NAVIGATING ECONOMIC INCLUSION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EXCLUSION

Immigration in Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract: Drawing on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Wallerstein’s world system theory, and Petras’ imperialist-centered model of capitalist accumulation, this article argues that the immigration of Changez from Pakistan to America in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* demonstrates a structural shift from the periphery to the center as a highly educated and skilled human capital in the era of global capitalism. The article contends that Changez’s decision to accept a funded scholarship at Princeton University is a result of the lack of economic opportunities in Pakistan and the corrupt economic and political systems that impoverished his family. Furthermore, the article critically examines America’s paradoxical policies of inclusion and exclusion toward Changez. While he gains access to Princeton University and the Underwood Samson company, his economic inclusion is not accompanied by genuine acceptance. In the context of global capitalism, Changez is economically included but psychologically abjected due to his ethnic identity.

Keywords: Acceptance, Inclusion, Exclusion, Abject Identity, Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Introduction: Immigration and Global Capitalism in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of Changez’s struggle for acceptance in America by placing his experiences as an immigrant within the broader...
The arrival of immigrants in their destination territory does not guarantee the end of their struggles or the fulfillment of their aspirations. Rather, upon being received by the host country, displaced individuals are faced with a new set of challenges that differ from those experienced in their home countries or along their journey. Migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is both shaped by and situated within a range of interrelated circumstances. These circumstances significantly contribute to our understanding of the broader context within which individual immigrants’ experiences unfold, emphasizing the need to consider the many factors that influence and shape migration in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (O’Reilly 2015; de Haas 2011). Being an immigrant in America, the cultural identity of Changez poses a theoretical underpinning in analyzing why he is rejected and discriminated against.

The discrimination that Changez experiences in the wake of 9/11, as well as his romantic relationship with Erica, a white American woman, cannot be understood in isolation from the broader socio-economic and political contexts in which they occur. This highlights the challenging task facing researchers seeking to investigate the various psychological, political, economic, and cultural factors that underpin the protagonist’s experiences of separation and exclusion. By recognizing the interconnected nature of these various factors, scholars can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of Changez’s situation.

Some critics have examined the novel’s style and form. Sarah Ilott (2014) examines how the second-person address in the novel aimed at engaging and empowering the reader to judge and appreciate the politics embedded in the text.
Madiou (2021) argues that the novel revolves around Hamid’s own artistic pursuits, experiences, and intimacies which are represented through his relationship with Erica.

The scholarly discourse surrounding Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* largely focuses on the post-9/11 American socio-political landscape. Some critics, for instance, draw parallels between protagonist Changez’s experience of alienation and the doctrine of American exceptionalism (Hartnell 2010). Other scholars examine racial paradigms of alterity and misrepresentation (Ali & Zafar 2019; Bibi et al. 2021; Naqvi 2021) and explore the connections between terrorism and fundamentalism (Singh 2012; Seval 2017). Notably, the pervasive effects of Islamophobia, manifesting as societal threats and suspicion, feature prominently in the discussion of the novel (Chowdhury 2018; Fateh & Mortada 2017; Munos 2012; Tilwani 2019; Maqableh 2022). Conversely, other scholars approach this novel as a countervailing literary response to the prevailing political rhetoric and literary discourses in the post-9/11 United States (Shihada 2015; Hai 2020; Shymchyshyn 2022). A shared consensus between most of these critical arguments is that these racial discourses impede immigrants’ ability to achieve assimilation, tolerance, multiculturalism, and the American Dream.

Many scholars have examined the role of globalization and cosmopolitanism that influence Changez’s transnational trajectory to the United States (Jarandikar & Jarandikar 2014; Karagöz 2020; Mahmutovic 2016). Concurrently, other critics have illuminated America’s economic fundamentalism as exemplified in the practices of the Underwood Samson company, which capitalizes on the expertise of skilled immigrants from the East within its capitalist machinery, thereby maintaining a structured economic gulf between their countries of origin and America (Araújo 2012; Hai 2020; Haider 2012; Kennedy 2018).

This article foregrounds the nexus between America’s economic fundamentalism and Changez’s immigration decision, drawing on the world system theory to elucidate this relationship. Indeed, some critics, in their discussion of the novel, have highlighted America’s manipulative and exploitative capitalist practices in Pakistan and generally in Third World nations (Poon 2017; Raggio 2016). Akers (2019) categorizes Hamid’s text as “world system literature” (iv), while Poon (2017) asserts that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* exemplifies “the issue of economic disparity and inequality in global capitalist societies” (2).

Despite these critical readings of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that emphasize Hamid’s inspection of America’s neo-imperialist and fundamental world system economy in the post-9/11 context, there has been a tendency to overlook the ways in which the protagonist’s migration from Pakistan to the US is a vital narrative event, one that is originally instigated and shaped by the same economic and political mechanisms. Therefore, this study redresses this scholarly void by employing
Wallerstein’s world system theory and Petras’ examination of the role of the United States in orchestrating the mobility of Third World immigrants and refugees. By foregrounding the socio-economic and political circumstances that shape their decisions to migrate from underdeveloped peripheries to developed ones, this article delineates the intricate interrelatedness between global economic forces and individual migration patterns.

This article captures the resonance between abjection within body politics and the racial and ethnic discrimination that Changez encounters in America. Drawing on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, the article argues that the protagonist’s exclusion from American society stems from his ethnic identity’s perceived contradiction to the symbolic order of American identity. Kristeva demonstrates that abjection is not only caused by filthiness, but by “what disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva & Roudiez 1982, 4), which spurs the potentiality of broadly contemplating the phenomena of displaced peoples’ exclusion and loathing as socio-political abjection.

Globalization, Capitalism, and Immigration

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* offers an insightful perspective on the intersection of globalization, capitalism, and immigration, particularly as it relates to the experiences of skilled professionals from the Global South seeking opportunities in the West. Changez’s journey from Pakistan to the United States is not simply a personal story of ambition and success, but rather a manifestation of larger global economic forces. Jim, Changez’s boss, tracks America’s economic stages and confirms that in the 1970s “America was shifting from manufacturing to services […] The economy’s an animal,” Jim continued. “It evolves. First it needed muscle. Now all the blood it could spare was rushing to its brain” (Hamid 2007, 45). The latest era Jim describes is characterized by its dependence on information technology rather than physical services (Greenspan & Wooldridge 2018). Therefore, Changez’s sharp mentality is exploited and regulated to serve America’s capitalist economy.

Changez’s mobility to America is due to an economic (and political) vulnerability in Pakistan. Changez specifies that the economic deterioration of Pakistan is manifested in that “Salaries have not risen in line with inflation, the rupee has declined steadily against the dollar […] and when the time came to send me to college, the money simply was not there” (9). Changez likens the current degeneration of the Pakistani economy and class disparity to “the old European aristocracy in the nineteenth century, confronted by the ascendance of the bourgeoisie” (9). He asserts that the unevenness in Pakistan’s social order is materialized in the accumulation of wealth in the hands of extremely rich people “who power through the streets in their BMW SUVs” (9) and its scarcity for the poor. Erica’s father
contemptuously reminds Changez that Pakistan’s economy has broken down because of “Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers […] the elite has raped that place well” (28). As a Pakistani citizen, Changez knows well the plight of his homeland and claims that what Erica’s father says is true. However, Changez is careful to disclose that Pakistan’s fragile economy is inextricably linked to America’s neo-imperialism. Nawaz et al. argue that though Pakistan was decolonized from direct British colonialism in 1947, the country’s economic and political institutions remain subject to the hegemony of the US neocolonialism (2021). Changez explains to his unspeaking addressee that:

In each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role. Moreover, I knew from my experience as a Pakistani – of alternating periods of American aid and sanctions – that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power. (69)

Through military and financial aid, America manipulates and corrupts Pakistan’s political and economic institutions and brings them under the yoke of enslaving policies.

Changez’s privileged mode of displacement locates him in an advanced position within America’s capitalist system, enabling him to discern its fundamental quality. He has studied at Princeton University and worked as a business analyst at the Underwood Samson company. These highly prestigious institutions associate Changez as one of America’s capitalist elite. Changez’s close connection to America’s imperial capitalism provides a scrupulous analysis of its structure. He explicates that the main principle of Underwood Samson is focusing “on the fundamentals” (46). The firm’s fundamental principle allegorically mirrors the US imperial capitalist philosophy of finance and economy that boosts money-oriented values over human and cultural ones. While interviewing Changez, Jim, a prominent figure in the company who has the appearance of an “army officer,” says to Changez “sell yourself” (7). Being a symbolic officer in America’s imperial capitalism, the terminology of his demand reflects his institution’s materialistic creed where humans turn to be marketable.

The scholarship awarded to Changez reflects a complex intersection of various factors, including America’s capitalist regulation of the Third World’s human economy, the desire for skilled professionals, and the promotion of American cultural and ideological hegemony. Changez perspicuously explains that in the United States, scholarships for international students undergo a rigorous selection and assessment processes “until the best and the brightest” (6) are chosen. The scholarship is not doubtlessly granted for free; Changez discloses to his American addressee that “Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete
financial aid […] In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society” (6). The scholarship thus is an initial part of an exploitative structure and goes in a complementary framework in which the educational foundations supply the capital market with refined students who blindly and fundamentally strive to serve the capitalist economy. He tactfully portrays the interdependence between the two fundamentals as sexual marketing:

Every fall, Princeton raised her skirt for the corporate recruiters who came onto campus and – as you say in America – showed them some skin. The skin Princeton showed was good skin, of course – young, eloquent, and clever as can be – but even among all that skin, I knew in my senior year that I was something special. I was a perfect breast, if you will – tan, succulent, seemingly defiant of gravity – and I was confident of getting any job I wanted. (6)

This corporeal and sexual representation is likely meant to reveal how the fundamental mechanism of America’s capitalist economy functions in a way that is based on lustful avarice; Changez is sucked in as a valuable product that catches the attention of business areas.

The US’s process of regulating skilled immigrants, exemplified by Changez, aims to exploit the human potential of the Global South and use them as tools to serve its imperial capitalism. Changez becomes conscious of this conspiracy after Juan-Bautista, the manager of a threatened book publisher in Valparaiso, Chile, has informed Changez that he in his evaluation job corrupts the lives of others and turns to be like janissaries who “had fought to erase their own civilizations” (67). While America spoils the economic and political systems of Pakistan and unbearably interferes in the affairs of Third World countries, Bautista’s remarks make Changez repentantly assess his abject reality, with his work at Underwood Samson, as “a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire” (68). Moreover, the racial discrimination Changez and other Muslims encounter in America after the events of 9/11 incorporates in Changez’s perception of America’s exploitation of international students and confirms the plausibility of Bautista’s employment of the janissaries’ allusion. He finally admits: “I myself was a form of indentured servant whose right to remain was dependent upon the continued benevolence of my employer” (70). Therefore, he rejects “to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination” (69) by going back to his homeland from where he acts against America’s imperial and economic fundamentalism. Changez becomes a university lecturer in Pakistan and reveals that:

I was popular among my students – perhaps because I was young, or perhaps because they could see the practical value of my ex-janissary’s skills, which I imparted to them in my courses on finance – and it was not difficult to persuade
them of the merits of participating in demonstrations for greater independence in Pakistan’s domestic and international affairs, demonstrations that the foreign press would later, when our gatherings grew to newsworthy size, come to label anti-American. (79)

The “brain drain” mechanism employed by America’s global capitalism is reversed by a “brain gain” process as Changez harnesses the knowledge and experience he had acquired from his work at Underwood Samson for the welfare of his homeland.

The Construction of Muslims as Threatening Others

In The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Changez questions America’s advertising claims of multiculturalism and highlights its ethnocentric structure. He states that after the events of 9/11, America’s reality is settled as Americans “retreated into myths of [their] own difference, assumptions of [their] own superiority” (74). This radical orientation constitutes the core of Americans’ symbolic order in which Changez turns out to be an outsider. Being so, the white American identity becomes an impenetrable boundary, posing exceptional stipulations for including other group minorities, Muslims in particular. Erica shuns Changez’s intimacy and Changez attempts “to understand why [he] had failed to penetrate the membrane with which she guarded her psyche” (63).

The portrayal of Muslims as threatening terrorists contributes to the process of Changez’s marginalization in America. Prejudice against Islam and fear of Muslims (Islamophobia) is not a new phenomenon caused after the events of 9/11 but has long been present in Western ideology (Said 1978) and, as Changez comments, is refueled by “the media and supposedly critical journalists” (74). Changez argues that hatred toward Muslims is stirred by “old thoughts that had settled in the manner of sediment to the bottom of a pond” (39). Muslims are disfigured as violent, uncivilized, and dangerous; “Islam is regarded by the West as a source of intolerance, terrorism and extremism aiming at destroying Western values” (Maqableh 2022, 197). The generalization about Muslims in Pakistan is totalized by Erica’s father as “You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism” (28). Changez comments that this ethnic identification is produced as “a summary with some knowledge, much like the short news items on the Front Page of The Wall Street Journal” (28). Changez, addressing an unspeaking American character, resents the stereotypical images of Muslims depicted in America’s media, “we were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels” (47). Changez’s reference to The Wall Street Journal highlights the significant role that Western media plays in perpetuating cultural differences and
racial stereotypes, ultimately contributing to his own experiences of discrimination and exclusion in America. Said (1978) states that “in [Western] films and television, the Arab-Muslim is associated either with lechery, bloodthirsty or dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate” (Said, 1978, 285). These representations, which have been historically and predominantly negative, have adverse repercussions for Arabs and Muslims in daily interactions. Although Said argues that Muslims have always been portrayed and depicted negatively in Western media, that is prior to the 9/11 terrorist attack, September 11 has consolidated the misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims as backward, violent, mystical, hateful, prejudiced, and misogynistic.

The act of portraying Muslims in this way in American media constructs Changez as a racial subject who is not yet assimilated into the American symbolic order. He becomes an abject figure who is seen as incompatible with American citizenship and is therefore excluded from it. He narrates that “being of a suspect race I was quarantined and subjected to additional inspection” at the airport (70). Changez’s detainment at New York airport is a micro-picture that epitomizes a symmetrical process of abjection against Muslims in America after the events of 9/11, “I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners” (36). Changez reports that “the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people’s houses” (44). Muslims are depicted as queer monsters who threaten to destroy the Western civilization (Giuliani 2016). Giuliani demonstrates that when the traditional orients “dwelled inside, they corresponded to the abject” (2). As Said argues, “Islam in European and American History since the Middle Ages was discussed or thought about within a framework created by passion, prejudice, and political interests” (Said 1978, 15). The discourse of identifying Muslims as the uncivilized other has been renovated by a new-orientalist discourse in the era of post-modern mobility wherein Muslims are reproduced as a threatening abject (Nilsson 2019) whose presence in the Western world causes symbolic castration to the Western civilization.

Changez’s beard is a crucial aspect of his physical appearance and symbolizes his connection to his Muslim identity and cultural roots. As the story progresses, his beard becomes a visual marker of his “Otherness” and a target for discrimination. In particular, after the 9/11 attacks, Changez’s beard became a symbol of threat and terror to many Americans, leading to his exclusion from mainstream society. After growing his beard, Changez is transformed from invisible into a “hypervisible” (Tyrer 2013, 138) threat, offering a justifying object to be abjected. His beard turns out to be a legible sign of otherness that collides with “the army of clean-shaven youngsters” (59) who fight for America’s imperialism. Even though it is perceived as proof of religious fundamentalism, Changez’s beard stands
against America’s imperial fundamentalism (Kennedy 2018). He confirms that his beard is “a form of protest on [his] part, a symbol of [his] identity” (59), and it does not necessarily signify religious affiliation; however, it is taken as a symbolic and bodily dirt that threatens Americans’ principles of clean whiteness. Changez’s beard spots him with suspicion and makes him vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse. His fellow analysts look at him “with evident unease” (71) and fear. His beard makes him “a subject of whispers and stares” (59). He reassures the stranger “Do not be frightened by my beard” (5). Americans’ fear of Changez’s beard is one of the stereotypical images that associate Muslims’ beards with terrorism, a Western and more likely American tradition that has been current in the mainstream media and public discourse (Easat-Daas 2018). The physical and verbal abuse Changez receives from two men “in the parking lot of the cable company” (54), as one of them reviles “fucking Arab” (54), implies not only a verbal discharge of the inside horror, but also elucidates that Muslims represent a corporeal void in which they are not a defined race (Tyrer 2013). A Muslim might be Arab, Persian, American, and so on.

The portrayal of Muslims as uncivilized terrorists in America does not reflect the truth, but rather reflects the inner fears projected onto the most vulnerable other. This inner horror “beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject” (Kristeva & Roudiez 1982, 2). The tension and fear evoked after the events of 9/11, depicted in The Reluctant Fundamentalist and justified in media as the war on terrorism, might be paralleled with one of Kristeva’s elaborations on abjection, “one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside” (1). Hamid clarifies how America justifies its tension by deploying its claim: “the fight against terrorism” (78). America unleashes the horror caused by its internal fragility on Muslims outside its borders (Iraq and Afghanistan) and Muslim immigrants inside, even though none of them had participated in the 9/11 attacks (Bauman2004). Bauman (2004) clarifies that this process of projection aims at “self-reproducing, self-corroborating and self-magnifying” (92). He relates the fear of Muslim immigrants to the “shakiness and vulnerability” (55) of America’s socio-economic conditions manifested partially by social crimes and lack of control over its borders in the era of liquid modernity. Similarly, Hamid draws attention to the fragility of America’s fantasy of superiority and difference as a reaction to the fact “that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (35). Therefore, America seeks to recollect a lost object/superiority during that period in which “America was only engaged in posturing” (74). Indeed, when the vulnerable different other arrives inside, he/she provides the easiest tool for projection through abjection.
The inflicted process of abjection manifested in Changez’s detainment is epitomized by a figurative process enacted by Erica, whose name is a “shortened form of America” (Ali 2016, 379). She refuses to engage in a real romantic relationship with Changez even though he pretends he is Chris, a representative figure of a white Christian and an American citizen, “I was Chris and she was with Chris, and we made love with a physical intimacy that Erica and I had never enjoyed” (49). The dynamics of their pretend intimacy disclose the fact that the abject is “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated” (Kristeva & Roudiez 1982, 1). Like the abject, Changez’s assimilation in the US is beyond reach. His failure to make an intimate relationship with Erica is imputed to the latter’s psychological state of abjection of the former’s identity as a threat to what Chris’ religious and racial identity stands for. Although the abject embraces a manipulative identity to be absorbed; it, as Kristeva, argues “cannot be assimilated.” Changez pretends to be Chris as a precondition for Erica’s consent, however, he is kept emotionally detached,

Probably this was why I had been willing to try to take on the persona of Chris, because my own identity was so fragile. But in so doing – and by being unable to offer her an alternative to the chronic nostalgia inside her – I might have pushed Erica deeper into her own confusion. (66)

Changez and Erica’s incompetence to bring about a real connection emanates partially from Erica’s religious intolerance, in other words her fundamentalism. She is unable to accept any other lover than Chris, who stands for Christianity. Mina Jafarisabet (2018) states “It is the abject that is not within the symbolic. It is the extimite. It is traumatic” (3). Erica’s craving for Chris, even though he is dead and her shunning of Changez’s intimate relationship symbolically reflects America’s intention to keep the past alive and embark on religious and cultural conflicts, which leads to her “illness of the spirit” (116), and eventually, as Ali (2016) adds, causes her death; Erica’s/America’s death means the death of its advertising claims of democracy and liberalism, which publicly frames America’s superego. The death of Erica hypothetically foreshadows the rebirth of the primordial fundamental and national version of America.

**Changez’s Assimilation and Manipulation in America**

Changez’s racial identity and his displacement from Pakistan to the United States have a significant impact on the way he is perceived and excluded. Despite his
socio-economic privilege as an immigrant, his color and ethnicity implicitly categorize him as the abject other within the racially charged hierarchy of American society. Changez’s privileged mode of mobility functions as a manipulative mechanism that permeates an aura of affluence to camouflage the process of his abjection. He entertains expatriation advantages of mobility, residence in New York, work prosperity at the Underwood Samson company and English language professionalism. Changez informs his addressee that “my experience is substantial” (6). He thinks that his “Princeton degree and Underwood Samson business card were invariably sufficient to earn [him] a respectful nod of approval” (40). Nida Choudary (2020) points out that “Changez believes his upward mobility will incorporate him into the locus of color-free Americanness” (35). However, Changez recognizes the theatrical reality of his assimilation by utilizing the word “blinders” (44) to assert his disillusionment with liberal America where he struggles to assimilate. His blinders deter him from discerning America’s reality. In other words, his immigration privileges are superficial signs of inclusion employed to exploit him. Changez realizes that he is a “servant of the American empire” (70). America’s capitalist structure exploits Changez’s passion for upward mobility concerning his job advancements and promotions; meanwhile, Changez manipulates the reality of his subordinate racial position to sustain his socio-economic position intact. His negligence to the incidents of mistreatment inflicted on Muslims after the event of September 11 (44) is a denial mechanism exercised to avoid a painful feeling of misplacement. In so doing, Changez separates his ethnic identity as Muslim from his economic advancement so as to maintain a sense of distinctive personal success.

**Conclusion**

This article has investigated the crisis of acceptance in Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, focusing on the themes of identity, race, and immigration. Through both macro and micro levels of analysis, the article has examined how Changez, the protagonist who plays the role of an economic immigrant, exposes America’s contradictory policies toward Third World immigrants. At the macrolevel, the article utilizes Petras’ “imperialist-centered model of capitalist accumulation” and Wallenstein’s World system theory (1974) to understand why Changez chooses to emigrate to America and how his mobility is regulated by America’s capitalist system. The article emphasized the time of Changez’s departure as a crucial factor in examining America’s regulation of immigrants and refugees from peripheral countries to fill specific positions in the country’s capitalist economy. It also revealed how America as a superpower corrupts the political and economic systems in the Third World countries and causes economic and political vulnerabilities.
that stir certain categories to search for survival or better economic opportunities in countries of the core. Therefore, the article emphasized that Changez whose country lacks the economic opportunity for highly educated people is exploited by America’s imperial capitalism as a skillful immigrant in the period of global capitalism. At the micro level of analysis, this article employed Kristeva’s theory of abjection to examine why Changez is included within America’s economic system but excluded as an abject identity. The article explores how ethnic exclusion, as an example of abjection, manifests in the novel. Changez’s Islamic identity disrupts the system of shared ideals, or the symbolic order of whiteness in America, which reflects its own weaknesses onto the most vulnerable members of society.

References


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