

## Liberal Humanism in The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid

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DOI: [10.59445/ijephss.1563569](https://doi.org/10.59445/ijephss.1563569)

**Atf / Cite:** Hashemipour, S., (2025). Liberal humanism in the reluctant fundamentalist by mohsin hamid, *International Journal of Economics, Politics, Humanities & Social Sciences*, 8(1), 38-46, <https://doi.org/10.59445/ijephss.1563569>

### Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

**Makale İlk Gönderim Tarihi / Recieved (First):** 08.10.2024

**Makale Kabul Tarihi / Accepted:** 23.12.2024

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### Abstract

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid sparks a debate on liberal humanism, and its repercussion during post-9/11 throws Neo-Orientalism and Islamic terrorism into question—recounted by Hamid. The novel mirrors all aspects of humanism and liberal intellection as a cultural product of humanism in the West. Hamid’s sensibilities of the fluctuant Western paradigm opposing immigrants, fundamentalism, and terrorism during post-9/11 is depicted from the protagonist’s perspective. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is invigorated in a threshold world of multiple borders—of characters and cultures—by the medium of brace contradictions. The protagonist observes the sufferings of his beloved city/woman and stages his changed position in society while the world of his dreams is crumbled, and he must select between staying in the country of his dreams or returning home country. Accordingly, this study surveys the neoliberal American society in the context of liberal humanism globally after the polarization of Islam/liberalism in the realm of Orientalism discourse due to Mohsin Hamid’s display of the U.S.A.

**Keywords:** Liberal Humanism, Post-9/11, Mohsin Hamid, U.S.A., *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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## 1. Introduction

During the past decades, a new generation of authors such as Alex Haley, Doctorow, Germaine Greer, Toni Morrison, Tom Wolfe, and Salman Rushdie was interested in social and historical events emerged, and a few decades later, fiction in the realm of the post-impact of 9/11 caused a critical threshold for many critics to discuss post-9/11 fiction as a literary genre. Don DeLillo and John Updike in the U.S. and Ian McEwan and Martin Amis in the U.K. dealt with the socio-political and socio-psychological aspects of 9/11 exposed in fiction and mass media—published in *Guardian*, *The Observer*, or *The Independent*. This study addresses subtle manifestations via connections between culture and power notion in a controversial work of contemporary American literature. What distinguishes this study from other reviews of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid is the liberal-humanist notion underlying the theme of this novel. By dealing with the post-9/11 process, the narrator makes the reader feel empathy and notes cultural liberation as a vital notion for the expansion of liberalism. Thus, here, liberal humanism highlights the moral function of fiction under ethics, discussed by Hartnell (2010), who examines the novel in the context of post-9/11 multiculturalism by studying racism in the U.S., and Shamsie (2009) discussed two contrasting dual identities—Eastern/Western—of the protagonist.

## 2. What Is Liberal Humanism?

An emerged post-9/11 fiction is a sample of liberal humanism, an approach that treasures human rights for liberty. Attacked by theories such as Marxism and Feminism, liberal humanism inspired reliance on rationality and the quest for truth due to the modern Western prospect of freedom—as the principal of humanism—by emphasizing the individual within the scope of rights—in relation to rational Romanticism, with a reaction to Enlightenment Rationalism. Humanism discusses humanity through criticism of democracy in the realm of class, gender, ethnicity, or racial issues. The establishment of humanity under the norms of rights is linked to Kant’s transcendental and Hegelian idealism in neo-Kantian and socialist approaches such as the Frankfurt school. Governments consolidate rights, which makes the modern Western judicial system challenged by humanism and its legal norms. The moral values of liberal democracy in governmental policy guarantees human rights are distorted due to politico-legal populism as Ronald Steel says, Easterners hate them for being “champion [of] a ‘new world order’ of capitalism, individualism, secularism and democracy,” which became “the norm everywhere,” end to whatever Robert Fisk, Mary Robinson, and Noam Chomsky call “crime against humanity” (2001: 101). This sanctioned ‘openness’ is the debate Žižek challenges organizational liberalism imposed by the bureaucratic ethos of liberal democratic institutions. (De Cock & Böhm, 2007)

The quest for undermining the text is detached from context, and by bearing individuality as a distinct transcendent subject, liberal humanism doctrines literature procures meaning out of cliché or inflated norms of ideological/political assumptions. The discourses of liberalism and humanism put rationality and individuality as the basis and freedom as the humanistic discourse. The central difference between liberalism and other humanist discourses is the concept of freedom and its achievement. Due to the roots of humanism in the classics and the polyphonic nature of literary fiction, all authors are humanists. The rediscovery of classical literature stands by “Humanism, with its reverence for classical authors” (Cartwright, 2024). However, for authors who find the liberal aspect of freedom a common foundation of humanism and individualism, the scope is limited. Liberalism examines humanity through the lens of individualism, which is the metaphysical and ontological core of liberal thought and the foundation of moral, political, economic, and cultural aspects. For individualism, everyone is ontologically prior to social structures and, morally and legally, takes priority over society in political, social, economic, moral, and religious realms.

Capitalism as a cursor of liberalism and individualism occasioned liberal humanism to support proprietarily capital-oriented individualism. Although liberalism distances itself from democracy, it does not set into the capitalist political system, but "... in time, liberalism and capitalism became compatible with democracy". (Popa, 2012: 590) Hobbes first proposed the underlying foundation of individualism, and later, other liberal thinkers, including Locke, Hume, Bentham, Adam Smith, Spencer, and John Stuart Mill, strengthened it and defined liberal democracy. For Hobbes, humanity is a commodity priced according to the demand, and "a state of nature, that is, a condition without government" (Lloyd & Sreedhar, 2022). John Locke's theory of proprietary individualism and Hobbes's theory of social contract find property a primary right and a priority to the capitalists. Prescribing the masses by the social contract, John Stuart Mill, the founder of liberal democracy, discusses individualism through materialism; thus, "liberal justice [is a] respect for liberty and fairness in the distribution of material resources" (Kymlicka, 1989: 885). John Stuart Mill defends the public right to vote but denies the capitalists' equal notion of poverty.

Social liberalism supports state welfare and freedom; it is distanced from Hobbesian individualism and follows a type of liberalism adopted in socialist democracy. (Rothstein, 2024) By the mid-19th century, individualism emerged, and the lower classes, impressed by the capitalist system, alarmed the liberals. Due to the irreplaceable role of individualism in liberal rationality, proprietary individualism flowed again by neoliberals who believed the welfare state encroached its bounds on privacy and legitimate individual freedoms. Thus, the aggressor government should be pushed back and not mess the masses with the same political rights. Here, Hayek's critique of pluralist democracy discusses depriving government employees, salary earners, the elderly, and the unemployed of voting and taking an active role in society, "as a form of government that characteristically degenerates into a regime of force and fraud." (Moore, 2016: 48) For authoritarians and liberals, the government protects property and citizens and sets rules to settle peace (Waldron, 1998: 600) under governmental authority.

The conflict between liberalism and democracy is a hidden issue, and the inconsistencies of liberalism and democracy in terms of individualism without the proper dominance of ethical liberalism seem far-fetched. Accordingly, Terry Eagleton reflects on the weak side of liberal humanism, in which freedom, individual rights, and democracy are abstract international policies: "Liberal humanism is a suburban moral ideology, limited in practice to largely interpersonal matters....and its valuable concern [is] with freedom, democracy and individual rights are simply not concrete enough.... Its view of individual freedom is similarly abstract" (Eagleton, 2008: 181).

Noam Chomsky (2002) believes that only a few intellectuals were not in the service of power (p.261), and Edward Said's explanation of the relationship between culture and imperialism elaborately deals with the essential connection between texts that the string of various connections interweaves them globally. (Said, 1993: 39) The novel places a cultural manifest in the global context, and for Said, the relation between a literary genre—e.g., novel—and imperialism is beyond a substantive relationship. By analyzing the novel—as a cultural product—the subtle cultural manifestations of imperialism are applicable. Liberal humanism is closely connected with the latest stage of the evolution of the long-standing discourse of Orientalism, such as neo-orientalism. For Said, "...it is genuinely troubling to see how little Britain's great humanistic ideas...having the power ahistorically to command over approval, how little they stand in the way of the accelerating imperial process" (1993: 82). This old phenomenon is a reconstruction of classical Orientalism designed to justify American imperialism's aggressiveness in the Middle East as a threat to Western civilization's assumptions. For Head (2008), "9/11 marks a watershed in literary history... the end of a particularly confident phase, legitimately characterized as the internationalization of the novel" (p.100); however, family and domestic realization distances us—from a break in the literary understanding of cosmopolitanism. The Western policy of

post-9/11 in the U.S.—regarding the Middle East—realized a new phase after obscure domination of colonization and imperialist presence in the realm of justification and public persuasion in the 21st-century war on Afghanistan and then Iraq.

The idea of the East's inferiority compared to the West's modernity is a redefinition of a long-standing theoretical cornerstone of neo-colonialism, in which the West presents a model, and civilizations adopt it. Stereotyped Orientalism in the post-9/11 era is attributed to the Easterners' shift to a "Muslim East"—a Eurocentric archetypal Hegelian understanding. Accordingly, "radical, uncompromising, unconvertible Otherness of Islam" (Almond, 2007: 171) is due to "[the] consensual reduction of Islam to the global order" (Almond, 2007: 172), which is considered "irreducible" due to "the law of democracy and the New World Order" and "the most radical form of anti-Western challenge", which Baudrillard emphasizes. (Almond, 2007: 172) The West has resorted to myth-making and proposed Huntington's political myth of the clash of civilizations to align the world's public opinion with its war policies. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World* is in response to Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which Fukuyama—referencing Hegel's theory—finds liberal democracy the ideological evolution of humankind and the best form of government. In September 2002, America declared its national security strategy to maintain its global dominance and remove any obstacle by resorting to force. (Chomsky, 2003)

Bottici and Challand (2010) investigate the mechanism of political myth-making as a narrative to respond to politico-social goals, including curbing free thinking on global issues and neutralizing decisions and policies in the global system. In cultural-based media analysis, the clash of civilizations has become a cognitive scheme for realizing today's time and age by an aesthetic form of stimulating humanism. (p.3) In the shadow of such policies and myth-making, countless unasked questions are left unanswered because the mere fact that they are asked will reveal the contradictory, dual, and hypocritical nature of the modern era. Due to this allegorical understanding, these questions are linked to power issues, for which Chomsky procured a story narrated by St. Augustine: Alexander the Great asks a pirate on what grounds he abuses the seas, and the pirate answers, "Because I do it with a little ship only, I am called a thief; you, doing it with a great navy, are called an Emperor." (2002: vii)

### 3. Liberal Humanism and Changez

In such a novel supposed to reveal humanistic aspects, the United States' position is debated from a liberal humanist perspective. For Eagleton (1985), "liberal humanism...lies creative exploration, richness of personal response," and (p.99) "a suburban moral ideology, limited in practice to largely interpersonal matters." (p.181) Here, postmodernism is more or less the same as liberal humanism: "It is this prison camp which the liberal humanists guard and patrol, believing as they do that it is one—perhaps *the*—enclave of freedom." (Eagleton, 1985: 99) Thus, Liberal humanism is "a literary ideology not because it always finds its own moral values" but because "[it] is perfectly able to identify moral and political values in literature whose implications would subvert its own ideology." (Eagleton, 1985: 100) However, Eagleton (1985) continues, "Now if liberal humanism is ideologically bankrupt...it is so because it cannot really survive the scandalous modern insight" (Eagleton, 1985: 100). Liberal humanism "[is] imagining free or potentially free subject whose creative experience is then stifled and shackled by *external* powers." (Eagleton, 1985: 100) Although "it would have nowhere else to go" (Eagleton, 1985: 101), "all good liberal humanist desire a transformed society, that is to say one marked by peace, justice, and loving kindness," although "is in utter self-contradiction." (Eagleton, 1985: 103)

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the protagonist's transformation into a control freak of destiny is the myth of liberal humanism. Changez, chained to social events and the historical paradigm, unsatisfactorily shifts his role from a dependent human—due to the tragedy of modern liberalism to

control his destiny as a victim of the social realm—to the dominant social and historical situations fundamentally exposed. Due to the evolutionary course of human consciousness, Changez, as an immigrant, doubts the essence of historical awareness out of the Western globalization understanding. Here, Capitalism's impact on Western societies is studied by Liberalism; the society comprises individuals, and liberals challenge governmental/personal dichotomy thoroughly. (Reilly, 1999: 479)

Western humanistic approaches in the Middle Ages and thereafter humanism's emergence that dates back to the Renaissance associates human centrality, and global orientation. The phenomenon of humanism and its later form, liberal humanism, is so vague and turbulent that any exact definition is tangled. For Davies (1997), "powerful connotations" and "ideological allegiance" of liberalism and its very imprecision make it "a shibboleth of approval or deprecation." (p.3). The origin of liberalism, as the cognate of humanism, goes back to the Renaissance and religious maturation during the 18th and 19th centuries. Initially, humanism and religion were not in conflict; religious humanists and Protestant reformers such as John Milton and Thomas More were sacrificed to reform the church to lead humanism rout secularism. However, secular humanists have traditionally contrasted science with religion since the Enlightenment (Norman, 2004: 45), and there is an essential contrast between the religious aspect of humanism during the Renaissance and its modern version. (Norman, 2004: 14) Changez talks about subjects "not permitted" to be discussed "religion, for example, and sexual orientation" (Hamid, 2007: 8) and religion restrictions that prevent him from getting his love, Erica. He confesses as grown up in "a tradition of shared rituals of mysticism" (Hamid, 2007: 140) but in New York, he realizes the effects of being "on the threshold of great change" when everything is "transformed" (Hamid, 2007: 150). He is "not at war with America" (Hamid, 2007: 73).

One justification of imperialism is the mission of civilizing in the realm of the humanistic dignity of equality, which helps Westerners justify globalism under cultural civilization. Here, anti-religion manifestation is the demonstrated threat of terrorism—equivalent to Islam—in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Mohsin Hamid's storyteller, Changez, is well-educated, and his career makes him a cognitive protagonist; his empiricist approach pervades being subjected to liberal humanism's skeptical and questioning entity. Changez says, "I was not at war with America. Far from it: I was the product of an American university.... So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?" (Hamid, 2007: 73) Changez queries the liberal intellectualism of the West, as he empathizes emotionally with the opponents of the war and replaces facts with meta-narratives. (Hulme, 1986: 15) He says, "I was confronting the possibility that soon my country could be at war" or watch news on "war on-terror montage" (Hamid, 2007: 182).

Liberalism and democracy after the Enlightenment resorted to values such as empiricism and utilitarianism to form a colonial mentality among intellectuals. (Habib, 2008: 225) The Enlightenment and the rational idealism after the 20th century in defining liberal-political postmodern rationality led to fascism. (Szahaj, 2005: 206) The impact of post-9/11 and the conflict between the Eastern and Western civilizations makes a debate on the ideological struggle between religion and literature in the Islamophobic works of authors such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. For example, Martin Amis finds ideology "a belief system with an inadequate basis in reality" and religion "a belief system with no basis in reality"; thus, "Religious belief is without reason and without dignity, and its record is near-universally dreadful." (Amis, 2002) Many authors of post-9/11, like Mohsin Hamid, created a counter-narrative, and liberal novelists turned to the creation of literary myths. (DeLillo, 2001: 34) Hamid imposes us to intercept narrative arrangements while challenging stereotypes "to be the kind of deterritorialized reader demanded by the emerging category of world literature" (Morey, 2011: 135).

According to Eagleton (1985), a human liberalist novel has a political appeal of moral techniques to build subjectivity in line with capitalist society's defined forms of value. In *The Reluctant*

*Fundamentalist*, the economy causes fundamentalism. For Giddens (2002), globalization is settled on the conflict between cosmopolitanism and fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a reading of a text in the social, economic, and political realms (p.47) first applied to the beliefs of followers of Protestantism in the U.S. who had rejected Darwin, and until the late 1950s, this word was not defined in the Oxford Dictionary (p.47). In Hamid's interpretation of the post-9/11 paradigm, fundamentalism cannot be independent of the West, and Changez is a graduate of an American university who works for a successful American business company and assures that he is "a believer in nonviolence" (Hamid, 2007: 181). To comprehend fundamentalism through economics, Žižek says, "The only way to conceive of what happened on September 11 is to locate it in the context of the antagonisms of global capitalism." (Lecouras, 2010: 49) For Hamid, this novel is the story of a person who encountered the capitalist system (Singh, 2012: 154) that is why Changez says, "The economy's an animal....That's where I wanted to be....We came from places that were wasting away." (Hamid, 2007: 96-97)

Fundamentalism can be studied in the public and the elite/non-public arena. From the novel's beginning—fully aware of the confiscation of the Western media's representation of fundamentalism—explores the signs of fundamentalism in literary, political, and social spheres from Changez's perspective. Thus, returned from Chile, Changez realizes "New York was in mourning after the destruction of the World Trade Center, and floral motifs figured prominently in the shrines to the dead and the missing that had sprung up in my absence." (Hamid, 2007: 78-79) He gradually realizes "[his] days of focusing on fundamentals were done" (Hamid, 2007: 153-154), and in the West, "[they] have got some serious problems with fundamentalism" (Hamid, 2007: 55).

All forms of fundamentalism are spiritualities besieged by the secular policy of decipherment. Fundamentalists fear the destruction of beliefs and struggle to strengthen their identity by reviving customs. (Armstrong, 2000: 2) The most important characteristic of fundamentalism, which is a fear of modernity, demonstrates the golden age of mental peace. (Armstrong, 2000: 28-29) The myth of the Golden Age makes fundamentalists mix historical reality and legends. (Ruthven, 2007: 56) Changez exposes his past to American readers without adherence to Islamic restrictions out of fundamentalism in the Western media and fiction. In Pakistan and after immigration, drinking alcohol and having intimacies with women represent Changez as a cultural Muslim rather than a fundamentalist. (Moore-Gilbert, 2012: 195) Lost in an imaginary past prevents us from knowing the present accurately and making precise decisions. As Changez says, "[We] have acquired a certain familiarity with the recent history of our surroundings...allows us to put the present into much better perspective." (Hamid, 2007: 45)

#### 4. Conclusion

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, the present and the past are delicately interwoven, and the reader is confused about how the past is seen in the present. This study discusses the liberal humanism represented in light of the post-9/11 events, the invasion of the U.S. to Afghanistan, neo-Orientalism, and the generated Islamic terrorism in the West. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a cultural product of manifestations of humanism and liberal thought in the West—through rationalism and human rights centrality in art and literature—emphasizes humanism thoroughly. Despite the apparent questioning of the novel's protagonist, queries about the contemporary world remain unanswered. Despite the apparent quest of the protagonist, basic debates on the state of the world in our age and time remain blank. Avoiding bias consideration and comebacks regarding issues is the basic quest of liberal humanism pursuant to socio-political and economic contexts. The novel's humanistic perspective of avoiding bias and dealing fairly with all aspects of the power issues is a well-representer of liberal humanism in the context of individualism.



### **Competing Interest**

*The author declares that he has no competing interests.*

### **Fundings and Acknowledgments**

*This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.*

### **Ethical Statement**

*It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.*

### **Author's Contributions**

*This article was created as a result of the author's own efforts and reviews.*

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