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*Araştırma Makalesi*

## MEMORY AND IDEOLOGY IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist, published in 2007, is a novel that focuses on the ideological standpoint of a young Pakistani man, Changez, who seeks for a solid standing ground in his own cultural origins after his educational and professional life in the US that westernized him fully. The novel, narrated within a frame story, is set on a single evening in Lahore where Changez tells his life back in America to an American in a café. Changez's narration follows the story of his past with flashbacks and he leads the reader through his ideological change. Thus, purpose of this study is to question Changez's ideological change after the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York 2001. As memory traces his own past through what he went under during the 9/11 attacks, his approach to his western acquaintance in the Lahore café changes. This paper, therefore, raises questions as to whether memories change one's ideology in terms of their political stance, or one's cultural origins that determine them.*

**Keywords:** Memory, Ideology, Culture, Islamophobia, Postmodern Novel.

## MOHSIN HAMID'İN GÖNÜLSÜZ KÖKTENDİNCİ ROMANINDA BELLEK VE İDEOLOJİ<sup>2</sup>

### Öz

*Mohsin Hamid'in 2007'de yayımlanan Gönülsüz Köktendinci romanı Pakistan kökenli genç Cengiz'in ideolojik duruşundaki değişimlere odaklanan bir romandır. Cengiz Amerika'da kendisini bütünüyle batılılaştıran eğitim ve iş yaşamından sonra kendi kültürel kökenlerine dönerek sağlam bir duruş noktası aramaktadır. Roman Lahor'da bir akşam vakti*

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geçmektedir. Bu çerçeveye öykü içinde Cengiz Amerika'daki yaşamını Lahor'daki bir kafede oturan bir Amerikalıya anlatır. Cengiz'in anlatısı geriye dönüşlerle geçmişine giderek, ideolojik değişiminin izini sürer. Bu çalışmanın amacı Cengiz'in 11 Eylül saldırılarından sonraki ideolojik değişimini sorgulamaktır. Belleği kendi geçmişinin izini 11 Eylül saldırıları sırasında yaşadıkları üzerinden sürmeye başladıkça, Lahor'daki kafede oturan Amerikalıya karşı yaklaşımı da değişmektedir. Bu nedenle bu çalışma belleğin kişinin ideolojisini ve siyasal duruşunu ya da bu duruşu belirleyen kültürel kökenlerine karşı yaklaşımını değiştirip değiştirmeyeceğini sorgulamayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bellek, İdeoloji, Kültür, İslamofobi, Postmodern Roman.

## INTRODUCTION

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, published in 2007, is a novel that focuses on the ideological standpoint of a young Pakistani man, Changez, who seeks for a solid standing ground in his own cultural origins after his educational and professional life in the US that fully westernized him. The novel, narrated within a frame story of a single evening in Lahore, recounts the story of Changez, the narrator protagonist who tells his life back in America to an American in a local café. Changez's narration follows the story of his past with flashbacks and he leads the reader through his ideological change as he rewrites his past with graphic details that intensify his Occidentalism.

The purpose of this study is to question Changez's ideological change after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York 2001. As memory traces his own past through what he went under during the 9/11 attacks, his approach to his western acquaintance in the Lahore café changes. There rise inevitable questions as to whether memories can change one's ideology in terms of their political stance or one's cultural origins that determine them. "The fixity of location in Lahore" which is "the narrative real time" of the narration as Harleen Singh suggests, is the opposite of "the cosmopolitanism of the American existence", that is "the recall of memory", situating the Pakistani and the US citizen "as inhabitants of divergent worlds and temporalities" (Singh, 2012, p. 26). Memory in the novel becomes a medium through which the ideological perception is modified. Therefore, Changez's memory turns into a postcolonial resistance to stand against what the Western world imposed upon him, and, by this, Changez re-writes his own past in America. The methodology of this study will include the analysis of the fundamental concepts of postcolonial theory such as hybridity, ambiguity and mimicry before Changez returns to Lahore, as well as emphasizing the issue Islamophobia that came into being particularly after the 9/11 attacks.

## HAMID AS A POSTCOLONIAL AUTHOR

Margaret Scanlan points out that many postcolonial writers including Mohsin Hamid "have produced novels that challenge the simplicity of public rhetoric" since September 2001 and they find themselves "on the treacherous fault-

line between the binaries of terrorist discourse”, between “native and alien” or between “Islam and the secular West” (Scanlan, 2010, p. 267). As the work of a formerly colonized subject, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the narrative of the new immigrant and a story of returning to the postcolonial nation. Mohsin Hamid, as the representative of the new generation of British Asian writers pioneered by the authors including Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, introduces a new kind of historical reading of the post-Islamophobic era from the perspective of a formerly westernized Asian individual. The protagonist Changez’s situation in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* invites an analysis of the text in terms of cultural dislocation. As a successful and educated immigrant who returned home, he suffers from nostalgia in the reverse. While postcolonial immigrants in the west emotionally fall into nostalgia for home, Changez nostalgically longs for the west.

Changez, a successful Pakistani young man, was educated at Princeton, employed at a financial company called Underwood Samson – the initials of which recall the United States – with high salary and had a relationship with a young American woman from a well-off family living in New York. Having realized the American dream, he never got involved with the other Muslims and Pakistanis in the US while he always attempted to adapt to the upper middle class largely dominated by white Americans. When he decides to return to Bombay after 9/11, he finds that settling himself back at home has its own hardships as he always compares his local and traditional life to his life in America.

As Changez suffers from nostalgia, his identity problems get even more difficult to overcome. Yet, this is an inevitable difficulty, since the change in one’s dwelling place generates a new meaning which produces its own reality and conditions. In the beginning of his essay ‘Imaginary Homelands’, Rushdie reminds us of the opening of Leslie Poles Hartley’s *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (Hartley, 2011, p. 5). Then he reverts this perspective and suggests that his present is what is foreign to him and his past is his home, “albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (Rushdie, 1992, p. 9). Rushdie feels lost in the past, because he argues that “the past is a country” from which everybody has emigrated and “its loss is a part of our common humanity”, and, thus, the writers in exile who are out of their own language “may experience this loss in an intensified form.” (Rushdie, 1992, p. 12)

Personal memory overlaps history and immigrants are forced to create an imaginary reality or an alternative history of the homeland. However, in Changez’s case in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the imaginary reality and alternative history are created for the west rather than the homeland, because Changez’s narration is the account of his own transformation from the westernized Asian immigrant back to a local, settled down Muslim identity who is conversant in western values. The overlapping of past and present is regarded as a postmodern discourse as suggested by Goonetilleke who claims that “in postmodern fiction, the boundaries of the past

and the present, too, are often transgressed ... challenged and ... investigated” (Goonetilleke, 1998, p. 50). If “nostalgia connotes evasion of present” and idealization of a fantasy, a past or a recovery of that past as a heavenly place in Hutcheon’s terms, then “the postmodernist ironic rethinking of history is definitely not nostalgic”, because it confronts the past with the present and “in a direct reaction against the tendency of our times to value only the new and novel, it returns us to a re-thought past to see what ... is of value in that past experience” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 39). In Changez’s situation, he does not try to see what is of value in his past, but he rather tries to find what is to be scorned in that period of time. The fact that past is imagined and re-created by immigrants draws a clear distinction between what is fictional and real. Since immigrants are distanced from home, the reality they imagine about their homeland is fictional. Their translated self no more suits the conditions of an imagined past, because his attachment to his hometown and his own cultural identity is not only a result of nostalgia but also a complement of his imagination. Yet, there is something ironical at that point according to Hutcheon who suggests that there is a doubled-edged condition: “the past and the present are judged in each other’s light” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 39).

### PERSONAL MEMORY AND IDEOLOGY

Memory, as an unreliable way of reconstructing the past, is ideologically motivated. If perception is ideological on the bases of one’s political stance, then memory is ideological, too. First of all, memory fictionalizes the past and thus politicizes it. It is unreliable, because it is based on lack of evidence. The only evidence that one relies on, when one remembers the past, is the personal memory and personal recollection of past events. For that reason, memory may be misleading as a result of individual experiences.

Changez, the narrator protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, recalls his past in the US and narrates it from his very own personal perspective. The US, in his own recollection, is intermingled with his personal memory. As his dwelling place in the past, US becomes the source of his Occidental reconstruction of America’s political history after 9/11 attacks which made him realise his non-western identity and his cultural refrain from the western ideological dominance. Thus, as Harleen Singh argues, “memory, and history prompted by 9/11, the multiple and shifting notions of the ‘other’ ... converge to form a singular entity” when the feelings are in question (Singh, 2012, p. 25).

After his return to Lahore, one day he notices a western stranger on the streets. He approaches the unnamed stranger and says:

*Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. ... I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services.* (Hamid, 2007, p. 1)

Changez thinks that the Stranger looks American and takes him to a nearby cafe where they have something to eat and drink. Although the stranger is completely silent throughout the novel, the narrative strategy of the text denotes that the stranger is fearfully oppressed by the local storyteller. He becomes the target of Changez's frustration towards the western culture, which represents, in the hindsight, his anger for the loss of his former life in the US. During the whole afternoon and evening, Changez tells the Stranger about his time in the United States: "I spent four and a half years in your country. Where? I worked in New York, and before that attended college in New Jersey. Yes, you are right: it was Princeton!" (Hamid, 2007, p. 3)

During his nerve-breaking conversation with the American in Lahore, he tells the stranger how he succeeded in the US as a young educated yuppie and how his relationship with an American woman came to an end. Recalling how he met that woman, he points out the way he was holding on to the western values and how he was integrated into a western circle of friends:

*We assembled in Athens, having arrived on different flights, and when I first saw Erica, I could not prevent myself from offering to carry her backpack ... . Her hair was piled up like a tiara on her head, and her navel ... was visible beneath a short T-shirt bearing an image of Chairman Mao.* (Hamid, 2007, p. 19)

Changez, as Rushdie once pointed out about *Midnight's Children's* Saleem, is an unreliable narrator, as he combines his personal fragility and his personal fragmentation with the Islamophobic fragmentation of the relationship between east and west. "[F]orgetting" in Homi Bhabha's terms "creates an uncertainty" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 15). The more he recounts his past the more he becomes aware of the fact that his relationship with the American woman constitutes the core of his Occidental political approach to the post-9/11 history, because, to quote Bhabha once again, "historical agency" transforms itself "through the signifying process" and historical events are "represented in a discourse that is *somehow beyond control*" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 18). His smooth breakthrough in the American society in the beginning was from that of an immigrant. He was successful, earning a high salary, and not an outsider at all:

*In a subway car, my skin would typically fall in the middle of the colour spectrum. On the street corners, tourists would ask me for directions. I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker.* (Hamid, 2007, p. 37)

However, the visibility of his skin after the attack on the Twin Towers is juxtaposed with his formerly westernized and integrated self. As Harleen Singh points out, "the myth of the perfect immigrant" and perfect America "is dismantled for Changez" (Singh, 2012, p. 29). Thus, the narration may be analysed in two ways; first, Changez's own confrontation with his own past; and second, his own political

and cultural turn against the west. His personal memory helps him re-evaluate his former life and character and functions to enable him to find excuses for his presently transformed self in Lahore. However, according to the analysis of the political point of view of the novel, his memory also functions to change his political stance. Memory, unlike nostalgia, does not recreate the past as a period for longing, but, at times, as a period to scorn politically. In fact, Changez does not take a political revenge on the west, but he avenges his own failed past, his own unaccomplished American dream by talking to a silent American in a Lahore café about his opinions on America. When he talks about his days in America, he cannot help sounding nostalgic: “Looking back now, I see the power of that system, pragmatic and effective, like so much else in America” (Hamid, 2007, p. 4). The international students “sourced from around the globe” were selected “not only by well-honed standardized tests” but also by painful “customized evaluations” until the best were identified (Hamid, 2007, p. 4).

Yet, this nostalgia soon turns into a regret. It is not a type of nostalgia for home felt by an immigrant in the west or a nostalgia for the former dwelling place, but it is a type of nostalgia that functions negatively. Although he resents some of his experiences in the US, he cannot hide the fact that he actually longs for the western values in the hindsight. However, it is only when he hears the news of the 9/11 that he realizes how he feels in a different way from the Americans. On a business trip to Manila, he watches the news of the attacks on the Twin Towers:

*I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one ... of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes ... my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased.* (Hamid, 2007, p. 82-3)

His smile that he cannot repress indicates his internal scorn against the west. He is unable to find an explanation for his desire to see America harmed although he was educated and produced by the American system and culture. “Culture (and cultural difference)” as Peter Morey argues, “is ... constructed as cause (and legitimation) of violence” either by “the fury of the terrorist” or by “the calculated precision attacks of ‘smart’ warfare, unmanned drones, and so on” (Morey, 2011, p. 136). Changez’s pleasure at seeing the Twin Towers bombed is based on this kind of fury stemmed from not only the cultural differences but also from the financial differences that determined the sharp differences in life conditions. Hence, this causes his frustration and he still feels a sort of internal pleasure:

*I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?* (Hamid, 2007, p. 84)

On remembering the past, he can contextualise his situation and how he was excluded in the American society due to his dark complexion. This exclusion he was forcibly drawn into raises his happiness about the attacks despite his economic and comfort in the US. As a result, his memory helps him reshape his past and make sense of it, because it is that memory which enables him to interpret the order of events:

*We were unable to leave Manila for several days, on account of flights being cancelled. At the airport, I was escorted by armed guards into a room where I was made to strip down to my boxer shorts ... and I was ... the last person to board the aircraft.*  
(Hamid, 2007, p. 85)

Therefore, Changez begins to seek for the safety of his domestic space. The US, that once provided him with the sense of being home, no more functions as home. As Bhabha argues, domestic space is also restructured in a similar way to “the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power and police” in which the personal becomes the political (Bhabha, 1994, p. 15). Memory, then, turns into fiction. His own objective truth is his version of the story which, for the west, meant crusades. Postmodern novels, in Hutcheon’s terms, “raise a number of issues” about “the interaction of historiography and fiction” which demand a more intensified scrutiny, then the problematic issues appear around “the nature of identity and subjectivity”, “reference and representation” and “the intertextual nature of the past” together with “the ideological implications of writing about history” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 117). Changez’s narration is, inevitably politicized through his memory. He finds out the details and implications of his problematic relationship with the American culture and politics, because he turns into a terrorist in the eyes of the American airport security on his return from Manila and is searched throughout by the guards. That is when he begins to notice how his impression is changing. When he remembers his first meeting with Erica’s family, he realizes his alienation:

*Erica led me outside to their roof terrace ... and introduced me to her parents. Her mother was sitting at a table-tennis table that had been converted with four place settings into the venue for our dinner ... Her father stood at a grill, ... it was apparent from his demeanour that he was a man of consequence in the corporate world. As we took our seats for the meal, he lifted a bottle of red wine and said to me, “You drink?” ... “I had a Pakistani working for me once,” Erica’s father said, “Never drank.” “I do, sir,” I assured him.* (Hamid, 2007, p. 61)

The relationship between memory and fiction is underlined by subjectivity and ideology. Erica represents the best part of America for Changez and this is made obvious in the spelling of her name that stands for “the last five letters of ‘America’”

(Scanlan, 2010, p. 274). However, regarding the meeting through his own ideological standpoint, his position within Erica's family determined his situation in the society. No matter how well he thought he was integrated, Erica's father placed him, in his subjective understanding, into where a Muslim immigrant as a non-alcoholic drinker stands in the prejudiced standpoint of an upper-class American.

Changez also recalls, as he talks to the American, how he tried to make love with Erica, who closed her eyes and asked Changez to pretend to be Chris, Erica's former lover who had died. That incident of love-making, in which Changez had to adopt an American identity, functions as a significant indication of his being an outsider. The only way for him to attain her love emotionally and sexually is to change his identity. He is not Changez for Erica, but he is a recreation of her former lover in bed, denoting that adopting an American identity is the only way for him to be accepted and be in bed with Erica, that is America. During that intimate relationship, he remembers how his skin and identity prevented him from being a true lover unless he concealed who he was and pretend to be someone else. That marked an inevitable change in his life. The 9/11 attacks that happened soon after this proved to him that America considers him as the representative of the stereotypical Muslim identity that attacked the USA:

*It seemed to me then ... that America was engaged only in posturing. As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. (Hamid, 2007, p. 190).*

Harleen Singh asserts that "popular western perception tends to view the conflicts generated by 9/11 as similarly benevolent endeavours" and, thus, "writers from the postcolonial world" who deeply focus on the historical senses "of colonial power and postcolonial conflict" generally come up with crucial "counter" narratives and thus "postcolonial novel in English" specifically addresses "issues of terror and power" (Singh, 2012, p. 25). Changez realizes, through his conversation with the American, that the reason of his return from America is the western perception that also led him to Occidentalism:

*I had been telling you earlier, sir, of how I left America. The truth of my experience complicates that seemingly simple assertion; I had returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased. I remained emotionally entwined with Erica, and I brought something of her with me to Lahore – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to relocate in the city of my birth. (Hamid, 2007, p. 195)*

Coming home causes recollections of his past in the US. Yet, memory is elusive and ideological. "Universal history", according to Deleuze and Guattari, "is not the history of necessities" but "the history of contingencies," (Deleuze &



Guattari, 2000, p. 140). Changez's life and ideological standpoint change due to the events out of his own control, because, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, "universal history is not only retrospective" but "also contingent, singular, ironic, and critical" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000, p. 140) and this contingent character of history leads Changez into a traumatic relationship with his past that turns his memory into a continuously critical one. He is forced by his memory to criticise his former place of residence. It is capitalism, in Deleuze and Gattari's words, that creates a social machine constructing "a memory without which there would be no synergy of man" and thus, it is necessary to wait for "capitalism to find a semiautonomous organization of technical production" with a tendency to allocate an "appropriate memory and reproduction" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000, p. 141). In Changez's situation, his memory is repressed and he has no synergy of man as he is a product of the American capitalism. He creates, in Nietzsche's terms, "a memory of words (*paroles*)" but not "a memory of things, a memory of signs and ... of effects" (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 7). As he narrates his personal history to the stranger in the café, Changez begins to realize that his country as a former colony is not totally independent. It remained, Vivek Chibber's words, "dominated by advanced countries through informal mechanisms of control" (Chibber, 2013, p. 253) which are justified and intensified after the 9/11 attacks. National independence changed its status from being a colony to being a neo-colony, as Chibber argues (Chibber, 2013, p. 253). Although Changez assumes that he performs an anticolonial nationalism, he is subordinated through neo-colonialism.

## CONCLUSION

For Changez, memory becomes a tool to determine his political stance and analyse his place as a subaltern identity in the society in which he formerly found success, money, love and belonging. Soon, due to the contingent structure of history, his memory forces him to turn his political views against the west and, in quite an Occidentalist way, consolidate his ideological position as an Asian. Memory for him is not only something that one uses to remember things in the past, but it also functions as a tool to design a future for himself. He shapes a new past by the help of a twist in history and believes himself in the new version of his recreated personal history that gives him a totally transformed ideological point of view. His new ideological standpoint is not only an indication of his transformed self, but also an indication of his effort to put an end to his postcolonial mimicry and hybridity. As a result, he radically returns to his cultural roots in a total rejection of his once Westernized identity.

Although his cultural location in the USA provided him with the wealth and society, the attacks on the Twin Towers changed the way he was perceived as an integrated white-collar immigrant and re-categorised him as a stereotypical representative of the Muslim community that, in the eyes of the American community, symbolised the hatred for the West. In return, remembering his

experience before and after the 9/11 attacks, he relocates his political and cultural identity as a reaction to the way he was categorised and adapts to the radical anti-Western values of his own culture.

One may argue that there are several elusive facts about memory. Personal memory, when one draws a parallelism with history, becomes political, and political becomes personal in return. Due to this reciprocal impact between them, memory generates a form of perception providing individuals with new ways of understanding and interpreting the world. Thus, memory and perception turn personal, political, ideological and unreliable, the only evidence being one's own perception of the past. In postmodern novel, memory becomes a fragmented way of rewriting the past. Yet, in Mohsin Hamid's postcolonial setting, memory stands out as a way of restructuring the political and colonial history. Hamid draws a line between the conventional postcolonial novel and the novels of neo-colonial condition shaped by global cultural hegemony without official and military colonization.

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