

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: A Critique of The Grand Narrative of Globalization

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Abstract: In the postcolonial and the capitalist phase, the phenomenon of globalization ushered the promise of economic prosperity. In the name of liberalization, it kindled a new dream of welfare society. Consequently, the phase of globalization witnessed the emergence of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism. However, the post – 9/11 scenario revealed 'cracks' and 'fissures' in the grand narrative of globalization. It reasserted the global-vernacular divide which has compelled the individual to re-locate oneself in the matrix of race, language and culture. In that context, the postcolonial studies provide a space to consider the phenomenon of globalization from a different perspective. In the process of postcolonialism, the pendulum has been shifted paradigmatically from the Euro – American narratives to the non-canonical Asian, African and Caribbean narratives. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by the Pakistani novelist, Mohsin Hamid is one such narrative that represents the tensions between the dominant forces and the ethnic minorities in the neo-avatar of the colonization. Mohsin Hamid's national and ethnic identity and its anxiety in the global context are well reflected in this novel. Though apparently seems to be a thriller, the novel encompasses the larger issues rooted in the colonial discourse.

Keywords: global citizenship, 9/11 scenario, ethnic identity, mimic stage, hybridity, stage of resistance

In the process of postcolonialism, the pendulum has been shifted paradigmatically from the Euro-American narratives to the non-canonical South Asian, African and Caribbean narratives. The literary scene has now been dominated by the new voices emerging from the erstwhile colonies. As far as the South Asian countries are concerned, it can be observed that a good number of writers are contributing significantly particularly, the writers from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and of course, India. In case of Pakistan, though there is a specific stream of "Pakistani novel (originally written) in English", it is seen that it was overshadowed by the literary giants from the neighbouring country India. But with the publication of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Mohsin Hamid a new wave of Pakistani fiction in English has been erupted, which is getting a critical acclaim. Daniyal Mueenudin, Mohammad Hanif, Nadeem Aslam are some promising writers from Pakistan writing in English. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the predicament of the protagonist of Mohsin Hamid's much acclaimed novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Mohsin Hamid (b. 1971)

has so far written three novels namely, *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013). The name Mohsin Hamid came into limelight when *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2007. The novel is supposed to be one of the important post 9/11 fictions. However, the novel, as has been generally considered, is not mere an outcry against the multicultural identity of a superpower like America. In a broader context, it incorporates the serious concerns pertaining to the grand narrative of globalization. The novel very significantly reveals the tensions between the dominant forces and the ethnic minorities in the neo-avatar of the colonization. Mohsin Hamid's national and ethnic identity and its anxiety in the global context are well reflected in this novel. Though apparently seems to be a thriller, the novel encompasses the larger issues rooted in the colonial discourse. In the postcolonial and the capitalist phase, the phenomenon of globalization ushered the promise of economic prosperity. In the name of liberalization, it kindled a new dream of welfare society. Consequently, the phase of globalization witnessed the emergence of 'global citizenship' and 'cosmopolitanism'. However, the grand narrative of globalization revealed 'cracks' and 'fissures' in the post-9/11 scenario. It reasserted the global-vernacular divide which has compelled the individual to locate oneself in the matrix of race, language and culture. In that context, the postcolonial studies provide a space to consider the phenomenon of globalization from a different perspective.

The novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* essentially a first person narration unfolds the protagonist's four and half years stay in America. The protagonist Mr Changez narrates his fascinating story to an American guest one evening in Lahore, Pakistan. The narrative of Changez constitutes his successful career in America that begins with his admission to the prestigious Princeton University, followed by his apprenticeship in the lucrative valuation firm, Underwood Samson and Company. There runs a parallel love story of Changez and the American girl, Erica. However, with the catastrophic incident of the destruction of the World Trade Centre, comes a drastic change in Changez's life story. With the exit of Erica from his life, at one particular moment, Changez resigns his job, bids goodbye to America and settles down in Lahore. The narrative of Changez incorporates two important questions – why did Erica deny the love of Changez, and what compels Changez to resign the prosperous job and to leave America? The destruction of the WTC forms the centrality of the narrative which divides it into the pre-9/11 scenario and the post-9/11 scenario. Changez's four and half years stay in America compels him to witness and experience the dominant and dormant facets of globalization. Changez's decision of resigning the secure, lucrative job by 'choice' and admitting the identity of a fundamentalist 'reluctantly' exemplifies three stages namely, 'mimic' stage, 'hybrid' stage and stage of 'resistance'. Thus, Changez's persona, by way of globalization, epitomises the dialectics of the postcolonial sensibility. As we know, the phase of globalization is understood as the late consequence of colonization. The colonialism was though overruled in different countries; its socio-

economic effects had brought a new culture. The instinct of imperialism had left behind in the several colonies that have resulted into a capitalist temperament. This transition created the neo-colonialist atmosphere where, under the extreme economic power structure, the countries (especially those colonies which were trying to develop and assert their individual identity with that power) subdued their existence. The new culture was providing a dream of unified identity. In this new culture, controlled by capitalistic forces, an individual, irrespective of his class, caste, race and even nation was promised to receive this unified identity of 'global citizenship'. But the idea of 'global citizenship' in its very genesis demanded the submission of an individual. It appeared that in those larger cosmopolitan cities, your national and racial identity hardly matters, and you are assimilated in this new world order. This is how it appears that in the late capitalist society the globalization project has turned into a grand narrative. The intricacy of globalised identity which in reality is a product of the colonization is remarkably reflected in the life story of Changez. Mr. Changez comes to America with a dream to gain the benefits of 'power'. He aspires to be a part of the power-structure. So, Changez intently changes his physical – mental makeup. In the Underwood Samson he is welcomed as a 'polished', 'well dressed' person with 'sophisticated accent'. During his stay in America, he feels proud when, assuming him as a 'native', tourists would ask him for directions in New York. His voice rises while saying, "I was, in four and half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker" (33). When he joins the Underwood Samson, his colleagues are wondered by his 'mannerisms'. When he is deputed to Manila, Philippines for his first Underwood Samson assignment, he admits, "I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, *more like an American*" (65) (emphasis added). All these events reveal Changez's aspiration to be an American which gives him a feel that he has been perfectly placed and assimilated in the power structure. It is now not necessary for Changez to relate himself to his past identity since he has become a 'global citizen'. However, what he assigns as his identity turns out to be a more 'mimic' stage though he realises it much later. One can easily identify that under the deceiving term of 'global citizenship' Changez has been victimised to the main objective of the colonization project. Destruction of the WTC is a shattering moment in the history of America. But more disheartening fact is the aftermath of the 9/11 scenario that exposes 'American dream' and its 'audacity of Hope'. Once the land promised, "There's not a Liberal America and a Conservative America – there is the United States of America. There is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America – there's the United States of America ... We are one people..."¹ (Mendell, 3). However, the 9/11 aftermath unveils America's 'systematic pragmatism' of imperialism. Changez is perplexed when he experiences 'an ingrained insouciance' and 'a structural injustice' in the global cosmopolitanism. The first realization to Changez about his 'mimic' identity comes when he returns from Manila to New York after

9/11. At immigration, he is separated from the American citizens and is rudely interrogated about his arrival to America by “a solidly built woman with a pistol at her hip and a mastery of English inferior to [him]” (75). With its economic supremacy, the so called superpower constructs the 'ideology' of 'duty' and 'honour', nurtures the stereotype identity of ethnic minorities who are savage, cruel and barbaric, and proclaims its “war against terror”. Changez finds himself victimized in this new world order. Even at Underwood Samson, Changez cannot find an escape from “growing importance of tribe” (117). In the altered world, Changez is well aware that he is constantly “being under suspicion” (74), and so he is grappled with a deep sense of paranoia. The global cosmopolitanism denies Changez “a right to difference in equality” (Bhabha, xvii). In these circumstances, comes a revelation for Changez. He perceives the inherent 'ruptures' and 'fissures' in the grand narrative of globalization. It is a realization of fact that the identity of 'global citizenship' is merely a myth. Its unified identity governed by the capitalistic forces does not allow any 'polished', 'well accented' outsider to assimilate in the dominant structure. The 'mimic' man can accommodate in this power structure till he subdues his 'native' identity, and helps to incorporate 'their' dream of economic supremacy intact. The destruction of the WTC destructs then this idea of global citizenship. Suddenly, the 'other' is located in his 'native' culture. The stereotypical identity of his race that is assumed to be reconciled and assimilated in the 'global cosmopolitanism' is re-gifted to him and is deliberately kept in 'doubt'.

In spite of being global, you are placed in back to your racial, ethnic and national identity. You are made to associate with this identity, and are compelled to destruct your 'new' identity of global citizenship. This understanding reveals a much more complex fate of that global citizen who in the aspiration of globalization has actually emerged as a 'hybrid' personality facing the consequences of hybridization. Changez's failure to assimilate in the power-structure and the impossibility of return to the native identity, mark the signs of 'hybridity'. In the novel, it has been observed that Erica though loves Changez, always lingers in the memories of her deceased American boyfriend, Chris. The momentary happiness in Changez – Erica relationship comes only when Changez persuades Erica to assume him as Chris. Thus, Changaz's 'black skin – white mask' persona is bound to keep him on the side of 'other'. The sense of 'otherness' in such relationship provides him a space to identify the problematics of a 'hybrid' persona. As Bhabha sees, 'the double vision of mimicry' and 'the ambivalence state of hybridity' reveals not only the 'workings of colonial authority' but also 'the dynamics of resistance'. Changez, at once, starts sharing this ambivalence, where at one level, he still associates himself with the 'global identity' and at another level, though reluctant starts presenting his ethnic identity. While returning to New York from Lahore after the Christmas vacation, Changez's mother, being alarmed by the threat to the ethnic identity, asks him, “Do not forget to shave before you go” (128). But despite his mother's request,

and knowing the difficulties that he would confront at the immigration, Changez comes to America with a bearded face. He maintains,

It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind, I do not now recall my precise motivations. (130)

It indicates that, at this point, Mr Changez is still under the ambivalence of 'hybridity'. His friend at the Underwood Samson who is the only non-white employer along with Changez is very much concerned about Changez's 'new' identity, and advises him "to be careful". Even Jim, the mentor of Changez and the Vice President of the Underwood Samson is worried about Changez's appearance and the perplexed state of mind. Such moments in his life further bring him to the dynamics of resistance. Gone through the stage of 'mimicry' and the fatal process of 'hybridisation' Changez finds his way in the expression of protest and resistance. It is revealed in one incident that takes place before he resigns his job and asserts his ethnic identity by returning to the native land. The incident takes place in Chile, when Changez has been deputed to his assignment to figure out the valuation of a book publisher. Here Changez meets Juan-Bautista who runs the publishing house for many years, but is not the owner of the company. Juan-Bautista is very much upset with the owner's decision to sell the company. His deep involvement with the company allows him to look at the Underwood Samson objectively. Though the Underwood Samson claims they are only interested in evaluating the assets and liabilities of the company, Juan-Bautista could sense the ultimate aim of the Underwood Samson in 'exploiting' the parental company and 'establishing' the new order. The dialogue between Juan-Bautista and Changez is quite natural because only a 'victimised' can communicate with another 'victimised'. Changez, at this moment still lingering in 'hybrid' identity is disturbed because of the turbulences that are taking place at 'home' due to 'the overwhelming force of America's military' against Afghanistan and also Delhi's 'warlike rhetoric' against Islamabad (143). At this point, Juan-Bautista's argument on 'janissaries' provides a strong ground of resistance for Changez against the ruthless mechanism of globalization. Juan-Bautista's reference to 'janissaries' proves a kind of revelation for Changez. He identifies himself with the indentured labourers. He could gain temporal social recognition in the multicultural society with the commitment to 'diversity' only because he was a part of the 'educated economic migrants'. But the pull of the identification with ethnic minority through its stereotype representation proves stronger than the 'educated economic migrant' identity. With this understanding, Changez who is still 'on the threshold of great change' (150) decides to resign his job at Underwood Samson, leave America and settle down in Lahore. In Lahore, he joins a university as a lecturer and deploys the site of 'resistance' in opposing the imperial policies of the new global order.

Erica's disengagement with Changez shows the problem of encounter between the two cultures and the two races. On the part of Erica, it underlines the impossibility of meeting these two cultures. At one level,

the dominating force (America), on 'their' side seeks the 'oneness' of culture, race and nation. And, on the other level, the globalization provides it another identity of 'the melting pot'. Erica's attempts to revisit the past and to capture that oneness after the 9/11 stand in contrast to America's identity of 'melting pot' where Changez cannot be incorporated. In this sense, 'Erica' and 'Underwood Samson' stand as the two metaphors (Underwood Samson: US; Am + Erica) highlighting the deconstruction of globalization. Thus, Moshin Hamid very significantly poses the postcolonial ethos in the global context and exposes the failure of the grand narrative of globalisation. Even at the narrative level, the novel intersects with the narrator – listener relationship. The victim's declaration in the role of a narrator creates a purposeful state of ambivalence. At one instance, the narrator tells the American guest, "... I am after all telling you a history, and in history, as I suspect you ... will agree, it is the thrust of one's narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one's details" (118). The narrator's insistence on the 'thrust of narrative' bounces back at the end of the novel which shrouds his image as an innocent 'victim'. When the dinner is over, the narrator intends to accompany the American guest who more or less appears to be a secret agent on the mission of terminating the 'fundamentalist'. At this point, the narrator detects 'a glint of metal' in the jacket of the American guest. And the narrator says, "Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy. I trust it is from the holder of your business cards" (184). The narrator's identification with the American guest 'by a certain shared intimacy' puts the whole narrative 'under erasure' leaving a space to speculate authenticity on the part of the reader.

To conclude, it can be said that the novel significantly urges to begin globalization 'at home' and expresses the need for evaluation of how the globalizing nations deal with "the difference within".

Endnotes :

1. This is how Barack Obama introduced himself to America in 2004. It is believed that Obama's this kind of rhetoric made his way smoother in the direction of the presidency.

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