

Resisting Dominant Fixed Identities
in *Jasmine* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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At the heart of the multicultural debate that arose out of the Rushdie Affair and Charles Taylor's landmark essay, "The Politics of Recognition" published in 1992, is the clash between liberalism and minority cultures. Though liberalism claims to be a universalist philosophy allowing for a diversity of practices and beliefs, it turns out that some of the liberties that the West holds in highest esteem, like free speech, are inimical to the values some cultures hold most sacred. Recent critics of multiculturalism have attributed this problem to the essentialization of identity. They criticize fixed identities for being rooted in uncritical notions of race, ethnicity, or religion. Not only does this criticism imply that fixed identities are shallow and anti-intellectual, it also implies (and sometimes explicitly states) that the dominant liberal culture encourages critical, unfixed notions of identity. But what happens when the tables are turned and the roles are switched? Bharati Mukerjee's novel *Jasmine* and Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* pose exactly this question. Both characters pursue a path of self-determination, rejecting fixed identities based in their ethnicity, yet both find themselves up against two dominant cultures that attempt to impose fixed identities on them. Their search for authenticity turns from a struggle for a self-determined future to a struggle to define themselves by their resistance to the dominant cultures that strain their identities.

The experience of Mukerjee's eponymous protagonist in *Jasmine*, a 1989 novel about an Indian immigrant, represents an immigrant experience that moves beyond the pressures to assimilate promulgated in Post War immigrant narratives. Yet Jasmine also rejects the pursuit of a fixed group identity, a movement that originated in the 1970s commonly known as multiculturalism. The Post War assimilationist immigrants, particularly from Asia, felt too far removed from their homeland and felt pressure to cut all ties with their culture of origin. With advances in communication and travel technology, a new wave of immigrants was increasingly able to access home, and instead of cutting ties, these groups went to the other extreme by idealizing their culture of origin, attempting to recreate their culture in the host nation, and developing fixed identities based in their ethnicity or culture. Jasmine rejects both the pressure to assimilate and the urge to seek a fixed identity. Instead she negotiates the extremes, pursues a path of self-determination, and allows her past in India to inform her search for an individual and fluid identity.

Her past, however, is antagonistic toward her yearning to create herself. She never develops the trope of nostalgia that is common in many immigrant narratives because her homeland is a place where her future is severely limited. She realizes at the age of seven, when an astrologer predicts that she will end up a widow and an exile, that she does not want fate to determine her future. Yet all the scenes that take place in India reveal that the structures of village life in India are the agents of the stars. Despite her potential attractiveness, as the fifth daughter in a family of farmers, Jasmine's marriage prospects are dim. Before her birth, the political struggles of Partition displaced her family against their will, and the residual political

struggles—in this case the Sikhs’ struggle for an independent state—create an atmosphere of violence that thwarts Jasmine’s future by killing her husband and confirming the astrologer’s prediction that she will end up a widow. The key to Jasmine’s pursuit of identity is this seemingly cosmic and violent struggle to overcome the determinism of feudal Indian society.

By resisting the deterministic forces of her society, Jasmine also resists Indian society’s ability to create an identity for her. Even in America, Jasmine must resist the stagnation of Indian culture. In New York she is taken in by Professorji and his family, who represent the type of multiculturalists who attempt to recreate Indian society in the US. Professorji’s family shut out as much of American society as possible to maintain the purity of their community. His wife, for example, constantly absorbs herself in Indian films during every minute of her free time, creating something of a simulacra of India superimposed on New York. Despite the generosity of Professorji’s family, who have only the loosest ties to her, Jasmine finds this life in Queens as stifling as her village in India, especially since her status as a widow carries all the same stigmas and limitations in Queens as it did in Hasnapur. The culture that Professorji’s family imports is oppressive to Jasmine and her efforts to create her own identity. This scene demonstrates Jasmine’s determination to unburden herself of feudal Indian culture and to define herself by her own terms instead of allowing her identity to be woven into the tightly knit fabric of Indian identity.

She finds the alternative in the American ideology of self-determination and societal fluidity. Mukerjee, the author, has been outspoken in her belief that immigrants’ presence in America allows them to be a part of, even the force behind, the fluid nature of US culture. This argument is deeply embedded in the multicultural debate, and finds an advocate in Jürgen Habermas, who, in response to Charles Taylor’s idea that a space must be created for immigrant communities, argues that as citizens immigrants are the authors of the laws to which they are subject. Once immigrants see themselves as such, they may assert themselves and access the liberties that lie dormant within a constitutional democracy. He almost seems to be channeling Mukerjee when he says:

Assuming that the autonomously developed state order is indeed shaped by ethics, does the right to self-determination not include the right of a nation to affirm its identity vis-à-vis immigrants who could give a different cast to this historically developed political-cultural form of life? (137)

This type of immigration ethos exemplifies the “transculturation” of the early Post Cold War era and its promise that Western-style liberal democracy would provide opportunity and prosperity to all people. The result of this is the notion that, although the core principles of liberalism remain a solid foundation of Western society, the large presence of immigrants in the West prompt the face of society to change.

This is all well and good when the US is “shaped by ethics” and willing to “affirm its identity vis à vis immigrants,” as Habermas puts it. *Jasmine* was written on the heels of a decade that saw the doors to the global market fly wide open with the fall of the Soviet Union. This coincided with a waning of the Reagan-style, Cold War era essentialism of American identity—the freedom-loving foil to the oppressive Evil Empire. As this essentialism faded, it gave way to a cosmopolitanism marked by fluid, globalized identities—the type pursued by (and denied to)

Changez, the protagonist in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Yet, for all the identity exploration and mutual exchange during this period, looming just beneath the surface was an imminent clash between the ideologies of liberalism and identity. As if to usher in a new era of conflict at the close of a long rivalry, the Rushdie Affair proved that as open to diversity as the West claimed to be, some liberal principles would always clash with some groups. This conflict undermined the notion that individualistic liberal principles were universally coveted freedoms. It revealed that liberalism could not provide equality to all groups in the form of recognition. (For example, the freedom from censorship does not ensure the freedom from insult.) It also revealed what Habermas states explicitly: fundamentalism and liberalism do not mix. The culmination of this clash on the global level occurred in the destruction of the World Trade Center and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a decade that saw a resurgence of American Exceptionalism. Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* turns this debate on its head by criticizing the notion that the United States' brand of liberalism allows for fluid identities. Hamid's novel shows what happens when, amid the hysteria of 9/11, the dominant culture adopts the essentialism it criticizes in multiculturalism.

Changez, the protagonist in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is at the center of this clash. Something of a Pakistani elite, Changez excels at Princeton University and lands one of the most coveted jobs among Ivy League business school graduates: an entry level position at Underwood Samson, a valuation firm in Manhattan. Along with his precipitate rise in America's meritocracy, he begins a romantic relationship with a fellow Princeton graduate and native Manhattanite named Erica. These parallel relationships (both of which serve as allegories of American society: Underwood Samson, and Am-Erica) are integral to his experience with US society, and after the World Trade Center attacks, these relationships are tested and strained. Like Jasmine, Changez does not identify with his past or homeland. Though he rejects American society in the end, it is not because liberalism has interfered with a fixed identity, but because American society has asserted an identity that pressures Changez to be something he is not.

Changez's relationship with Erica serves as a challenge to his identity formation. To all appearances, Erica is Changez's girlfriend, but the relationship moves unusually slowly because of Erica's attachment to a former lover who passed away after his first year at Princeton. As she slowly begins to open up to Changez, the World Trade Center attack seems to reawaken the neurosis in her. She checks into a mental hospital and eventually vanishes mysteriously, seemingly having committed suicide though her body is never found.

Erica's neurosis parallels that of the American public during the hysteria after the 9/11 attacks. There is a latent nostalgia residing in Erica that rises to the surface in the wake of the attacks, just as the reaction of the American public is a reawakening of a latent nostalgia for an American exceptionalism. Changez's very presence is too much for Erica to bear. In the same way, the Middle Eastern immigrant's presence in a hysterical America raises such doubts about his loyalties that his presence is not welcome. This reveals in Erica and American society a pathology that depends on nostalgia—a common trope for multiculturalists—for comfort and mental stability.

Erica's neurosis and American society's hysteria cause a disruption in Changez's pursuit of cosmopolitan New York life. Having succeeded in America's meritocracy and proven himself

culturally competent enough to date someone as classy as Erica and navigate the social environment of Manhattan society, the return of America's nostalgia has shut the door to Changez's pursuit of cosmopolitan life. The American society that has allowed Jasmine the freedom to pursue a fluid identity has imposed nationalistic standards that Changez cannot attain.

The pathological nostalgia that the American public suffers from is not unlike the nostalgia of the multicultural immigrant who forms an identity based on a past or homeland that doesn't exist anymore. The Post-9/11 America in the novel is characterized by a desire to return to the American Exceptionalism of the Cold War; the American public in general desires to essentialize itself as "American." Christopher Douglass, a sharp critic of the notion of fixed identities and multiculturalism, uses the example of Cold War America to illustrate the dangers of identity. He states, "How much easier it is—existentially more soothing—to turn to a notion of identity in order to supplement a very blurred ideological power struggle" (253). In all the hysteria, America seems to be standing up for vague and abstract values while at the same time depriving Middle Eastern immigrants the freedom to grow a beard without being outcast or harassed at the airport or at work. The contradiction is that "America could still be about democracy and freedom even if it did not actually do democracy and freedom" (253).

By revealing America's pathological nostalgia and retreat to identity, Hamid turns the tables on the multicultural debate. In this instance it is the dominant culture that demands the space for recognition by asserting an identity founded in an idealized past. Hamid no doubt agrees with Habermas that there is no room for fundamentalism in a constitutional democracy, except this time it is the fundamentalism of the dominant culture asserting a rigid identity and demanding it of its immigrants. Amid the hysteria, the model immigrant, the liberal cosmopolitan, who should be among those "authors of the law" as Habermas puts it, are divested of this status because they are not "essentially," or ethnically American.

Changez never seeks a fixed identity based on his ethnicity or culture. Before the attacks however, the novel reveals a tension within Changez that detects something inauthentic about his relationship to his job at Underwood Samson. Changez's acceptance into the society of the meritocracy is not unlike Nick Carraway's acceptance into high society in *The Great Gatsby*. Changez highly admires the notion of being rewarded for hard work; he always attains the highest evaluations in the company, and ingratiates himself with the directing manager, Jim. However, just as Nick Carraway sours on the high society when he scratches the surface, so does Changez, who begins to identify the exploitative nature of Underwood Samson.

Underwood Samson comes to represent America's economic dominance—a wolf in sheep's clothing. Despite its ethnically diverse employment and its merit-based ethos, it is ultimately driven by an insatiable thirst for profits, the driving force behind the US's neoliberal foreign policy of the US. When the attractive aspects of his job wear off and the stress starts to kick in, Jim advises Changez to "focus on the fundamentals." This maxim exemplifies the role of the modern day worker who is only responsible for a small aspect of a complex machine. In one sense, "focusing on the fundamentals" is a way to prevent a worker from feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the project, but in another way it provides the worker with a kind of plausible deniability by removing the worker's responsibility from the effects of the entire mechanism.

The realization that Changez's job is exploiting developing nations like his own homeland, Pakistan, weighs heavily on his conscience and causes him to second guess what it means to be a member of the US's elite meritocracy. Though the "focus on the fundamentals" philosophy is meant to hide his complicity, it eventually exposes it. Changez cannot pursue an identity as a cosmopolitan if it means he is complicit in exploiting other nations. Instead Changez finally rejects it and, as a professor in Pakistan, makes a career out of exposing the faults in American foreign policy and leading students in protests against American exploitation.

By the end of the novel, we find that Changez has situated himself in an identity that is ultimately and primarily grounded in his resistance to US foreign policy and the same neoliberalism that Underwood Samson practices. He focuses all his energies on exposing the fact that American society and the liberalism it promulgates is indeed not "shaped by ethics." Yet, what separates Changez from a typical multiculturalist critique of the US is that he does not argue for recognition of an essentialized identity. In a way, he is arguing for recognition of a cosmopolitan identity, but by the end, the most prominent feature of his identity is the fact that he makes a living opposing the United States.

Though the novel *Jasmine* does not offer the same critique of liberalism that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* does, they both show that resistance is an important function in identity formation. The protagonists of both novels share a crucial common trait in their search for identity that connects them across the pre- and post-9/11 continuum. Both characters ultimately find their identity through resistance to a dominant culture that puts pressure on their pursuit of authenticity. Though the objects of their resistance are different (feudal India and hegemonic America), these dominant cultures assert the same societal pressure on both characters, a pressure that results in ambiguous identities. What I mean by ambiguous identities is that neither assimilates or characterizes herself as American nor does either character find stability or authenticity in any notable cultural trait. Though the novel ends with Jasmine running off to California with Taylor, the author provides the reader with no assurance that Jasmine will stay with Taylor or stay in California. She has established her identity in a *refusal* to be led by fate, a *refusal* to allow societal structures (particularly those deterministic forces indicative of India, but even traditional American ones) to prevent her from charting her own course, a course that has no discernible direction. And though she finds the liberty to constantly refashion herself, she does not find identity through any nationalist or essential American trait.

Charles Taylor builds his argument on authenticity by employing the notion of a dialogically formed identity. In other words, authenticity is found through interaction with and support of community as opposed to the Enlightenment notion of forming one's identity individually from within. Anthony Appiah appends this notion by stating that authenticity is also formed through resistance to the community. He states, "The rhetoric of authenticity proposes not only that I have a way of being that is all my own, but that in developing it I must fight against...society, the school, the state—all forces of convention" (154).

Jasmine constantly refashions herself through a variety of experiences and describes this process as a murdering of the old self in order to be born into a new self. The final sentence of the novel emphasizes that her pursuit is not one of seeking identity but of resisting the determinism inherent in feudal structures: "Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the

astrologer” (240). Changez’s only notable characteristic as a Pakistani university professor is the inspiration he imparts to his students to protest America’s involvement in Pakistan, and by the end of the novel it is ambiguous whether or not Changez is some kind of secret agent in Pakistan sent to disrupt the work of US agents. Neither Jasmine nor Changez finds identity through solidarity with a group. Each forms an identity that is ultimately based on the resistance to a dominant culture.

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