The Evolution of Changez’ Identity

Hybridity and Culture in Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist

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Abstract

This essay explores the concept of hybridity and its relation to cultural identity in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Changez’ identity is analysed by using postcolonial theory and its notion of hybrid identities. By analysing Changez’ cultural identity, I came to the conclusion that his hybridity is not fixed, but rather fluid and changing. At the beginning of the novel, Changez’ hybrid identity is fractioned and unstable, leading him to become ashamed and uncomfortable with who he is and his Pakistani culture. At the end of the novel he realises that his experiences in America will always be part of who he is – part of his identity – and his hybridity becomes harmonious and stable, in turn allowing him to use Western culture against itself; a key part of hybridity in postcolonial theory.

Key words

Hybridity, fractured identity, culture, orientalism, the East, the West, Pakistan, America
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Introduction

“I did not know where I stood on so many issues of consequence; I lacked a stable core”

(Hamid 168)

Mohsin Hamid’s 2007 novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist tells the story of Changez, a Pakistani immigrant in America. After 9/11 Changez becomes disillusioned with the American Dream upon realising the extent of American imperialism and its impact upon the rest of the world; particularly its impact on Pakistan and the Middle East. The novel revolves around a plethora of contemporary themes and topics, such as migration, transnationalism, and identity, and is often analysed within the field of postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial theory is a relatively new field, dating back only to the 1990s. It gained its popularity due to books such as In other Worlds by Gayatri Spivak (1987) and The Empire Writes Back by Bill Ashcroft (1989). A major tendency of postcolonial theory, and the word postcolonial itself, is to use it as an umbrella-term that encompasses every colonial experience everywhere. This despite the general knowledge that, for example the British colonial enterprise differed not only from, say, the French, but also from colony to colony: the British did not treat the Indians the same as the South Africans (Loomba 35). This universalism was imposed on literature by liberal humanist critics, which, due to it pertaining to universal beliefs, necessarily disregarded not only different nations’ experience as colonies, but also those of the different people (Barry 194). The destabilisation of that universalism is thus very important, because a “universal” work elevates Eurocentric norms and its consequent disregard for those it deems as Other (195). This is what Jorge Klor de Alva argues for: that postcolonialism should be seen as “a multiplicity of often conflicting and frequently parallel narratives” (245).
A postcolonial concept filled to the brim with seemingly conflicting narratives is that of hybridity. The term “hybrid” began as a term used for biracial people, where the white colonisers had children with the native population. This was most common in the Spanish colonies in Latin America, where the term was “mestizos” (Loomba 29). Populating the colonies with biracial children was at one point advocated as a way to “‘hispanicise’ [sic] and … ‘extinguish’ [the] Indians” (171). It therefore began as a way to eradicate the original population by, essentially, turning them European/Western, creating “a class of persons [native] in blood and colour, but [European] in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay §34): closing the distance between the Us- and Them-group while also maintaining it. Nonetheless, it became a way for the colonised to undermine and challenge the oppressive colonial structures. Since they were now part of both the Us- and Them-group, they could adopt and juxtapose Western ideals and ideas with those from their own cultures. This can be seen in Ghandi’s ideas of non-violence, which stem from the likes of Emerson and Tolstoy, but yet also maintain a “vision of an ideal society [which] evoked a … Hindu vision of … the … reign of Lord Rama” (Loomba 172). For critics like Homi Bhabha, however, the colonial authority is ambivalent in its hybridity, because it is always in a state of mimesis. It is always replicating itself without fully succeeding because “the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (150). By not being able to maintain its status as the “ultimate authority”, colonialism falls short and allows for the native population to use it against itself.

The task of juxtaposing cultural ideals grew more difficult as racism became about something more than just race. In the 1990s Étienne Balibar coined the term “‘neo-racism’”, which is based, not in “biological heredity”, but in “the insurmountability [sic] of cultural
differences”, and focuses on “the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions” (21). In other words, neo-racism is a “‘racism without races’” (21) and can be seen in the contemporary Western fear of (especially Muslim) immigrants and their respective cultures.

The focus of this essay will be the concept of hybridity and how it relates to identity. I will analyse how Changez’ identity changes throughout the story: how, after 9/11, he finds himself on the receiving end of American prejudice against Muslims, making him alienated in the society he called home. The alienation makes him turn back towards the Pakistani identity he has suppressed and ignored, but he does not seem to feel quite at home there either, and so he finds himself in a state of “in-betweeness”; hybridity. To analyse the novel, I will be using postcolonial concepts in general, but with a focus on the fragmentation of Changez’ identity. I will be looking into why his identity becomes fractioned and how, by analysing him as he changes. The concept of hybridity is broad, and I will therefore narrow down the theoretical section, focusing only on the hybrid experience that might accompany a Muslim (Middle) Eastern immigrant who has migrated to the West, since that is what Changez himself is. I argue that it is important to focus on individual experiences due to the aforementioned tendency of postcolonialism to be universalist, so that the “post”-colonial West can recognise the problems colonialism and imperialism caused and still causes. My essay focusing on Changez will therefore represent not the experience of all Muslim immigrants in America, but the experiences of one man, allowing the readers of this essay to further realise that the Western world needs to take individuals into account when considering postcolonialism.

While many previous analyses of the novel revolve around Changez’ identity (for example Valerie Kennedy [2018], Brygida Gasztold [2015]), I have not found any that relate to the specific topic of hybridity in itself, and therefore my analysis will highlight another way of looking at, and interpreting, Changez’ identity. Nonetheless, both Kennedy and Gasztold,
as well as Ghosh (2013), have proved majorly helpful to my own analysis, in that they too discuss Changez’ conflicted identity. Gasztold and Ghosh discuss Changez’ desire, and ultimate failure, to belong to American society, and Kennedy’s essay focuses on Changez’ conflicting behaviour in regards to his internalisation of orientalism and Western ideals.

I will begin by presenting research in the field of postcolonialism which relates to the purpose of the essay – hybrid identities – and how a hybrid identity might show itself in different ways. The analysis will be divided into two parts, the first being about the impact of Changez’ name, and the second being about his identity. The novel will be analysed by applying the research on hybridity from the theory section, and comparing it with my own reading of the text. In the conclusion I will summarise my findings and make suggestions for future research.

Theory

In his discussion about hybrid identities in Turkey during the shift from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey, Önder Çakırtaş refers to Webster’s online dictionary to explain the lexical meaning of the word “hybrid”. The dictionary says it is either 1) “a person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions” or 2) “something heterogeneous in origin or composition” (2). They clearly refer to the same phenomenon, as something that is a “blend of two”, by definition, is heterogeneous. But since this is an essay about hybridity in identity as it relates to culture, the most fitting definition is the first one. Despite the, seemingly, quite clear definition(s) of the word, critics in the field of postcolonial theory nonetheless employ the word differently. Çakırtaş brings up other critics’ definition of the word: where Marwan M. Karidy suggests that “‘hybridity is an association of ideas, concepts, and themes that at once reinforce and contradict each other’” (qtd. in Çakırtaş 2), another
critic, Niljana Bardhan, posits that “‘hybridity is about cultural mixing and mingling’” (qtd. in Çakırttaş 2). Again, these definitions undoubtedly talk about the same thing – Karidy’s definition is more about how the different cultures interact with each other: either by reinforcing or contradicting each other, and Bardhan’s definition simply states the fact that there are different cultures interacting. Then follows the question, who is a hybrid? The first lexical meaning – “a person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions” (2) – speaks for a person who is either 1) biracial/bicultural, which incidentally would suggest that culture is racial, and brings to mind the aforementioned concept of “mestizos”; 2) someone who grew up in a former colony; 3) someone who lives in a diaspora (for example African-Americans); or 4) an immigrant to another country/culture. As stated in the introduction, I will be discussing the hybrid experiences that an immigrant might have (no. 4), and specifically the experiences of a Muslim (Middle) Eastern immigrant. However, I am not suggesting that the following scenarios are possible only for Muslims, but that they should be seen as general outlines for all who migrate into a new culture.

Still, a question remains: what is culture? To Raymond Williams, a Welsh Marxist theorist, “[c]ulture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (87). In his book Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (1983), he states that the word has three main definitions:

(i) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development, … (ii) the independent noun, … which indicates a particular way of life, whether of people, a period, a group, or humanity in general, … (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. (90)
Williams also reveals that the word brings with it a certain hostility, due to its association with class: “virtually all the hostility … has been connected with uses involving claims to superior knowledge (cf. the noun INTELLECTUAL), refinement … and distinctions between ‘high’ art (culture) and popular art and entertainment [not culture]” (92). This belief of one form of culture as superior to others clearly shares a connection with today’s neo-racism, which focuses on, not differences within a culture, but rather differences between cultures and cultural practices. Because of this, “[c]ulture (and cultural difference) [becomes a] cause (and legitimation) of violence, whether that be the fury of the terrorist or the calculated precision attacks of ‘smart’ warfare” and it can thus be “seen as the motor driving cataclysmic intercontinental violence” (Morey 136).

In contrast, Önder Çakıtaş’ definition is very straight-forward. To him, culture is “a society’s perception, thinking, and lifestyles; … a society’s identity, separating it from other communities’ values” (2). Simply put, culture is a way of life; a set of values. By this definition, hybridity is when two value systems interact with each other, and, as per Karidy, these systems either reinforce or contradict each other. Contradictory interactions, then, can possibly be said to be forms of culture clashes – when two cultures’ value systems are not compatible – and can give way to neo-racism (today mostly directed towards Muslim immigrants). Arguably, even in one person, two cultures that are contradictory can lead to neo-racism against one of the cultures. The hybrid Muslim immigrant might find themselves in “a state [of] ‘in between’ two contradictory cultures” and “torn between new and old, entrapped between the dichotomies of cultural hybridity” (7). They become victims of a “cultural divide [that] is further widened” as they try to adapt to their new society: a divide which might make them “forge an imaginary identity” to fit in, in turn creating “multiple and conflicting” identities (Ghosh 50).
A conflicting and fractured hybrid identity connects to orientalism (the West’s condescending attitude towards the East), which holds the idea that the East/“Orient” is “backward, degenerate, uncivilised, and retarded” (Said qtd. in Kennedy 9). The two are connected because, by wishing to fit in in a society where one’s native culture (and, by proxy, also oneself) is deemed all those things, the identity the immigrant creates in order to pass as Western might contrast with the native identity/culture. This could lead to a fractured hybrid identity, rather than a harmonious one. This fractured identity, in part due to the hatred for their native culture by the new one, may also lead to the immigrant not feeling at home in either cultures as a result, making them “cognizant of the existence of irreparable differences between the two” (Gasztold 17). For the (Middle) Eastern immigrant, it might even lead to them employing those orientalist stereotypes themselves, showing that they have, in fact, assimilated into Western society so “well” that it results in them adopting its neo-racist view of their former homeland/culture. Another major part of orientalist stereotypes is the idea that the countries in the “Orient” are uncivilised, and “any glory it might have had is in the past, not the present” (Kennedy 9). This thinking reinforces and “reproduce[s] the binary oppositions of Eurocentric thinking” – it forces the East to remain stuck in the past, something that, in turn, makes the West uphold its ideas of the East as unmodern/uncivilised; it remains in opposition to the modern, civilised, West (Grosfoguel 25). Should the immigrant adopt their adopted country’s orientalism and its associated stereotypes, it might lead them to also become nostalgic for a “glorious past” which they were not associated with, nor a part of. This connects to the concept of “‘armchair nostalgia’”, which is “‘nostalgia without lived experience’” (Appundari qtd. in Dancus 257). As such, orientalism and nostalgia go hand in hand, connected by a longing for the past.
The notion of nostalgia itself, with its origins in the Greek *nostos* (meaning home) and *algos* (meaning pain), suggests a “dislocation or discomfort with the present” which necessitates “an embellished recollection of the past” (Lorcin 97-98). Lorcin posits that “nostalgia is not just about displacement and loss of a cherished past” – which, in context with armchair nostalgia, means a past that never was, or a past that the subject never felt themselves – “it is also about a ‘romance with one’s own fantasy,’ where fantasies of the past are defined by the exigencies of the present” (98). This suggests that what is happening in the present, affects how one feels about the past, and, in combination with orientalist stereotyping, it might make the immigrant feel nostalgic for a time “before”, when their original culture was “great”. Problematically, I believe this could potentially make the immigrant’s identity even more fractured; making them long for a past they have no real association with. The “before” is probably pre-colonialism (or even further back in time) and in that way the immigrant might suffer from a sort of pre-colonial nostalgia of the (formerly) colonised. It is, essentially, a nostalgia for a time when their native country/culture might have been, or might not have been, powerful. Alternatively, it could also show that, being continuously subjected to racial/ethnic/cultural stereotyping, the immigrant longs back to and idealises (is nostalgic for) a time where they were not stereotyped and looked at in a negative light; when they were in a place where the majority of the population shared their own culture. This demonstrates not only the difficulties in being accepted in a new culture, but also the difficulties the immigrant might face as they try to navigate cultural differences; possibly fracturing their identity in the process. It also highlights the exceedingly difficult task of actually creating a hybrid identity that is, at least somewhat, balanced between the old and new culture, as well as the problems one might face in a new society with different norms to emulate and ideas about what deviates from those norms.
Of course, the immigrant might not have these problems at all, or as severely, and instead be able to balance both cultures by “foster[ing] [an] understanding or facilitat[ing] [an] acceptance of diverse ideological and religious systems” (Gasztold 17). Arguably, however, that implies that the culture they join can do the same, and there is no proof that the West, with its aversion to difference (see further discussion below), has this ability. If the immigrant is able to somewhat juggle both cultures – that is, have a stable hybrid identity – this could be a potential way to fight back against the West’s oppression and prejudice against their culture, by, as mentioned in the introduction, juxtaposing the cultures’ respective ideals and ideas with each other. By using the Western culture against itself by applying Eastern ideals, the immigrant could open up a conversation about cultural difference in a way that does not equal the typical “West equals good, East equals bad”, where the West has to save the East from itself; a conclusion which many cultural “debates” seem to land on today. As Ramón Grosfoguel says:

> the imperial project of military interventions under the rhetoric of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ in the 21st century, have all been imposed by militarism and violence under the rhetoric of modernity … saving the other from its own barbarisms. (25, my emphasis)

A conversation about cultural difference, then, could help the West see other cultures from another perspective: an inside perspective, rather than from one where the West is a perpetual (and, self-anointed, superior) onlooker. This could help the West become more open and tolerant towards new cultures and their experiences. Important to note, however, is that I am in no way suggesting that it is the immigrant’s role to make the West change its way of thinking, to make it more tolerant towards others’ views or values that might conflict with its own. Nevertheless, I do think that there needs to be more cross-cultural communication
happening that does not stem from violence between the West and East; that is not in relation to one culture having more (military) power over another. Novels like the primary text of this essay are in that context very important, because they can open a line of communication where both parties are on more equal footing, or, at least, where the East is not seen as less than the West.

Another thing to take into account is the Western world’s imperialist ventures in the East, as well as America’s neo-colonialist (a term coined by Ghanaian Kwame Nkrumah) endeavours in the Middle East through the occupation of Iraq (Loomba 25). The “re-signification of older forms of European colonialism” was “undoubtedly accelerated by 9/11” (Hartnell 336), and forces the immigrant standing in the middle of the East/West divide to choose between one or the other. If the immigrant has family living in the East, it becomes a choice between their family and the life they constructed for themselves; this might in turn make the immigrant feel that they are betraying their family/country/culture. Because the “war on terror” does not allow anyone to occupy a liminal space – to be ambiguous in their loyalties – entire communities have had their loyalties questioned (Morey 135), because, as former US president George W. Bush himself said: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists” (eMediaMillWorks). The war on terror itself is “a repetition of the European colonial project” (Hartnell 337); and an “exercise in US imperialism” (Lorcin 102). It also exposes the fascism that is on the rise in the West: in the Oxford English Dictionary, part of the meaning for fascism is a “system of government” that is “often pursuing an aggressively militaristic foreign policy” (“Fascism”), which, especially the US is doing through its war on terror, but also other Western countries, like Great Britain and France, by lending a helping hand.
To be forced to choose between one culture or the other can also be seen in the immigration policies in the Western world. Assimilation – when the immigrant’s native culture is discarded – has now become the standard in many countries. In fact, America “distinguishes itself by incorporating a racist and xenophobic aversion to difference with the more appealing sense that shedding ‘old world’ difference [the old culture] is precisely what becoming American is all about”: to become American the immigrant must assimilate; they must become “transformed by [their] new environment” (Hartnell 342); they must be “imbu[ed] with a set of desired values” (Gasztold 18). Contrary to this, critic Quratulain Shirazi posits that “in the new diaspora context, it is no longer assumed that migrants make a sharp break from their homelands” (17), which, hypothetically, would allow for immigrants to retain their old cultures while integrating into Western society. This “new diaspora context”, however, does not reflect today’s reality, which is littered with excessive security checks, racial profiling, attacks on “ethnic groups who might be perceived as ‘Muslims’” (Hartnell 338), etcetera. Rather, it is that which Shirazi calls the “classical diaspora perspective” (17) that truly reflects today’s immigration policies, because migration is seen as a one-way street towards complete assimilation in, and absolute loyalty to, the new culture. America, and most of the Western world, “absorbs the immigrant” through homogenising slogans such as “E Pluribus Unum” (out of many, one; used by the US Advertising Council in a Public Service Announcement post-9/11) (Hartnell 339), where people’s backgrounds are ignored, “appropriating [differences] into the logic of the same” (338). By assimilating into Western society, then, an immigrant might take on some of the West’s hostility towards the East/Muslims/difference, and, like Çakirtaş says, become “torn between new and old” (7). To demand full assimilation into Western culture by immigrants shows that the older forms of European colonialism – with its accompanying disregard for anyone not Western – are very much still alive today.
Hybridity, as showcased above, is complicated. It can be positive: a way for the underdog to fight back against oppression by using a repressive culture against itself; it might be an eye-opener, giving the immigrant a new, wider, perspective on things. But it can also be negative, leading to a fractured sense of self for the migrant coming to a new culture; a fight between what was and what will/can be; it might show the immigrant that cultural differences cannot be overcome, that people are doomed to fight over imagined dissimilarities forever.

Analysis

In this section, divided into two subsections, Changez’ identity will be analysed. I will begin by briefly discussing the impact of his name, and how that is indicative of both the changes the character goes through, and the fractioning of his identity. Then, for the remainder of the analysis, I will be looking at how his identity is fractioned.

What’s in a name? More than Shakespeare thought, obviously.

The very name ‘Changez’, which contains the word “change” itself, “situates him at the intersection between” two different belief systems: the individualistic, capitalist and imperial US/West on one side, and the “traditional humanist definition of the individual” of Pakistan/the East on the other (Kennedy 6).

To Western readers, the name’s clearest connection is, as said, to the fact that his name contains “change”, but also that, in French, “changez” is “the second-person plural imperative form of the … verb, to change, ‘changer’” (6). To the Western reader, then, the name seems to suggest that the very character himself is representative of the individual change and “development that have long been part of the self-definition of the USA and the West more generally” (6). This connects to, as stated above, the belief that in order for
immigrants like Changez to become American, they must change, because “shedding ‘old world’ difference is precisely what becoming American is all about” (Hartnell 342) – which is of course exactly what Changez attempts to do. His very reason for coming to America is to fulfil the American Dream, to climb up the social ladder and regain some of the glory he feels he has lost because his family are losing their wealth. So, in a way, he is representative of the individuality that accompanies Western ideology, and, especially, the concept of the American Dream.

Comparably, in the East, the name is another version of the names Chengis and Genghis, which Eastern readers, and Western upon learning it, can easily connect to the “twelfth-century Mongol leader, Genghis Khan” (Kennedy 6). This connection, Kennedy suggests, allows for Changez to be “identified with the ‘invader who attacks and destroys the Caliphate, the largest and most successful Muslim empire of its time’”, which in turn “differentiates him from any Islamic belief” (6). But because the Mongols also invaded Europe, I argue that it also reflects Changez’ own views of the West’s imperial aspirations. It places him as its direct opposition when he, after his identity has changed, wants to stop the post-9/11 America that takes its “grief” out “on the stage of the world”, saying that: “[s]uch an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in [its] own” (Hamid 190). The name’s obvious connections to Empire also speak for the nostalgia he suffers from, for a past where Pakistan and “the people of the Indus River basin” (38), were great; where they “built the Royal Mosque and the Shalimar Gardens … and … the Lahore Fort with its mighty walls” and they were “saints and poets and … conquering kings” (116).

Even the disconnect itself, between Eastern and Western readers’ knowledge, I suggest, is a sign of Changez’ hybridisation. For the non-hybrid reader, it would merely indicate a lack of knowledge, a lack of a wider perspective. For Changez, a product of two
worlds, two cultures, a hybrid with a – for most of the novel – fragmented identity, it represents the struggle between them: one side of him seeing the world in one way, the other in another way. In that way it also represents his inability to merge the two sides of him – it is only after he accepts his hybridity, after he has merged the two sides of him, that he is able, as is his intent at the end of the novel, to use Western culture and its ideals against itself.

Alternatively, it could also suggest that Hamid himself, through the novel, advocates for a wider, more complete perspective of the world. One where both the West’s and East’s ways of thinking are represented. This, in turn, should allow for a more open world; by respecting that there is more than one way of seeing things, by disregarding the binary and exclusionary thinking of the West, society, I believe, would become more tolerant. As Gasztold puts it, because Changez “[b]rings his native and immigrant experiences to the fore, Hamid’s protagonist challenges the preconceived ideas about who ‘us’ and ‘them’ are” (18). Being able to understand that difference – new perspectives – should be valued and seen as helpful in “facilitating mutual understanding” (21) might even lead to the West disregarding difference, in turn eradicating the very concepts of “us”, “them”, and Other.

**A TERRORIST! – No, that’s just a man with a beard.**

The main focus of this subsection will be the unfixed manner in which Changez regards his culture – it and its values being the basis for his identity – as this fluidity is a key concept in hybridity. One moment he is proud of his heritage, the next he is actively downplaying it. However, when he does suppress his Pakistani side, he becomes ashamed (see discussion on Manila below). Consequently, the act of suppression appears to be something negative for Changez, which in turn allows for the reader to grasp the difficulties he has in America that stem from him wanting to be seen as American, yet still remain Pakistani in culture and heritage.
To be seen as both American and Pakistani is the cause of all of Changez’ troubles. Due to America’s immigration policy (unofficially) being assimilation, there is not really any room left for Changez’ Pakistani culture. America, in line with Shirazi’s “classical diaspora perspective” (17), sees migration as a one-way street, and at the end of that street lies complete assimilation and loyalty to the “gracious” new host country. Therefore, in order to pass as American, Changez needs to comply to American standards, to the “national culture determined to assimilate differences only as past, as history” – he needs to convert his heritage, his culture, to history, because if he does not, “integration on any terms is no longer possible” (Hartnell 342). America accepts no half-truths or liminal spaces: there is no place for divided loyalties. Like Hartnell so eloquently puts it: “American culture places [an absolute claim] on its newly arrived immigrants, a claim that remains peculiarly indifferent to the dynamics of cultural exchange that might recognize the values brought to America by its migrant population” (342). Or, in other words, America’s assimilation policy “absorbs the immigrant” (339) and appropriates differences, new perspectives and knowledge, “into the logic of the same” (338). An effect of homogenising the country is of course that there is no room for new ideas, and tolerance for new cultures – for otherness – must surely stagnate the more assimilation is pushed as the best integration policy. For Changez, the pain that comes with him attempting to choose America over Pakistan – his attempt at assimilation – is itself an indicator of his hybridity. Had he not felt pain in suppressing his culture, he likely would not have had any issues assimilating into US society, as it would have shown that his Pakistani culture/identity meant little to him. The pain indicates hybridity because it places him, quite literally, in the middle of the East/West divide – forced to remain there because the US will never accept him unless he chooses it. Of course, the more this narrative is pushed on Changez, the more he sees it for what it really is: a fascist attempt to delete differences, to homogenise a country rich in diverse histories. Simply put, in America (especially during the
war on terror) there is no room for difference, for complex identities, or for “divided” loyalties.

This is a reality that Changez comes face to face with after 9/11, for example when he, on the flight back to New York from Manila after a business-trip, feels “uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion” (Hamid 85). Here he becomes singled out because of the West’s preconceived notions of what 1) a Muslim looks like, and now, post-9/11, 2) what a terrorist looks like. Because after 9/11 “the practice of ‘terrorism’ [was explained] as ‘Islamic’. ‘Islamic Terrorism’ is thus offered as both description and explanation of the events of 9/11” (Mamdani qtd. in Morey 136). In retrospect he ponders “whether I believed at all in the firmness of the foundations of the new life I was attempting to construct for myself in New York”, because “the power of my blinders shocks me … so stark … were the portents of coming disaster” (Hamid 106). He actively ignores rumours of “Pakistani cab drivers … being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI … raiding mosques, shops, and even people’s houses; Muslim men … disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse” (107); he is “clad in [an] armour of denial” (108). And, as Ghosh argues, both his avoidance and denial “expresses his agony at having to choose between America and [the East]” (51). The biggest confrontation between him and America’s fear of otherness, is when he is “struck by [America’s] determination to look back”, and finds himself wondering whether or not the past with which the US seems so enamoured with, “contained a part written for someone like me” (Hamid 131). It is here that he really begins to question who he is and what his place is in US society.

But in what ways does Changez suppress his Pakistani identity in order to begin the process of assimilation? One such occasion is during a holiday to Greece at the beginning of his stay in the US, where he is accompanied by a group of fellow Princeton students. During
the trip, Changez is appalled at his companions’ disrespectful treatment of their elders, as it
directly contrasts with Changez’ own ideals and his “traditional sense of deference to one’s
seniors” (24). However, since he does not attempt to voice his dissent, this is an example of
him suppressing his cultural ideals – likely in order to not stand out, to be seen as one of
them. He wants to be seen as part of the group of wealthy Americans; even though he sees
himself as the “well-liked … exotic acquaintance” (19). This is significant because it shows
that Changez is, at some level, aware of how he is perceived by the Americans, that he is
aware of the orientalist prejudices they have – those very stereotypes and beliefs being what
allow them to objectify him, to see him as “exotic” and, by definition, as Other.
Consequently, already before his disillusionment, he recognises and is aware of his own
“Otherfication”, and “lives with the knowledge that his identity is constructed in the gaze of
others” (Morey 144). Alas, despite this, the trip “provides an illusion that he may actually
become one of them” (Gasztold 18) because he is so attracted by the idea that he might be
seen as part of the Us-group that it effectively blinds him to reality. Of course, the reader,
realising that he is in fact perceived as Other, understands that his efforts to blend in are futile
because “Changez’s immersion in American society is illusory and … will only bring
disappointment and frustration in its wake” (18). This situation is a perfect example of
Çakırtaş’ and Karidy’s discussions on culture and hybridity, which suggest that, this is two
cultures – two value systems, Pakistani and American – interacting in a contradictory manner.
As Changez believes one way, yet does nothing to change the situation, he is quite literally in-
between “two contradictory cultures which induce cultural hybridity” (Çakırtaş 7) – his
position in the middle is what makes him a hybrid.

Another occasion where he suppresses his culture is during the business-trip to
Manila, where he attempts to “act and speak … more like an American” (Hamid 74). The
reason for this suppression is interconnected with the orientalism that Changez has adopted. He goes there, expecting “to find a city like Lahore” but “found instead … a place of skyscrapers and superhighways. … Manila’s glittering skyline and walled enclaves for the ultra-rich were unlike anything [he] had seen in Pakistan” (73). The comparison bothers him, because “it was one thing to accept that New York was more wealthy than Lahore, but quite another to swallow the fact that Manila was as well” (73-74). He is effectively seeing Manila and the Philippines – which he even calls “the East” (73), homogenising different people/cultures just as much as the term “Orient” – through the eyes of a Westerner, thinking that it ought to be stuck in the past. His attempt to speak more American comes with an attitude towards others that he does not agree with, telling “executives my father’s age ‘I need it now’”, cutting lines “with an extraterritorial smile”, and even going so far as to tell people, if asked, that he is from New York (74). He is ashamed and troubled by his behaviour, but because he wants the Filipinos’ respect, and is embarrassed to be from a city he deems to be poorer than Manila – Changez connects value to financial success – he dials down his Pakistani side and suppresses it, while strengthening his American side.

The orientalism Changez has internalised is due to the suppression of his culture, which itself is due to the assimilation pushed on immigrants. The chain of events leading to his adoption of orientalism can be perceived as being:

assimilation → suppression of Pakistani culture → internalised orientalism

The orientalism he has embraced can be seen in how he views Pakistan and the East. When he first begins at the valuation firm Underwood Samson he, some forty floors above the ground, remarks: “supporting my feet were the achievements of the most technologically advanced civilization our species had ever known” (38), but because he stresses “the technological development and power of America (and thus the West), Changez seems to be unwittingly
accepting the orientalist vision of the West as progressive versus the East as backward and static” (Kennedy 6). The comparisons he falls back on are “mildly hubristic and laced with nostalgia” (Ghosh 49), describing Pakistan as it was – its past glories – and comparing it with America: “Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians” (Hamid 38). Consequently, Changez’ need to assert Pakistan’s greatness falls flat, and comes off as a need to assert its superiority instead: “We built the Royal Mosque and the Shalimar Gardens in [Lahore], and we built the Lahore Fort with its mighty walls … And we did these things when [America] was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent” (116). Because he is unable to see value in Pakistan as it is in the present, he becomes dissatisfied “with the gross difference in scientific and industrial advancement between America and Pakistan” and nostalgic for “past glories” (Ghosh 50). Thus, Changez orientalism is tinged with a heavy nostalgia for a past he has no real connection to (“armchair nostalgia” [Appundari qtd. in Dancus 257]), a past where, according to him, Pakistan was greater than America. He longs back to the time before colonialism had sunk its teeth into the Indian subcontinent; his nostalgia is therefore a pre-colonial nostalgia.

This also suggests that he sees value the way a Westerner would, by placing it in the notion of modernity, and “the dominant meaning of modernity refers, all in all, to societal and political philosophies of secularism, … and western-orientation” (Çakirtaş 4, my emphasis). What Çakirtaş is arguing here is, simply put, that modern equals Western. This, due to the West’s binary and Eurocentric thinking, necessitates that unmodern/uncivilised equals Eastern. As such, by only seeing Pakistan’s glories as being of the past, and placing value in modernity, he literally becomes “torn between new and old” (7). This need he has to look to
the past is, according to Ghosh, a way for Changez to “forge an imaginary identity”, because as he is “[c]onfronted with what he increasingly perceives as the encroaching of power of American neo-imperialism, he must affiliate himself with another paradigm in order to be able to stand up to it” (50). His use of orientalism signifies that he has internalised the “binary oppositions of Eurocentric thinking” (Grosfoguel 25) and the West’s view of the world as West versus East; Occident versus Orient; civilised versus uncivilised. But where Morey argues that the function behind the orientalism is to “give a local habitation and a name to a part of the world the West too often sees only as a strategic problem to be solved” (141) – which, to some extent, I can agree with – and Shirazi sees it as Changez being “in touch with his ancestral history” and simply an act of nostalgia (21), I argue that the orientalism is meant to indicate that Changez truly is a hybrid: loving Pakistan, yet condemning it to the past.

However, the orientalism is not only a sign of his internalisation of Western ideals, but also, expanding on Shirazi’s argument, a sign of his crippling nostalgia for Pakistan – for the safety of his home. He does not feel at home, nor safe, in the West, and because, like Lorcin argues, “fantasies of the past are defined by the exigencies of the present” (98), he looks back to a time where he perceives Pakistan as greater than the West/America, and, consequently, to a time of security.

It is during his trip back to Lahore that he “wakes” from his cultural slumber; that “he begins to dismantle the American side of his identity” (Ghosh 51). As he is looking at the house he grew up in “with the eyes of … that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me” (Hamid 141), and sees only its faults and shabbiness, he realises that “I was a man lacking in substance and hence easily influenced by … others” (142). Because he realises that he has adopted an American/Western way of looking at things, he effectively foregrounds his fractioned, hybrid, identity himself. In the end it is therefore his
home that allows him to make the connection between his Westernised worldview and his fractioned identity: he cannot perceive the place he describes as home, and loves deeply, as also being lowly and shabby, without being divided and fragmented. Because Changez has also adopted the West’s binary thinking, the East and West cannot be the same thing: if the West is favoured, then the East, by definition, has to be its opposite. It is only when he returns home, and realises the effects of his perspective, that he grasps how fragmented he is. In the end, it is after this, and the televised bombings of Afghanistan – “Pakistan’s neighbor, our friend” (113) – that he sees the cracks in the American façade: the fascism and its xenophobic view of non-Westerners; he “is no longer capable of so thorough a self-deception” (114). Unable to ignore reality any longer, he realises the devastating effects America’s ‘war on terror’ has upon his home and the people he considers neighbours. It “ignite[s] in him sentiments of displacement, dispossession and resentment against [the] American socio-political and cultural system”, which makes him “reinstate his Muslim identity” by growing a beard (Shirazi 17). The beard itself “is an act of … rebellion against American post-9/11 policy towards Muslims” (Gasztold 24), and simultaneously a challenge to those who tend to see the world in stereotypes. Wearing a beard is a deliberate and outward demonstration of this part of his self that might significantly jeopardize his inclusion into American society … but [it] also shifts his notion of himself by leaning towards the inherited rather than adopted legacy. (24-25)

Later he realises that America, due to its fear of the Other, “retreated into myths of [its] own difference, assumptions of [its] own superiority” (Hamid 190), which resulted in the treatment Changez, and the Middle East, received.

However, there is one event that confirms his fractioned identity more than the others. On a business-trip to Valparaiso, Chile, he cannot focus on his work, instead diverting his
attention to the ongoing Pakistan-India conflict which appears to be escalating. This signals that Changez has turned his gaze, his focus, back to his home; away from America and the West. Nevertheless, he remains somewhat fragmented, because he also wonders why America has not stepped in and attempted to pressure India by “inform[ing] [them] that an attack on Pakistan would be treated as an attack on any American ally and would be responded to by the overwhelming force of America’s military” (162-163). This clearly shows that he can still see value in America’s “imperial and neo-colonial ambitions to become a dominant nation in the twenty-first century”, and its attempts to “establish its total control over” the world (Shirazi 24). During the trip he continues to turn his gaze increasingly towards his home, seeing Lahore reflected in “Valparaiso’s former aspirations of grandeur” (Hamid 165). The more time he spends there, the more he sees that in Underwood Samson’s “constant striving to realize a financial future, no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one’s emotional present” (165), a realisation that allows him to discover “latent traits of imperialism” (Ghosh 50) in the firm; traits that he previously had been able to ignore. The sentence “In other words, my blinders were coming off, and I was dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of my arc of vision” (Hamid 165) is significant because it signals that Changez has begun to accept his twofold, hybrid perspective; he has begun to accept his Pakistani identity and now attempts to reintroduce it to his worldview, in turn opening and broadening his perspective.

The reason for his final turn back towards Pakistan comes from the man who ran the company they were in Valparaiso to value, Juan-Bautista (a name close to John the Baptist: signalling him as the cause behind Changez’ re-birth). He tells Changez about the child soldiers of the Ottoman Empire, “the janissaries” (171), who “‘were Christian boys … captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army. They were … utterly
loyal’” and “‘always taken in childhood’” because “‘it would have been far more difficult to devote themselves to their adopted empire … if they had memories they could not forget’” (172). The story makes Changez start, and “plunge[s] [him] into a deep bout of introspection”, upon which he realises that “[t]here really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with kinship to mine” (173). Upon this realisation he says: “I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire” – which of course represents the capitalist, individualistic, American, side of him – “when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion to those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain” – representing the traditional, humanist, Pakistani, side of him (173).

His re-birth is what allows him to leave the destructive parts of his American identity behind, as he quits his job at Underwood Samson the very next day and flies back to New York. He continues to consider America’s part in world-affairs, but to an extent also his, and reflected that I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; [its] constant interference in the affairs of other countries was insufferable. … in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role. … [and] 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. It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination. (177)

This further alienates him from US society, cementing Changez’ shift in both identity and loyalty: he is no longer “willing to renounce the principles that have formed his Pakistani self for the sake of American materialism” and soulless capitalism (Gasztold 19). He means to
“look about [him] with an ex-janissary’s gaze … free … to consider … the whole of
[American] society” (Hamid 177-178): he means to use American culture – its ideas and
ideals – against itself, thereby doing what I discussed in the introduction: using it in order to
undermine and challenge its oppressive cultural structures. Changez, now “possess[ing] the
experience of both the Western and Eastern world” (Gasztold 17), can criticise US society by
turning its ideals against itself. Aside from this, however, he is also feeling doubt and
desperation, likening it to “the breakup of a romantic relationship” (Hamid 179), which
signals that his identity is no longer simply Pakistani: he retains some of his American
identity, even as he returns to Pakistan. It can, more clearly, be seen in the passage: “I had
returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of [America] had not entirely ceased. I remained
emotionally entwined with [it], and I brought something of [it] with me to Lahore” (195). He
understands that “it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been
blurred and made permeable by a relationship” (197), and appears to accept that some part of
his identity will be American; that his identity will be hybrid. This acceptance allows him to
further strengthen his identity, to make his formerly fractured hybrid identity into one that is
more harmonious and balanced.

In Lahore he gets a job as a university lecturer in finance, and uses it as a platform for
his “ex-janissary’s skills”, organising demonstrations “for greater independence in Pakistan’s
domestic and international affairs”, which were later deemed “anti-American” by the foreign
press (203). The demonstrations appear to have a humane purpose, as, upon the definition of
terrorism as “the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing
the uniforms of soldiers” (202), Changez feels that it necessitates that “the lives of those of us
who lived in lands which such killers [terrorists] also lived had no meaning except as
collateral damage”, which he believes to be the reason “why America felt justified in bringing
so many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq” (203). Of course, in real life we know that Changez’ statement holds some truth, as per the classified US military documents released by

WikiLeaks in 2010, between 2004 and 2009, there had been around sixty-six thousand civilian casualties, roughly sixty percent of the reported total (“Casualties of the Iraq war”).

The people in the Middle East have therefore seemingly become nothing more than collateral damage. To bring attention to this, Changez uses Western notions of peaceful protests to send a message to the West; effectively using that culture against itself – a key factor of hybridity.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this essay has been to show that Changez’ identity is a hybrid identity, made up of the value systems of two cultures, Pakistani and American. But because Changez for most of the novel is unable to reconcile the differences between the cultures and their ideals, I have come to the conclusion that while Changez’ identity indeed is hybrid, it is also fractured, fluid, and unstable, rather than harmonious, fixed, and stable. In fact, it is not until the end of the novel, when he no longer has to suppress his Pakistani side, that he comes to understand and accept that both Pakistan and America will always be part of him – part of his identity – and thus is able to use Western culture against itself. In simple terms: when he accepts all aspects of his identity, his hybrid identity becomes harmonious.

Of course, because he does not realise this until he has re-settled in Pakistan, Changez suffers from his fractioned and disconnected identity for the entirety of his ventures in the US, as the two parts of him continuously struggle and chafe against each other. This disconnect, coupled with America’s incessant need to erase immigrants’ old cultures from their identities, and his wish to belong to the American elite, leads Changez to suppress his Pakistani identity, in turn resulting in him adopting a Western perspective. But because Changez, perhaps at a
subconscious level, still holds his Pakistani culture close to his chest, the act of suppression becomes an act of shame for him, making him troubled. It is not until he goes home to Lahore that he realises that the “Americanness” of his gaze comes from him suppressing his own culture; the culture of his family, his people.

Away from American society with its crippling expectations on immigrants, the realisation gives way to a tangible shift in his identity, and Lahore thus represents a turning point for Changez. His former naïveté and idealised view of America shatters, and he sees it for what it really is. After this, his disillusionment is unstoppable, and he cannot un-see the cracks in the façade. His attempts to remain in the US and at Underwood Samson fall flat, as he has realised that he cannot merge the two sides of his identity into one stable unit. This inability stems from his belief that the traditional, family-centred values of Pakistan, do not agree with the individualistic and success-driven values of America and the West. He finds himself unable to agree with America’s profit-oriented capitalism and its consequent disregard for human lives and emotions. In the end, this makes him quit his job and move back home to Pakistan, where he, no longer forced to suppress a part of his identity, has an epiphany that allows him to, finally, combine the two cultures. He understands that he will never be the same; that America will always be a part of him, and he sees the value this has for him. He begins to use Western culture and its ideals against itself, in order to undermine and challenge the US’ ideas of its own superiority and its subsequent disregard for the lives of anyone not American/Western.

For future research I suggest looking into Erica, Changez’ semi-girlfriend, and what impact she had on Changez, both in enabling the “birth” of his American identity, and then later in dismantling it. A paper on Erica from a hybrid perspective could thus be seen as a companion piece to this one, complementing my take on the reasons behind Changez’
hybridity. Changez’ view of Erica could also be analysed, perhaps from a joined feminist/postcolonial angle, or simply a feminist one – it too might be revealing for who Changez as a character is. The focus on distinct characters is due to my belief that postcolonial theory needs to continue looking at individual experiences, and the suggestions above are examples of that, just like my own essay is. By focusing on individuals rather than groups or entire countries, postcolonialism might finally move past its universalist beginnings and remaining tendencies.

In the end, Changez did not become a victim of his fractured identity because he had a drastic change in perspective, brought about by his home. He realised who he had become, how he behaved, and decided no more. He took control of his own narrative, and turned away from the harmful aspects and ideals of American/Western society, choosing to preserve the positive aspects in order to undermine the harmful ones; to make the world a little more tolerant of him and of people like him; of difference; of Otherness.
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