

## Identity Crisis as Reflected in Selected Works: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *the Black Album* by Hanif Kureishi

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### Abstract

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*The identity of Pakistanis is more endangered in post 9/11 situation than it was ever before. Being Pakistani means to be part of a society divided into various groups at war with one another on religious, sectarian and political issues. To have one unique national identity is simply impossible in such a situation, when Pakistan is not only engaged in war on terror but also herself a victim of terrorism. People loyal to different groups mainly divided into liberals (educated, enlightened and progressive) and fundamentalists (religious extremists, fanatics and 'jihadis') feel themselves marginalized in their own society. They are looked as 'others' in their own homeland. Their situation is comparable to that of the characters portrayed in the selected works of Mohsin Hamid and Hanif Kureishi facing identity crisis in a diasporic environment. Pakistani writers like African, Central and South American writers are responding back to the old colonizers and today's policy makers. 9/11 transformed the image of the Muslim world into fundamentalists and terrorists forever. Another obsession with Pakistani writers is the loss of values, religious and political exploitation of common masses, suicide attacks, and sectarianism and the consequent evolution of an individual's perception of his identity in an alienated social framework.*

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**Hypothesis:** Pakistanis are facing identity crisis like characters of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Black Album* Hanif Kureishi.

**Research Questions:** How are Pakistanis, like characters of the selected novels, marginalized in their own society due to political, intellectual and religious differences?

Research Methodology: The paper will use qualitative data consisting of primary resources:

- a) *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid.
- b) *The Black Album* by Hanif Kureishi.

The paper will explore the similarities between the situation facing Pakistan today and characters of the selected novels. The secondary resources include the criticism on these works and the relevant works. Qualitative research has been used to give a better insight into the complex situation.

### 1. Introduction

Pakistan is a country in which people are living among rising conflicts, muslims dying at the hands of muslims, women being marginalized and minorities being deprived of their rights. Muslims belonging to various sects are leading an insecure life and are a vulnerable target of so called religious organizations. Pakistanis are divided in groups; pro-Taliban, anti-Taliban, liberals, religious and secular. The conflict between all these groups has so blurred the scene that it is difficult to capture the clear picture of the nation with one face from one angle.

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It is a multi-faceted nation, where antagonism among various groups is evident. The division is not just due to religious differences; rather the people are divided due to political beliefs also. There are pro-democracy and pro-dictatorship groups. Moreover there are feudal lords, industrialists who are in fact mafias' controlling the political and economic structure of Pakistan. There is no go from them. Democracy is no real democracy. A common man has no role in nation building other than casting vote to father or son or brother. Few families are ruling the country like their personal state. The paper explores the identity crisis faced by characters of the selected novels to depict the dilemma faced by today's Pakistanis both in Pakistan and abroad.

## **2. Statement of the problem**

Common man has no right to be someone important in the national fabric. This manipulation and maneuvering also makes his identity questionable. As a Pakistani, he is marginalized in his own country, and if he tries to escape from lawlessness and chaos of his own society as an immigrant abroad, he is looked at as a 'Paki' and a potential terrorist. Thus, in 21<sup>st</sup> century, identity of a common person living in Pakistan has become even more precarious than it was ever before. The mixed response to incidents of terrorist attacks, suicide bombs and issues like vaccination and education bring to limelight the differences among these groups again jeopardizing national identity as a Pakistani.

These groups exist with one another, but still they sustain coldness among them to defend their own set of beliefs. Often, this leads to aggression and violence. Sectarianism is one example; attack on progressive and working women another. This highlights a situation in which humanity is no longer valued and people are disgraced, killed and deprived of all rights because of their loyalties to opposite set of beliefs. For example, Salman Taseer was a Pakistani but he was imposed with identity as a blasphemous person. Malala voiced the right of girls to education but identity of traitor is imposed on her. The women vaccinating the children are imposed with the identity as agents. Thus, it is not in the hands of a person to define his own identity. It is more a matter of social labeling. This is not only true of Pakistani society but also abroad where Pakistanis are easy target of public opinion. People do not look at them as citizens but as extremists. The issue of identity is not resolved even in a foreign land, where they have to face racism and ethnic discrimination.

## **3. Literature Review**

Muddasar Nazar in his article "Identity Crisis in Pakistan" talks about post 9-11 situation.

*The post-colonial state of Pakistan is faced with identity-related challenges, and is struggling to define its identity, particularly from the onset of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Parallel movements are running across the landscape of Pakistan, as some demand an Islamic state, some a multinational state, some fight for a secular one, and some a democratic Islamic republic, and if Islamic state, again beset with complexity as to what type of Islamic state — Shia or Sunni — Pakistan should be and to what degree. (Nazar 3)*

This extract highlights the issue of division among various sections of society. There is a conflict between fundamentalism and liberalism. There is further diversity and division in these two groups. We see Pakistani Talibans, Punjabi Talibans, Shias, Sunnis, Seculars, Islamic liberals and so on. Every group disowns the others, depriving them of their identity as true Muslims or true Pakistanis. They are denied equality as Pakistani citizens.

D. Asghar in his article "The Identity Crisis of Pakistan" says, "We have divided and subdivided ourselves into so many class and categories ranging from religious, economic, geographic and linguistic lines that it will require a complete overhaul to bring us remotely close to the ideals of Quaid." (1)

Those who migrate abroad to find meaning in their life, still fail to discover their true identity. This problem is beautifully depicted in modern Pakistani English literature.

The article “The Reluctant Fundamentalist sees a Flawed American Dream- Lead to an Identity Crisis” says, “Ever since the great country of Pakistan was formed, it has been going through its ideological and identity crisis.” (metro.co.uk) It further comments, “But post-9/11, the playing field changes, as does the ever-so-aptly named Changez himself. And as he watches his American Dream explode before his eyes, Changez finally confronts who he really is and shifts his gaze homewards.” (ibid) He can not recover that sense of alienation in Pakistan too. This view is reinforced by many scholars. In a Seminar “Identity and Identification in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*”, Prof. Dr. Greta Olson says, “Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can definitely be read as criticizing deduction of identity on the basis of identification from outer appearance”. (16)

Same is true of the characters of *The Black Album*. They feel torn between two extremes, caught between two cultures, indecisive to choose one for themselves. If they go for Western lifestyle, the White make fun of them. If they follow the culture of their origin they are looked at with suspicion. Steven H. Shane in his article “Appropriated Identity in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album*” writes, “In the novel, we see that no culture – and no individual – belongs to any particular group or exists in any pure form in the modern world.” Identity becomes an ‘unstable’ and ‘shifting’ process. (Abstract) Characters do not feel at home in their new country or in Pakistan. They suffer from alienation and rootlessness. Ulla Ambursley in her thesis, *The Search for Identity in The Black Album* (2006) rightly comments;

*The author does not serve the reader with an easy solution to how identity is found, but more a true reflection of life itself, and that is what the book is all about. It is simply and convincingly a realistic account of a person’s search for identity in today’s multicultural Britain and all the complexity that comes with it.*

(Ambursley Abst)

#### **4. Development of the argument**

Late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Pakistani literature can be read as literature of resistance against Western opinion of Muslims as terrorists. In 9/11 context, we find Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as an important milestone. It refutes the Western prejudices against Pakistanis by giving message of peace. It treats ironically war on terror and all kinds of violence. It creates sinister atmosphere of distrust and suspicions that followed 9/11 attacks. In early years of publication, the novel invited negative criticism misinterpreting the text as anti-American and a political piece of art.

Changez, the protagonist of the novel tells his story engaged in a dramatic monologue to a silent American narrate, who later is revealed as a CIA agent assigned the task to assassinate Changez. Changez feels a change in behavior of Americans after 9/11. He leaves America for Pakistan, where he gets involved in anti-American activities.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* breaks the stereotypes and misconceptions that promote prejudiced and biased view against the people who are considered as ‘Others’. (Low 194) Other denotes inferiority of people due to differences in colour, religion and nation. Gail Ching Liag low states in his book *White Skins- Black Masks*, “The reflected image after all is not the self but an image of the self as Other; identification is hence both recognition and misrecognition. (194) These others try to fit in the society that has isolated them following the process of ‘mimicry’ as Homi K Bhabha has used the term for the colonized subjects who copy their colonial masters to save their skin. Similarly, in this context marginalized groups behave like the colonized subjects.

Changez tries his best to camouflage his Pakistani identity under the mask of American identity, trying complete assimilation into American culture. As a Princeton university graduate, he adores its Gothic beauty and thought as if his American dream 'come true' (Hamid 3) At one time he felt like 'a New Yorker with the city' at his feet (Hamid 1) Pre 9/11 made him feel at home in America. He felt disillusioned after 9/11. The welcoming nature of New York seemed to be an illusion and not a reality anymore. Post 9/11 scenario demanded peace and end of extremism, but the strategy to secure peace by America was equally extremist i.e. war on terror, aggravating the anxiety and antagonism. After the attacks, Al Qaida 'an ill-equipped and ill-fed' Afghan tribal group accepted the responsibility (Hamid 113).

Changez says, 'I was struck by how traditional your empire appeared.' (Hamid 178) It was just like revival of the colonial period that pampered the difference between the colonizer and the colonized, self and the other. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said reveals that Orient is occident's "cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other." (Said 2) 9/11 attacks confirmed the negative image of the Orient. The Muslim world was looked at as the hub of terrorism. The already existing gulf is widened by this incident. Occident is civilized and pure, while Orient is uncivilized and corrupt. This notion of superiority paved way for colonialism. "The relationship between Occident and Orient is relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. (Said 5)

The discriminatory attitude is highlighted in Erica's father's attitude towards him, frequent allusions to political instability in Pakistan, fundamentalism and obsession with religion. After his arrival in Philippines also, he is respected by Filipinos only when he hides his 'Pakistaniness' under the cloak of American culture. (Hamid 82) His beard makes him more suspicious as if he has some link with Al Qaeda, again making his identity doubtful in the eyes of American society. He felt himself pushed from centre to periphery as a terrorist in a situation when "...FBI was raiding mosques, shops and even people's houses..." (Hamid 107)

Saeed-ur- Rehman's article 'Success of Understatement', published in *The News* on April 29, 2007 declares the text to be free of any religious motif or intention.

*Changez does not withdraw from his Western life because he has found religion as a zone of ultimate comfort but because he is not happy serving a civilization which does not respect his culture of origin and because USA is a shallow country.*

So his return to Pakistan is a decision concerned with the sense of identity instead of religious fundamentalism. He lacks any sense of belonging with American society. The feeling of alienation is so strong as to push him back to Pakistan. Americans looked at him as an outcaste and a lackey of attackers. He says, "I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged, in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither..." (Hamid 168)

Many critics in their articles label Changez's manner as Anti-American. These articles include 'Booklist Review', 'An American Dream Turns to Dust in the Rubble of the Twin Towers' and 'Into the Dark with a Glass of Green Tea'. The reality is different as he is not a terrorist. He is confused caught in the image built for him by public opinion. At a point, he is mistaken to be an Arab and thus targeted with hatred. He has to bear prejudiced, racist and discriminatory attitude of Americans towards him. His identity crisis is summed up in his lines, "I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged- in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither." (Hamid 168)

Same identity crisis is visible in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*, where we find characters caught between two extremes of liberalism and religious fundamentalism. Ambiguity and ambivalence govern these characters. Diaspora and displaced existence pushes them into state of confusion where they cannot be clear about their identity. The characters are fighting for survival and sense of belongingness while inwardly they feel strongly attracted to Western free lifestyle.

His characters also feel disillusioned in the West (in this case England) facing racism and discrimination.

*The Black Album* takes its title from the notorious censored English music album of English pop singer 'Prince Rogers Nelson'. The title itself is ambiguous with the image of a man sitting on prayer mat giving a strictly religious message but simultaneously reminding of obscene and vulgar tracks of the singer. The word diasporas itself refers to one's existence hanging between two cultures with mixed identities. Such characters are tempted by Western lifestyle and simultaneously crushed under their historical and cultural backgrounds. All the characters of the novel, fascist Riaz, aggressive Chad, liberal Osgood and conflicted Shahid seem to be captured in a puzzle of thoughts and ideologies. Everyone is trying to locate the purpose to have his identity.

Globalization offers a lot of trends and identities to a person. Being diaspoic is the intersection point of meeting between the two different civilizations or a collision between two contradictory things. Karim voices his loss of identity in *The Buddha of Suburbia*; "But I don't care- Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless an easily bored." (Kureishi 3)

Kureishi in his book of essays *The Word and the Bomb* says, "Racism was real to me; the empire was not." (3) This racial discrimination aggravates the sense of alienation and looking at oneself as the 'other'. Lacan says, "...our identity is given to us from outside, and we are constitutively alienated. The imaginary or narcissistic character of all desire merely conceals this basic fault, this radical alterity or otherness in human existence." (*Literary Theory, An anthology* 124)

Shahid on the one hand, is lured by lifestyle of London and on the other hand is he tries to locate his roots in Islam and Pakistan, Shahid and other characters are trying to discover their true identities. For this, some are attached to religion, while others to liberalism. In both cases, their aim is similar. Shahid feels disillusioned with religion. The condemnation of various forms of art like music, dance and literature by so called fundamentalists compels Shahid to question the freedom offered by religion. Their true identity is crushed under imposed images of colonial past on their minds in the novel, while with the threat to be overtaken by the militants in reality. The exhibition of an aubergine in which Allah's name is inscribed highlights the shallowness of Islamic believers for whom a human being is not sacred miracle of God but a vegetable is.

For so called fundamentalists, it is no sin killing anyone who likes reasoning in religious matters. The souls of commoners are enslaved to these religious monsters. Chad and Riaz, victims of racism, want revenge on the white imperialists. Their attack on the racists, destruction of blasphemous book *Satanic Verses*, murderous attempt on Shahid and Osgood are all glimpses of violence which are in conflict with teachings of Islam that prefers peace to war, forgiveness to revenge and moderation to extremism. Their behavior, like the terrorist acts of the religious groups in Pakistan, distorts the image of Islam. Terrorist attacks reflect the same madness as evident in the aggressive instinctual behavior of Chad and Riaz. They are judgmental and self righteous in their approach. They feel justified to kill someone for the sake of their beliefs.

The humiliation they face at the hands of citizens of London makes them half aggressive maniacs and half suppressed citizens. In London, they have to face titles like 'Paki', 'blackies', and 'coloured' etc. This not only crushes their dignity and self respect but also makes their identity dubious. This imposed identity as a result of discourteous naming puts so much pressure on the characters that they identify themselves with what others think of them and forget who they really are and get involved in terrorist activities. Kureshi in his book of essays *The World and the Bomb* says, "From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted be rid of it.

I wanted to be like everyone else.”(Kureishi 15) Here he voice the conflict faced by many immigrants like Changez of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Shahid of *The Black Album*. Shahid suffers the same agony and pain tormented by white folks in school, college and the Suburb.

The identity crisis is beautifully summed up in the following lines portraying Shahid’s disillusionment, “He believed everything; he believed nothing. His own self confounded him. One day, he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite.” (Kureishi 187) This highlights a lot of confusion, in which a person can not decipher true sense of religion, when people belonging to same religion are not ready to own him, nor can he identify himself with the people outside his country with different set of beliefs. Shahid’s father changes his very purpose of life after moving to London. His shallow decorum, aloofness from religion and materialistic approach are unconscious efforts to be part of a progressive society.

Chad, a Black Pakistani Muslim kid, adopted by an English couple, faces racism from them as well as society. As a result, when he grows up, social rejection of him does not allow him embrace that culture. In his fury, he becomes a fundamentalist. His rootlessness is summed up thus. “In England white people looked at him as if he were going to steal their car or their handbag, particularly as he dressed like ragamuffin. But in Pakistan they looked at him even more strangely. (Kureishi 107) In Pakistan, religious jargon and appearance is embraced to please the all powerful ecclesiastics to embrace the social fabric. This search for identity diminishes a man’s value as a human being. People are destroyed just because of their controversial identities.

The diasporic people remain in search of home. This myth of home denotes not only the idea of residence but also a shelter that provides security and protection. This security and shelter Pakistanis have failed to find in their own society. They are pushed to the periphery by status quo, bureaucracy, feudal system, political and religious mafias. They are marginalized and displaced in their own country as well as abroad.

These divisions in Pakistani identity are like borders. McLeod sums up Homi K Bhabha’s concept of borders in these words; “Borders are important thresholds, full of contradiction and ambivalence. They both separate and join different places. They are intermediate locations where one contemplates moving beyond a barrier.” (McLeod 217) People like characters of these novels want to break these barriers, for the sake of progress. They want to discover their identity distinct from Talibans, their so called political and religious representatives and other power players projecting a horrible image of Pakistan on international forum. These Pakistanis want progress. They want to get rid of the image imposed on them as fundamentalists, extremists and Pakis. Also in their own country, they want to get rid of the imposed image of agents, heretics, hedonists and non-conformists.

Fundamentalists make liberalism a point of conflict and propagate against it. Western people consider Muslims as destructors and violators incapable of doing something positive for the society. This leads the ‘others’ to mimic the image imposed on them as a reaction. The wrong projection of the idea of ‘jihad’ by so called religious scholars brings bad name to entire Muslim nation. The title *The Black Album* shows the darker aspect of Islamic fundamentalism, how it shadows the virtues of human race just because of frustrated and conflicted existence.

## **5. Conclusion**

To sum up, loss of identity is the major dilemma faced by people caught up between two worlds. Often they end as aliens in both worlds despite their best efforts to assimilate in the surrounding environment. It is difficult to proclaim one’s identity, while various conflicting groups at war with one another deprive an individual of this basic right. An individual is considered the ‘other’ by the opposite groups no matter if he is liberal or religious. Camouflaging is important to assimilate oneself into the social and cultural fabric to save oneself from annihilation.

They cannot enjoy freedom of speech and reasoning in a society facing threats of dominating militants. Anyone challenging irrational decisions is declared blasphemous, atheist or traitor. Thus, Pakistanis like characters of these novels face crucial identity crisis both in their own country and abroad.

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