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GLOBALIZATION AND ISLAMOPHOBIA  
A STUDY OF MOHSIN HAMID'S THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST

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**Abstract**

The novel talks about Changez, a Pakistani, getting a scholarship to study at Princeton. Then a job at a well-paying company in New York and his love life with a Princeton graduate Erica. This more than happy life is changed by the attack of 9/11 and the events that follow it. Changez's encounter with his dual identity because of the phenomenon called globalization and his getting stuck in an environment stuffed with anti-Muslim hatred usually referred to as Islam phobia. The papers deals with different facets of identity and multiple versions of Islam phobia like racial profiling. It also tries to highlight America's mishandling of its security policies which garnered the country a worldwide hostility rather than much needed sympathy.

**Keywords:** Globalization, Islam phobia, race, 9/11

**Islam phobia:**

The term 'Islam phobia' was popularized by Edward Said in 1985 (Bahdi and Kanji) (Bahdi and Kanji). Since then, it has become a part of political, legal and popular lexicons. In the contemporary discourse, Islam phobia emerged with the publication of the report "Islam phobia:

A Challenge for Us All" by the British race relations NGO the Runnymede Trust (1997). The paper defines Islam phobia as "the dread, hatred, [and] hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims". At times, fear is stated to be the cause of Islam phobia but in many other cases, fear is said to be the natural concomitant of that whole process which is carried out to generate Islam phobia. For example, a British Columbia Human rights Tribunal highlighted the evidence of expert witnesses who laid out that Islam phobia was deliberately and strategically deployed to generate fear. This case actually was based on a complaint against Maclean's Magazine after an article was published in it. The article carried out the claims that Islam was motivated by imperialistic ambitions which strived to take over and win the West (Bahdi and Kanji).

However, Khalid Beydoun in his American Islam phobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear emphasizes that the way Islam phobia is generally defined as an 'Irrational Fear' is problematic. The reason he states for the same is that it confines this kind of racism to private sectors only and ignores or undermines the systematic role of state in targeting and

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discriminating against Muslims(Beydoun). This is so because prominent writers have, at many times, stated in public that their hostilities are not against Muslims as a group rather maintains a severe distrust against Islam as a doctrine. Shortly after the publication of 1997 Runnymede Trust Report, The Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee wrote “I am an Islamophobe, and proud of it” while, a decade later, Sunday Times columnist Rod Liddle presented a talk entitled “Islam phobia? Count me in”(Bleich). Apart from journalists and authors, prominent politicians also began to exploit such vocabulary and carefully drafted statements which couldn’t hide their propensity towards Islam phobia. The 2016 nominee for Democrats, Hillary Clinton, would always be cautious while referring to Muslims as she would add qualifiers like “terror hating” or “peace loving” to Muslims. This was because using the word “Muslim” without a qualifier, as she felt, would cost her political mileage.

An example in this regard might help to ascertain whether a particular act or attitude qualifies to be called Islam phobia? If a woman who was born in a society where Islam was interpreted in such a way so as to justify forced subservience from females, she may naturally develop certain negative attitudes towards certain interpretations of Islam by a particular community. Questioning any aspect of Islamic doctrine or practices of a subgroup of Muslims doesn’t qualify for Islam phobia. However, if she concludes from the above experience that Islam and Muslims are worthy of condemnation as a whole, it turns into an indiscriminate attitude which constitutes Islam phobia.

**September 11 Attacks:**

The attack on Twin Towers in New York on September 11, allegedly by the militant organization Al-Qaeda was an incident that changed the Muslim world forever. After Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in World War II, this is considered to be the worst attack on America’s soil. The New York Times termed it “The worst and most audacious attack in American history”. On 9 Sept. 2001, 19 militants associated with the militant group Al-Qaeda hijacked four planes and carried out suicide attacks on their designated targets. Two among the four planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York. At 8:45 in the morning, an American Airlines Boeing 767 loaded with 20,000 gallons of jet fuel crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. Exactly eighteen minutes after this, a second plane Boeing 767-United Airlines Flight 175-pierced out of the sky, got its direction pointed towards the WTC and went ripping into the South Tower near the 60<sup>th</sup> floor. Outside the Washington D.C, the third plane hit the Pentagon and the fourth one crashed in a field in Shanks Ville, Pennsylvania. Almost 3000 people were killed in the attacks.

The man who was the actual driving force behind the 9/11 operations was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed who was a Kuwaiti-born. Even before he had acquired the membership of Al Qaeda and presented his ideas to its leadership, he had, at multiple occasions displayed his keen interest to use aircrafts for terrorist attacks. Finally in 1996, Khalid was given an opportunity to put forward his plan before the Taliban

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leadership. He proposed an operation that will involve trained pilots to crash into buildings into the United States. For around two years, Bin Laden was reluctant to join in, and when he did, he advised to blow the White House up. But, the other persons in the group like Ramzi Binalshibh, the operations commander, considered White House too difficult a target(Fawdah et al.). Finally, after deliberating over different options like White House, the U.S. Capitol Building and the Pentagon, World Trade Centre was selected to be the prime target.

The known motive in carrying out these attacks, which had tremendous symbolic significance, was to make Al Qaeda's worldview public which was based on the struggle going on between good and evil. The attacks, on the one hand, were to display the power and potential of Al Qaeda and on the other hand lay bare the vulnerability of America and whatever its claim stood for. In the aftermath of the attacks, the United States, despite having huge military and technological backup was shown as a country that was not impossible to be defeated. The myth called 'NSA-CIA-FBI' was debunked in the ugliest form possible(Ilardi).

**The critique of Globalization:**

The lead character of the story is Changez who hails from Lahore, Pakistan. On a busy day, he sees a stranger on the street and offers him his assistance, in case he needs any. After Changez hosts him in a nearby café, he learns by his bearing that the stranger is from America. Changez makes him feel comfortable and narrates to him that he has a long and close association with America. During the course of conversation,

Changez tells the American that because of his extraordinary academic and sports achievements, he had once earned a place in the prestigious Princeton University. By the time he had become a senior at University, he successfully faces an interview with Underwood Samson, a company which evaluates the worth of companies before a prospective buyer takes them over. Before kick starting his career, Changez goes to Greece for Holiday where he meets a beautiful girl called Erica who also happens to be a Princeton graduate. After holidays, he gets back to New York and apart from spending quality time with Erica, he joins Underwood Samson.

September 11, 2001 is the day when everything changes for both Changez and as well as for America. The news breaks to him like this: "The following evening was supposed to be our last in Manila. I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news, I stared as one-and then the other-of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased"(Hamid 88-83). This part of the novel is very crucial as it first hints at the duality of the identity in Changez for he takes pleasure to see that very country bleed which has hitherto offered him a priceless opportunity to study in one of its premier university, given a white collar job in a reputed firm and showered love through the lady called Erica. Why, then, his initial reaction to the ghastly attack is pleasurable for him? James Lasdun, reviewer of the novel in The Guardian

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tries to understand the rationale behind this wacky reaction and states:

“The richest instance of the latter is in the way it plays with the idea of fundamentalism itself. From the title, and from the increasingly tense atmosphere arising between Changez and his American listener, the expectation is that Changez is moving towards the revelation that he has gone, however "reluctantly", all the way over to the dark side of Islamic fundamentalism, and is possibly, even as he speaks, orchestrating some Daniel Pearl-like execution of his perhaps literally captive audience. But in a neat - arguably too neat - reversal, it transpires that the real fundamentalism at issue here is that of US capitalism, specifically that practiced by Changez's former employer, Underwood Samson, whose motto, as they do their pitiless bit for globalization, is "Focus on the fundamentals"(Lasdun).

Globalization, as it may seem, has numerous advantages, people go to different countries for education or work easily. But the pleasant feeling, enjoyed by Changez at the fall of Twin Towers, describes the difficulty of multiple and conflicting identities that can result out of globalization. About globalization, says Mike Featherstone, “the theory of globalization developed by Robertson in which nation-states are not seen to simply interact with its own processes and forms integration”. But this integration leaves a person shuttling between multiple identities which create a kind of duality inside him. Changez himself gets to know about this duality when he meets a person called Jaun-Bautista who identifies him as a modern day “janissaries”. Janissaries, Jaun tells

Changez,”were Christian boys....captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to”(Hamid 171-172).

But Changez had lived in Pakistan for around eighteen years and unlike janissaries, he had strong and powerful association with his homeland and his actual identity. This, precisely, was the reason that he had not transformed into an American in the absolute sense. Towards the end of novel, Changez clears the air himself in his monologue, addressing the strange American:

“Yes, my musings were bleak indeed. I reflected that I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country’s constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, .....had required so much time to arrive at my decision”(Hamid 177).

**Islam phobia in the Reluctant Fundamentalist:**

The September 11 attacks mark a significant rise in the Islam phobia in the West. The novel chronicles numerous anecdotes where the lead character Changez encounters different people and situations which are inspired and motivated by Islam phobia or indiscriminate hatred against Muslims. These incidents are actually the reflection of that treatment which was carried out by majority of the Americans towards its Muslim citizens. Changez in his monologue,

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narrates one such incident that made him realize that he belongs to a tribe:

“Once I was walking to my rental car in the parking lot of the cable company when I was approached by a man I did not know. He made a series of unintelligible noises-“akhala-malakhala”, perhaps, or “khalapal-khalapala”-and pressed his face alarmingly close to mine. I shifted my stance, presenting him with my side and raising my hands to shoulder height; I thought he might be mad, or drunk; I thought he might be a mugger, and I prepared to defend myself or to strike. Just then another man appeared; he, too glared at me, but took his friend by the arm and tugged at him, saying it was not worth it. Reluctantly, the first allowed him to be led away. “Fucking Arab” he said”(Hamid 133-34).

Many Muslims in America had to go through such a derogatory and fatal experience for they were targeted as Arabs or having association with Muslim lands prominent for Muslim Civilizations. The role played by media in this regard too was bolstering such tendencies into its American viewership. Khaled Beydoun argues in his book how senior journalists like Connie Chung had earlier, after the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City was bombed on April 19, 1995, gave a very problematic and biased version of the attack through their media platforms. Chung said “This is the deadliest terror attack on U.S. soil. A U.S. government source has told CBS News that it has Middle Eastern terrorism written all over it”(Beydoun 70). Chung was so much confident while making this statement that the culprits

behind the attack which later came to be known as the Oklahoma City Bombing, were “Middle Eastern”, a region which is largely conflated with Islam and repeatedly with terrorism.

This provocative representation by the media focused to unleash the collective anger upon Muslims in general, blurring any distinction of culprit and innocent. Even though being the citizens of America, the Muslims became vulnerable for the backlash that was bound to come and it came six years later with another attack. Furthermore, the period before 9/11 witnessed a re-emergence of the binary set by Orientalism which puts Islam and West at the loggerheads. This clash between Islam and US (supposedly guardian of the Western civilization) gave rebirth to the stereotypes rooted in orientalism and emboldened state with a reason to launch a pre-war on terror against Muslims on domestic level and Muslim majority countries at the foreign level. In this process of transforming the theory of clash of civilizations into a national security policy, the vital role was played by the media representation of Islam.

It was the outcome of this misrepresentation of Islam that Muslim structures and Muslim population had to endure the wrath of indiscriminate anger. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported seventy-eight attacks on U.S. mosques in 2015, the highest number since the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks(Rathod). Moreover, the Southern Poverty Law Center found that the number of anti-Muslim hate groups rose from 34 in 2015 to 101 in 2016, becoming more common than neo-Nazi, white nationalist, and anti-

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LGBTQ outfits, and growing at a far faster clip (“Hate Groups Increase for Second Consecutive Year as Trump Electrifies Radical Right”). It is not Muslims only, non-Muslims also were subjected to the violence generated by Islam phobia. Six days after the attack, the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, owner of gas station in Mesa, Arizona is a lasting example of how Sikhs were made targets because their turban and beard fit the caricature of the Muslim terrorists which was subscribed to by many Americans. He was the first victim of private Islam phobic murder after 9/11. The man who killed Sodhi shouted “I stand for America all the way!” after killing him(Lewin).

Changez is perturbed by the growing alienation and anger around him. It seemed to him that “America, too, was increasingly giving itself

.....as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back”(Hamid 133-34). Because of the change in atmosphere in America, Changez feels a desperate need to pay a visit to his home in Lahore. On his visit, he senses that now he was witnessing even his own house from the eyes of a foreigner, ‘and not just any foreigner but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American’. This realisation angers him and he ‘resolved to exorcize the unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed’.

On his return to New York, Changez’s mother requests him to shave his beard which can lead him to trouble at immigration, but he doesn’t. ‘It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my

part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind’ he tells himself. This protest came at a cost which he had already anticipated ‘More than once, travelling on the subway-where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight subject of whispers and stares’.

The author in the above lines draws attention of the reader to such a kind of racial profiling which does not launch attack on Islamic theology, rather its target is Muslims and those who look like Muslims. There were numerous incidents reported in the aftermath of 9/11 where Muslims were targeted just because of their use of particular language or certain kind of appearance. Craig Considine in his research work *The Radicalization of Islam in the United States: Islam phobia, Hate Crimes and Flying While Brown* writes:

“There is a common misperception that all Muslims are the same and all Muslims are Arabs. Muslim, however, does not mean Arab. Moghul makes this point while discussing a Muslim airline passenger and Iraq asylee, Khairuldeen Makhzoomi, who was removed from a Southwest Airlines flight because his appearance reportedly set off “alarm bells.” According to a Southwest Airlines (2016) statement, Makhzoomi triggered anxiety among other passengers by speaking Arabic. The crew reported the situation to law enforcement agencies to prevent any threat to civil aviation, and later requested Makhzoomi to leave the aircraft. Makhzoomi also had a beard and a generically Middle Eastern appearance, which allegedly contributed to the anxiety of the

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plane’s passengers. The willingness to communicate publicly in a language (Arabic) associated with Islam, as well as “looking Muslim,” is correlated with being ‘religiously Muslim’. The common thread in these cases of racial profiling seems to be that anyone who does not conform to the standardized appearance of an ‘American’ is made to feel like a criminal. Nor is what happened to these men and others a mere misunderstanding or mistake; it can be viewed as racism based on profiling”(Considine).

Changez feels that the atmosphere around him is turning gloomy and America is turning into a nation which is consuming itself. He tells the stranger “It seemed to me .....  
.....but also in your own. I resolved to do so, as best I could. But first I had to depart” (Hamid 190). Changez returns to Pakistan forever.

**Conclusion:**

What Changez learns throughout his journey is that different conflicts in the world were united by a common strand and that was ‘the advancement of a small coterie’s concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing the uniforms of soldiers.....Thus, I reasoned, was why America felt justified in bringing so many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq, and why America felt justified in risking so many more deaths by tacitly using India to pressure Pakistan’ Changez, therefore, takes the job of a University lecturer and makes it his mission to ‘advocate a disengagement from your country [America] by

mine [Pakistan]. America’s response to the attacks by invading Afghanistan has been criticized by many scholars as it prompted the entire Muslim world to turn ‘Anti-American’. Sir Simon Jenkins, former editor of The Times observed it aptly: “No single figure since the Second World War has made so profound an impact on world events as Osama bin Laden. Had the world responded to his 9/11 attack on America with moderation he would probably have disappeared, expelled from Afghanistan or killed by his Tajik enemies. Even the Taliban were known to have been shocked by 9/11, when almost the entire Muslim world came out in sympathy with America (including the PLO in Palestine). It was a brief moment of American moral supremacy. Yet by launching armed aggression, first against Afghanistan and then against Iraq, America wholly squandered this gain.....The decade since 9/11 must rank among the most inept and counterproductive eras in the story of modern statesmanship”(Jenkins et al.).

The same rationale made Changez popular in his students, perhaps because they could witness his skills of being an ex-janissary. It was also not difficult for Changez to make the students comply with the need that Pakistan’s domestic and international affairs needed to be made more and more independent. The reaction to it was usual which any such venture would receive, these demonstrations were reported by foreign press as ‘Anti-American’.

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