

Marginalization, Mimicry and Subversion: A Bhabhian Reading of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract This paper examines the process of marginalization as experienced by Hamid's protagonist, Changez, in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) from Bhabhian perspective. It highlights the West's tendency to destroy the non-Western ways of knowing-something achieved through its institutionalized education systems. The experience of marginalization proves epiphanic for Changez as he stops looking at the world from the Eurocentric optics. Marginalization, thus, turns out to be a springboard for Changez, as it enables him to adopt mimicry as a form of colonial subversion. While it acts as a catalyst in Changez's acculturation, mimicry also discloses the ambivalence of the colonial discourse and deauthorizes America's position of subjectivity. It empowers Changez to question the Western ways of thinking. It challenges epistemic violence, American ethnocentrism, and impels the reader to perceive marginalization as a privileged postcolonial motif and mimicry as an anti-colonial tool that set Changez against the imperial machinery of silencing.

Key words marginalization; mimicry; subversion; deauthorization; ambivalence

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Introduction

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is the story of a drastic volte-face in the worldview of the principal character, Changez. Changez relinquishes his Pakistani self to blend in with the U.S. culture. He establishes his credentials as a top-ranking financial analyst and as the finest graduate of Princeton University. His relationship with his girlfriend, Erica, directly corresponds to his relationship with America. A smooth relationship with Erica reflects a smooth relationship with (Am) Erica, and the fading of Erica reflects fading away of the American dream. In the aftermath of 9/11, Changez experiences stiff marginalization in American society which transforms him into an explicit anti-American. He cannot come to terms with the idea of being treated as an outcast in America despite embracing the American culture by all means. The inability to reconcile with his marginalization turns him against America. He, therefore, unleashes his anger by preaching anti-Americanism to his pupils as a university lecturer in Lahore, Pakistan.

Marginalization shatters the American dream of Changez and impels him to subvert the subject position of the West. It sets Changez on a rebellious path against the imperial dominance of America. Changez's disillusionment with America is not due to his religious leanings; it is rather the result of racial/cultural insensitivity that he encounters during his stay in America. For Morton (2010), "Marginality is one of the privileged metaphors of postcolonial studies. It is from the margins of colonial subordination and oppression on the grounds of race, class and gender or religion that postcolonial writers and theorists claim political and moral authority to contest or oppose the claims of a dominant European imperial culture" (162). Marginalization provides Changez the moral justification to attack America's cultural imperialism of its non-native and especially Muslim residents: "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Edmund 126). Changez turns American consciousness on its head. He mimics the colonial culture to gain acceptance in America, though his marginalization prompts him to dismantle the American consciousness.

The colonial subject's fantasy to mimic the colonizer's culture renders Changez an outcast. The subaltern is caught up in two different worlds ideologically, while "the disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit — a grotesque mimicry or 'doubling' that threatens to split the soul and whole" (Edmund 107). Changez turns his back on the native culture to attain self-aggrandizement. His mimicry of the American norms reaffirms his otherness, while his actual self is completely at variance with his adopted colonial self. The fall of the Twin Towers serves as a turning point in the life of Changez. The toppling of the Twin Towers symbolizes the toppling of Changez's identity and dreams. He loses his sense of self in the process of acculturation: "We cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us" (105). Changez inherits certain traits from the American culture that can never be abandoned. The post 9/11-disillusioned Changez experiences a shift of perspective — the lover of America turns into the hater of the same.

By subverting the stereotypical representation of events, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows the perspective of the subaltern (Changez) on 9/11. For Parkash (1994), "The term 'subaltern,' drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture" (1477). The subaltern's version of reality challenges the U.S. ethnocentrism. Hamid tends to convey that the subaltern's narrative cannot be controlled by the West any longer. In fact, the subaltern launches a literary backlash by coming up with his own voice. Changez is subalternized on account of his cultural background. He becomes a victim to America's rising ethnocentrism in the post-9/11 phase. For instance, the insensitive remarks from a driver directed against his culture, Erica's father's diatribe against Pakistan, and his intense checking at the airport instigates Changez to revolt against the humiliation inflicted on him for being a Muslim coming from the third world. The sending of a shadowy, nameless American to allegedly murder Changez for speaking against America in front of the international media shows America's hawkish mentality. This sense of marginalization provides Changez the moral pretext to settle scores with America for treating him as an alleged terrorist.

Changez's disempowerment ironically empowers him to destabilize the Western ways of thinking. The chief goal of marginalization is to hijack the voice of the subaltern and to dispossess him of his identity. Changez's (un)silencing in the wake of marginalization impels the reader to analyze the thematic politics of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* from the non-Western optics. Changez exposes the colonial machinery which tends to treat him as the cultural other. The counter-

hegemonic practices of Changez undermine America's position of subjectivity: "Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them" (Bhabha 91). Subalternization culminates into resistance, while the (ex) colonized subverts the colonial dominance. Ironically, the desire to mimic the colonial culture turns into hatred for the same. Therefore, the mechanics of discrimination adopted by America to reduce Changez to slavery turn him into an anti-colonial agent.

In the wake of persistent marginalization, Changez makes a conscious decision to get rid of all the American influences. By shifting his loyalties towards Pakistan, Changez signals his disillusionment with America. This ideological shift is the result of racial affronts that Changez encounters during his stay in the U.S. Not only the central character spurns the guidelines of the imperialist state, he starts preaching anti-Americanism to his pupils as a university lecturer. In the article "Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*", the emphasis is on Changez's disillusionment with America: "No longer able to work for the "officers of the empire," he [Changez] returns to Pakistan to become a university lecturer" (Darda 111). Changez awakens to a new plane of existence and decides to settle scores with America that played a critical role in dividing his loyalties. He becomes overtly hostile to the American domination. He asks his compatriots to pour scorn on America for betraying Pakistan at a time of crisis. This will bring about intellectual illumination among Pakistanis: "I made it my mission on campus to advocate a disengagement from your country by mine" (Hamid 108). Changez urges Pakistanis to cut off relations with America. This is the outcome of marginalization that Changez undergoes as a Muslim and a Pakistani.

Changez as a Mimic Man

In order to avoid becoming the subject of scrutiny, Changez learns the art of camouflaging his Pakistani identity. He does not disclose to the natives of America that he hails from Pakistan. It is a calculated move to hide his origins so that he can blend in with the American culture, otherwise, he might be perceived as a threat to American culture. Changez does not want to be a social outcast: "And I learned to answer, when asked where I was from, that I was from New York. Did these things trouble me, you ask? Certainly, sir; I was often ashamed. But outwardly I gave no sign of this" (Hamid 38-39). In order to integrate with the U.S. customs, Changez intentionally relinquishes his Pakistani self. He puts on a deceptive appearance for the sake of getting benefits, though the prejudice of Americans remains unshaken:

“I was the only non-American in our group, but I suspected my Pakistaniness was invisible, cloaked by my suit, by my expense account, and—most of all—by my companions” (Hamid 42). The way Changez disguises his Pakistani self makes it clear that he does not want to incur the displeasure of his foreign colleagues. The fear of getting singled out for being a non-American prompts Changez to dress like an American.

Changez, as a subaltern, does not battle for supremacy; he wants to be on par with Americans: “The struggles waged by the oppressed and subordinated, i.e., the subalterns, were seen as struggles for recognition as equals” (Pandey 4735). In order to become socially acceptable in America, Changez imitates all the U.S. mannerisms. Since Changez’s accent exudes foreignness, his colleagues keep a high opinion of him: “I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an American. The Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues . . . and I wanted my share of that respect as well” (Hamid 38). Changez masters American accent to gain respect in the U.S.: “Whatever the reason, I was aware of an advantage conferred upon me by my foreignness, and I tried to utilize it as much as I could” (25). He fully understands that in America, a person’s sense of worth is determined by his appearance and dressing.

With his acculturation, he disregards the traditional conventions of morality. Now, he is more in pursuit of personal happiness and independence. Changez’s attempts to assimilate reaffirm his otherness: “Disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit – a grotesque mimicry or ‘doubling’ that threatens to split the soul and body” (Edmund 107). Changez desires to put on the American mask to hide his cultural origins but ends up as a misfit in the U.S. culture. Therefore, Changez subverts the colonial structure as he ‘mimes the forms of authority’ (Edmund 130). Thus, one sees how mimicry facilitates (de)authorization of the colonial machinery.

Changez becomes self-indulgent in the process of becoming an American. In order to solidify his love affair with Erica, Changez disregards the conventional standards of morality. Not only he is besotted with his girlfriend, he relishes the prospect of entering into the realms of fantasy. “My excitement about the adventures my new life held for me had never been more pronounced” (Hamid 18). It shows the sexual maturity of Changez. From an intellectually refined individual, Changez is now on his way to becoming a pleasure-seeker. In order to feel at home in America, Changez adopts a hedonistic mode of life. Transgressing all the moral boundaries, Changez intends to achieve sensual pleasure with Erica. Overcome by moral wickedness, Changez gives vent to his sexual energy by having intercourse with

Erica: “I cannot, of course, claim that I was possessed, but at the same time I did not seem to be myself. It was as though we were under a spell” (Hamid 63). Despite satiating his sexual lust, Changez does not feel any overwhelming happiness. In fact, he explains that he commits the sexual act in a state of mind where emotions take control of him.

As a result of divided loyalties, Changez experiences intense crisis of identity. He is in two different worlds ideologically: “I did not know where I stood on so many issues of consequence; 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” (Hamid 89). His intense self-examination gives an indication of his confusion. Since he is victimized in the U.S. on account of his Muslim and Pakistani identity, therefore, he starts feeling demoralized. He does not know whether he has ideological leanings towards the U.S. or his homeland Pakistan. This ambivalence is the result of American doctrines that are hammered into Changez at Princeton. Regardless of his exalted position at Underwood Samson later, he feels disempowered while his fragile identity makes him feel ashamed. Therefore, Changez renounces his Pakistani self and adopts the ways of Chris (Erica’s ex-lover) to be at home in America: “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Edmund 130). Changez mimics the American norms to avoid becoming the victim of racism in the U.S. It establishes Changez as America’s cultural other. The ambivalence of the colonial power, especially in terms of the acculturation of the non-native other, deauthorizes the supremacy of America’s colonial subjectivity.

Looking at Changez, Erica’s father makes a gross assumption that Changez might be a fanatic as he wears a beard. Changez, nonetheless, enlightens Erica’s father that he was clean shaven when he first came to America. Actually, the treatment that Changez receives in the U.S. in the form of racial insensitivity, intense inspection on ethnic grounds, and attack on his cultural belonging impels him to keep beard as a mark of protest: “Perhaps you misconstrue the significance of my beard, which, I should in any case make clear, I had not yet kept when I arrived in New York” (Hamid 32). In the same vein, Changez observes that the nameless American is looking at his beard with suspicion. The Americans brand the bearded people as terrorists following the attacks on World Trade Center. Changez urges the American visitor to cast off his preconceived notions about Pakistanis. Changez clarifies that beard is a cultural symbol, and not a symbol of provocation: “Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America” (Hamid 1). Keeping “lustrous beard” (45), therefore, does not indicate

that he harbours an active ill-will for the Western community. The yardstick to determine one's character should not be one's appearance. This again endorses that in the post-9/11 phase, the U.S. citizens keep a biased opinion against Muslims. In the view of the U.S. tendency to generalize things about Muslims, Changez tries to remove misconceptions about Muslim cultural symbols.

As a testament to the U.S. hatred for Muslim cultural symbols, Changez is subjected to discriminatory attitude in the U.S. as he does not shave his beard. Wainwright urges Changez to reconsider his decision of keeping beard, as the colleagues at Underwood Samsung have reservations about it. Changez encounters cultural resistance in America; it prompts him to mentally detach himself from everything that is associated with the U.S. This voluntary mental disengagement with the U.S. is a defining point in Changez's life. "Wainwright tried to offer me some friendly advice. 'Look, man,' he said, 'I don't know what's up with the beard, but I don't think it's making you Mister Popular around here'" (Hamid 78). Bhabha, in relation to this, holds, "And it (mimicry) is a double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation /recognition of the colonial object" (Bhabha 88). Changez is treated as an outcast because of his beard. The Americans cast aspersions on the identity of Changez for his non-native (ness).

In the wake of 9/11 attack, the ideological gulf between America and Pakistan widens. With the recent commencement of hostilities, Changez faces racial bigotry in America. While Changez tries to live an orderly life with his American colleagues, he is treated as a shady character. This tactical maneuver of the U.S. brings Changez out of his comfort zone. Therefore, he lambastes American racial intolerance by remaining a part of the U.S. culture: "You can never represent or act from an 'outside', since you are always already situated inside discourse, culture, institutions, geopolitics" (Kapoor 640). Even his colleagues make him an object of ridicule: "I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares" (Hamid 78). On account of wearing beard, Changez gives discomfort to his colleagues at Underwood Samson.

Changez experiences an uncanny feeling of pleasure on the collapse of World Trade Center. America is castrated and stripped of its colonial, phallogocentric self the same way it had castrated Changez and made him give up his ethnoreligious identity. Nevertheless, he elicits "looks of concern" (Hamid 44) since he is perceived as a threat to the security of Americans. Regardless of Changez's influential position in his company, his religio-cultural background makes him a possible suspect in the attack on twin towers. The security personnel constantly keeps an eye on Changez,

as he does not look like an American. Changez, at all this, feigns composure, though Jim senses his unease: “My entrance elicited looks of concern from many of my fellow passengers. I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion” (Hamid 44). Two Americans hurl insults at Changez by calling him a “fucking Arab” (Hamid 70). This derogatory epithet prompts Changez to change his ideological position with respect to the U.S. He feels outraged for being marginalized at a place that claims to be the home of cultural pluralism. In fact, Changez intends to have a war of words with the people who mock him on the basis of his ethnicity and religion: “‘Fucking Arab,’ he said. I am not, of course, an Arab. Nor am I, by nature, a gratuitously belligerent chap. But my blood throbbed in my temples” (Hamid 70). Being on the periphery proves epiphanic for Changez since “Marginality is one of the privileged metaphors of postcolonial studies. It is from the margins of colonial subordination and oppression on the grounds of race, class and gender or religion that postcolonial writers and theorists claim political and moral authority to contest or oppose the claims of a dominant European imperial culture” (Morton 162). Changez’s marginalization, therefore, proves to be a springboard that throws him up to his own awakening.

In a fierce polemic, Erica’s father gives a disapproving portrayal of Pakistan. He himself has never been to Pakistan, while the way he decries the culture of Pakistan gives a hint of his racial bias. By relying on the articles published in the US journals, Erica’s father launches a diatribe against Pakistan. He makes fun of the style of governance prevalent in Changez’s homeland and believes that the upper class is exploitative. Most important of all, Pakistanis, for Erica’s father, are charged “with fundamentalism” (Hamid 33). Similarly, the country’s “Economy’s falling apart though, no? Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers . . . And fundamentalist. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism” (33). Pakistan is painted as a place unable to govern itself. It is on the verge of destruction. As a matter of fact, “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest” (Bhabha 70). The colonial machinery constructs its cultural other to justify the exercise of colonialism. Ironically, however, disempowerment of the colonized turns on its head and leads to subversion of the colonial apparatus.

With a sea change in the U.S. policy for Muslims, Changez discovers the dehumanizing treatment given to him following the attacks on World Trade Center. A clampdown is started against the Muslims to track down the suspected engineers of the attack. By stripping the Muslims of their self-respect, the U.S. proceeds

according to her new plan. With this new desensitized version of America, the loss of Muslims' identity becomes an ordinary occurrence. Not only the Muslims are put into custody, they are killed under the guise of interrogation. How "the FBI was raiding mosques" (Hamid 56) shows that U.S. suspects Muslims to be the attackers of World Trade Center. And so, "Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives . . . Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse" (56). In the guise of interrogation, third degree torture is carried out against Muslims. The deaths of Muslims in FBI's custody show how Americans treated the outsiders following the attacks on World Trade Center.

In the recent ideological offense against the Muslims, the U.S. makes the contracts of Muslims null and void. The "groundless dismissals" (72) of Muslims highlight the rage of the U.S. community. Americans wish to oust Muslims from their country, so that the potential threat to their security can be minimized. Changez, however, still wants to serve the American Empire, as he is in the quest of selfish pursuits. In the aftermath of the "September attacks" (72), the U.S. blacklists Muslims: "I had heard tales of the discrimination Muslims were beginning to experience in the business world— stories of rescinded job offers and groundless dismissals" (Hamid 72). The insulting treatment given to Muslims in America shows what the U.S. culture actually stands for. Despite the claims of being a multiethnic society, America shows racial bias against Muslims in the post-9/11 phase.

Changez dices with death by expressing his anti-American views in front of the international media. The frequent replaying of the video might propel the U.S. to make Changez pay for denouncing her foreign policy. The U.S. knows the art of silencing the voices of resistance. America follows a violent course of action to eliminate all the potential threats to their system: "But my brief interview appeared to resonate: it was replayed for days, and even now an excerpt of it can be seen in the occasional war-on-terror montage" (Hamid 110). Towards the end of the novel, the nameless American puts hand in his jacket to settle all the disputes with gun which shows that he is a trained CIA operative. Changez is, therefore, under constant American scrutiny for lambasting America on international media.

Against the backdrop of marginalization, Changez starts questioning the motives of the nameless American whose ways confirm Changez's suspicion that the former is an undercover U.S. agent. Soldiers truly understand the pre-wartime anxieties that unsettle the contestants. It can be perceived as counter-accusation on the American colleague. On a macro level, it represents the deterioration of relationship between Pakistan and the US: "Aha! Then you have been in the service,

sir, just as I suspected! Would you not agree that waiting for what is to come is the most difficult part? Yes, quite so, not as difficult as the time of carnage itself—said, sir, like a true soldier” (Hamid 77). The nameless American considers Pakistan an intolerant society and believes that his life is in jeopardy in Pakistan. Changez experiences cultural insensitivity and ethnic persecution abroad, which compels him attack the double standards of America. Changez and the nameless American have serious doubts on each other’s integrity. This symbolizes the fissures that characterize the relationship of Pakistan and America in the post-9/11 phase.

Conclusion

Marginalization empowers Changez to destabilize the Western ways of thinking. He removes his Eurocentric optics and challenges the epistemic violence against the colonized in the post-9/11 world order. His (un)silencing marks a watershed in his career, as he recovers his identity and starts preaching anti-Americanism to his pupils. The reactionary Changez deauthorizes America’s position of subjectivity through his colonial mimicry. He unsettles the American colonial machinery of silencing by highlighting the modes of discrimination adopted against the colonized. Changez’s marginalization, on one hand, disposes him of his identity, though it ironically provides him the moral grounds to unlock his fundamentalist self. So, marginalization is a privileged postcolonial motif as it impels Changez to adopt mimicry as a form of resistance. The disempowerment of Changez, therefore, turns on its head and leads to the subversion of the colonial hegemony.

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