

Deciphering The British Pakistani Novelist's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in The Light of Jean Baudrillard's Assertion-Singularity Avenges Singular Cultures

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore how the Pakistani protagonist in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* took the initiative to thwart the predominant global power by manipulating the characteristic of "singularity" of Islam culture. As a Middle Easterner surviving in the Western world, Changez suffered from ubiquitous biased treatment especially after September 11 events and it awakened him to penetrate the disguise and dominance of global power worldwide. Accordingly, how the protagonist intentionally flaunted his characteristic of singularity to protest against the hegemonic power and simultaneously strengthened self-identification in the novel will be interpreted in the light of Jean Baudrillard's assertion- "singularities are not necessarily violent, and there are some subtle ones, such as those of language, art, the body or culture." Concerning immanent power sought from the idiosyncrasy of singularity, how the first-person narrator subverted and flipped the single-track route of hegemonic global power will be discussed by analyzing the cultural and ethnic portrayal of singularity flipping the stereotyped image of Islam appearance as the symbol for self-identification strengthening.

Keywords: global power, Jean Baudrillard, Mohsin Hamid, singularity, singular cultures.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As an America lover, Changez never felt perplexed at the issue of identity before September 11 and even felt conceited of being an employee with considerable wages of an American company, as he mentioned, "I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as a proud Underwood Samson trainee, and my firm's impressive offices made me proud" (RF-represents the abbreviation of Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 34). However, after 9/11, the protagonist's attitude toward such country varied. He started to feel ashamed of being recognized as an American inhabitant when traveling abroad on official business. The hero expressed his reluctance to be the slave of a globally dominant country by intentionally refusing to shave off his beard and uttering "when asked where I was from, that I was from New York. Did these things trouble me, you ask? Certainly, sir; I was often ashamed" (RF, p. 65). Besides, when going to Chile on an errand, excitement of sitting in the luxurious cabin did not occur to him as before and the remorse about consecrating himself to the States appeared repeatedly in the monologue. Changez's perspective toward the America had totally "changed" and that subtly responded to "the pronunciation and the symbolic meaning" of his name "Changez." Circumstances mentioned above have raised questions comprising why a first-world country celebrating the so-called liberty and democracy dramatically disappointed a third-world Pakistani who emotionally invested a lot in building his American dream, and how the protagonist ultimately intended to apply the beard bound with the image of singular culture as reticent resistance regardless of hazards in sensitive post 9/11 moment.

II. SEPTEMBER 11 EVENTS AS SYMBOLS OF VANQUISHED GLOBAL/AMERICAN POWER

As a result of globalization, considered as the route for Westerners to extend power, rapid development of transportation and communication supply opportunities for various cultures to flow across each other but possibly result in conflicts in different countries, like September 11 events, depicted as pivotal symbols to reveal the collapse of global/American power in the novel. While having a business travel in Philippine, Changez got the news of terrorists' toppling skyscrapers down in New York and he unexpectedly smiled: "I stared at 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 remarkably pleased” (RF, p. 72). As for Changez, educated and employed in the Western society, witnessing collapse of twin towers was bewilderingly considered his unconscious desire as he describes, “I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed” (RF, p. 74)? Yet, the answer to Changez’s question was conspicuous in the plot as follows, “At Princeton, learning was imbued with an aura of creativity; at Underwood Samson, creativity was not existed—it was still present and valued—but it ceded its primacy to efficiency. Maximum return was the maximum to which we returned, time and again” (RF, p. 37). Underwood Samson with “shrewd and clear-cut capitalism” could also be taken as a mirror reflecting how the world is operated by Western elites and there is nothing impartial left but downright exploitation (Hetland, 2007, p.3). Possessing inordinate desire for “maximum return” precisely responds to Baudrillard’s criticism against global power that despoils the world of “upmost benefit, right and resources” and September 11 makes “global power” symbolically defeated and humiliated (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 101). Correspondingly, Changez took such attacking incident as a symbol of defeated “American power” and he was “caught up in the symbol of it all” (RF, p. 73). With regard to the symbol of 9/11 defined by Baudrillard and the protagonist, it helps us to sum up that American power is executed on behalf of global dominion.

Injustice takes place high and low in the era of globalization. Derrida defines “globalization” via depicting it does not happen resulting from seriousness of inequality. And if it takes place, for better, knowledge pushes democracy through; however, for worse, the immunity of national identity and technological abuse deteriorate the antagonism between Bush and Bin-Laden (Derrida, 2003, pp. 121–124). “National identity” that polarized the problem of ethnicity was tremendously advocated by Americans after the horrific attacks and “technology abuse” never ceases to further the increase of power.

The barrier between mass media and the real-world requires to be eliminated with morality and justice. Bin-Laden has been identified as a terrorist and other Muslims have been considered enemies of the States or sponsors of terrorism since 9/11 (Jackson, 2010, p. 11). Although it is not object enough to impute misunderstood Islamic images to mainstream news media, it is accurate that Muslims are often associated with terrorists and the situation of Islamophobia constantly emerges. It implies that the U. S. government acquiesces in mass media’s fallaciously molding Muslim images. Jackson describes how Islam images are incorrectly presented by interpreting, “Common sorts of representations of Islam recently given in news media illustrate that the assumption that Muslims are, may be, or are like terrorists has remained ever present in well-known mainstream representations of this group since 9/11, even if this assumption is sometimes played with or framed critically” (Jackson, 2010, p. 7). Also, culture hierarchy affects American’s empathy and media control as discussed above plays a part of accomplices to construct American “national identity” with “national trauma” after the event (Jill, 2003, p. 132, 137). In wars, flags stand for compatriots’ centripetal force and loyalty to the country. Uncannily, in Bush government’s war on terror, flags become excuses and identity symbols to seclude Muslims (potential terrorists) from American territories. Far and wide, flags declare that Muslims are not welcome. After 9/11, flags are everywhere “They all seemed to proclaim: We are America” (RF, p. 79). Flags with the indication of “national identity” made Changez excluded furious by classifying American power as “the mightiest civilization the world has ever known” and uttering “you have slighted us; beware our wrath” (RF, p. 79). “National identity” had aroused the crisis of the hero’s identity. Although he had been a New Yorker for four years, his emotion toward the land had been obliterated at the very moment. Simultaneously, he found the anomaly that all Americans became fervent patriots stressing nostalgia with flags, uniforms, duty, and honor, as what he observed,

Possibly this was due to my state of mind, but it seemed to me that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time. There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as duty and honor. I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back. (RF, p. 115).

Changez drawn on “flags and uniforms” and “duty and honor” to indicate the irony of American citizens’ looking forward and back who brought themselves into the awkward situation by questing for unquestioned ascendancy, national security and moral certainty which are actually incompatible.

With the trend of globalization, Western authority and discourses have powerfully stricken roots all over the world. Culture filled with Western values predominates over the global stage with its economic and technological advantages. Such dominant culture forces Third World people to reconstruct their own identity and cultures and it implies they are compelled to accept external authority instead of making choices by themselves. Developing countries are insensibly subsumed into capitalism of the global chain. Integrating Western disseminated consumerism of transnational corporations with political and military

policy, developed countries progressively devastate cultural and economic structure of developing countries. Consequently, a gradual awakening of the disadvantaged nationals to compete against hegemonic power for surviving comes about. Self-upholding and challenging the Western unreasonable dominance are obviously disclosed in Asian and Islam world. In Asia, culture confidence is enhanced, and Western or American culture is not the optimal standard anymore. In Islam territories, the widespread emergence of “Islam culture renaissance” is interpreted as the determination to boycott the dominance of Western culture and values (Huntington, 1996, p. 102). The term, Islam culture renaissance, originated in the 1920s and 1930s with the founding of the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt. The suppressed Muslim Brothers constructed their own society for liberty by creating the movement. Contemporarily, it is also called “Islamic culture revival” around the world to reverse the stereotypical perceptions possessed by people who misapprehend the reality of Islam culture. It is a directly reaction to the global trends that constitute modernity, comprising “the formation of national states, the organization of capitalist economies, technological and scientific developments, and the cultural and social changes that accompany these phenomenon, has generated religious movements among Muslims” (Lapidus, 1997, p. 444).

How does a Third World citizen, like Changez, exert himself to be an immigrant in the First World? Appadurai brings up the conception, “Globalized mediascape” bound with the idea of “de-territorialization and re-territorialization,” to elucidate such phenomenon. For instance, wealthy characters in mass media are usually Westerners with luxurious decoration and products of well-known brands in stores are almost imported from the Western world. In de-territorialization, high-value consumption and superior quality life motivate Third World people cross the original territory to new one for surviving with high position and great wealth. “Globalized mediascape” provides a blueprint of prosperous future for Third World people to imagine and to emigrate to the First World but after crossing the boundary between countries, immigrants can hardly avoid predicaments of “re-territorialization” resulting from natives’ discrimination owing to their imaginative ethnic differences (Appadurai, 1996, p. 40). On the subway and in Underwood Samson, Americans inexplicably glared at Changez with revilement out of their assumed racial discrepancy which became more serious after 9/11. Unfriendliness existed all over as the hero referred to as follows, “More than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abused by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares” (RF, p. 130). Further, disillusionment of “global mediascape” had disclosed in Changez’s awakening to pseudomorph of Western media “And in America, no matter how poor you are, TV gives you a good view. But I was dirty poor” (RF, p. 70). Changez pierced to the truth with pertinent remarks to unmask the false front of globalization existing for certain people living with privileges and resulting in seriousness of economic and social inequality all over the world.

Criticizing the failure of globalization, Judith Butler proposes that in global power, “rights” relates to “individuals” all the while, yet “discrimination” connects with the term, “a class or a group” (Butler, 2004, p. 24) as what protagonist illustrates, “at Underwood Samson I could not entirely escape the growing importance of tribe” (RF, p. 117). In the parking lot, the hero’s Pakistani ethnicity was mistaken for Arab one and accidentally abused. In the gaze of Westerners, Pakistanis embraced no difference with Arabians misread as a group of people living in the same territory with similar ethnic origins and cultures. Unavoidably, dissimilar singularities of Pakistan and Arab culture were ignored. Rather than “nationality,” “a class or a group” is emphasized in the sphere filled with global power.

III. SINGULARITY IN CULTURAL AND ETHNIC INTERPRETATIONS

At the very begging of the semi-autobiographic novel, seated beside an American stranger, Changez declared with a caution, “Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America” (RF, p. 1). Apparently, implications of the remark above, warning the white stranger not to feel aghast Ethnicity at the beard of an America devotee, had prophesied that there were connotations concealed in “the beard.”

Before discussing how the beard, a characteristic applied by the hero to intensify his identity, was considered singularity of Islam culture to fight against global/American hegemony, the following content is about to unfold how characters containing Americans, Pakistanis families and Changez himself possessed distinct viewpoints in interpreting Changez’s beard.

First, the owner of the beard, Changez viewed it as “only a hairstyle, after all” while the White aggressively treated him with animosity in public (RF, p. 130). After the disenchantment of hypocritical Western power, he concluded straight out that Americans are “entitled and unsympathetic” and intentionally flaunted his “beard as a provocation, craving conflict with anyone foolhardy enough to antagonize me” (RF, pp. 124, 167). The beard symbolized an anti-American weapon and identity, like what he professed, “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” (RF, p. 130).

Second, as to the perspective of Changez's Pakistani families on the beard, the brother and father lived uninterruptedly with their beard, natural appearance in Pakistan. Ironically, such normal hairstyle in American society was over-interpreted as a disguise of a potential terrorist. Therefore, when Changez left his hometown for the States, the mother exhorted him to shave off his beard for fear of bringing him predicament while passing through Immigration Control in America. As a Third World countryman, the mother submitted herself to the American power by requesting her child to shave the two-week-old beard for averting unnecessary persecution. Notwithstanding, Changez did not comply with the mother's suggestion.

Third, how Americans looked upon Changez had been altering after the 9/11 event because of his beard. Before the incident, the States was described as a friendly environment as the hero says, "It was a testament to the open-mindedness and—that overused word—cosmopolitan nature of New York in those days that I felt completely comfortable on the subway in this attire" (RF, p. 48). After 9/11, on the contrary, the American empire manifestly became inimical. Suffered from strangers' invective on the subway and colleagues' whispers and stares more than once at Underwood Samson, Changez made a comment that "I realized how deep was the suspicion I had engendered in my colleagues over these past few—bearded and resentful—weeks" (RF, p. 160).

Fourth, from Changez's standpoint, how did others regard his beard? At a café table in Lahore, the protagonist talked to a suspicious American with a preliminary announcement to caution the White not to dread his beard and he further expressed, "Perhaps you have drawn certain conclusion from my appearance, my lustrous beard" (RF, p. 76). Based on the discourse above, it revealed that in Changez's point of view, the White with preconception of Islamophobia had been prejudiced by the very first impression on his beard.

Diverse attitudes toward the beard mentioned above seemed ostensibly intricate. Nevertheless, if getting to the bottom of these circumstances, it was detected that "American power" relating to "irrelevance of imagined political boundaries" was the arch-criminal to cause the cleavage between the self (referring to Americans themselves holding the so-called national identity of the U. S. power) and the other (referring to anti-American suspects excluded from national identity) (Jill, 2003, p. 133). In Pakistan, without imagined political boundaries of Western dominance, Changez's bearded father and brother naturally passed their lives in Pakistan. Oppositely, the presumed "national identity" of Americans, who actively protected themselves from being attacked by terrorists again, resulted in bearded Changez's being threatened everywhere in the post-9/11 States. With reference to the ill-advised policy in the clarification of antagonists and allies, Jill implies it is time to examine such dominant power by saying, "As the United States attempts to come to terms with the sudden realization of deep enmity and together with its key allies, works to build allegiances, we could argue that it is precisely the time to investigate assumptions about national identity and shared identifications" (Jill, 2003, p. 133). In other words, it is time to penetrate how the U. S. subjectively treated Americans and non-Americans with discrepant values. As for Changez, as what is discussed above, he was eliminated from American citizens affiliated with American national identity.

IV. SINGULARITY OF ISLAM CULTURE AS THE FLIPPED SYMBOL TO STRENGTHEN SELF-IDENTIFICATION

On account of fragility of self-identification and culture attribution in post-9/11 period, Changez applied singularity of Islam culture as the flipped symbol to strengthen self-identification and retaliate against global/American power. In addition, in the novel, the protagonist evidently regarded his beard as "a form of protest" and "a symbol of identity" (RF, p. 130).

Resembling a vagrant after the attacks, Changez endured exclusiveness arising from "politics of fear" in the so-called melting pot. 9/11 brought the whole society nervousness incurring Americans' irrational wrath against non-white ethnic groups. Fear compelled the leader of a country to make an unwise decision to protect countrymen from terror bombardment. For instance, Bush promised Americans a secure homeland with unfearful future by indiscreetly assailing innocent Third World or by arresting suspects doubted of their terror intention in the States. The indistinct demarcation line between "politics of fear" and "politics of violence" usually sparks off expansion of hegemonic power. Fear of non-Americans was tantamount to edge them out. Furthermore, "ethnicity" is a product of "politics," and it was the reason why bearded Changez could hardly be treated with equality and justice even though he possessed outstanding academic and occupational background (Bowen, 2000, pp. 79–80). As what Huntington noted, in post-9/11 American society with trepidation, individuals' identity was defined with "ethnic or religious terms" (Huntington, 1996, p. 8). Accordingly, the non-White or non-Christian were precariously exposed in mistrust, and they might be misconceived as enemies all the time.

In the novel, unforeseeable threat brought Changez discrimination attributed to his "sensitive" identity. It was apparent that such "sensitiveness" related to inappropriate manipulation of the U. S. government's

politics of fear (violence) preposterously desubjectivated immigrants. For consolidating his identity, Changez intentionally had not shaved the beard as he stated, “my identity was so fragile” and “I had not shaved my two-week-old beard. 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” (RF, pp. 130, 148). Beards, ineluctably misread as stereotypes against Muslims, made the hero a fundamentalist in the eyes of American power. Hostility toward the indication of religious fundamentalism fractured the bearded individuals’ identities. Whereas being treated with Islamophobia, the protagonist defined his beard as the solidarity of his Islam cultural root to symbolically attain reinforcement of self-identification.

Both witnessing toppled products (the World Trade Center and Twin Towers) of the American empire and heeding Juan-Bautista’s admonishment against global/American dominance had aroused the hero to reject being an American slave as he contemplated,

In any case, Juan-Bautista’s words plunged me into a deep bout of introspection. I spent that night considering what I had become. I spent that night considering what I had become. There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day Janissary, a modern servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. Of course, I was struggling! Of course, I felt torn! I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain. (RF, p. 152).

Regarding being employed by Underwood Samson standing for American power with upmost beneficial authority in the tendency of globalization, Changez (a Muslim educated in Christian civilization nowadays) resembled a janissary in history a Christian boy captured by the Ottomans and trained to be a complicit soldier in the Muslim army to destroy his own Christian civilization. Changez had recognized that how he blindly approved the capitalist, military and foreign policy of the U. S. power that had ever assaulted his Pakistani countrymen and families, his neighboring country, Afghanistan and even the other countries worldwide as the following conclusion he inferred, “no country inflict death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America” (RF, p. 182). 9/11 terror attacks provided an opportunity for the Bush government to offend Middle East by taking “war on terror” as an excuse for the advance of the American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. On the surface, American military attacked for human liberation and the peace of the world. In fact, it assaulted for maintaining its dominance for the future and eliminating all potential terrorists worldwide. In the war on terror, countless innocent Middle Easterners were sacrificed.

Moreover, the protagonist was struck by how traditionally the American empire appeared taking possession of finance and resources or exercising its insufferable power to play a central role among “Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan” (RF, pp. 156–157). Flying from San Diego to New York, abominable American/global power excited Changez reversing his infatuation for the U. S. into malice against it. Therefore, impersonating a menacing bearded stranger ripened his retaliation.

In the multicultural global village, an immigrant like Changez originally loved both the settler’s state and the home country (America and Pakistan), yet fallacious policy of the U. S. dominant government violently interfered with these multicultural lovers to abstain from that they loved. As for the hero’s case, Hetland proposed a discourse to expound how Muslims were originally multiculturalists and tolerant to accept cultural difference before September 11 attacks,

Ironically, most Muslims, as well as non-Muslims, love (or loved) America, the American way of life, and the Western liberalism. Yet, at the same time, Muslims, as other people, also love their home countries, with centuries and millenniums of unique cultures, which belong to them. Muslims, like all of us love both cultures, and rather many cultures, in a multicultural world, in the global village. But all of a sudden, after 9/11, and the way that the tragedy was handled, new differences have come to develop between people and cultures. (Hetland, 2007, p. 5)

Plainly, inequality of globalization and the war on terror, the horrible military actions of the Bush government, were main causes of ethical problems among people and cultures.

Changez’s love and hatred for America guided readers to the argument about “the personal and the political” demonstrated in the plot. In the article, “Mohsin Hamid talks about *The Reluctant*,” the author accentuated that he strongly believed that in the intertwined nature of the personal and the political, they moved together (RF, p. 2). Besides, he illustrated this point with the relationship between the hero and

Erica, “In the case of Changez, his political situation as a Pakistani immigrant fuels his love for Erica, and his abandonment by Erica fuels his political break with America” (RF, p. 2). The author skillfully symbolized the hero’s emotion toward Erica as the one toward America to substantiate that one’s emotion could be influenced by “the critical personal and political issues” which were emphasized again by Changez when feeling disappointed that nothing but “a financial future” pervaded Underwood Samson’s article of faith. Changez bared the authenticity of how bound relationship between the personal and the political was indifferently ignored by the global power with the discerning remark, “I saw that in this constant striving to realize a financial future, no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one’s emotional present” (RF, p. 145). Consequently, Changez decided to be an initiative taker for disclosing his antipathy against self-absorbed Western power by playing a bearded non-violent protester.

Upon singular cultures, Baudrillard expounds that “singularities are not necessarily violent, and there are some subtle ones, such as those of language, art, the body or culture.” Besides, singularities “avenges all the singular cultures that have paid with their disappearance for the establishment of this single global power” (Baudrillard, 2003, pp. 96–97). Indeed, violence is not the absolute route to solve inequality among various ethnicities. Beside the beard, a region of the “body,” going to be discussed later, Winegar illuminates the function of “art,” one of the singular cultures. Art not only plays as a “uniquely valuable and uncompromised agent of cross-cultural understanding” but “constitutes the supreme evidence of a people’s humanity” (Winegar, 2008, p. 652). Like a “bridge of understanding,” art attracts audiences to see another side of the Middle East rather than stereotypes emanating from mass media or conservative talk radio.

Winegar explains that the “bridge of understanding” brings people get together to smash the ethnic boundary through art appreciation. In New York, an artist, Alwan “has organized a smorgasbord of music and dance performances, art exhibits, poetry readings, and film screenings (including one on Islam to address post 9/11 fears).” Besides, Arte East, another New York-based arts organization, founded in 2003, “brings Middle Eastern film and visual arts to audiences in the city and elsewhere through travelling film programs and its website, which features an arts magazine and a virtual gallery” (Winegar, 2008, p.653).

In the progress of global power construction, distinctive culture (singular culture) was possibly sacrificed. Changez’s beard, the most typical exemplification, caused the mother’s anxiety about his security in New York and the beard was once asked by the mother to be shaved. For fear of being arrested on suspicion of potential terrorists in the society teeming with American power, the singular culture lapsed into intimidation. None the less, singularities avenge all the singular cultures like the hero said, “sometimes I would find myself walking the streets, flaunting my beard as a provocation, craving conflict with anyone foolhardy enough to antagonize me” (RF, p. 167). Also, after global/American overbearing comportment’s replacing Changez’s love with despair and animosity, returning Pakistan for advocating a disengagement from American declared his anti-American/global determination.

V. CONCLUSION

In the light of Baudrillard’s portrayal of singularities, Changez applied “non-single-track” celebration principles with cultural characteristics to impede global system filled with the “single-track” thinking (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 96). In intertwined global relationship, single-track principles of hegemonic power can never correspond to the realm of diverse cultures bound with multiplicity concerning the culture of body, art, and languages, by contrast, global system with single-track cogitation results in its monopolistic and profitable orientation. It is human nature that one does feel uncomfortable with others’ negative stereotypes. Changez’s suffering as a discriminated Muslim and Middle Easterner has reminded readers that it is irrational to divide global villagers into the oppressed “uncivilized other” with subordination, and the predominant “civilized one” with priority.

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