

**RETHINKING MOHSIN HAMID'S *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST* THROUGH A
TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY: THE PROTAGONIST'S SHIFTING SENSE OF
BELONGING**

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ABSTRACT

A transnational approach to individual identity has come to the fore front recently. This approach is what Mohsin Hamid is concerned with in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, in which he presents a transnational character displaying the Pakistani experience of migration to America. The protagonist of the novel, Changez, has bicultural characteristics and his idea of home changes in accordance with time and space. In the first half of his story, America is the place where Changez feels "at home." However, there is a particular turning point of life for him, which is the 9/11 attack to the Twin Towers, and this experience functions as an agent of self-awareness, shifting his sense of belonging from the host country, that is America, to the homeland, which is Pakistan. Thus, Changez spiritually returns to the homeland in the second half of his story. While, prior to the 9/11 attack, Changez enjoys his "Americanness," represented by the American education, the American girl, and the American business, his shifted identity after the event brings a consciousness of his "origin," and in the end, the "Pakistani Changez" overwhelms his American self. Thus, Hamid displays how fragile and fragmented identities might become in modern times.

Key words: transnationalism, identity, belonging, home, shift, America, Pakistan

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"[...] I lacked a stable *core*. I was not certain where I belonged—in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither—[...] because my own identity was so fragile" *Changez*

In an era of rapid global exchange in people, goods, information and so on, the idea of fixed identity within national boundaries has lost its significance. In view various technological advances and attending social developments, the concept of "home" has become more and more blurred, and a

territorial understanding of identity and belonging has further been discarded. Thus, a transnational approach to individual identity has come to the fore front.

Considering the new perception of identity after the theories of transnationalism, this article argues that identity is not something deeply rooted inside a person. In other words, identity is far away from being a *transcending*, single, and stable core; it is rather a *transforming*, fragmented, and dynamic phenomenon. In this sense, this article associates identity more with culture than with nature. In parallel with these ideas, this study aims to apply the theories of transnationalism, particularly the ones related with the concept of identity, to a fictional character. Through the medium of an imaginary persona, Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the main purpose will be to search for an answer on how (much) an identity might drift between different centers of emotional connection as the cultural conditions in which identity is experienced are perpetually changing.

Mohsin Hamid is concerned with the issue of identity shifts in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, in which he presents a transnational character displaying the Pakistani experience of migration to America. The protagonist of the novel, Changez, has bicultural characteristics and his idea of home changes in accordance with time and space. In the first half of his story, America is the place where Changez feels "at home." Adopting a pragmatist self in the host country, Changez lives in his own American Dream. However, there is a particular turning point of life for him, which is the 9/11 attack to the Twin Towers, and this experience functions as an agent of self-awareness, shifting his sense of belonging from the host country, that is America, to the homeland, which is Pakistan. Thus, Changez spiritually returns to the homeland in the second half of his story. Disillusioned in the "myth" of American superiority, the protagonist now sees himself as a part of larger Moslem community around the world. While, prior to the 9/11 attack, Changez enjoys his "Americanness," represented by the American education, the American girl, and the American business, his shifted identity after the event brings a consciousness of his "origin," and in the end the "Pakistani Changez" overwhelms his American self. Thus, Hamid displays how fragile and fragmented identities might become in modern times.

Transnational identity and transnational idea of belonging have been studied by a wide range of scholars. According to May Friedman and Silvia Schultermandl's (2011) definition, transnationalism handles with our experiences to share in this global era regardless of our race, class, gender, and citizenship (p. 8). Friedman and Schultermandl have also referred to the opinions of Alejandro Portes, Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, and Patricia Landolt, who have considered transnationalism as "occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation" (as cited in p. 8). Thus, as Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004) have argued, a transnational approach rejects the notion that "society and the nation-state are one and the same" (p. 1003).

Within the sphere of transnationalism, the concept of identity cannot be examined from a narrow perspective. If experiences are brought outside national borders, individual identities would expand territorial limits, too. Identities are no longer dependant on certain locations. Due to the increasing globalization, "borders (physical borders, at least) are becoming more and more permeable;"

therefore, identities are too complex to explain within the frame of nation-states, as Schultermundl and Şebnem Toplu (2010) have claimed (p. 11, 17). At this point, what transnational approach suggests is to forget the myth of "unified identity;" instead, to accept a "fluid sense of self" which is a result of "a continuous cultural dialogue between self and other" (Schultermundl & Toplu, p. 13, 16). In the same sense, Schultermundl and May Friedman (2011) have seen individual through "transnational sensibility" which implies "a lack of fixity" and "rich in possibility" approach to the concept of identity (p. 5). Through a "non-essentialist stance," they have asserted that "identities are constantly in flux" (p. 7, 13).

A fluid identity approach implies a flexible notion of the concept of "home." Just as identity, the idea of home within transnationalism is subjected to alter. Adriana Sandu (2013) has studied transnational concept of home from various angles in her article "Transnational Homemaking Practices: Identity, Belonging and Informal Learning." The idea of home is related with across time and space, shaped by memories of past homes and images of future homes, and it brings imaginative and material geographies of residence together (as cited in p. 497). Moreover, as opposed to the national and local space idea, transnational idea of home is outside fixity and always implies fluidity (as cited in p. 497). That is to say, for transnational characters, the concept of home is "both multiple and ambiguous, often reflecting attachments to more than one place" (p. 498) and shaped by "memories as well as everyday life, experiences and practices" (as cited in p. 498). Sandu (2013) has also emphasized that home is not necessarily somewhere "to return;" a transnational person may feel at home elsewhere (p. 498). For Sandu, transnational home is never static but always up to the individual and his/her circumstances.

Since there is not a principle of constant home for transnational individuals, their sense of belonging is not supposed to be fixed to a certain culture. Transnational concept of belonging is somehow ambiguous and dual-natured but never one-sided. Many scholars—such as Steven Vertovec (2004), Levitt and Schiller (2004), Cristina Bradatan, Adrian Popan, and Rachel Melton (2010)—have studied this issue and their opinions have come together on the point of double sense of belonging in transnationalism. The duality in the idea of belonging for transnational people has been referred to by use of a number of different phrases such as "double consciousness," "dual orientation," "bifocality" (Vertovec, p. 975-977), "simultaneity" (Levitt & Schiller, p. 1003), "flexible loyalty" (Friedman, p. 112), and "double loyalty" (Bradatan et al., p. 172).

"[...] I lacked a stable *core*. I was not certain where I belonged—in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither—[...] because my own identity was so fragile" says Changez, which is actually pointing to the protagonist's fluid identity (Hamid, 2008, p. 168). Changez's self holds "an alternative identity, a B-side to the self" in Jhumpa Lahiri's (2004) words (p. 76). Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* covers the protagonist Changez's fluxional self and thereby changing sense of belonging in time. In a way, Changez's double sense of belonging works in accordance with time and space. Changez experiences a turning point in his life, which makes him feel closer to the homeland, Pakistan, while more distant to the host land, America. Till the 9/11 attack to the Twin Towers, Changez feels like an "American boy."

"How strange it was for me to think I grew up on the other side!" admits Changez, meaning the half-material half-imaginary wall between the West and the East (Hamid, 2008, p. 26). Although he

knows where he comes from, he feels closer to American community. For the first part of his story, Changez is "a lover of America;" however, his love comes from what he himself explains, American "pragmatism—call it *professionalism*—" that supports American success (Hamid, 2008, p. 1, 41). He becomes a practical person to provide himself with that success; thus, he gives up his original self, at least for a long while. In fact, he does exactly what Levitt and Schiller (2004) have detected through immigration scholars; "In the United States [...] to move up the socioeconomic ladder, immigrants would have to abandon their unique customs, language, values, and homeland ties and identities" (p. 1002). He suppresses his "Pakistani side" and acts like an American (Morey, 2011, p. 143-144). Leaving his Pakistani part of identity aside, Changez enjoys his "Americanness," represented by the American education, the American girl, and the American business. These are the main elements which reinforce Changez's ties with the host land. They make him feel more belong to America.

As one of the "brightest" students in Pakistan, Changez is given visa, scholarship, complete financial aid, and "invited into the ranks of the meritocracy" by America; but in return, he is expected to contribute all his talents to American society (Hamid, 2008, p. 4). Thus, he gets the opportunity to become a student of Princeton. "Princeton made everything possible for me" says Changez, focusing on the value of being one of "Princetonians" (Hamid, 2008, p. 16). It is quite so since through Princeton he reaches to a good education, a group of young and wealthy friends, a nice girlfriend, and a good job, all of which are thanks to his acceptance of belonging to America. In this environment which is full of advantages, Changez gives in to "the pleasures of being among this wealthy young fellowship" (Hamid, 2008, p. 23).

The American girl is another contributor to the American part of Changez's identity. The weakened connection to the origins is visible through the strong attachment to an American girl, that is, to America. Erica becomes Changez's emotional connection to the host land. His love of Erica symbolically refers to his love of *America*. Erica might stand for Changez's desire to enter into the American way of life, to embrace American customs. Or from Bhalla's (2012) perspective, Changez-Erica relation might show assimilative desires for whiteness and national belonging for South Asian Americans; because, Erica may represent "Western high culture and international sophistication," "a cultural usher," and "the fetishization of norms of Anglo-American culture and taste" (p. 113-115). Thus, to sleep with Erica means a sense of accomplishment in Changez's eyes. When Bhalla's (2012) idea on whiteness, as a symbol of "freedom of choice and escape from tradition" for an Asian man, is taken into consideration, this argument makes more sense (p. 118). In this way, a sensational bond supports the material loyalty to the host land.

As another gift by Princeton, Changez gets a very prestigious job in Underwood Samson Company. The company, "the initials of which visibly recall those of the nation," reflects the power of America according to Anna Hartnell (2010, p. 337) and thus, it attracts Changez's interest. This business job is again crucial in Changez's love of America because a position in this company provides him with a huge amount of money, a great respect, and again a group of friends who are this time shiny with their intellectual capacity. But the point is, all of these acquisitions are on the condition that he accepts American nationality. His earning in the company is so big for him that he can take his colleagues out for

an "after-work drink" and "spend in an hour more than [his] father earned in a day!" (Hamid, 2008, p. 42). He is very happy, feeling "a warm sense of accomplishment:" "Nothing troubled me; I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet" (Hamid, 2008, p. 51).

This power through a strong position in business life makes Changez feel a "New Yorker." Hence, Changez can do anything, even conflicting things, not to lose this American material sense of success through the first half of the story. For the sake of practical gains, he even exploits his original self which is suppressed by himself, "I was aware of an advantage conferred upon me by my foreignness, and I tried to utilize it as much as I could" (Hamid, 2008, p. 47). However, when his "foreignness" harms his interests he knows how to make his "Pakistaniness" invisible cloaking it by his "suit," by his "expense account," and mostly by his "companions" (Hamid, 2008, p. 82). That is to say, there is no "essential identity" of Changez for the first half of his story since "his identity is constructed in the gaze of others" (Morey, 2011, p. 144).

Changez's practical worldview affects his idea of "home" in the first half of his story. His approach to the homeland and to the host land takes shape through personal interests and he more feels "at home" in America. For this reason, while anything American seems positive to him, Pakistani-related things sound negative as an indicator of his inferiority complex at this stage. "[He's] touchy about where [he] come[s] from" in Erica's words (Hamid, 2008, p. 64). He thinks America is superior to Pakistan in many arenas including geography, law, technology, and civilization. As Changez himself states, though he often misses home he is content with where he is, America (Hamid, 2008, p. 31). A few times, he says he feels at home in America: first about New York, and then in Erica's room (Hamid, 2008, p. 36, 57).

Changez's feeling "at home" in America is partially due his feeling inferior about where he comes from. While he considers America as "the most technologically advanced civilization our species had ever known," he is ashamed of the disparity between American civilization and Pakistani backwardness (Hamid, 2008, p. 38). America provides a person with many possibilities for Changez. You can see the sea in America while you cannot in Pakistan (Hamid, 2008, p. 49). In America, you can bring a guilty candle-wax manufacturer before court; however, in Pakistan it results in merely your crying, fainting, and a scar (Hamid, 2008, p. 54). Changez accepts that Lahore is not a New York but even Manila is wealthier than Lahore; thus, he speaks and acts like an American among the Filipinos and says he is from New York to share the Filipinos' respect for the American (Hamid, 2008, p. 74).

The first sign of upcoming alienation for Changez actualizes through an identity crisis during a business travel. When he is in Philippines during a limousine ride with his colleagues he catches a Filipino driver's gaze at him. At this point, he shares "a sort of Third World sensibility" with the driver; he feels closer to the Filipinos on their way to home while seeing his American colleague so *foreign* (Hamid, 2008, p. 76-77). He understands that in fact the one who is *foreign* is himself among the Americans. This is the moment when Changez sees that he is in fact "acting" the American. After this first shock, the actual blow shattering his "Americanness" is the 9/11 attack to the Twin Towers, which brings Changez's "Muslim identity" into light setting him at odds with his western life style in Morey's

(2011) opinion (p. 143-144). Experiencing what Kumar (2013) has called “an emotional vacuum” (p. 6), Changez would first metaphorically and then physically return to the homeland.

Changez's behaviors and actions after this milestone indicate how his identity and belonging shift coming closer to the homeland in the second half of his story. His initial reaction to the attack is "smiling" for someone brings America to her knees (Hamid, 2008, p. 83). A part of him desires "to see America harmed" though he is "the product" of her (Hamid, 2008, p. 84).

The behavior of the American to Changez after the attack also helps Changez's getting more and more distant to the country. He is now in badly with Erica and then they break up. His separation from Erica holds a symbolic meaning implying his separation from *America* considering its previously explained connotation. In other words, “the love story in the novel between man and woman does not simply mirror but also complicates the protagonist’s relationship with America” (Hartnell, 2010, p. 342). Erica cannot forget her dead lover, Chris—whose very name connotes “Americanness” through Christianity and Christopher Columbus (Hartnell, 2010, p. 343)—then disappears from the story. From the viewpoint of Erica-America correspondence, this nostalgia may suggest what Hartnell (2010) has argued, “the ‘dangerous nostalgia’ that shapes post-9/11 America” (p. 343). Thus, Erica’s choice of dead Chris as her lover reminds Changez his place as “the other” in the country and facilitates his alienation. He can no longer “pretend” as if he was Chris. Referring to Bhalla’s (2012) analysis, the failure of Changez-Erica relation might have its source in the "tension between desires for assimilation and ethnic authenticity;" thus, Erica might turn out to be "an object against which [Changez] defines himself" (p. 113). In other words, Changez might feel a fear of “cultural displacement” and “ethnic alienation” if he continues to be with her (Bhalla, 2012, p. 116).

Apart from Erica, some other Americans’ attitudes to Changez are no more that friendly. Changez is now a potential suspicious person in the eyes of his American friends, American officials, and American community in general. Since all these developments cause the "destruction of [his] personal American dream" Changez no longer accepts being an American and feels belonging to Pakistan and to Muslim community (Hamid, 2008, p. 106). When his manager Jim understands that Changez's "Pakistani side" makes him uneasy with the ongoing issues, Changez is unwilling to accept that "[his] loyalties could be so divided" (Hamid, 2008, p. 136). But they really are since Changez is a transnational character with a dual loyalty.

Now, feeling more belong to the homeland, Changez sympathizes with the discriminated Muslim businessman after the attack (Hamid, 2008, p. 137). He then grows a beard as "a symbol of [his] identity" (Hamid, 2008, p. 148), which is a materialized token of his spiritual transformation. In Hartnell’s (2010) view, the beard is a kind of indicator that “integration on any terms is no longer possible” for Changez (p. 342). He no longer wishes to be among "the army of clean-shaven youngsters" because "[his] days of focusing on fundamentals were done" (Hamid, 2008, p. 148, 175). Changez no longer works for the American (company).

The shift of belonging brings about a shift of the concept of "home" for Changez. He is not comfortable and does not feel "at home" in America now. His idea of American superiority at the cost of

Pakistani inferiority comes to an end. Noticing that he has been "a modern-day janissary"—implying fighting to erase one's own—he no longer wants to join in the "project of domination" by America (Hamid, 2008, p. 173, 177). He rejects to be "a servant of America's economic empire" in Hartnell's (2010) words (p. 340). As Peter Morey (2011) has argued, Changez recognizes that "old colonial instincts are still alive" (p. 145). That is why, he criticizes American aggressive politics around the world: he favors Afghan side against America, criticizes the American support to India and to other strong states in the invasion of smaller ones, and talks about American aggression on people (Hamid, 2008, p. 113-114, 149, 207). Thus, Changez's idealization of America becomes topsy-turvy; he now sees her as "a myth of superiority" for America is now looking *back* to her strong days while Changez has thought her as always looking *forward* (Hamid, 2008, p. 131, 190).

After the 9/11, Changez's idea of "home" comes closer to Pakistan. It is visible through his frequent use of phrases such as "we Pakistanis," "my people," and "my home." He is now proud of what is Pakistani: food and his national ancestors who were "saints and poets and—yes—conquering kings" building precious constructions in a time when America was still "a collection of thirteen small colonies" (Hamid, 2008, p. 115-116). He is also sensitive to any negative opinion on his place (Hamid, 2008, p. 110-111). Changez's shift of belonging is resulted in his material "return" to his roots after the spiritual one; hereby, he returns to Pakistan and becomes a professor and a mentor who is opposed to American aggressive actions and raises students on this approach. From then on, he defends the sovereignty of Pakistan against any outsider interference, mainly the American one.

Changez's words in the epigraph of this paper reflect the position in limbo for the protagonist's belonging. He is a transnational character whose flexible identity leads him to constantly altering sense of belonging throughout his life. He has a double consciousness bringing along with ambivalence in the identity; that is why, Changez belongs to both places, Lahore and New York, but in a sense, he belongs to neither at the same time. In his journey of identity-formation, there is a shocking experience for Changez which shatters his loyalty to the host land. After a kind of self-awareness, his perception of "home" gets into a transition from America to his origin in South Asia. The 9/11 attack to the Twin Towers becomes a kind of climactic point for Changez's fluid self.

Transnational people are considered transcending identities regardless of national borders. Their sense of self is so fluid that it rejects one-sided attachment to any place. There is not an essential identity closed to change. Thus, for a transnational person, it is impossible to talk about a stable location of belonging. Identities may shift in accordance with the time and space in which a person lives at the moment. An individual identity cannot be confined within the borders of any unity such as one family, one nation, or one culture. The reason is that identity is not something static but dynamic; it is not a particular point but a process. It is a continuous movement involving one's whole life; in other words, identity is an endless journey.

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