



RESEARCH PAPER

Identity and Victimization of the Muslims in America: A Literary Study

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| PAPER INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| <p>Received: October 17, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: December 29, 2021</p> <p>Online: December 31, 2021</p> <p>Keywords: 9/11, Home Boy Identity, Immigrant, Other, Self, The Reluctant Fundamentalist</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: sultanulaarifeen@gmail.com</p> | <p>Created differently, human beings identify themselves with what they have and what they aspire to have. But at times, though not very often, some incidents and circumstances bring people to such a crucial point in their lives that they have to prove or disapprove, show or conceal their identities to ward off existential crises. 9/11 was one such incident that divided the global world into two halves, Muslim, and non-Muslim. Muslims, wherever they were in European countries, especially in America – the center of the so-called civilized world, were seen as enemies and uncivilized. Such debates were raised worldwide in different fields of inquiry including literature. This research tries to explore the identity crises of immigrant Muslims in <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i> by Mohsin Hamid and <i>Home Boy</i> by Mohsin Naqvi. The study shows that protagonists of both these novels were considered progressive and civilized before the fall of the twin towers but immediately after that they were labelled negatively even though they were not directly or indirectly involved in acts of terrorism on American or any other soil. The sudden and undeserved typecasting, otherization and marginalization of Muslim lovers of America made them rethink, redefine, and restructure their identities.</p> |

Introduction

Aurat Identity is both a boon and bane. A boon because it gives one confidence, courage, and recognition; allows one to participate in society, usually without any difficulty; controls one's physical, spiritual and mental growth; gives one a powerful center to hold one's self to it and provides a dimension to go forward for achieving one's objectives; and determines one's status in society as well. A bane because it isolates people of particular communities; makes one a helpless and hopeless creature; makes one appear as dangerous; results in one's physical, mental and spiritual retardation and degradation; pushes one into the deepest recesses of oneself where considering oneself an alien one cannot feel safe and secure; it haunts and follows one like a specter; and most of all it makes life meaningless and makes one feel guilty and melancholic. Huntington (2004:21) asserts "Identity, it appears, is like sin; however much we may oppose it, we cannot escape it." This sinful scenario may, however, result from one's political, religious, racial and national affiliations and bonds and also from hybrid and exilic identities. Huntington (2004: 22) further believes "Identities are important because they shape the behavior of people." And the behavior of the people may or may not be just shaped by a single force or an event; multiple forces therein usually play their role.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, the protagonist, Changez, it appears, moves to America for study but his secret and main objective is to support the crumbling glory of his family. And in the *Home Boy* by H. M. Naqvi, Chuck, the protagonist –

an orphan and the only son of his widow mother also moves to New York with economic purposes so that he may support her. The identities of the immigrants like Changez and Chuck are thus redefined. And the multiple identities that people have (like Changez and Chuck) are, therefore, submerged into the leading and dominant identity save their color and nationality, which become distinct and visible after 9 / 11. Thus, the government (s) involvement in assigning identities to the people bespeaks of the control of the 'Self' over the 'Other' and this control has its roots in the capitalism that is the backbone of the modern empire. For example, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the *Home Boy* also raise the curtain from the American capitalism and put it into the witness box as the events unfold. Changez, therefore, realizes that he was a "servant of the American empire" (TRF, 91). Thus "finance was the primary means by which the American empire exercised its power" (TRF, 94) and certainly prolonged it too. Immediately, therefore, after 9 / 11 everything in the empire appears to proclaim and profess its identity as "*We are America . . . beware our wrath*" (TRF, 47).

Both the protagonists being of Pakistani origin are well aware of the fact that their country is "always burdened by debt, dependent on foreign aid and handouts" (TRF, 61). Chuck, in the *Home Boy*, therefore, goes for banking in America as "In this country you gotta make the money first" (HB, 7). It is, thus, the material happiness that the protagonists pursue to give themselves a new identity and America is the best place for that, for America is a place where "*civilized human beings*" (HB, 9) live. But Naqvi, exposes America's identity through the mouth of AC who narrates:

about twenty years ago, bands of Afghans battled the Red Army? . . they were called rebels, freedom fighters – Mujahideen – the Holy Warriors . . . We invited them to Washington . . . They were the good guys, chum. Osama B. was one of them (HB, 10).

And over the years people like Founding Fathers turned into Taliban but America did not need them now as they were like used cartridges, so they had to be left in the lurch. Once friends and comrades, by a single stroke of 9 / 11, they "transmogrified into the villains of modern civilizations" (HB, 11).

Identity

The identity, that America claims and has acquired, therefore, appears to be soaked in and fed on blood and financial resources of the Third World countries as Hamid narrates "America felt justified in bringing so many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq" so the lives of 'Others' "had no meanings except as collateral damage" (TRF, 108). Moore (2004: 63) too points to such American behavior that in the wake of September 11 "Bin Laden's real asshole for murdering those people . . . but he will never be as big an asshole as Bush who bombs all over the world for oil profits." Iraq was one such country which, under the guise of Weapons of Mass Destruction, was bombed for oil only, and Ali (2003: xii) describes this empiricism in these words " State Department sponsored Iraqi exiles speak openly of an acceptable casualty rate: 250, 000. And there is no danger of any US politician or military commander being charged with war crimes since the Empire situates itself above international law." Huntington (1997: 184) writes "What is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest" and right he is because universalism, using the words of Richards (2010: 20) in the context of the novels of the study, appears to be "only an optical illusion . . . an effect created by a discourse." Identity, therefore, in the words of Richards (2010: 11) "is neither 'natural' nor 'essential', but constructed from discourses of difference and inequality." Similarly, Said (1994 :52) says that identities are not "god-given essences." and "no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions," but the construction of such binary oppositions, in the postcolonial context, using the words of Said (1994: 166) "effectively silences the Other." This silencing of the 'Other' has wider connotations and in this process the 'Other's' being is continuously subjugated through different means so that he may surrender before the dominant force

his mind and thinking and all that he owns or considers his own. Richards (2010: 21) therefore writes that the postcolonial subject is "'displaced', 'dislocated', 'hybrid'" and "this rupture caused by empire has created a universal psychic 'migrancy' and sense of dislocation as well as physical displacements."

Self and Othering

The 'Othering' in the context of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the *Home Boy* that causes self-alienation, seems generating from the hybrid identity of the protagonists of these novels. The characters' Muslim origin precipitates the destruction of their hybrid identity into the most difficult zones of their lives and what underlies beneath it is the white man's fear or anxiety that hybridity is dangerous for its dominance, purity and power. This white man's phobia about hybridity seems centuries old. Extremely apropos is, therefore, Goldberg's (2005: 79) contention: the concept of hybridity represented dominant concerns that white or European-based purity, power, and privilege would be polluted, and in being polluted diluted. . . Hybridity thus assumed the conceptual expression of anxiety, of white people's paranoia, signaling the ultimate powerlessness of the powerful.

These whites' concerns raised their heads with a great force and intensity at the outset of the 21st century when twin towers collapsed in New York. It, therefore, appears that the marginalization of the nonwhites and many threats posed to them including their survival on a massive scale in America and worldwide were the result of the white man's fear for the safety of his dominance. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* such a fear can be noticed in the relationship between Changez and Erica, the former being a nonwhite while the latter a white. In the novel, both of them at first come closer to each other quite naturally as Changez narrates that in Athens "We were introduced, she smiled as she shook my hand . . ." (*TRF*, 10) and thereon their friendship begins which later on turns into a love affair with both being intently absorbed into each other yet as the relationship deepens, Erica tries to distance herself from Changez despite the fact that he "was better than any medication at putting her at ease" (*TRF*, 54). Apparently, there are two motives that prevent their complete mixing. First is the Erica's love for her deceased first lover Chris (a white) and second is the fear that if Erica's second love matures Changez too may leave her like Chris. Yet the underlying motive appears to be the whitish fear that if Changez is allowed a hybrid identity, then the purity, power and privilege that white man has over the nonwhite will not only be polluted but diluted. It is because of this reason perhaps that when Changez embraces Erica, he at first finds "She did not respond; she did not resist; she merely acceded as I undressed her" but Erica's discomfort at this is visible when Changez says "I found it difficult to enter her; it was as though she was not aroused . . . and so I forced myself to stop" and Erica herself admits this fact when her eyes are filled with tears and she tells Changez quite painfully "I just can't get wet. I don't know what's wrong with me" (*TRF*, 53). But the first abortive love experience does not make Changez hopeless and in the words of Fanon (1986: 63) "to be acknowledged not as black but as white," he makes further advances towards Erica in the hope that he may succeed some day in convincing her to love him without any fear. And as Erica kisses and loves Changez, he, in the words of Fanon (1986: 63) feels "By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man." But the reality proves otherwise as what Changez feels, in his own words, is "I had diminished myself in my own eyes; perhaps I was humiliated by the continuing dominance . . . of my dead rival" (*TRF*, 63-64). But Erica, despite her romantic adventure with Changez, keeps her identity intact and this is what we realize when we read Changez saying that "she placed me in the past tense" (*TRF*, 81). Mills (2002: 111) points to this fact when she says that "Johannes Fabian has demonstrated, colonizers set the colonized and its inhabitants in the distant past tense, relegating them to a period which has been superseded by the colonizers, and hence denying them 'co-evalness'."

The *Home Boy*, similarly, is also full of the issues and crisis of identity that have their roots in the constructs of 'Self' and 'Othering' which result in the self-alienation of the

characters of the novels. So, what is most wanted is the identity of the immigrant Muslim characters as it chases them like a ghost wherever they go and whatever they do. It's not that committing some sort of crime will make them criminal, but their being Muslim becomes a big crime and for that they must suffer and they suffer, indeed. We, therefore, see that AC, Jimbo, Chuck, Shaman, Abdul Karim and people like Ansar Mahmood all sail in the same boat of 'Othering' across the seas of 'Self.' They all seem to be penetrating deep into the host culture with the hope to acquire a hybrid identity which is initially welcomed by the host country, yet it becomes a matter of great concern for the whites who are fearful of their purity being diluted and degenerated. And to materialize their concerns the whites need some ground and 9 / 11 provides them a golden opportunity to keep the immigrants at bay and save the purity of the white culture and its power. For example, AC – a green card holder, a Muslim atheist, a humanist and a believer in the American fundamental principles of liberty, equality and justice, thinks that by virtue of his green card he has some rights as an American but he receives a big blow when at Shaman's he is bluntly told by FBI agents that "You aren't American . . . got no fucking rights" (*HB*, 107).

These examples from the novels show that the characters face a denial of hybridity which is in fact the denial of their new identity in the host country and according to Goldberg (2005: 80) "the denial of hybridity, physiologically or culturally conceived, accordingly becomes the refusal of possibility to the mixed, the repression of conditions of possibility for hybridity to materialize." Such a denial is not just physiological or cultural but mental, psychological and humanistic in nature and when it occurs, and one is aware of its occurrence too then it is *retreatism* that the sufferers resort to. The *retreatism*, however, can be multidimensional as for example it is of political and religious nature in the context of the novels of the study. And it is one of the many results of alienation. Apart from *retreated* – identity there are some important identity markers, other than those discussed above, which also need to be highlighted and elaborated with reference to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the *Home Boy*. They include, in case of the characters being Muslims, Pakistan, Islam, Arab, Quran, Beard, jihad and Hijab, mainly. These salient identity markers become a source of self-alienation for the characters of the novels in the first instance when they are in America and in the second instance when they *retreat* or decide to *retreat* the same identity markers become a source of their pride and recognition that will neither fade nor vanish as it is acquired through great hardships. And it is important to note that these markers are dependent upon each other and the presence of one can naturally refer to the presence of the others.

Identity Markers

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the very first identity marker that one comes across, in the very beginning of the novel, is the beard of the protagonist. The beard seems to have become a symbol of fear and fright for the Americans as its very show is quite concerning for them. Changez, therefore, wants the undercover assassin "not be frightened" (*TRF*, 1) by his beard. And that instead of looking Changez through his beard he in fact needs to be looked as a native of New York who speaks English language and contributes intellectually, by virtue of his job, to enhance the financial resources for the host country. Underlying this wish, which Hamid conveys through his protagonist, is a desire of understanding each other not through certain identity markers but through humanism and one's intentions and one's role in a society, whether native or adopted. And if this is not the case then a dangerous game of guesses will continue, and people will be labeled accordingly. This is why, perhaps, that the suspicious American seems puzzled over how his place of origin has been recognized and Changez attempts to answer "How did I know you were American?" (*TRF*, 1). Interestingly, in the wake of 9 / 11 every bearded person was viewed as a terrorist. But Changez is not that narrow minded to blindly believe in what others, especially the Americans, do and this is evident when he says that "sportsmen and soldiers of all nationalities tend to look alike", it is rather the "*bearing*" (*TRF*, 1) of the American that makes Changez identify him but this too is not just because of some guess

rather using the words of the protagonist "And my experience is substantial" (TRF, 2) that allows him identify the American as has he been portrayed by Hamid in the novel. This discussion leads us to distinguish between an informed view of identity and that of what seems to be based on speculations and guesses. But since the informed view is of the 'Other,' from the 'Other,' and by the 'Other' so, given the 9 / 11 perspective, it loses its truthful weight and instead the game of guesses and speculations prevail to self-alienate the 'Other.' It is thus evident that Changez's self-alienation, amongst many other factors, also results from his growing a beard which becomes a dark side of his personality that lay hidden perhaps before 9 / 11 but immediately after that he visibly wears it. What alienates the readers at this point is the bitter fact that Changez's mother seems well aware of the fact that if his son grows a beard he will be misconstrued by the American (s) and owing to this she warns his son with a motherly affection in advance not to "forget to shave before you go" (TRF, 77) back to America as he is in Pakistan now to see his family after 9/11 and under the threats of an Indian sponsored war against his country that has been looming large for quite a time. And despite his mother's requests Changez does not shave his hairy face partly because of the fact that his father and brother too have beards or partly because of the "anxieties that precede armed conflict" (TRF, 77) (as war clouds had been hovering over his country) and partly because of the fact that it was "a form of protest . . . a symbol of" Changez's "identity" (TRF, 78). These may be some of the reasons behind the protagonist's growing a beard, but he says that "I do not now recall my precise motivations" (TRF, 78).

Looking at the beard through altogether a different angle than the one discussed so far one finds that it (the beard) is still responsible for the estrangement of Changez. This different angle can be formed by what Huntington (1997: 20) stresses as "cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people." Let's thus assume that the beards are a form of cultural identity. Changez's saying, therefore, that "They are common where I come from" (TRF, 78) signifies that they are a culture in Pakistan, although there are many who don't grow beards. Yet, when Changez travels back to America with his bearded cultural identity he is jeered at and abused. This, hence, points to a gross contradiction that is perhaps inherently present in the 'Self' when it comes to the treatment of the 'Other.' The 'Self,' to use the words of Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Frantz Fanon's (1963: 7) *The Wretched of the Earth*, at first pick(ed) (s) out the 'Other's' "promising adolescents; they branded them, as with red-hot iron, with the principles of Western culture" but jilt(ed) (s) them in times of crisis. Extremely apropos here is the case of Changez who by virtue of his being talented is immediately picked out by the Underwood Samson and as long as he adheres to the company's principles and remains 'clad in his armor of denial' of the existence and suppression of his true self, he is welcomed but the moment his own self starts overshadowing the Underwood Samson's self, the protagonist is fired off from his job. He is not only fired off from his job but fired off from the centre of the 'Self' and having no other options left, the 'Other' in the form of Changez goes back to his own self. The other goes back to himself possibly because of the realization that Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Frantz Fanon's (1963: 8) *The Wretched of the Earth* asserts about the 'Self' that "You are making us into monstrosities; your humanism claims we are at one with the rest of the humanity, but your racist methods set us apart." Such a realization is although not devoid of the self-alienating factors for the 'Other' yet on the other hand it has positive aspects as well.

Since America is superior and civilized so, to use the words of Huntington (2005: 368), they (Americans) "have the responsibility to persuade them or to induce them to embrace the universal values that America espouses." Huntington (2005: 368) further contends "The imperial impulse was thus fueled by beliefs in the supremacy of American power and the universality of American values." As an individual and a type, Changez's ordeal, from his self-alienation to *retreatism*, thus, exposes the hollowness and superficiality of American universalistic and imperialistic posture which Huntington (2005: 368) tries to veil by emphasizing that "Cosmopolitanism and imperialism attempt to reduce

or to eliminate the social, political, and cultural differences between America and other societies." *Retreatism*, if judged in the light of the American universalism slogan, may be called a process of decolonization of the mimic man because, to quote Fanon (1963: 43), "In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these values, insult them, and vomit them up."

Retreatism, therefore, of Changez is twofold. Firstly, it is microcosmic in nature in that it is his own self that starts crumbling because of the misdirected American wrath and fury but nonetheless he tries his utmost to get adjusted to the changed and charged America by being 'clad in his armor of denial.' America, however, does not allow him resettle on her land. Secondly, it is macrocosmic in nature in that it is the collective – 'Other' that supersedes the interests, anxiety, suppression, demonization, voice and identity of the individual – 'Other' to the extent that the individual – 'Other' dissolves into the collective – 'Other.'

Similarly, in the *Home Boy*, the identity markers also become a source of self-alienation for the immigrants, especially the Muslim characters. Naqvi's novel, therefore, seems an attempt to expose and differentiate between "The theoretical premise of America" (*HB*, 15) and the practical premise of America. In the former case, while in America, "You did not . . . have to explain yourself" and "you felt you were no different from anybody else; you were your own man; you were free" (*HB*, 15), but this premise stands on the tip of a needle and its sharp and sudden pierce remains only fragments of seconds away from a slightest movement. The contradiction between the theoretical and practical premise of America is evident to self-alienate the characters of the novel and the readers alike, when at Shaman's one finds that AC – a self-proclaimed Muslim atheist for whom Islam is a bastard violent religion and who if viewed from a true Islamic perspective could be declared a heretic because of his views against Islam – removes the curtain from the true face of America by saying that "*I thought this country was based upon freedom of speech / Freedom of press, freedom of your own religion / To make your own decision, now that's baloney / Cause if I gotta play by your rules, I'm bein' phony*" (*HB*, 98). But he feels betrayed now as the newspapers and TV channels are busy in projecting the one-sided story, i.e., of the 'Self.'

Muslim – is thus a given but vulnerable identity that the characters of the novel have. They may forsake the actions necessary for becoming a Muslim but cannot forsake their Muslim names and anything that has a Muslim impression becomes a subject of suspicion and suffering of any nature. This is why perhaps the novel begins with two incisive but powerful sentences "We'd become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We weren't before" (*HB*, 1). These sentences are dangerously pregnant with a terrible feeling of self-alienation as they appear to be imparting the Muslim characters, given the story of the novel, an identity, which they do not deserve at all and hence abhor it. Naqvi, through his opening sentence of the novel, therefore, just suggests the plight of his characters and once one is finished reading the whole novel in detail one realizes that being a Muslim is worst than the Japs, Jews and Niggers as it is the Muslims who are at the receiving end. This is because, to quote Said (2003: 228), "An Oriental man was first an Oriental and only second a man." But Oriental is not even treated as a man. For example, when AC, Jimbo and Chuck are at Shaman's and FBI raids the house and starts interrogating the three unwarranted, AC, being a green card holder questions the agents "Do you have search warrants?" as "I know my rights" (*HB*, 100) and "The pursuit of happiness is my constitutional right" (*HB*, 101) but to his disappointment he is not given a positive response and instead all three are handcuffed and driven to "America's own Abu Gharib" (*HB*, 105) Metropolitan Detention Center where Chuck, being frightened, too tries in vain to impress it upon an interrogating man that "I want to make my phone call. I know my rights" but quite rudely and contemptuously he is told that "You aren't American! . . . You got no fucking rights" (*HB*, 107). But this is just the tip of the iceberg as the humiliating and inhumanly treatment that the protagonist of the novel undergoes at MDC bespeaks of the callous atrocities committed upon the 'Other' by

the 'Self' because "This is a matter of public safety" (HB, 101). It is important here to note that the three major characters of the Naqvi's novel integrate themselves into the American culture and civilization - usually thought to be universal in nature; with Chuck only having its roots in Pakistan in the shape of his widowed mother who has attached great expectations with her son's prosperous future, but given his adjustment in the American society his roots do not appear to be significant as he intends to permanently live in America when thinking about his mother and himself he says "we'd live a happily ever after like a happy, all-American family, minus father figure" (HB, 28); they (AC, Jimbo and Chuck) believe perhaps, in the words of Huntington (1997: 43), that "Civilizations have no clear-cut boundaries . . . People can and do redefine their identities . . ." but they are denied the opportunity of redefining their identity. They, therefore, can easily be subjected to humiliation and punishment the imperial center may decide for them, anywhere and any time. It is, therefore, quite disturbing to read that the redefined identity of the characters of the novel, which is not Islamic by any canon of law but has a universal perspective in that all are hankering after wealth and its related pleasures, is not accepted at all by the host country.

Conclusion

The discussion shows that identities are framed, angled and structured to shape behaviours and attitudes and they may be ascriptive, economic, territorial, social, political, religious, cultural and national. With globalization on its peak, it is observed that economically, militarily and politically rich country like America has been defining identities from citizens to its servants. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* give us an insight into redefinition and structuring and restructuring of identities. In Hamid's famous novel it is Changez who undergoes various ordeals after 9/11 to prove himself a citizen of America but all his efforts fail as he is forced to leave American soil and return back to his homeland. Similarly, Naqvi's protagonist Chuck undergoes the same bitter experience. Both the protagonists suffer because of identity markers like Muslims, Islam, Arab, Quran, Jihad, Hijab and Beard. Identity is, therefore, a bane and boon.

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