

Cultural Assimilation Leading to Third Space Identity: A Postcolonial Analysis of The Reluctant Fundamentalist

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Abstract: *The present paper analyzes the novel ‘The Reluctant Fundamentalist’ (2007) from the postcolonial perspective in terms of Cultural Assimilation and Third Space Identity. Postcolonial theory features cultural hybridity and conflictive and conflated identities with a specific focus on theorists like Frantz Fanon’s ‘The Wretched of the Earth’ (1961), Edward Said’s, ‘Orientalism’ (1978) and Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘Location of Culture’(1994). In the postcolonial context, cultural assimilation refers to cultural domination where the dominant culture seeks to erase indigenous culture and identity, whereas the Third Space Identity is the in-between space where cultural identities are hybridized. In ‘The Reluctant Fundamentalist’ Pakistani expatriate, Changez is filled to the brim with the issue of an identity crisis. After 9/11 he questions his American Dream when he experiences the prejudice of Americans against Muslims. The paper will explore the theme of identity consciousness and crisis that leads to hybridization in the selected text by applying postcolonial theory. The focus of the study will be on Cultural assimilation and Third Space identity and will examine ‘The Reluctant Fundamentalist’ the in pre and post-9/11 literary and socio-political milieu.*

Key Words: Cultural Assimilation, Third Space Identity, Postcolonial, 9/11

Introduction

The present paper uses a postcolonial perspective to analyze Mohsin Hamid’s ‘The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2008)’. The novel sheds light on the postcolonial themes of identity, alienation, cultural clash and power imbalance which result in hybridity and third-space identity in the host country. Dizayi (2015) defines identity as “The identification of an individual or a nation in postcolonial perspective is linked to the “Other” that means they iconize themselves “Us” with the existence of the “Other”. This section of the paper also incorporates the scope of the study, the

justifications, significance and benefits of the research. Changez, a protagonist in the novel goes to America to study and after graduating from Princeton University; he seeks a job as a consultant at a firm, Underwood Samson. At the outset of the novel, he was an extreme assimilationist but gradually he got radicalised by America’s trolling after 9/11. Changez went through a typical Psycho process after 9/11 and intended to revisit his American Dream, he wanted to synthesize his transformation deep rooted in his Pakistaniness. (Ghafoor et al., 2016). The novel is told in monologue style in 184 pages

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with Changez as a first-person narrator. Changez comes across an American in Old Anarkali Bazar and invites him to tea with him and in this way the meeting prolongs. Changez relates his past to the American from graduating from Princeton and scoring a great job to once again living in Lahore. He says, "Excuse me, Sir, but may I be of assistance?"(p.1) it begins." Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America (p.1). In light of the above quote, it can be inferred that a sense of belonging remains alive in one's memory. The social, political, economic and demographic climate is there but the sense of affiliation and belonging cannot be demolished from consolidated memory (Castro [2018](#)).

Changez battles with his inner feelings to decide whether he should stay in America, His Dream or go back to Pakistan. Changez struggles to come up with an American identity as he believes in progressive transformation but after 9/11 he was forced to revisit the thriving American lifestyle to indigenous Pakistani identity. We can see it as an identity crisis and it can be analyzed by using postcolonial theory which involves power and Western dominance. Nyoman and Kutha Rama state that where there is domination, there is resistance. According to Homi K Bhabha, hybridity is the Third Space or the space between (in-betweenness) in which differences overlap. The paper will also observe critically that migrant identity is not given rather it is one's choice.

Research Objectives

The researcher endeavors to seek the following objectives:

- To explore the idea of cultural assimilation and its implications on personal identity
- To investigate the concept of third-space identity
- To analyze the impact of cultural integration on the formation of third-space identity

Research Questions

- How does cultural assimilation affect the individual identity?
- How does cultural hybridization intersect with the concept of third-space identity?

- What factors play an imperative role in the construction of third-space identity?

Importance of the Study

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is significant in its treatment of issues faced by expatriates. It navigates the issues of culture, diasporic identity, hybridization and third-space identity on national, international and intranational levels. It also exposes the biased and prejudiced mindset of Americans towards Muslims. In a sense, The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a counter-narrative against the allegations channelled against Muslims in the conspicuous timeline of post-9/12. Through his narrative, Mohsin Hamid tried to justify that Muslims are not terrorists. They are faithful to the American Dream and American land as well.

Literature review

The post-colonial theory dates back to the 1990s. It became famous due to literary works such as *In Other Worlds* by Gayatri Spivak (1987) and *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft (1989). Post-colonial theory is brimmed with controversial narratives of hybridity, transformation, cultural assimilation, third-space identity and cultural juxtaposition. Another thing to be counted is an imperialistic view of the West about the East and especially colonialism was undoubtedly accelerated but 9/11 and the immigrants like Pakistani Americans were befuddled to choose between the one or the other because the "War on Terror" did not allow anyone to occupy an ambiguous identity- entire communities have had their loyalties questioned (Morey 135). In 2001, Former US president George W. Bush Himself said: "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" (eMediaMillWorks). Cultural assimilation in the post-9/11 era became a seemingly forced policy of the US. In a conversation with Yaqin Mohsin says in the context of pre and post-9/11, in comparison to Europe, America accepts everyone if: You have an American accent, you are most probably American.... America's culture will imbibe you regardless of your religion. As if the American myth comes true that by dint of being born here, you are one of us (Yaqin, [2008](#), p.48)

Cultural assimilation and its impact on indigenous identity remained a significant research area for

researchers for decades. The concept of third space identity originates from hybridization in multicultural societies. 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' provides a spellbound narrative to explore the essentials behind cultural assimilation. Postcolonial theory measures the criticalities caused by colonialism which still remains in the 21st century in imperialistic form. Homi K. Bhabha states that identity is an intricate and complex issue which remains alive between the dominant and the dominated. Cultural identities which include tradition, civilization, norms and many cultural and religious activities cannot be marred or sabotaged. They cannot be alienated easily. They can be adjusted or modified, as 'Black Skin, White Masks' by Frantz Fanon (1952) states that coloniality just affected the colonized in terms of psychological and cultural terrain of thought.

In 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' Changez the protagonist goes to America to honour his American Dream he is assimilationist in the very beginning but after 9/11 he observes a paradigm shift in Americans' attitudes towards immigrants especially they link violence and viciousness, sadism and savagery, brutality and carnage with Islamic doctrines and slander Muslim image in the world. On the other hand, their actual identity is as tall and worthy as the mountain summits of Pakistani. It created humanoid effects on American Muslims. The novel exemplifies the challenges and struggles faced by individuals torn between the two cultures named third space in pursuance of the American Dream. In such a strangled atmosphere, one is forced to assimilate the foreign culture which leads to inbetweenness or third-space identity. In 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' the assimilated identity of Changez is the speaking picture of Third Space Identity.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory is applied to the paper in hand; to justify the question of cultural Assimilation leading to Third Space identity, the researcher dwells on foremost theorists i.e. Fanon, Said, Chakarvorty and Bhabha et al. During the assimilation process, a person inoculates a new culture and the loss of native culture is inevitable. The term hybridity and third space identity has been crucial in Homi K. Bhabha's view of postcolonial discourse. It sheds light on cultural

mixing between the colonized and the colonizer especially, when the colonizer remains dominant in terms of foreignness.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Postcolonial theory emerged in the 20th century as a response to European colonialism. It seeks to critique the dynamic power structures, social hierarchies and colonial impacts on the colonized culture. Postcolonial theorists seek to dismantle and oppose the prevailing power structures and ideologies that uphold colonial hierarchies and disparities. Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakarvorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha are the upholding tenets of postcolonial theory. It's beyond doubt to say that postcolonial theory is heavily indebted to these torch-bearers of the postcolonial era.

Edward Said's landmark 'Orientalism' (1978) is frequently cited as a watermark document in postcolonial philosophy. Said emphasizes how the West fabricated and exaggerated, exoticised and dehumanized the East in order to legitimize its dominance. He found that colonizers' identity is a "European invention". He relates that the relationship between the Self and Other is a relationship of dominance in postcolonial discourse. Said's Orientalism is criticized by Young (1992 & 2001); according to Young Said's Orientalism signifies more the culture of the colonizers and ignores the resistance of the colonized. Young (2001) opines about Orientalism as:

"If the representations of Orientalism were so false, as Said continuously insists, he does not offer a method that enables a counter-representation that allowed the colonized to speak...a task which he admits his study leaves 'embarrassingly incomplete'. (Young, 2001, p.391)"

Another seminal work 'Black Skin, White Masks' (1952) by Frantz Fanon is a stamp on postcolonial theory. Fanon delves deep into the psychological and social dehumanizing effects of colonization on the subjects. In 'Black Skin, White Masks' (1952) Fanon explores how racism and colonization affected black people, during the French colonial era. He examines the ways in which White culture is idealized, leaving behind their indigenous norms and culture as obsolete. Language is also used as a powerful tool to instil

and inculcate new ideologies in their minds. Fanon critiques the dehumanization and objectification of Black people during French colonial. Probing Fanon's point of view, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an open gallery of racial pictures in the backdrop of 9/11 and the speech on the American president endorses this very dictum. Hartnell, A. (2010).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is another postcolonial theorist who made a significant contribution to postcolonial theory with her essay 'Can Subaltern Speak' (1988). In her essay, she criticises how the voices of underrepresented people are silenced and marginalized in Western discourse. Socially and politically downtrodden people are called, "subaltern", according to Spivak, they are left out and overshadowed on social and political grounds.

In his grounding-breaking book 'The Location of Culture' (2012) Homi K. Bhabha introduces the concept of hybridity which establishes 'Third Space' (p.37) Bhabha theorizes that colonial subjects engage in the co-optation, modification, transformation and adaptation through the process of miming and negotiating. In this cultural ambience ambiguity, the dominant culture survives and the subservient culture is demolished by and large Bhabha in an interview illuminates Third Space identity, culture, community, and difference and sketches its recurring impact on cultural politics (Rutherford J. 1990). In "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" neither culture is in its pure form rather it is in hybrid form. As a result of globalization and localization the immigrant culture loses its pure form in the host country and doesn't remain in either form holistically. (Rutherford J. 1990).

Changez, the protagonist of the novel, a Pakistani man with a Muslim background makes his way through the corporate world of America as a student, lover and an employee. He endeavours to assimilate the foreign culture in favour of successful American life. In the first chapter of the novel, he says to the unnamed American, "Princeton made everything possible for me. But it did not, could not. Make me forget such things as how I enjoy the tea in this, the city of my birth, steeped long enough to acquire a rich, dark colour, and made creamy with fresh, full-fat milk" (Hamid, 2007, p.2)

In "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" we see both Pakistani and American cultures in hybrid

form. In the novel, we come across 'Urdu-speaking drivers', samosas Chana-serving establishments in Manhattan and 'girls in jeans', Royal Marquee' and Company Punjab Club in Lahore. So, it cannot be claimed whether Changez is a Pakistani or an American being; this conglomerated sort of culture is called Third Space. At the very outset of the novel, Changez tells the American, "I am both a native of this city (Lahore) and a speaker of your language" (Hamid, 2007, p.1)

Mansoor (2012) states in her article how Pakistanis suffered on a collective as well as individual level and how they imbibed the concept of Otherness after the traumatic incident of 9/11. Changez is a man with an unstable identity. He transformed his identity very swiftly after the 9/11 attacks. He grows a long beard and leaves his job and America as well. He starts life with a singular Pakistani identity as a Muslim in the post-9/11, Changez becomes disillusioned and de-centred between dual identities. Now Changez is standing at a crossroads of cultural identities neither Pakistani nor American. As chapter 2 starts Changez diverts the American's attention by saying "Do you see those girls, walking there, in jeans specked with paint? Yes, they are attractive. And how different they look from the women of that family sitting at the table beside ours, in their traditional dress" (Hamid, 2007, p.3). Maybe through such sort of justifications, he wants to rectify that he is not a fundamentalist et al. (Schlesinger, 2008).

Textual and contextual analysis of the novel illustrates that Changez is not a fundamentalist. His friend Erica, who symbolizes America, tells him, "You give people space. I really like that. It's unusual. But, in response, he is not given space by Americans in post-9/11. On one occasion, he says, "I said, I hoped one day to be the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capacity; the others appeared shocked, and I was forced to explain that I had been joking. Erica alone smiled." It shows the prejudice and fundamentalism of Americans against Muslims or Islam that they could not digest an Islamic nuclear state.

Following Bhabha's concept of identity, it can be implied that identities are fluid and trans-cultural and can be negotiated. After 9/11, Changez is treated in a conservative stereotypical manner-it shows their biases, prejudice and fundamentalistic approach towards Muslims. Similarly, the waiter and the bearded man

symbolising the common strata of the Pakistani community, got troubled by the American's presence in Anarkalli bazar. It creates an impact of prejudice towards Americans. So, on either side, even on national, international and international levels, such sort of cultural fluidity can be found. Changez grew out in such prejudiced circumstances and successfully assimilated American identity which seems above board of prejudice in pre-9/11 but the situation got topsy-turvy in post-9/11. Bhabha proposes an interstitial space of cultural collision where the colonizer and the colonized negotiate and as a result hybridity takes place and this state of in-betweenness is termed as Third Space (Bhandari, N.B [2022](#)).

Conclusion

The paper underscores the key findings of how cultural integration leads to Third Space identity. It also figures out how dominant culture prevails in the colonial mindset in foreign lands. To pursue the American Dream, Changez undergoes a cultural overhaul and he imbibes foreign culture and norms setting aside all conservative

prejudices. He serves as a young ambitious professional in the American firm, Underwood Samson. But suddenly his assimilation is interrupted following the 9/11 attacks. After 9/11, Muslims were victimized and they were charged with the allegation of terrorism. Now Changez's integrated identity is under suspicion as Americans trigger internal revelation of his identity. In this retrospective phase, Changez questions his fidelity and affiliation to America and this internal conflict propels him towards a Third Space identity. He no longer fully belongs to indigenous culture, nor does he fully assimilate into American society. Instead, he navigates a liminal space, named Third Space identity. The concept of hybridization can be interpreted at various levels, including cultural, psychological, etc., and it may open new vistas of research in postcolonial literature. A singular paper cannot deal with all of the mentioned postcolonial aspects. To round off the discussion, it can be concluded that 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' is a postcolonial narrative of Changez's hybrid identity. Further, the analysis shows that all these trans-cultural identities are transitory, not fixed, and they are affected post-9/11.

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