

Intersectional Identity: Bhabha's Ambivalent Creative Zone in Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist

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Abstract

The research aims to explore the formation of intersectional identity as collective identity that Hamid creates. The objective of this research is to understand Pakistani-Muslims as equally human as those beyond its borders. It allows the fraction under consideration to be interconnected as represented by the intersectional identity obtainable by ambivalent creative zone of hybridity. This research is important in the field of South-Asian literature as it looks at the ways in which borders physical or metaphoric affect identity construction through politics of labelling. The concept of ambivalent creative zone from Bhabha highlights the development and impact of intersectional identities in representation of Pakistani-Muslims in and across borders. This research will set the pace for viewing Hamid's work as a creative space which is beyond limits set by culture, place, and stereotypes; offering itself as a ground for the construction of intersectional identities that have the capacity to co-exist.

Keywords: Intersectional, representation, interconnected, ambivalence, co-existence.

Introduction

English fiction writing by diaspora writers holds immense importance in the representation of the dichotomy between writer's native-current residing countries. One such writer is Mohsin Hamid who having lived in two different countries namely Pakistan and England feels the responsibility to portray a picture of Pakistani-Muslims that is closer to reality than perceived. The focus of diaspora writers is to convey what it is like to belong to more than one place at one time. Such is the role chosen by Hamid that apart from expressing this shared identity he also subtly criticises the affect labelling has on people who are tied to two nations at the same time.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is one such novel through which Hamid has subverted the idea of fixed identity by allotting the

intersectional identity to the reader himself – as the novel is written in first-person narrative of a citizen of an accused terrorist state, who currently resides in America. The internalization of being categorized as an object and the sense of dislocation it promotes into human beings makes the idea of intersectional identity gain relevance. The Pakistani-Muslims within Pakistan and abroad elsewhere have been forced to undergo identity crisis. This is merely because of the fear or shame ingrained into them of being held accountable for the terrorism that they might have not even committed.

This research aims to explore the emergence of intersectional identity within the readers as collective identity that experiencing the state of ambivalence creates through analysis of the narrative of Hamid's work. The objective of this research is to understand Pakistani-Muslims as equally human, interconnected to others in the contemporary global world as represented by the intersectional identity. This identity is obtainable through experiencing the state of ambivalence that comes as a result of belonging to two different places and cultures simultaneously. The ambivalence instilled hence then acts as the creative zone where the readers identify themselves with the protagonist and re-create a more adaptable identity.

This research is important in the field of South-Asian literature as it looks at the ways in which borders and categorizations physical or metaphoric affect identity construction through politics of labelling. The concept of ambivalence as creative zone from Bhabha highlights the development and impact of intersectional identities in representation of Pakistani-Muslims as human beings within and across borders.

Intersectionality therefore forces to re-think over the existing frameworks regarding identity and inclusion. Bhabha's idea of ambivalence substantiates intersectionality. Hybridity as a third and ambivalent space can be used for the subversion of the gaze to decentralize existing narrative that labels an individual in a fixed position. The following research tends to answer questions such as through Bhabha's hybridity, how does Hamid invent intersectional identity? How does the intersectional identity counter objective identity? What part does the intersectional identity play in representation of Pakistani-Muslim? How does this intersection of identity spanning over vertical and horizontal axis of time and geography create an atmosphere of interconnectedness across borders? And, how is the emergence of intersectional identity relevant to current concerns of the contemporary world?

This research will set the pace for viewing Hamid's work as a creative space which is beyond limits set by culture, place, and stereotypes; offering itself as a ground for the construction of intersectional identities within the readers that enables them to have the capacity to co-exist in harmony with other identities. Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been viewed as a creative zone that uses the state of ambivalence of identity to develop an intersectional identity both through its subject and narrative technique. Hence, making the novel a creative space where the reader departs himself and the character from the labelled identities.

Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) narrates the story of a man Changez whose identity is brought into question as a consequence of 9/11 – an event that took place in America. It is a novel that undertakes the pressing issue of post 9/11 geopolitics and with respect to it a man's search for true identity. His work has received plenty of praise within Pakistan and abroad. *Washington Post* comments, "Some books are acts of courage... Extreme times call for extreme reactions, extreme writing. Hamid has done something extraordinary with this novel" (Book Cover). And *Seattle Times* writes, "Changez's voice is extraordinary. Cultivated, restrained yet also, barbed and passionate" (Book Cover).

Hamid also talks what his work is about, "I believe that the personal and the political are deeply intertwined... in my novels... I try to explore the places where they intersect most powerfully, people and countries tend to blur in my fiction, both serving as symbols of the other" (qtd in Shamsie 396). The novel has also been viewed at length by Muneeza Shamsie in *Hybrid Tapestries*. She states that the narrative of the novel, "In a text full of innuendoes and ambiguities, challenges narratives of Otherness, discusses the inequality of nations, and draws parallels between cut-throat capitalism, war, and terrorism" (401).

Another critic Bruce King appreciates Hamid's work saying, "Hamid cleverly gives the novel a double perspective and a sensational ending" (qtd in Shamsie 401). This double perspective is very significant as it means that there are more than one ways of looking at the subject and narrative technique employed by Hamid. That could give the readers clues to search for the hidden meanings in the sub-text of his novel.

What is interesting is that the readers hear only Changez's voice and the American is "interpreted and appropriated by Changez... [offering] a reversal of the traditional colonial narrative where the Western colonial interprets local 'orientals' " (Shamsie 402). It means that the characters have switched their identities in the wake of the

dreadful event of terrorism. This idea in turn links with what Morey says, “the story turns out to portray the impossibility of maintaining this globalized, post-political identity position as the forces of resurgent nationalism develop (qtd in Shamsie 403).

Intersectionality emerged as a theory to overcome the problem of single axis framework against the backdrop of multidimensionality of experiences to deal with the problems regarding exclusion of those that did not exist within the pre-existing frameworks. It put forward the need to “account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw 1245).

Intersectionality therefore forces to re-think over the existing frameworks regarding identity and inclusion. This theory was formulated originally by Kimberle Crenshaw, who was a feminist to locate the black woman’s identity. Women are marginal in the patriarchal world due to their gender and sex. Similarly, diasporic people are marginalized due to their lack of fixed identity and those belonging to terrorist labelled states are multiply marginalized abroad on the basis of their choice of religion, their country, their race and their native identity.

Bhabha’s idea of ambivalence substantiates intersectionality as stated in her essay “Signs Taken for Wonders”, hybridity is a state of ambivalence, a third- space that can be used for the subversion of the gaze in order to de-centralize the existing narrative that labels an individual in a fixed position (154). Through the analysis of the novel’s subject and narrative technique in the light of Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence that acts as a creative space - the readers locate and identify themselves with intersectional identities and regard them as equally human.

The *Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008) is a novel written by Mohsin Hamid. It is set both in Lahore, Pakistan and New York, USA. It is built around the point of view of a Pakistani who has spent a time of his life in America. The attack on the twin towers in America suddenly becomes a defining factor in the lives of Pakistani-Muslims living abroad who are suspected to be involved in this framed terrorist attack. Through the narrative Hamid subverts the labelling of Pakistani-Muslims in the wake of terrorist attacks; especially those who have been living abroad. Hamid subverts the categorization of Pakistani-Muslims as suspects, terrorists through the use of first-person narrative which infuses an intersectional identity within the reader. As it is stated, “Intersectionality provides a basis for re-conceptualizing race [social constructs]” (Crenshaw 15). The reader identifies with the protagonist, Changez.

With him, one forms a coalition where any socially, politically constructed categorization is re-created. This effect is achieved by invoking the level of intimacy that springs from the first-person dialogue with the reader. As the novel begins one immediately becomes a part of the scenario, “Excuse me. Sir, but may I be of assistance?” (Hamid 1).

First- person narrative allows the reader to internalize the state of ambivalence that diaspora people experience especially when struck by some catastrophe that involves someone from their category of race, religion, colour, and ethnicity. The novel explores the turmoil that the lack of identity inculcates within doubly displaced people - first, geographical; secondly, psychological displacement. Hamid writes of this sense of feeling out of the place abroad, “... I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged – in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither... my own identity was so fragile” (Hamid 168). And as it happens to be so that, “Intersectionality may provide the means for dealing with other marginalization’s [apart from gender] as well” (Crenshaw 15). The lack of core that the protagonist experiences turns into a site of contestation where he would be fighting by presenting his side of the story to re-claim his right to live with his identity freely.

Therefore, the novel opposes any idea of a fixed reality and hence, identity through the narrative of the protagonist, the reluctant fundamentalist – Changez. The word, reluctant from the title itself is very significant in determining the state of ambivalence this character experiences. He describes himself as someone who is not willingly accepting the new category he has been put into. One needs to understand here that, “categorization is not a one-way street” (Crenshaw 13). It means, that it can be opposed, by subversion. That is precisely what Hamid has done by presenting the view-point of only the protagonist. As “critical resistance strategy for dis-empowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it” (Crenshaw 13). As stated in the novel, “America was engaged only in posturing... unwilling to reflect upon shared pain that united ... you retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority” (Hamid 190). The one sided voice of the superiors had to be resisted and counteracted with the narrative from the other, rather than choosing to stay silent about it.

He goes on to write, “... you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (Hamid 209). Had the protagonist not felt ambivalent about his identity and belonging, he

would not have had the urge to speak about the talk about it and use this experience as a zone to nurture his creativity. He describes this feeling quite remarkably, “It is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable... we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us” (Hamid 197). At another point he writes, “Things always change” (Hamid 109). Further adding to it, “... as I reacclimatized... it occurred to me that... I had changed” (Hamid 141). Here one observes that the protagonist is quite aware of the relativity of reality and expects the other to open up to possibilities as-well.

Conclusion

In Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the use of first- person narrative which states the main character in an ambivalent position regarding forced identity crisis, serves as the creative zone. It is within this creative, third- space that reader identifies himself with the protagonist. And then eventually becomes one with the experience of living with an intersectional identity that Changez inhibits. This approach of using the state of hybridity, ambivalence in interpretations and while considering categorizations lets Pakistani people or any other labelled group to break away from any categorizations that are based on an individuals’ religion, race, gender and, ethnicity. At times due to a catastrophe, especially an act of terrorism committed by some accused member of the state to which one belongs. And the fact that it threatens to deprive these individuals off their individuality raises the urgency in the need to take charge of the narrative and re-identify oneself as someone who they really are. The novel tries to break these wrong and forced images of people from Pakistan that are being promoted around the world due to lack of voices from within it.

Hence, Hamid creates an aura of inter-connectedness and co-existence most suitable for inhabitants of the global world. His narrative gives Pakistani – Muslims or other immigrants a voice and identity of their own. The narrative allows these people to speak for themselves without having the need for the intervention of any outside party to write them and their experiences. Hamid allows the reader to experience the third-space taking a journey along the protagonist, turning the novel into a creative space which is beyond limits set by race, ethnicity, and stereotypes. His work offers itself as a ground for the construction and experiencing of intersectional identities that have the capacity to co-exist in the global world.

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