

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**A New Historicist Study of Mohsin Hamid's Novel,  
*The Reluctant Fundamentalist***



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**Abstract**

The study examines Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* from the perspective of New Historicism. The novel is written against the backdrop of pre- and post-9/11 events, revealing the transnational journey of Changez from Lahore to the United States and his return to Pakistan, his homeland. The mode of the study is qualitative and descriptive in nature; The researchers depend upon textual analysis in this regard. The New Historical study analyzes a work of literature keeping in view the cultural and political situations of the time in which it is produced. Hence, it considers any work as a product of its time. The study shows that Hamid depicts the 9/11 from a Pakistani perspective through the character of Changez, a Pakistani who works for Underwood Sampson in the U.S. It also explores that the novel is allegorical in nature as it reveals the history of 9/11 and its effect on the lives of the Muslims of the West. Finally, the two main characters in the novel are also symbolic, as Changez is associated with Pakistan, while the stranger represents United States, signifying the trust deficit between the two countries Pakistan and United States

**Keywords:** New Historicism, History, Identity, 9/11

**Introduction**

Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* seems to be written as one of the many responses to the event of September 11, 2001, narrating the political history of America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The historical event of 9/11 and its aftermath that followed have been fictionalized in the novel. This event is seen through the monologue of the main character, Changez, whose dreams are shattered into pieces after the fall of the twin towers in New York. This study explores the history of 9/11 fictionalized in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* through New Historical perspective.

It is pertinent to note that the "New Historicism" was first coined by Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of New Historicism. However, it was Louis Montrose who gave the more explicit theoretical definition to his readers. He put forward the core concept of New Historicism: "textuality of history" and "historicity of text", thus breaking the binary opposition between history and literature. The textuality of history means that historical texts have the characteristics of literary narratives, whereas the

historicity of text means that literary texts participate in the construction of history. In other words, history and text cannot be separated. Apart from Greenblatt and Montrose, other major representatives of New Historicism include Hayden White and Jonathan Dollimore.

New Historicism reveals that history is not objective fact, but rather it is a narrative shaped by those who record it (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000). New historicists claim that history is a text, a story, and a narrative. It shows that historical events exist only in the form of textual imprint (Montrose, 1989). Therefore, readers can understand history in both textual form and in a textualized form. Likewise, the same historical events may have completely different or even opposite meanings through different treatments.

The novel follows the story of Changez, a Pakistani who studies in the United States, gets a well-paid job at a private firm and falls in love with an American girl Erica. He visits Philippines on an assignment where he watches on television the fall of the twin towers of World Trade Centre. Americans are deeply saddened by the attack but Changez feels a sense of joy in the fall of the American pride. Changez's sense of joy can be perceived when he says, "I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (Hamid, 2007, 83). The event changes everything not only for him but others who are Muslims and live in the United States. He is treated with suspicion and distrust when he returns from his tour of Manila to the United States. Although, he was a moderate Muslim but they saw him a potential and threatening terrorist due to Islamophobic thoughts that had developed in the mind of every American. After much suffering, he returns to his homeland, Pakistan, grows his beard and becomes a lecturer. The novel seems autobiographical in description. One can find glimpses of Hamid's life in the novel. A short background of the author can contribute to a better understanding of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* through a New Historicist perspective.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* seems to be a product of its time and, from a New Historical perspective, can be seen as a representation of the events of 9/11. However, it is intellectual and political history of 9/11. The major problem this study

is concerned with is that the cultural and historical aspects of America influenced Mohsin Hamid to write *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The event of 9/11 portrayed in the novel is analyzed along with the biography of the author through a New Historical perspective.

### **Literature Review**

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid skillfully weaves a narrative, depicting the complexities of identity, cultural conflict, political tussles and the global repercussions of 9/11 (Shah et al, 2024). Sell (2012) analyzes that the title of the novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is allusive and metaphorical. Changez is reluctant to be perceived as a fundamentalist after 9/11 although, he grows a beard and his identity as a Pakistani, but he is not strictly religious. The novel entertains the idea that a Pakistani bearded man in New York is immediately perceived as a fundamentalist. Furthermore, Hamid himself is reluctant to work as a financial analyst valuing firms based on 'fundamentals'. Changez, too, realizes after 9/11 the ethics and morality of his job that fires workers which, for him, is morally not legal. Hamid frequently uses the second person, "you," in his works to encourage the reader to participate in the discussion.

Lau (2016) in *Post-9/11 Re-Orientalism: Confrontation and Conciliation in Mohsin Hamid's and Mira Nair's The Reluctant Fundamentalist* refers to the novel and its film adaptation by Mira Nair. It examines the shifting Western perspective towards Pakistan and vice versa. It argues that both the novel and the film highlight the post-9/11 mutual distrust between Pakistan and America. However, Lau focuses more on movie rather than the actual text.

Gajjar (2017) in her paper *Treatment and Response of 9/11: Trauma, Displacement and Question of Identity in Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist* analyzes the treatment of 9/11 and its response in the light of displacement, trauma and identity crisis. Her view of the main character in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is that Changez, the protagonist, experiences a sense of loss and cultural alienation. He is caught between a rock and a hard place. Chandio (2017) explores the trajectory of identity of Changez Khan in the novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The protagonist is a Pakistani, a cultural Muslim immigrant, who

succeeds in getting first-class schooling and a subsequent profitable job in his dreamland, the USA, a land of dream. After 9/11 attacks, Muslims faced hostility in the United States, giving space to racial discrimination. Islamophobia increased and Muslims were considered as threats to national security. As a result, Muslims were treated as outsiders in American society, reinforcing a harmful “us versus them” concept. Media has a pivotal role in developing a poor image of Muslims, which eventually dramatizes the recognition of the public at large. This binary opposition of popularity and backlash at personal, expert, and public stages requires and regulates his place in the majority of the host society.

Downie (2013) mentions that there emerged another group of Muslims identity as a cultural part, and did not manifest religious orthodoxy in their conduct, nor did strictly adhere to the injunctions of Islam.” When in Pakistan, Changez meets the Stranger (an American). He assures him not to be frightened by his beard, and that he loves America.

Imtiaz (2015) concludes “that Hamid has brilliantly presented the rift between East and West when he portrays the American as West and Changez as East. About the experiences of the Muslims in America, Imtiaz (2015) further writes that

Changez had bitter experiences in post-9/11 America, such as intimacy with Erica, Erica’s father’s comments on Pakistan’s political situation, experience of prejudice at the airport and in a street and above all, his colleagues’ reaction when he leaves the job (p. 353).

The novel is discussed from many perspectives such as Post- Colonial, Cultural Hybridity, Historicist perspective but there is still a gap as the novel has not been discussed from New Historicist perspective which focuses more on intellectual history rather than linear historical description.

### **Research Methodology**

The methodology used in the current paper is both descriptive and analytical. The research is qualitative in nature. Moreover, the study analyzes the novel in the context of the tenant of New Historicism— Historicity of text presented by Montrose and Catherine Gallinger and Stephen Greenblatt (2000). Similarly, the secondary sources comprise of journals, books, magazines, history books, research papers and

online data. The researcher uses textual analysis as a research method to study the novel from New Historicist perspective.

For this study, the researchers followed certain steps: they read the text first and took notes; then selected passages were analyzed from the New Historicist perspective focusing only on the historical perspective of the text. The text was read for underlying meaning then related the literary texts with non-literary texts such as historical documents, other metafiction, memoirs, autobiographies and biographies. The researchers focused on the intellectual history rather than traditional history narrated in history books.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been interpreted through the lenses of New Historicism, presented by Stephen Greenblatt (1982). Stephen Greenblatt believes that a literary work is the product of time, place and circumstances. New Historicism is characterized by a parallel reading of a text with its socio-cultural and historical conditions, which form another version of the same text. New Historians turned down the fundamental canons of New Criticism. On the contrary, New Historicism, as Louis Montrose suggested, deals with the textuality of history and the historicity of texts. Here, textuality of history refers to this idea that history is constructed and fictionalized in literary texts. The historicity of text refers to its inevitable embedment within the socio-political conditions of its production and interpretation.

Greenblatt says that text and history are inseparable. This school of thought believes that a literary work is the product of time, place and circumstances. Hence, Mohsin Hamid's novel *Reluctant Fundamentalist* is interpreted in historical context because these texts reveal historical, political, cultural and religious issues emerged during and after 9/11 in Pakistan. Thus the text and the context are perceived as expressions of the same historical moment. Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) does a New Historicist reading of Renaissance plays. The discipline of New Historicism has also been influenced by Althusserian concept of ideology, the Derridian deconstructionist idea, Bakhtinian dialogism and Foucauldian Power.

**Historicity of Text: The Reluctant Fundamentalist**

Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* portrays the world, before and after September 11 attack, from two conflicting point of views; one is of the Muslims and the other is of Non-Muslim Americans. Hamid gives a figurative touch to his novel by linking Changez to East and the Stranger American to West. The challenge that Hamid faced in the process of writing this novel was about its plot and characters. The novel is a conversation of one man's two sides- Pakistani and American- and it is a symbol of his "ambivalence" which functions for his "diasporic subject". Hamid himself is a bi-product of two different cultures. He explores the Pakistani point of view and reduces the American to a "mere listener" (Sell, 2012).

Changez recounts the story to the American sitting beside him in a café in Lahore, after making his hand into a fist Changez tells him that he is not a sociopath who does not have any emotions about the sufferings of others. He confesses his own feelings of perplexity and delight at the butchering of thousands of innocent people in 9/11 attack. Changez's response to 9/11 investigates the individual and political side of Hamid: how Changez is satisfied when he knows about the attacks of terrorists on American supremacy while he is sentient of the sufferings of others that even films give him a twinge of torment (Imtiaz, 2015).

Changez is happy in New York before 9/11. He studies there for four and a half years on a scholarship at Princeton University and takes a tour to Greece with his American friends. There he falls in love with an American girl, Erica. After completing his studies, he gets a well-paid job and enjoys a lavish lifestyle. On account of work, he embarks on a tour of Manila. While staying there he watches on TV the twin towers fall, the event that changes his life completely:

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— and then the other of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased (Hamid, 2007, p. 82).

Changez's reaction is symbolic of a typical Pakistani man. He smiles that

“someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (Hamid, 2007, p.73). This reaction is based on the past prejudices Americans had towards Pakistan. America used Pakistan in their war against the Soviet Union. When America came to a crossroads, she held her hand towards Pakistan by giving substantial aids. This relationship was a kind of a patronage and a client. Pakistan had been a client for the patronage of America (Hussain, 2016; Sunawar & Coutto, 2015). This bias and prejudice rested in the hearts of Pakistanis and when America was attacked by terrorists, Pakistani Changez viewed it keeping the past prejudice at the back of his mind. Although, Changez admits the fact that he “was the product of an American university... earning a lucrative salary...was infatuated with an American woman” (Hamid, 2007).

The United State Imtiaz (2015) framed new international strategies against extremism that lead America to invade Afghanistan so as to dismantle Al- Qaeda's camps and; Iraq in order to eliminate Weapons of Mass Destruction (Imtiaz, 2015). In the 9/11 commission report Secretary Powell suggested that America must “make it clear to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Arab States that the time to act was now” (Kean, 2002). The two Democrats and Republicans clamored for the U.S. government “to get tough on terrorism”, and leaders of the two parties maintained a strategic distance from the scapegoating of minorities. For sure, Bush tried visiting a mosque after 9/11 to underscore his point that a band of zealots, not Muslims as a network, were behind the brutality and massacre (Bryman, 2019).

Erica, the American girl whom Changez is in love, is deeply hurt by the attacks on the dignity of America and falls into a nostalgia. She leans on Changez's shoulder and is:

She [Erica] appeared deeply anxious. Yet her anxieties seemed only indirectly related to the prospect of dying at the hands of terrorists. The destruction of the World Trade Center had, as she had said, churned up old thoughts that had settled in the manner of sediment to the bottom of a pond; now the waters of her mind were murky with what previously had been ignored (Hamid, 2007,p. 94).

Before 9/11, Erica has feelings for Changez. After the attacks on the twin towers, she falls into depression and anxiety. She rejects Changez and thinks of her ex-

boyfriend, Chris, who is dead by then but she still is nostalgic about him which prevents the possibility of loving Changez. The name Erica is contained in “America” which might show her relationship to America as she rejects Pakistan after 9/11. Pakistan is given a choice whether to be on the same page as America or against it (Jabeen, 2009). That choice for Pakistan was impossible to reject due to the fact that India, Pakistan’s perennial enemy, was asked to join the American camp which could leave Pakistan to be on its own. Left with no other choice, Pakistan joined the war on terror.

Hamid gives his readers the vision of the history in his *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by putting the incident of 9/11 at the heart of the novel. Its plot revolves, in every sense, around that event and its historical worth. Apart from giving a Pakistani view about 9/11, he also gives room to Erica to view the event in American terms. Erica is depressed due to the psychological force it has thrust upon her and many other Americans like herself. This portrayal by Hamid shows a connection between literature and history which is one of the New Historical perspectives. As viewed in history, so viewed in literature but in a slightly different tone which represents more a Pakistani view due to the fact that the Stranger American does not speak. Americans were deeply hurt and their silent rage is represented in this novel. It recreates the narrative of 9/11.

The anomaly of relating Erica with the name “America” seems to carry some weight in the sense that Changez thinks that America “was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time.” America was speaking of “duty” and “honor”. It was the duty of every American to fight against terrorism and to have honor in their own country. Before 9/11 everyone in America was individualistic but after that tragic incident, every American felt a sense of unity and connection with every other American. Resultantly, it excluded others, such as Changez. Changez was, thus, considered an alien. He was a Muslim and the 9/11 attacks were believed to have been architected by Muslims. Changez was, in the aftermath, thought to be a terrorist. American culture had thus become narrowed which halted the progress of Muslims in America. Hamid, himself being a Muslim as well as a Pakistani, might have been viewed through the same lens. In the times that followed, he might have

been influenced by the narrow outlook of Americans and limiting their culture to people like him. These forces might have forced him to change the plot of his novel to include the historical anecdote that is 9/11, in his novel.

Hamid, in an interview with NPR, expressed that America should make room for Pakistanis in their diverse culture so that they have cultural exposure (Hamid, 2010). As a response to their restrictive culture, Hamid seems to have penned his ruminations imaginatively by fictionalizing the anecdote of 9/11. He seems to explain to the American that it was not all the Muslims who were responsible for orchestrating the plot of the fall of the World Trade Center. If they were Muslims, they were a countable few who could have been easily found and punished. But it was not the case, America viewed every Muslim as a potential terrorist including people like Changez who was not a practicing Muslim. He drank and had illicit relationship with Erica. He was completely Americanized and considered himself a New Yorker. Changez reminds the Stranger about his becoming a New Yorker, “on 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, 37). When Changez leaves Manila for New York, he is “stripped down” and inspected. At the airport in New York, he recounts his tale to the Stranger:

I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners. The officer who inspected my passport was a solidly built woman with a pistol at her hip and a mastery of English inferior to mine; I attempted to disarm her with a smile. “What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?” she asked me. “I live here,” I replied. “That is not what I asked you, sir,” she said. “What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?” (p.86).

Changez had been staying in New York for so long that it had become his home. But the suspicious outlook of Americans no more accepted him. Their thinking of Muslims had completely changed since 9/11. Afterwards, he finds his identity as a Muslim and grows his beard. After moving to Pakistan, he gets himself involved in anti- Americanism. His view of America was shattered from being a place of diverse

culture to a place of racism of which he, too, was once a victim back in a parking lot in a cable company in America. Many Muslims faced incidents like these which forced them to become anti-Americans. It appears that this limited cultural hybridity forced Hamid to write a counter narrative to the perspective of the American. So he finds himself an American and recounts his narrative.

Hamid seems to mirror actual life experiences in his novel. New Historical studies view literature as the product of its social and cultural situations. Hamid has been through these situations himself. He writes in an article in *The Guardian* that he “tend[s] to write from experience” (Hamid, 2019). He travelled widely and he seems to be a product of two distinct worlds thousands of miles apart, America and Pakistan. Residency, for Hamid has been a complex issue. He goes to California at age three, unable to utter a word of English. But at nine he becomes a “California boy plopped into Lahore”. Now he speaks English, not Urdu:

At eighteen, I was both a foreign student and not a foreign student, having arrived a week early for international orientation at college, in New Jersey. A year of writing in Lahore followed, then three of law school in Boston. At twenty-six, thoroughly mongrelized, I began a job in New York City (Hamid, 2019).

Hamid was caught in two worlds. By birth, he was a Lahori, by living standards he was a New Yorker and he loved both of them. Hamid’s love for both cities shows us his diasporic nature. He is an able writer to represent both the culture and social issues of these two worlds where he has lived. He spent half of his life in America and half in Pakistan. He has graduated from Princeton University *summa cum laude*. Changez, the protagonist of his novel, has also graduated from the same university. That is no coincidence at all. Hamid, as aforementioned “tend to write from experience” (Hamid, 2019). This is a firm ground for a New Historical view of his book, especially, the anecdote of 9/11, which is at the heart of this novel. His novel appears to be a direct influence of the incident of September 11, 2001.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, he seems to portray the views of these two countries, in a broader perspective, the views of East and West, Muslims and non- Muslims.

## **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

Changez, the central character who utters a dramatic monologue to an American Stranger about his past experiences in America pre and post-9/11 is a representation of the East. He views America through his Pakistani eye. The Stranger, is an American of whom we know little because he does not speak. Erica, the girl Changez falls in love with, is a symbol for America. The cultural element of East and West is visible in the comment Erica's father makes about Pakistan:

Economy's falling apart though, no? Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers. Solid people don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism (Hamid, 2007, p. 33).

The words "you guys" seems to show some distance between Changez and Erica's father. Changez is considered an "other" in America despite being a New Yorker. This representation is typical of any American instead of Erica's father, who draws a boundary between the West and the East, by analogizing Changez with "you". But Changez is smart enough to defend his country "Yes, there are challenges, Sir, but my family is there, and I can assure you it is not as bad as that" (Hamid, 2007, p. 33). As we look at how everyone in the novel sees one another, Juan Bautista sees Changez with a different angle, considering him a janissary. "I noticed Juan-Bautista watching me as I shuffled about half-heartedly from one meeting to another." Bautista is from Chile who is the ex-CEO of a publishing company. He advises Changez not to be a "janissary" for the American Empire. He sees Changez a hired soldier just as the Turks once trained Christian boys to fight against their own people. America attracts Changez through a scholarship, trains him, and uses him to work against his own people by giving him a "lucrative salary" (Hamid, 2007). After some time, Changez realizes that:

I was a modern-day Janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. I was predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-

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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain (Hamid, 2007, p.173).

Changez feels depressed when he realizes that he has become “a modern-day janissary”. The next day he informs Jim, his senior that he will not work for Underwood Sampson anymore. He seems to have found his original identity of being a Pakistani. In his revelation of his original identity, he leaves for Pakistan.

The novel is a careful representation of Hamid’s personal narrative and views about America, especially, the attack on the World Trade Center. Thus, interpreting the event of 9/11 from a Pakistani point of view. As Jonathan Sell puts it, “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a critical analysis of America by someone originally from Pakistan who has lived a long time in the United States” (Sell, 2012, p. 67).

## **Conclusion**

This study analyzes the novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* through the lens of New Historicism focusing, especially, on the representation of 9/11 and how certain traces of Hamid’s background have contributed towards the writing of this novel. The study concludes that novelist, Mohsin Hamid himself was profoundly affected by the catastrophe that struck the United States on September 11, 2001, as his identity is shaped by his connections to both Pakistan and America. He felt his inner identity scattered and his life in America somewhat distorted due to the consequences of the political and cultural exclusion of Muslims from America. America’s attacks on Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq had troubled Hamid. It led him to pen his response to that miserable attack on the twin towers. His representation is that of a Pakistani viewpoint. He places his Pakistani equivalent, Changez, at the center of his dramatic monologue. Moreover, Hamid connects history and literature in the novel. It is pertinent to note that New Historicism endorses the same idea of the interconnectedness of history and literature. He fictionalizes the history in order to make a quest for its understanding. The study also reveals that the novel is allegorical because it reveals the history of 9/11 and its effect on the lives of the Muslims of the West. Finally, it seems symbolical because of the association of the character of Changez to the East and the Stranger to the West.

# Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

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