a disengagement from your country by mine”. (179) He was called an “anti-American” (179) by the foreign press as he started demonstrations in which many students participated and talked about the Pakistan’s domestic and international affairs.

To conclude, Mohsin Hamid has tried to express the condition of the Pakistani immigrant who lives in America after 9/11. By using the Lyotard’s concept of metanarrative on this novel the fact is established that Changez, the protagonist of the novel has tried to sustain his own little narrative, the narrative which opposes the universal or metanarrative of American hegemonic ideology and also the concept of subalternity to which Changez was exposed is vividly present in the novel. It shows the fate of the Muslim immigrants who live in America. Their identity changed after the 9/11, as their identity was questioned. Also, American dominance is being put to drill. The subaltern group, here the Muslim minority, is also given the opportunity to express their side of the story.

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