

# Identity Crisis in Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist

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Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* presents a postcolonial study of the clash between the Eastern and the Western identities. It also discusses that the people face different oppositions, dilemmas as well as challenges which threaten their identity in a foreign culture. The novel shows that the identity is at risk due to cultural conflicts which results in the transformation of identity and ethnicity for the gain of the domination.

The novel's opens up with Changez immigrating to the United States, attending Princeton University and joining a consultancy firm, Underwood Samson, as an analyst. It would seem that his American Dream has been realized and he has finally got such opportunities which would ensure a promising and a bright future. However, after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, his attitude towards the United States changes as he becomes the victim of racism and worst surveillance.

The issue of identity in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is so much evident. This results from the connection among Erica (an American woman), Changez, (a Pakistani Muslim) and Chris, (Erica's ex-boyfriend in the background), and also due to larger political and cultural reasons. Erica and Changez, at one level, represent their own cultures and countries. Through the protagonist, Changez, Hamid conveys to America, the present neo-colonial power, that everything is not ideal as far as its culture and policies are concerned.

**“Time only moves in one direction. Remember that. Things always change.”**

Hamid confirms that extremism and intolerance do not only rear in the cultures and countries like Pakistan and further brings forth that the neo-colonial approach and behaviour of America that types hatred for it around the world and is against its own good.

“...like Pakistan, America is, after all, a former English colony...”

Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* depicts the dealings between American and Pakistani cultures. Even after independence, Pakistan and its people like many other so called developing countries are still living in the shadows of American neo-colonialism, which has a direct impact upon people, their culture and their identities. He uses the individuals as representations for their own cultures and societies.

The uncomfortable relationship between Changez and Erica symbolizes the complicated and confusing relationship that is present between Pakistani and American cultures. The political posture and policies of America have a setback on individuals and their identities. It has raised misunderstanding between individuals from these two cultures. This is why, the American sits with his back so close to the wall, because of security consideration, and on a very hot afternoon he keeps his jacket on. The idea is that he might be keeping a weapon inside his jacket (2). He also gets troubled at the appearance of the waiter, probably; he takes him for a killer and is on his alert (3). He is even uncertain to take his cup of tea and Changez has to switch his cup with the American, showing the original misunderstandings (7). The American listener to Changez continues to remain awkward throughout their meeting (19). This further reflects the air of distrust and the intricacy which exists between the two cultures. He is troubled at the power outage and rises to his feet. Changez has to give surety that everything is safe (36). Hamid shows that despite America being the chief donor of financial and military aid to Pakistan, the connection between America and Pakistan is very edgy.

The protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a Pakistani Muslim with a historical and mythical name, Changez. Changez was a medieval Asian conqueror. The present Changez is the best result of American system, with all As in academics from Princeton university. He is also a soccer star. He can get a very competitive job in a well-established American firm, with a brand-name, which can certify admission in Harvard Business School (3). He is fascinated with Erica, a very gorgeous white American woman. Changez is extremely aware of his culture and background and is proud of the ancient civilization and cultural heritage of Pakistan (6). His attraction towards Erica represents the massive attraction Pakistani culture experiences towards American culture. Erica at the personal level is extremely pretty and attractive. She has many admirers due to her attraction and striking beauty. Erica at the symbolic level represents America. Her appeal, attraction and being there reflect the world status and authority of America. Even her name not only rhymes with America, but is actually a part of the name of America. Changez, in his desperate need for approval, has started concealing his Asian/Pakistani identity. He would introduce himself as a New Yorker and would behave and speak like an American (38). This is the expression of mimicry on the part of Changez. But even his mimicry cannot award him recognition and equality in the American society. He is still looked upon as the "Other" (40). His Pakistani-ness cannot be disguised by his expensive suit, expensive car or even by the company of his American friends (42).

**At the symbolic level Erica stands for the American culture,** therefore, Hamid points his finger at the American culture for its negative impact upon individuals. Living in the past is not the only fault of Erica and America. Hamid shows that American culture suffers from very

serious melancholy. He shows that American individuals, the society and the government are guilty of displaying superiority, prejudice and intolerance on cultural and racial grounds. Changez identifies the American, in Lahore, not by the colour of his skin, dress or fashion and style but by his attitude. **“Instead, it was your bearing that allowed me identify you**

Hamid reveals the racial discrimination to which non-Europeans are subjected to by the American culture and society. He shows that American culture and society are not perfect and they are as prejudiced towards the racial and cultural differences as any other culture or society. Jim, Changez's interviewer for the job, cannot accept that a man from Third World Muslim country like Pakistan could be that clever and gifted. Erica's father's attitude towards Changez exhibits the same arrogance exhibits the same arrogance towards Changez. He finds Erica's father's attitude quite insulting and hateful.