

Tracing the Burden of Representation in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

The article analyzes Mohsin Hamid's novel, The Reluctant Fundamentalist in the light of the theory of The Pakistani English Novel: The Burden of Representation and the Horizon of Expectations (2018) by Dr. Masood Ashraf Raja. This article explores the novel, The Reluctant Fundamentalist in the context of the debate about national expectations of the Pakistani audience and metropolitan market. The article expresses the role of the protagonist functioning as the mouthpiece of the writer addressing the matter of representation. Lahori culture represents primary culture whereas the culture of New York symbolizes the expectations of the global audience. It reflects the representation of the primary culture as represented by Lahore, one of the major cities of Pakistan, and the depiction of the culture of a host country as represented by New York, a cosmopolitan city. Though the novel emphasizes the racial differences, yet it offers raw material to depict the experiences of the protagonist with competing habitus who is fascinated by the culture of the host country offered by its cosmopolitanism and also wishes to embrace his cultural roots in Pakistan. Mohsin Hamid carries the burden of representation and reflects primary culture during his interaction with Erica, and his colleagues in America, and with an unnamed American in Old Anarkali.

Key Words: Burden, Lahore, Culture, Metropolitan, Pakistan, Representation.

Introduction

Pakistani fiction writers seem to feel the anxiety of carrying the burden of representation of their primary culture. They present a world that is considered to be a realistic representation of Pakistani society to a metropolitan audience whereas for the Pakistani audiences it might look like a misrepresentation of their culture or reflection of only a slice of primary culture. They expect these authors to inform the metropolitan audience of the positive side of the picture by portraying a positive image of Pakistan. Their expectations are discursively produced and they expect diaspora authors to be socially institutionalized individuals in terms of their creative and literary endeavors. It sounds like an unusual and unfair demand on part of the Pakistani audience.

The article utilizes the theory of *The Pakistani English Novel: The Burden of Representation and the Horizon of Expectations* (2018) by Dr. Masood Ashraf Raja to analyze Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Lahore embodies the spirit of the country and its culture manifests the metropolitan essence accommodating inhabitants from diverse groups across the country. Raja is of the view that the selection of all characters from Lahore gives a platform to present Pakistani society. He says that "...to choose from in the city of Lahore, Mohsin Hamid's *Changez* in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), offers yet another simplistic take on the transcultural aspirations of a Pakistani male subject". From a postcolonial perspective, the protagonist seemingly finds the environment of the host country exotic and America as a land of opportunities.

Research Questions

1. How is the Pakistani culture represented before the metropolitan market?
2. How does Mohsin Hamid carry the burden of representation as a diaspora fiction writer of Pakistani origin?

Literature Review

Pakistani readers of English fiction raise expectations with Pakistani English writers to represent only the positive side of Pakistani culture.

A literary writer represents the world around him the way it looks. However, Pakistani diaspora writers who write in the English language essentially for the Western audience don't find local readers as their addressees. According to Raja, "Pakistani writers use the raw material to compose their fiction, they inhabit a peculiar transnational habitus, and their Pakistani readers...read the same works with the predetermined expectations of their own particular habitus." (Raja 2018, 348) Pakistani audience sees diasporic writers writing from the colonizer's perspective whereas they want o them to write from the colonized perspective.

Diasporic writers are not only representative of the country of their origin. Their writings also reflect the culture of host countries. These writers with different identities present a world acceptable for the audience of the country of origin as well as a cosmopolitan market. According to Raja, "through ascribing cultural practices and values to habitus makes it easier to understand the difference in tastes as well as the reception and evaluation of various works." (Raja 2018,349) Their writing is judged from the perspective of colonizers as well as colonized perspectives.

The perception of Pakistani English fiction writers may be different from that of the Pakistani audiences and it also influences the way any work is perceived, interpreted, and analyzed. The audience resides in different living conditions and different political scenarios. It makes the expectations of the audience opposing each other.

There are people in Pakistan who oppose the English language as a sign of slavery and reminiscence of the colonial past. The grudges against the Pakistani English writers are actually grudges against the language of colonizers. Raja believes that Pakistani writing in English is characterized by the notion, "When colonized natives acquired the language of their colonial masters, they also acquired and internalized their aesthetics and often their politics." (Raja 2018,350) They take language as a carrier of culture, identity, and preference. They feel that writers have to decide what matters the most for them. Ngugi is of the view that" Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation."

(Ngugi1986, 9) Language influences the thought process and defines individuals.

The identities of writers also affect the way they write. It becomes part of an unconscious process in the construction of an author. “The nationalist habitus works as both a structure and a structuring mechanism: it constructs not only the expectations of its inhabitants about their national identity but also how the national identity is represented and perceived elsewhere in the world.” (Raja 2018,351) Our words reflect our thoughts and perception of the world. It shows our worldview. Thus, literary writers present a world manifested by their national identity, history, and culture.

The representation of Pakistan in the eyes of the global audience is already distorted and affected by media reports. “It is no secret that within metropolitan circles a view of Pakistan as a ‘dark place’ or as a place riven with despotic patriarchy, terrorism, and interethnic conflicts already exists.” (Raja 2018,351) The dark and bleak picture of Pakistan is drawn by media reports. Grossberg reports that “identities are produced and taken up through practices of representation.” (Grossberg 1996, 90) However, Pakistani authors are held responsible for shaping the negative image of Pakistan through their negative portrayal where Pakistan is undermined and its social evils are given space.

Raja also talks about the approach of Pakistani English writers who do not live permanently in Pakistan and they “lack the capacity of, in some cases, do not have the right to write about Pakistan” (Raja 2018,352) As a Pakistani writer, nobody can dissociate himself from his culture and identity which exert formative and primary influence on one’s personality.

Social evils are prevalent in all societies. But these evils are emphasized in Pakistani writings. There is much more to say about Pakistan but “Pakistani authors write about the ills of their national or regional cultures, it is part of their job as socially engaged artists and writers. But sadly, these ills are also stereotypical; views of Pakistan upon which global perceptions of Pakistan”. (Raja 2018, 352) Pakistani English writers are responsible for the global perception of

Pakistan so media reports are not the only reason for creating a negative image of Pakistan.

There are exceptions as well when writers also talk about the responsibility of the West for creating a challenging environment for writers to let them express themselves with full freedom. Raja writes that “Some authors take the risk, even when they are genuinely challenging national ills and highlighting the complicity of Western nations states in what goes in the global periphery, of either being misread or lamed for being in service to metropolitan, cosmopolitan audiences.” (Raja 2018,353) These writers are branded as agents of the West to mar the positive side of Pakistan.

Pakistani audience considers those writers informants of West who portray only the negative side of Pakistan and presents a Pakistani world that is surrounded by social evils of all kinds with nothing positive. Raja says that “Pre-existing perceptions of Pakistan and Pakistani stereotypes...come across as more authentic because they are written by so-called ‘authentic’ cultural informants.” (Raja 2018,353) It is the role of Pakistani authors to change the perception of the western audience by creating a world where Pakistan is represented as a country with rich culture and diverse colors.

Literary writers have a complex relationship with the Pakistani audience in terms of freedom of expression. Pakistani audience takes writers of Pakistani origin as ambassadors of their primary culture. The social structure of Pakistani society creates expectations in the audience and it also becomes a cause of anxiety for writers who are writing with conflicting identities. Raja writes “Within the cosmopolitan habitus, all the authorial choices make perfect sense...a writer has the right to represent all aspects of his or her culture and he or she must guard this freedom at all costs...the national habitus structures not only national expectations about representation but also anxieties about perceptions of the nation elsewhere in the world.” (Raja 2018,357) They feel the anxiety of depicting Pakistan because the local audience seemingly considers them responsible for creating a positive image of Pakistan.

Nobody can deny the fact that texts are produced and are social products. Text is socially constructed and in the global landscape presents the picture of society. Raja writes that “Within the global arena of cultural representation there are no unmotivated texts or transparent representations; all acts of representation come with cultural and political baggage and are read and consumed within the larger context of socially produced knowledge about a broader specific culture.” (Raja 2018,358) It is up to the writers who need to grasp the reality that their writings will be taken as a reflection of their primary culture and an opinion will be formed within the global landscape.

Raja says that “Pakistani writers of English must also bear in mind that the stories they tell are not just stories but also windows into their primary culture.”(Raja 2018,358) Through their writings, the audience peeps through the window and sees primary culture as it looks like. The way their primary culture is represented in their writings comes within his responsibility to carry the burden of national representation.

Discussion and Analysis

Beard symbolizes Pakistani identity in the novel. Changez addresses the metropolitan audience when he says, “Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America.” (Hamid 2008, 01) It shows that Beard has connotative implications in the West. The protagonist doesn’t want the symbol of the beard to be misrepresented by the American. Changez finds the American to be curious about his beard. As Changez says, “Perhaps you misconstrue the significance of my beard” (Hamid 2008, 61) He tells him that he had no beard when he was in America before 9/11. As Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes argue: “In Changez, Hamid presents a protagonist who subverts orientalism, but while he attempts to seize voice and representation from the West about the West, the representation of Pakistan in the novel remains troublingly orientalist” (“Post-9/11” 7).

Changez represents a Pakistani who has been empowered by Hamid to speak for himself. It is noticeable that American representing a global audience has been silenced in the novel. Mohsin perhaps is more concerned about what a Pakistani, feels about the misrepresentation of the Pakistani Muslim diaspora than what Americans know through

media reports. Changez's remarks, on the very first page of the novel are meant for the Pakistani audience as well as the metropolitan audience when Changez talks to American that, "I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services." (Hamid 2008, 01)

At another place, Changez becomes a guide for American when he is found to stare at a man with a long beard who stops beside the girls of the National College of Arts and asks him not to expect him to harass them as it is not possible in the bazaars of Lahore. He further tells him that, "if a woman is harassed by a man, she has the right to appeal to the brotherly instincts of the mob, and the mob is known to beat men who annoy their sisters." (Hamid 2008, 25) In this way, he addresses the metropolitan audience that women in Pakistan feel empowered in the presence of the public which protects them in case of untoward circumstances. Changez speaks for Pakistan as an ambassador of his Pakistani culture.

Hamid, through Changez talks of his primary culture and tells American that, "We have a range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier." (Hamid 2008, 01) Changez is the mouthpiece of Hamid and through his character, he gives voice to the subaltern and presents a realistic picture of Pakistan, its values, and culture.

Changez is conscious of the pre-established notions of Americans about Pakistanis. He tries to tell him that it is part of Lahori culture to stare. When he observes the American staring at NCA girls and another man with the beard, he tells him, "That bearded man...is himself unable to stop glancing over his shoulder at those girls" (Hamid 2008, 29)

Changez is concerned about telling the American the history and culture of his native country. Changez tells him that tea is considered to be one of the most favorite drinks in the evening. He also tells him the etymological significance of Anarkali. He says, "Old Anarkali—named...after a courtesan immured for loving a prince" (Hamid 2008, 02) Changez acquaints him with the magnificent history of his native

place. Changez also talks about Kashmiri tea, jalebis, and the popular tea of Anarkali. Food is part of cultural identity. We are what we eat, drink, and celebrate. He presents a picture of his primary culture. He tells American that Urdu is a sweet language which shows polite behavior. He hints at the polite behavior of the waiter and associates it with the Urdu language when he tells him that, “irreproachably polite: you would have been surprised by the sweetness of his speech, if only you understood Urdu.” (Hamid 2008, 06) The Urdu language is very rich and the idea of sweetness and politeness are also attached to it. Changez also refers to the Urdu poets when he talks of his mother and her interest in Urdu poetry. He tells him that, “my mother quoted the poems of Faiz and Ghalib.” (Hamid 2008, 43) Changez tells the American about Erica and her interest in the Urdu language. When Erica asks him about Urdu writing script. He tells her that, “Urdu is similar to Arabic, but we have more letters.” (Hamid 2008, 31) During his stay in America, his primary culture has been part of his identity. Even Americans are also found to give respect to his culture.

Changez introduces himself and through Changez, Mohsin Hamid introduces Lahore to the metropolitan audience that Changes is from Lahore which is the second-largest city of Pakistan and it is, “ancient capital of Punjab, home to nearly as many people as New York, layered like a sedimentary plain with the accreted history of invaders from the Aryans to the Mongols to the British.” (Hamid 2008, 08) It seems as if he were talking to a global audience to have a more refined and refreshed view of Pakistan because of its magnificent and glorious past. John McLeod argues in this sense that “to be 'at home' is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves.” (McLeod2000, 210) Upon Erica father’s remarks, Changez was hurt however he says that “I felt myself bridle. There was nothing overtly objectionable in what he had said; indeed, his was a summary... on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*”(Hamid, 2008, 63) Americans are familiar with Pakistan through media representations and misrepresentations. It is not all about Pakistan. He further tells him that “Yes, there are challenges. and I can assure you it is not as bad as that.”(Hamid 2008, 63) Erica can feel that Changez was upset about what her father had said. Erica

tells him that, “You’re touchy about where you come from. It shows on your face.” (Hamid 2008, 64)

Through Erica’s father, Mohsin Hamid has expressed the views of Americans about Pakistan as represented by media reports. It was quite disturbing for him when he says that, “Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers. Solid people, don’t get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well... And fundamentalism.” (Hamid 2008, 62-63)

The novel also addresses the possibility of cultural engagement in terms of bringing people of diverse identities together. Changez tells his addressee about his forefathers and their education from England. He tells, “my grandfather and father both attended university in England” (Hamid 2008, 10) John McLeod argues in this sense: “The concept of 'home' often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong.” (McLeod2000, 210)Changez tells him about his whereabouts, family history, and his long association with Lahore. He says, “Our family home sits on an acre of land in the middle of Gulberg, one of the most expensive districts of this city...Gulberg, one of the most expensive districts of this city...which would, in America, imply that we were a family of great wealth.” (Hamid 2008, 10-11) He establishes an analogy for the American audience.

He becomes a representative of Pakistan and openly expresses his concerns about the issues of Pakistan in recent times. Changez tells him, “Salaries have not risen in line with inflation, the rupee has declined steadily against the dollar, and those of us who once had substantial familyEstates... and when the time came to send me to college, the money simply was not there.” (Hamid 2008, 11) It might be a misrepresentation of Pakistani audience misperceives the factual evidence. Hamid’s concerns about major issues of Pakistan are quite genuine and realistic portrayals of local culture.

Hamid through Changez talks about the Pakistani dream, shattered in Pakistan and could be materialized in America. Changez tells him

about the choices he makes while living in America to give an impression to Pakistanis that he is well-off and to leave an impression on American fellow beings that he was a prince. As he says, “I chose both. At Princeton, I conducted myself in public like a young prince, generous and carefree. But I also, as quietly as I could, held down three on-campus jobs”. (Hamid 2008, 12) Hospitality is part of Pakistani culture and Changez through his behavior depicts this quality in the novel. Changez says, “I see you have finished yours. Allow me to pour you another cup.” (Hamid 2008, 12)

Changez also tells him about the diversity of culture in Pakistan and the empowerment of women as represented by the students of the National College of Arts, often misunderstood in the West. Changez says, “DO YOU SEE those girls, walking there, in jeans... And how different they look from the women of that family sitting at the table beside ours, in their traditional dress.” (Hamid 2008, 18) Changez’s remarks imply that Pakistan is misrepresented as a country where women are not allowed to study and move freely in public. Here he implicitly speaks to his global audience. Hamid also gives respect to the diversity of culture when he asks the American about his love history in the Past. Changez asks the American, “Tell me, sir, have you left behind a love—male or female, I do not presume to know your preference.” (Hamid 2008, 18) It also hints at the dialogic possibility between a Pakistani and American with the implications and acceptance for gays from a global perspective. Hamid candidly talks about the curiosity of a person from his primary culture and it shows a realistic depiction of Pakistani culture about staring women as Changez says, “when I noticed Erica was untying the straps of her bikini. And then, as I watched, only an arm’s length away, she bared her breasts...I am being dishonest; it was *more* than a moment—she turned her head to the side and saw me staring at her.” (Hamid 2008, 26)

Changez talks about the way he feels when he sees Erica and his habit of staring. He says, “I could suddenly avert my eyes, thereby proving not only that I had been staring but that I was uncomfortable with her nudity” (Hamid 2008, 27) He represents most of the people here in Pakistan who don’t feel comfortable seeing women and consider it

indecent to reveal their private parts publicly. However, they keep on staring and cannot ignore it. He continues that, “how being in Pakistan heightens one’s sensitivity to the sight of a woman’s body. Do you not agree? That bearded man...is himself unable to stop glancing over his shoulder at those girls, fifty yards away.” (Hamid 2008, 29) It demonstrates the culture of Lahore where people stare at girls though it is considered indecent and unacceptable in Pakistan.

Erica is curious to know about Pakistan. She symbolizes a global audience that is also interested to know about Pakistani culture, its history, and its traditional values. Erica says, “So what’s Pakistan like?” she asked. I told her Pakistan was many things, from seaside to desert to farmland stretched between rivers and canals... to China on the Karakoram Highway.” (Hamid 2008, 30-31) Hamid becomes a cultural diplomat and through Changez, he presents a realistic picture of Pakistan and what it offers to its tourists. Hamid looks to be a genuine representative of Pakistani culture. Changez also tells him that, “alcohol was illegal for Muslims to buy and so I had a Christian bootlegger who delivered booze to my house in a Suzuki pickup.” (Hamid 2008, 31) This shows an honest and true picture of Pakistan where alcohol is available if one wants it. Hamid doesn’t feel reluctant to share the dark aspects of his culture. Pakistani miss their place of birth whereas they feel comfortable during their stay in a developed country. As Changez says, “I often did miss home, but in that moment I was content to be where I was.” (Hamid 2008, 31) Genuinely speaking about his local culture makes Hamid a very popular writer.

Freud says that an individual shares his unconscious even in jokes. Changez almost terrifies his colleagues when he says, “I hoped one day to be the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability”. (Hamid 2008, 33) However, it shows the ambitiousness of Pakistani people who want to excel in every field to make their lives better. It also shows his sense of humor which is also a characteristic feature of Pakistani culture.

Changez also tells the American about the routine of traffic in Old Anarkali in the busy hours. As Hamid writes, “Soon they will shut to traffic the gates at either end of this market, transforming Old Anarkali

into a pedestrian-only piazza.”(Hamid 2008, 35) He continues to speak about the culture of Lahore and the boys who violate traffic rules. He tells him that Police will arrest boys on a motor scooter, “Only if they can catch them!” (Hamid 2008, 36) He further tells him about Lahore and shares his thoughts about Lahore. He tells him that there is no place for pedestrians to walk. He further says, “Lahore is more democratically *urban*”. (Hamid 2008, 36) He wants to make a comparison of Lahore to New York. Changez openly accepts that “our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education.” (Hamid 2008, 38) He makes honest remarks that this is something to feel ashamed of. He is convinced about the superiority of his culture in the past and underdeveloped cities in the present.

Changez performs the role of a cultural diplomat and he speaks for Pakistani culture and its history. Changez tells, “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 2008, 38) He openly accepts that the decline of values that has transformed his place of birth altogether that America and the Westerners are living in far better conditions than Pakistanis are. Changez feels ashamed of being a Pakistani during his stay in America which is quite disturbing for him.

Food is part of the identity of a culture. Changez feels proud that the Lahori food is delicious. As he says, “our food...is something we Lahoris take great pride in. Moreover, it is a mark of friendship when someone treats you to a meal” (Hamid 2008, 45) He talks about the richness of Pakistani culture where guests are given respect and feeding them is considered to be a mark of a good relationship. He continues to make comparisons between Pakistan and America. He talks about his impressive mannerism and rationalizes it in these words, “like Pakistan, America is, after all, a former English colony, and it stands to reason, therefore, that an Anglicized accent may in your country continue to be associated with wealth and power, just as it is in mine.” (Hamid 2008, 47) He presents a realistic picture of

Pakistan that an Anglicized accent is considered as a status symbol in status-conscious society of Pakistan.

As a Pakistani, Changez cannot conceal his sense of elation during his stay in New York. As he says, “I was happy in that moment. I felt bathed in a warm sense of accomplishment. Nothing troubled me; I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet.” (Hamid 2008, 51) He also talks about the comfort level of the American sitting in Old Anarkali. He says, “Yes, we have acquired a certain familiarity with the recent history of our surroundings” (Hamid 2008, 51) Changez wants his guest to interpret his present in the light of his past.

When he visits Erica’s home, the selection he makes to wear also demonstrates his preference for his primary culture. As he says, “I took advantage of the ethnic exception clause that is written into every code of etiquette and wore a starched white kurta of delicately worked cotton over a pair of jeans.” (Hamid 2008, 55) Erica’s father talks about his interaction with Pakistanis when he says that “I had a Pakistani working for me once,” ... “Never drank.” (Hamid 2008, 61) It shows most of the Pakistanis live away from their primary culture and their preference for it.

Conclusion

Hamid is also torn between two conflicting identities. However, in the later part of the novel, he carries the burden of representation and becomes a mouthpiece of his primary culture, and puts emphasis on the spaces of cultural engagement, acceptability, and dialogic possibility. He silences the American and gives Changez importance to speak for himself and his primary culture. This is important to note that he doesn’t discard the cosmopolitan nature of New York and American as a land of dreams. However, so far as the matter of representation is concerned, we cannot ignore Hamid as spokesperson of his Pakistani side.

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