

The influence of the 9 11 tragedy



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In post 9/11 America, identity regarding gender, race, and class flipped completely, causing many members in contemporary American society to question themselves and their worth in the United States. In the novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, by Mohsin Hamid, readers are able to track the influence of the 9/11 tragedy into the marketplace, corporate America, and living life in general in America through his main character, Changez.

Changez is a hardworking individual that experiences racial discrimination while participating in corporate America's market fundamentals - a tragic mix of being destined to fail, and racial inequality for those working in the field. The dehumanizing nature of post 9/11 America sends influential shivers down the spine of corporate America and bleeds into the work place for minorities through the way Changez interacts with his coworkers, regular citizens, and the market in general.

When Changez reflects on what makes Underwood Samson so different and reveals American ideals and culture, he recalls a conversation with Sherman - " It was a testament to the systematic pragmatism - call it professionalism - that underpins your country's success in so many fields" (Hamid 36). While Changez understands the old adage of " business is business", he still finds it hard to believe the stark difference between Underwood Samson and when he was a student at Princeton, " at Princeton, learning was imbued with an aura of creativity; at Underwood Samson, creativity was not excised - it was still present and valued - but it ceded its primacy to efficiency" (Hamid 37). This instance of reflection by Changez reveals several things about Underwood Samson, not only the fact that it promotes a lifeless atmosphere and hires people who do not encompass a team attitude, but it is open about this.

While they boast this “hard knocks” theory of working, they do so to devalue the life of Changez, and get a leg up against him. This establishes the mantra of corporate America – even if you can help in some way, it is not about what you know, but who you know. Hamid writes, through the trials of Changez, this dehumanization of a minority in a post 9/11 setting. Hamid communicates these ideals through the way he is handled in the work place, with several interactions that are cringe worthy and generally unfortunate. In Peter Morey’s article, “‘The rules of the game have changed’: Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and post-9/11 fiction”, Morey recognizes the intent of Hamid while also appreciating and informing his own readers about what literature framed in this time period does not only for the sake of the novel’s plot, but for the community at large, and how writing about these injustices helps reconfigure the main tropes of corporate America.

While Morey understands that the initial reaction for many of Hamid’s readers is to have an immense sense of nationalism when reacting to the tragedy of 9/11, he identifies this book as something that challenges that nationalism by exposing what really happens when speaking about minorities participating in corporate America. Morey also claims that the novel “defamiliarizes our relation to literary projects of national identification” (Morey 136), a tactic that allows Hamid’s readers to exit their comfort zone in order to feel what someone from the outside might feel. Hamid’s unreliable narrator also aids this literary strategy because it reaches out to Hamid’s main audience – people living in America in this post 9/11 world. It makes it more understandable to view the re-institution of learning

these “ fundamentals” through the eyes of someone who does not approve of them, and is incredibly suspicious of them at the same time.

Just as Changez is ready and willing to break down the American system of doing things, he certainly also is not afraid to speak up about it. Hamid adjusts his readers’ lens at the end of the novel to see Changez as someone to trusts, as opposed to the unreliable, ever-changing narrator we grew to know him as. Changez reflects later in the novel about his distrust with the American way, specifically referring to Americans and America using the word “ you” (Hamid 168). This word choice sticks out because it is used to describe a nation that has theoretically given Changez so much, but in reality, it has chewed him up thoroughly and spat him out.

This reflection from Changez addresses what he truly feels about the manifestation of corporate America into the modern society which he has had so much trouble with – living, believing, and trusting it. He belittles America and labels America acting out the beliefs which he understands as “ myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority” (Hamid 168) by claiming Americans threw a tantrum for the rest of the world to clean up. Essentially, the way America handles change and indifference makes them less superior, and framing this theory through the lens of the work place allows readers to understand exactly what Changez sees about America.

While his ideas are justified, he sees the corporate world, and almost exclusively the parts of American culture that exhibit the dire competitive nature of how America functions. In the environment he experiences, he

obviously expects competition, but never to the point of public humiliation and dehumanization that comes to physical confrontation. One instance of Changez experiencing this was when he was when he finally decides he has had enough of Underwood Samson, and he decides to quit. As Changez leaves Jim's office for the final time, he writes that almost none of the fellow employees even bother to look up from their work and see him out. He confesses that even Wainwright, the man he considered to be looking out for him, does not bother to show any real affection or love towards him. In fact, Changez feels violated even in his parting, thinking "the others, if they bothered to look at me at all, did so with evident unease and, in some cases, a fear which would not have been inappropriate had I been convicted of plotting to kill them rather than of abandoning my post in mid-assignment" (Hamid 160). This was the last straw for Changez, and the irony lies in these actions from his co-workers because while they put on a facade throughout the entirety of his employment at Underwood Samson, they pretend to be a team. They speak like they are working together for a common goal, however in reality, they break Changez down consistently throughout the novel both mentally and physically.

While most of post 9/11 America, was busy mourning the loss of many lives in the tragic incidents, many people were preaching the importance of staying close together. The president at the time, George Bush, told people to remain close, and to remember what America consisted of - brave, powerful, and strong people that cared deeply about their country and who belonged to it. However, as reflected by the actions of Underwood Samson, unity in a post 9/11 America is selective. Those whom you choose to unite

with should be looking out for you, essentially, but besides the core people, there is no room for charity when it comes to corporate America. Unity, to the members of Underwood Samson, should only be used for your own benefit, instead of following the actual definition of the word, being inclusive.

These fundamentals that have been unfortunately framed by 9/11 and the culture of America post 9/11 are designed to be inclusive, yet are incredibly discriminatory. The execution, as shown by the actions of the American characters in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, are fairly poor while exhibiting the American's fatal flaw of caring too much about other people and their impending business.

The interaction that Changez shares with his former co-workers is then also highlighted by the way he is forced to leave. "The guards did not leave me until I was outside the building, and it was only then that I allowed myself to rub my eyes with the back of my hand, for they had been watering slightly" (Hamid 160). Up until this point in the novel, explicit emotion responding to this American aggression has been difficult to capture from Changez. While we see his physical and mental response, readers have not seen him cry tears of frustration, disappointment, and pure anger. Here, readers are allowed into the world of our narrator, Changez, and how even at the end of his time at Underwood Samson, he identifies that his hunches he once had, especially at the beginning of the novel, turned out to be true.

Michael Kimmel, author of the essay "Masculine Entitlement and the Future of Terrorism", displays the white perception of 9/11 and how anybody of a different color or origin will automatically be seen as an "outsider" who is "

stealing their place at the table” (Kimmel 617). While Kimmel does not directly relate his argument to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, his argument does explain a lot of the possible motives and motivations that some of the other characters might feel towards Changez. While it is inexcusable, Kimmel sheds a little light on why they might do what they do.

This aching fear of losing a job, or being ousted by an “outsider” that is displayed in physical aggression and attempted mental breakdowns from the other characters stems directly from America’s post 9/11 culture. In Changez’s struggles to adapt to American culture, he is met with another difficulty that places him under a deep spell of confusion. He is confronted by many people at Underwood Samson about the fact that he allows his beard to grow out, “I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares” (Hamid 130). Not only does this puzzle him deeply as to why anyone would care about how he wore his hair, but he is deeply concerned that the one other minority at his company, Wainwright, insults his culture and heritage by making a rude and demeaning comment about his beard, saying “They are common where I come from,” I told him. ‘Jerk chicken is common where I come from,’ he replied, ‘but I don’t go smear it all over my face. You need to be careful. This whole corporate collegiality veneer only goes so deep’” (Hamid 130-31). This dialogue between Wainwright and Changez tells readers how little his coworkers care for him, and even more surprisingly, the ones who supposedly do care for him really do not. While Wainwright sounds like he is protecting him by telling him to shave his beard, he cannot

allow himself to give Changez any advice without giving him his own personal insult.

Part of the reason Wainwright expresses himself in such a way is the divide between not knowing exactly what to say to help Changez and the trouble with American society. On some level, he wants to help Changez, but on another, he wants to stay secure in his own skin, and to fit in with all the other corporate clones that they both work with. Besides the verbal abuse that Changez receives from everyone, the mental intimidation factor is incredibly high, especially in a high-pressured office such as Underwood Samson.

In addition to Wainwright showing his true colors, many of the people that surround Changez show themselves to him shamelessly with their dehumanization. This is done on a strangerly, face-to-face basis through aggressive discourse that is not only offensive to Changez, but several other cultures that misinformed Americans often confuse together, especially after the events of 9/11.

In the parking lot after leaving work, Changez is confronted by a man who begins to make noises at him, mocking the way he looks, and evidently labeling him as a ““ fucking Arab”” (Hamid 117). This exchange is wildly harmful because as Changez greets the man mocking him, he thinks “ he might be mad, or drunk; I thought also that he might be a mugger, and I prepared to defend myself to strike” (Hamid 117). However, as the man began to approach Changez, he slowly realizes that the man does not want anything from Changez, he comes to recognize that this man is merely

racist. Changez can see that this man does not want to harm him physically, just to pass along hateful discourse for his own enjoyment. It is with a confused and angry response that Changez questions this idea of working as a team, and America's ideals in general. After " a few murderous seconds" (Hamid 118), Changez and his attacker chose to not physically confront each other, which was most likely in the best interest of the attacker. However, this does not absolve any part of the conflict for either party. Changez walks away shaken, not knowing what to do, and questioning the morals of the American citizens he is supposed to be respecting and striving to be like.

Mahmood Mamdani, author of the essay " Good Muslim, Bad Muslim" works to approach American readers on how not to talk about Islam and politics - two very controversial and fragile topics of discussion among common Americans. I found this essay interesting because it connects some of the similar topics Mohsin Hamid attempts to bridge in his novel. In the essay, Mamdani writes about George Bush's " public flirtation with the idea of an anti-Muslim crusade," (Mamdani 24), something that sounds slightly outrageous to a more modern audience, but was tragically true. In this post 9/11 warzone of America, Bush would continuously preach to Americans about distinguishing "' good Muslims' from ' bad Muslims'" (Mamdani 24). While Bush did this, many people saw this proclamation as an opportunity to implement this into their workplace rituals and everyday routines, something we see prime examples of in the characters in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

After 9/11, many Americans, similar to those we see directly in the novel, decided to make this assumed religion, meaning anyone who was suspected to practice Islam, was a political problem. If someone appeared, to a white

American, to be Muslim, they should be placed in the “ good” or “ bad” category, and should be dealt with accordingly. The “ good” vs. “ bad” culture that was raised in the United States produced toxic mindsets that evidently leaked into the way people lived their lives, which is what Hamid tries to teach his readers in his novel. The politicization of culture appears to be a direct result of the Bush administration, and although not every single American thought/thinks like this, there are the select groups that really believe in this “ Us vs. Them” discourse that continues, to the dismay of many, to this day in the United States of America, the supposed “ greatest country on Earth.”

Studying this odd dichotomy between those who have reserved their seat at the table of corporate America and those who are begging for the scraps brings about many interesting arguments and analyses. Mohsin Hamid, through the dialogue, plot, and interesting and powerful character dynamics pioneers his way through the epicenter of writing literature through the scope of post 9/11 America. Hamid trains his readers not to trust his narrator, just as the narrator should never trust those he deals with, to put his readers in a similar seat as Changez. This novel, just like many novels similar to it, is meant to make readers uncomfortable, yet it is also used to instruct, teach, and challenge the readers’ connotations of America, specifically after 9/11, and how we, as a nation, deal with problems on a large and small scale.

These fundamentals that we have discussed throughout the study of this novel are not something Changez wants to subscribe to. In his efforts to become like the people he hates, he realizes the toxicity and the hardships

that he must endure to do something he does not exactly want to do with the same people that falsely supported him throughout his journey. On a large scale, this is an inverse coming of age novel, one in which the protagonist realizes that coming of age is not exactly what he is meant to do, especially not in America. Hamid paints these lessons well and continues to write with a purpose throughout the entire novel, not once letting up his grip on telling the story of a man whose ambition was stolen by the crooked setup of the American corporate realm, the government, and the society in general.