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Caught In World of Conflict: Identity and Alienation in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract
This research paper explores the experiences of marginalized individual grappling with identity crises, and the emergence of cultural hybridity, leading to feelings of alienation. Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) portrays protagonist, who confronts inner conflicts related to his identity, that significantly disrupts personal life. An analysis of the work is conducted to examine how the novelist presents the psychological and cultural struggles of character. The study highlights the character' estrangement from authentic self and the ideological void inhabited by the persona. Drawing on relevant secondary sources, this research investigates the compartmentalization of societies and the development of identity within postcolonial contexts. Furthermore, it probes into the internal tensions that exist between imperial and Third World nations, emphasizing how the political dimensions of novel reflect these conflicts. Finally, diasporic elements are analyzed to reveal the lasting impact of colonial histories on postcolonial identity formation.

Keywords: Self-estrangement, Identity, Cultural Hybridity, Alienation, Powerlessness, Conflict, Normlessness, Meaninglessness and Cultural Estrangement

Introduction and Literature Review

In the crucible of global conflict, identity becomes both weapon and wound. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Mohsin Hamid exposes lives suspended between belonging and betrayal, exploring how, displacement, and ideology fracture the self. The novel navigates the shifting landscapes of post-9/11 geopolitics, revealing characters who are not merely shaped by history, but scorched by its shadows. This paper examines how identity and alienation emerge not only as personal crises but as consequences of larger cultural and political ruptures, offering a haunting meditation on what it means to be caught in a world at war with itself. Khan et al. (2025) considered that literature has long been served as a mirror reflecting the struggles and revolt of disregarded communities reflected in Pakistani English fiction which unveiled the untold realities. In connection to postcolonial context, Frantz Fanon (1963) critiques the colonial perception of Africa, stating, "For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God" (p.1).

Edward Said's (1993) work explores how imperialism is reflected in literature, focusing on its lasting impact on colonized populations. By analyzing the cultural and intellectual perspectives of Western authors, particularly through selected 19th- and early 20th-century novels, Said highlight's themes of culture, victimization, and imperial power. Homi K Bhabha (1994) states "When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer us the image of our psyche survival" (p.18). Mallot's (2012) book explores how memory in South Asia is contested, reimagined, and deeply embedded in contemporary culture. Through an analysis of literature, film, and historical narratives, the work investigates the politics of memory, particularly the tensions between remembering and forgetting. Pokharel (n.d.) discusses the expansive Indian diaspora and situates its experience between the "home of origin" and the "world of adoption." He further asserts that the journey of diasporic individuals or communities involves a transitional process, one that begins with alienation and gradually moves toward assimilation within the adopted culture.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the concept of postcolonial alienation, which refers to the psychological and cultural dislocation experienced by individuals in the aftermath of colonialism and imperial domination. Alienation, in this context, is not merely a personal or existential condition, but a systemic consequence of colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and geopolitical marginalization. Drawing on the works of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhabha, this research explores how character in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* caught between cultural worlds, often feeling estranged both from their native traditions and the dominant Western societies they attempt to navigate. Fanon (1963) emphasizes the deep psychological scars left by colonialism, arguing that the colonized subject internalizes a sense of inferiority. Said's (1993) concept of *Orientalism* reveals how the East is misrepresented and marginalized by the West, leading to a persistent sense of otherness. He further adds "The nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by the European powers;" Similarly, Bhabha (1994) introduces the notion of cultural hybridity, highlighting the fractured identities of postcolonial subjects who live in the "third space neither fully Eastern nor Western. Through this lens, Changez's growing disillusionment with American society and dislocation across geopolitical borders are interpreted as manifestations of postcolonial alienation, where the self becomes fragmented under the weight of history, migration, and political exclusion. The gap necessitates a more targeted investigation into how personal crises intersect with broader socio-political forces. Seeman (1959) identifies six core features of alienation: *powerlessness*, where individuals feel unable to control their lives; *meaninglessness*, the lack of purpose in one's actions; *social isolation*, a sense of disconnection from community and shared values; *self-estrangement*, the loss of interest in societal norms; *normlessness*, the breakdown of guiding social rules; and *cultural estrangement*, where personal beliefs differ from dominant cultural values, leading to marginalization. These aspects collectively define the alienated condition, particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts.

To address this, the following section outlines the central research questions and objectives that guide the present study, aiming to explore how identity and alienation are intricately portrayed in these two post-colonial narratives.

Research Questions

This study aims to explore the following key questions:

How does Mohsin Hamid portray alienation and the internal conflict experienced by the central character in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*?

In what ways does the selected novel depict the identity crises of protagonist, and how are these crises shaped by cultural, political, and historical contexts?

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are:

To examine the representation of internal conflict and alienation in the character of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

To analyze the effects of alienation and identity crisis on the personal and psychological development of the characters in the select novel.

Discussion

This section analyzes the transformation of Changez, the protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), in the context of post-9/11 identity crises. The narrative illustrates Changez's internal conflict between his Pakistani heritage and the pressure to assimilate into American culture. Drawing on postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha, and Seeman, the analysis explores how Changez embodies mimicry, adopting American customs, accent, and fashion to navigate social and professional spaces, while simultaneously facing cultural alienation. Gail Ching-Liang Low's theory of identity as both recognition and misrecognition is used to explain Changez's attempt to suppress his Pakistani roots. His relationship with Erica further complicates his identity, as he attempts to bridge both cultures, exemplified in his choice to wear a fusion of American and Pakistani clothing during a visit to her family. However, subtle rejection from Erica's father and America's broader socio-political atmosphere post-9/11 deepens Changez's sense of exclusion. Despite this, the reality is harsh, had a dilemma in this situation: he had to decide between his native Pakistani society, norms, and culture, or American society and its norms and culture (p. 36–37). Changez was involved in a girl named Erica while on a college vacation to Greece. She claimed to have never met someone her age who was as courteous as Changez, which drew her in, and she also mentioned that she enjoyed Changez's company as usual Changez makes a point of differentiating himself without going overboard. He has a self-assured belief in the eastern way of living; Erica is aware of these traits. She developed a strong friendship with Changez and gave him access to New York's contemporary ethics, which he would not have otherwise had (waterman). Changez spent several hours debating whether to wear American or Pakistani attire for his meeting with Erica's family. Ultimately, he opted to wear a combination of the two. He wore American trousers and a Pakistani Kurta. (p. 55). Erica's father did not think well of the combination of the two outfits and thought it was unusual. Changez and Erica's father had a lengthy conversation during their meeting about Pakistan's political unrest, fundamentalism, and other issues. This was a hint that Erica's father was subtly rejecting Changez. Changez made a concerted effort to gain trust by mimicking an American accent and other aspects of his personality. Changez's alienation; who has been feeling alienated in the company of Erica's father, his self is denied, because of being eastern or Pakistani. Internal unrest and conflict of Changez led him to mimic the American accent while talking to Erica's father. In the same context, Sinari (1970) defines alienation as "an awareness of the other and a felt estrangement from it, accompanied with a feeling that this ought not to be so," highlighting the emotional and moral dissonance experienced by individuals who perceive separation from their social or cultural surroundings as unnatural or unjust. (p. 127)

Effects of 9/11 on Changez Khan

Bilal Ahmed (2025) referenced Richard Hofstadter, stating that "England gave Darwin to the world, but the United States gave to Darwinism an unusually quick and sympathetic reception." This reflects a form of natural selection of the powerless, like Changez, a Muslim, Pakistani, and citizen of the Third World, who is, whether naturally or socially, less powerful and thus subject to

exploitation. After 9/11, Changez and his friends felt more like strangers, increasingly destitute in spirit. He learned of the attack on the Twin Towers while visiting Manila. At first, he thought the situation would worsen, but then he grinned and seemed oddly pleased. He didn't share Spain's apparent sense of joy over the attacks on America, but he was captivated by the sheer scale of it all—the realization that someone had managed to bring America to its knees. At that moment, he felt no compassion for the victims (p. 81). "One evening, he met with his colleagues and pretended to be shocked upon hearing the full story of the attack. Another character, Amir, also feigned shock and expressed that the people who died had died for their values, even showing a sense of pride." Amir remarked, "We are finally winning," not as a Muslim, but as a man from the Middle East. Before boarding the plane back to America, Changez was observed during his return trip from Manila. Upon arrival, he stood in the foreign nationals' line, where a woman, whose English was not as proficient as his, asked for his passport (p. 86). From then on, Changez became the target of ethnic discrimination at every turn. He soon concluded that he should not completely abandon his Pakistani identity (p. 303). He began to question America, the so-called most powerful nation in the world, seeing it as arrogant and bloated with resources. One key moment came when the U.S. attacked Afghanistan. Changez realized his identity was more closely aligned with Afghanistan than with America, given Pakistan's shared border and regional ties with Afghanistan. Later that year, when Indian soldiers began mobilizing, Changez grew concerned for his family's safety in Pakistan. When he discovered that America would not support its ally Pakistan in a potential conflict, he became anxious and agitated. He later told himself he was overreacting and that this had no direct bearing on his personal life (pp. 114, 177, 100). "He decided to leave America, though he did not fully understand why or what exactly prompted this decision" (p. 145). "He suddenly realized who he was, and what his true identity meant. He was trying hard to deny the clear connection between the collapsing world around him and the disintegration of his American dream or at least, to stop himself from believing in that connection" (p. 106). One day, Juan Bautista, the head of a company, invited him to lunch in Venezuela. That lunch proved to be a turning point in Changez's life, prompting him to embrace his Pakistani identity. Bautista told him the story of the Janissaries boys abducted and turned into soldiers who were then forced to fight against their own people (p. 172). This story struck a chord with Changez, who was already in the midst of reflecting deeply on his identity and questioning his way of life. Eventually, Changez quit his job, left the company, and returned to Lahore, Pakistan. He was overwhelmed by these thoughts and visions. During a later meeting, he thanked Bautista, saying, "Thank you, Juan-Bautista, I thought as I laid myself down in my bed, for helping me to push back the veil behind which all this had been concealed" (p. 178).

Changez in the Process of Becoming Inferior Pakistani

At the outset of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez is portrayed as a man trapped within an inferiority complex, shaped by the perceived superiority of the West. His initial admiration for America masks a deeper insecurity, his belief that his homeland, Pakistan, lags behind the United States in power, progress, and prestige. This imbalance becomes a source of quiet humiliation, compelling Changez to suppress his ethnic identity in a bid to assimilate. However, this erasure of self leads to internal conflict and a futile struggle to reconcile competing identities. A telling moment occurs at Underwood Samson, when Changez, during an interaction with his colleagues and the vice president, is overheard by Jim saying under his breath, "It comes from feeling out of place" (p. 25). This admission underscores his outsider status forever on the margins, never truly accepted. His journey through corporate America ultimately brings a painful epiphany: his devotion to American ideals has alienated him from his roots, transforming him into a symbolic 'hired gun' serving interests that conflict with his own cultural values. This realization propels

Changez to reclaim his suppressed Muslim identity and reassert his Pakistani nationalism (pp. 38–39), signaling a decisive turn away from assimilation and toward self-reclamation.

To be Muslim Means Terrorist?

Changez's journey in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reveals a gradual awakening to his ethnic and national identity, triggered by repeated experiences of prejudice and alienation. On his return from New York, he faces discrimination at Manila airport: "This time was harder than previous, because he was not allowed to stand in queue of Americans, rather he was ordered to stand in foreigners queue" (p. 44). Despite his professional affiliation with Underwood Samson, he is subjected to further scrutiny "although he told to investigation officer that he has association with well reputed firm... the officer was not satisfied" (p. 44) leaving him isolated and disillusioned. The indifference of his colleagues further emphasizes his outsider status, prompting a deeper reflection on his identity. The symbolic act of growing a beard marks Changez's shift: "either an attempt on my behalf to express protest, a representation of who I am, or a way for me to jog my memory of the world I had just left behind" (p.78). This physical transformation becomes a statement of resistance, distinguishing him as a Muslim and Pakistani in a post-9/11 America that increasingly treats him with suspicion. Despite harassment, Changez remains committed to keeping his beard, embracing it as part of his identity. His rejection of assimilation reflects his growing discontent with American imperialism. He admits: "I had always resented how America conducted itself in the world; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision" (Hamid 94–95). Ultimately, he denounces American hegemony, advocating that the U.S. should "cease abusing humanity" (p.101). His desire to return to Pakistan reflects a deeper need to reclaim his authentic self, shedding the "American mask" he once wore and reaffirming his cultural roots.

Changez as Victim of Prejudice and Identity Crisis

Tyson (2010) explains that the act of dehumanizing those who are culturally or racially different is referred to as Othering, a process that divides the world into "us" (the so-called "civilized") and "them" (the "others" or "savages"). According to Tyson, the "savage" is often portrayed not only as inferior but also as inherently evil, a construct she terms the demonic other. (p. 420) Hamid portrays American society as rife with racial and cultural prejudices, particularly against individuals who are not from European backgrounds. He demonstrates how Changez's experience of racial and cultural "otherness" shapes his identity quest. Despite his intellect, refined manners, and academic accomplishments, Changez is consistently made to feel like an outsider—never fully accepted as an equal member of American society (p. 69). His achievements are rendered insignificant in a society that judges people based on race and origin. This is exemplified early in the novel when he shocks his circle of friends by joking that he might one day become the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability (p. 17). The fact that his American peers are horrified rather than amused by the comment highlights the deep cultural disconnect and mutual misunderstanding between them. Hamid suggests that American culture bears some responsibility for nurturing intolerance, radicalism, and hatred. He exposes non-Americans are subjected to discrimination and mistreatment on racial and cultural grounds (p. 56). Changez becomes acutely aware of his place within this society, marked by episodes of humiliation and exclusion. The cumulative effect of these experiences is captured in his unconscious smile at the fall of the Twin Towers—an expression of deep, conflicted emotions that he attempts to suppress (p. 43). Later, as the last passenger boarding a flight, he remarks, "I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty... this naturally led to my becoming stiff and self-conscious" (p. 112). Hamid illustrates how, after 9/11, Asian Americans and particularly Pakistanis experienced intensified scrutiny and public shame. These mounting experiences of alienation and racialized suspicion push Changez toward disillusionment. Hamid suggests that it

is not only political policies but also cultural attitudes in the United States that catalyze Changez's transformation. Ultimately, he grows distant from America, hence the title *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. By the end of the novel, Changez overcomes his conflicted feelings toward American society and reclaims his cultural identity. Hamid critiques American capitalism as well portraying it as ruthless and dehumanizing, despite its professed commitment to meritocratic "fundamentals." This system contributes to Changez's existential crisis and propels his search for selfhood and ancestral belonging. Eventually, Changez asserts pride in his Asian heritage and rejects the colonialist assumptions of Western superiority. He reminds his American interlocutor of the rich historical and cultural accomplishments of his homeland and laments that Pakistanis abroad are often viewed as fanatics. Hamid shows how such racialized perceptions damage the self-esteem and identity of non-Europeans, deepening their awareness of their cultural background. He also critiques America's unwillingness to recognize other nations' identities, ambitions, and histories. America's tendency to view others as politically and culturally inferior "others" is part of what Hamid finds dangerous: "Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own" (p. 101). Changez's unsettling joy at watching the Twin Towers collapse "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" (p. 73) reflects his deep resentment and disillusionment. Hamid's novel functions as a microcosm of the broader psychological and cultural consequences of America's global influence, particularly for those caught between Western values and their indigenous identities. The metaphor of the Janissaries is central to this conflict. Like the Ottoman soldiers who were severed from their cultural roots to serve foreign interests, Changez identifies himself as "a modern-day Janissary… a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine" (p. 120). Hamid uses this analogy to illustrate how Pakistan, in trying to align with American ideals, often undermines its own cultural and national interests. He further emphasizes that, despite Pakistan's loyalty and "Janissary-like" duties, America has never acknowledged it as a true ally, treating it more like a disposable asset (p. 94). In protest against the prejudice and humiliation he faces, Changez grows a beard: "I cannot now clearly remember my exact reasoning, but it may have been a form of protest on my part, a marker of my identity… I was profoundly upset… and I did not want to blend in with the army of clean-shaven young people who were my coworkers" (p. 154). His appearance becomes a symbolic act of defiance against assimilation and American policies. Upon returning to Pakistan, he takes up a teaching position and encourages students to think critically about U.S. involvement in their country's affairs. He notes how easily they are persuaded to join demonstrations for national sovereignty, though the international media frames these protests as anti-American. Hamid captures the fear, mistrust, and hostility that increasingly define the relationship between the West and the Muslim world. This tension is reflected in the ambiguous dynamic between the quiet, suspicious American listener and the mysterious Pakistani waiter in the novel's frame narrative. The unresolved ending leaves the broader American-Muslim conflict intentionally open, symbolizing the complexities and dangers of cross-cultural misunderstandings. Though Changez breaks away from American ideology, Hamid also acknowledges the inevitability of cultural hybridity in a globalized world. Changez continues to be shaped by American culture even after his return to Lahore (p. 104), and his relationship with Erica, in particular, leaves a lasting imprint on his identity (p. 105). Ultimately, Changez channels his experience into activism, advocating for a Pakistan that resists foreign influence. His personal transformation reflects the broader impact of American neo-colonialism on individuals and societies and the possibility of reclaiming one's identity through resistance and self-awareness.

Conclusion

This study was set out to explore the internal conflicts, identity crises, and alienation experienced by the protagonists of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, using post-colonial theory as a critical lens. Through qualitative analysis, it was revealed that Changez Khan caught in a world shaped by political, cultural, and historical conflicts, torn between East and West, belonging and exclusion. internal strife does not stem solely from his origin, but from how they are perceived and treated in Western societies. Changez's humiliation after 9/11 resulted national identity becomes a burden under the gaze of power. Changez with the American Dream, only to confront rejection, othering, and cultural displacement. The novel reflects the larger post-colonial tensions between the rulers and the ruled, highlighting themes of imperialism, hybridity, and fractured identity. The protagonist's psychological journey underscores the damage inflicted by global power structures, where security, race, and nationality define one's place. Ultimately, his struggles represent a quest to reclaim selfhood and resist erasure, an attempt to assert identity in a world that seeks to fragment it. Through the lens of Seeman's six dimensions of alienation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, self-estrangement, normlessness, and cultural estrangement *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* vibrantly illustrates the psychological and cultural fragmentation experienced by individuals navigating postcolonial identities. Changez's journey from admiration for the West to disillusionment and eventual self-reclamation reveals the deep internal conflicts provoked by racial and cultural marginalization. His alienation is not only personal but emblematic of the broader postcolonial struggle, where identity becomes a site of negotiation between inherited traditions and imposed ideologies. By portraying the subtle yet pervasive forces of exclusion and estrangement in American society, Mohsin Hamid critiques the global hierarchies that sustain cultural hegemony and alienation. Ultimately, the novel invites thinkers to reconsider the costs of assimilation and the enduring need for self-definition in a world shaped by historical and political inequalities.

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