

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 10 : 11 November 2010

ISSN 1930-2940

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## Redefining Secularism – An Analysis of John Updike’s *Terrorist* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as Post-9/11 Novels

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“The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.”

“September 1, 1939”. W. H. Auden

### Effects of Secularism

Secularism implies that life can be best lived by applying ethics, reasoning, non-discrimination among religions as well as guaranteeing the human rights of all citizens, regardless of creed. It is paradoxically believed that the secularization of a society protects it from religious fundamentalism. However, the attempt to marginalize religion through secularism has actually strengthened religious fundamentalism in the world of our times.

It is no secret that in the age of globalization there has been a parochial retreat into religious fundamentalism and fierce anti- internationalist interests. Honor killings in South Asia are due to stern adherence to a traditional code of conduct. Hindu – Muslim strife in India, war torn West Bank and the ethnic cleansing in some parts of the world are caused by reversion to religious customs, conventions and regional sentiments.

## **Effects of Transnationalism**

The dawn of the twenty-first century witnessed the flow of capital, labor, media and ideologies. This marked the beginning of new era, an era of transnationalism. As a result of transnationalism, formations have transgressed national borders producing new social formations, which often lead to cultural and religious fanaticism.

## **Multiple Identifications**

The new global order has led to the politicization of identity in the form of fundamentalism, xenophobia and a fanatical espousal of tradition. There are multiple identifications and contested affiliations in the era of globalization. Fresh infusions from different parts of the world for generations after generations into American life made Americans create a nation with a common identity and objectives, while welcoming and sustaining religious culture and ethnic diversity.

## **Violent Attack on Secularism**

The belief in this state of secularism has been threatened by the attacks on the twin towers on 9/11. The question of belonging has become increasingly territorialized and penalized.

The question of identity which occupies centre stage in the troubled territories of nationalism and citizenship has become even more contested in the 9/11 landscape. Some critics call this century as the post- secular era, the word can denote either the turn to religion or the upsurge of all kinds of fundamentalism.

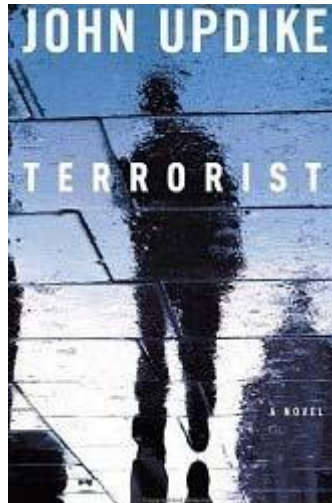
## **A Portrait of Resurgence**

This paper is an attempt to analyze this scenario through a reading of John Updike's twenty-second novel, intriguingly named as the *Terrorist* and Mohsin Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

This study evaluates the extent to which Updike and Hamid are able to portray the resurgence of this sort of religious, social, cultural and political struggles related to it.

These two writers write from different locations: Updike is a mainstream writer, writing in a white Christian/secular mainstream society; while Hamid writes from a mainstream predominantly patriarchal, Muslim Pakistan. Both the novels attempt to grapple with a cataclysmic event in American history, the destruction of the Twin Towers.

## **Updike's *Terrorist***



Updike's *Terrorist*, is a departure from his usual themes, which include the cultural, socio political and religious history of the United States.

In this novel, he takes the reader into the mind of a *Terrorist* who is a homegrown threat to the security of homeland society. "DEVILS, Ahmed thinks. These devils seek to take away my God." (Updike 2006:1)

This brief monologue of the central character which marks the opening and concluding lines of the novel, explains the crux of the novel, which is the struggle between Ahmed, the hero, with his all powerful god and Jack, a sort of semi-hero, with his secular humanism.

Set against the backdrop of that blue September sky, in post 9/11 New Jersey, Updike charts the development of Ahmed Mulloy, an eighteen year old teenager. When most boys of his age are roaming the streets, he works as a part-time clerk, for whom God is an invisible companion, "a Siamese twin attached in every part, inside and out, and to whom he could turn every moment in prayer" (Updike, 2006: 37).

Through Ahmed, Updike dissects American materialism, decadence and the life styles of the people. Ahmed expresses a deep disgust towards the dissipation he sees around him, girls exposing their soft bodies and bare bellies, teachers who are paid to teach democratic and secular values by the government, his mother's flirtatious character, the radio and television channels which air the lewd and lascivious programs. He has decided to take a straight path, which is very difficult in a country, which has too many paths and full of infidels selling many useless things.

Ahmed is the product of a third generation Irish-American mother who has abandoned her religious faith and an Egyptian exchange student who decamped when Ahmed was three. He idolizes his absent father, yearns for him and so turns to Islamic faith when he was eleven. The Imam at the mosque becomes his surrogate father who waxes eloquent to motivate him to carry out terrorist activities. Though Ahmed knows he is being manipulated, he faithfully listens to his

master who advises him to become a truck driver instead of continuing with his higher studies. He is also afraid that academic studies would expose him to American secular beliefs and weaken his faith. Trucking has become a means to achieve his ends, to be a martyr to wage war and struggle against the infidels.

Ahmed's career guidance counselor Jack Levy is quite perplexed at his student's desire to drive large trucks filled with hazardous materials, especially in the wake of 9/11. Levy, an American Jew is one of the characters in the novel who have abandoned practicing religion. He is the anti thesis of Ahmed. He too is critical of American culture, but unlike Ahmed who feels the American way of life has taken him away from God, he views that as the out come of historical events. He feels happy to live, yet there are significant similarities between the views of the world-weary Jewish teacher and his idealistic Muslim student. The joke he casually shares with his wife about the bombing of neighborhood points out the affinities between the thinking of the teacher and the student.

To Ahmed it is not a joke. Shaik Rashid, his Imam has groomed his young acolyte to be a terrorist and places him at the hands of those manipulators who could instigate violence in the name of religion.

Through Jack, Updike blames the society for not allowing the children to be innocent anymore. The adults can't tell them what to do and no one is there to accept the responsibility. "Kids keep showing up, hoping for some guidance", says Jack, "they are so hopeful, wanting to be good, to amount to something... They want to please society..... They want to be worthy, if we could just tell them what worth is" (Updike, 2006: 202).

In order to prove his loyalty to the religion he follows he drives the lethal truck laden with explosives to cause collateral damage to the Lincoln tunnel under the Hudson river exactly on the anniversary of the 9/11 attack. Jack too accompanies Ahmed to the tunnel to dissuade him from going ahead with his plan. When Ahmed expresses his displeasure about his mother's association with a Jew, Jack asks him to consider him as an American first "Hey come on, we are Americans here. That's the idea; didn't they tell you that at central high? Irish-American, African- American, Jewish Americans, there are even Arab Americans" (Updike 2006:297).

Finally the transformation of a serious minded teenage Muslim boy takes place. In an epiphany moment he realizes that: "God does not want to destroy: it was he who made the world: this was the will of the Beneficient, the merciful, Ar-rehman and Ar-rahim, the living, the patient, the generous, the perfect, the light, the guide. He does not want us to desecrate His creation by willing death. He wills life". (Updike 2006: 301)

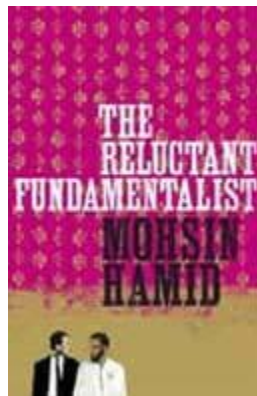
The change of mind at the end is not the last minute transformation. The inner struggle, conflict whether to be a Jihadi or not to be a Jihadi can be traced when he himself confides, "Jihad doesn't have to mean war.... It means striving, along the path of God. It can mean inner struggle" (Updike 2006: 146). He dares to argue with his master "shouldn't God's purpose, as enunciated by the prophet, be to convert the infidels. In any case, shouldn't he show them mercy,

not gloat over their pain (Updike 2006: 74).

This confused innocent soul can be seen when he stumbles over his answer when his master queries him about what he has seen when he delivers in and around the New Prospect “did you not discover that the world in its American portion emits a stench of waste and greed of sensuality and futility? Ahmed hesitates and then answers as best he can “people are pretty nice mostly,” (Updike, 2006:230) hardly an answer Imam would like to hear. Ahmed does not hate all Americans but the American way of living, living as infidels. He has started looking at life through a new veil, a new lens. Apart from Jack, Ahmed’s employer Habib Chehab, also believes America is an honest and friendly country where everyone can live without any problems. He dismisses the allegations leveled against America as propaganda.

This novel can be seen as Updike’s 9/11 novel and the plot to sabotage the tunnel is fixed on 9/11 the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks to convey the message effectively that they will strike whenever they please. The Imam feels triumphant at the fall of twin towers, a symbol of capitalistic oppression. To him 9/11 is a joke. It is a war for them. Fall of the twin towers is a god driven celebratory act. Society’s reaction to Muslims after the attacks has been beautifully brought out when Teresa Mulloy explains that they had to disconnect their landline because it was flooded with hate calls. “Anti – Muslim” (Updike 2006:76) In this novel, Updike substantiates the notion that the belief in American multiculturalism is the only good reason a human being could have for staying alive. “You believe this; I believe that, we all get along” (Updike 2006:36)

### **Mohsin Hamid’s *Reluctant Fundamentalist***



Pakistani diasporic writer Mohsin Hamid, lived in New York for many years and moved to London just two months before the fall of Twin Towers. His second novel *Reluctant Fundamentalist* is woven around the experiences of sub continental Muslim youth living in the United States after the attack of 11 September 2001, its impact on their of sense of belonging in relation to host and home nations and their dissent. *Reluctant fundamentalist* is written by Mohsen Hamid.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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Changez's trajectory towards fundamentalism is not a confused one like that of Ahmed who is an immature student. Hamid sculpts and locates his character in such a way that he is not just like any other fundamentalist but a young Pakistani, scion of a prominent Lahore family, who works for major corporate after graduating from Princeton and falls in love with a beautiful American woman named Erica. Hamid delineates the development of this character through his monologue which seems like blood gushing out from a wounded animal; addressed to a mysterious American tourist whom Changez encounters by chance on the streets of his city.

In the beginning Hamid paints him as a person who loves America. His dream comes true when he gets into Princeton. The beautiful campus inspires in him the feeling that everything is possible in life. His company Underwood Sampson has the potential to transform his concerns about money and status things of the distant past. But the idyll is marred by the collapse of the twin towers on 9/11. His multiple allegiances to America are brought into sharp focus when he watches the twin towers being bombarded by the terrorists. He is quite perplexed at his initial reactions "And then I smiled. Yes despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (Hamid 2007: 72). He is happy to see that someone has brought America to her knees.

After the apocalyptic event all the foreigners have become the objects of suspicion. Young American Muslims especially immigrants were the targets of suspicion after 9/11 attacks. Actually the war on terrorism was waged primarily against immigrants. "Pakistani cab drivers were being beaten to within an inch of their twice; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops and even people's houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centre for questioning or worse" (Hamid 2007: 95).

Changez too was in the state of paranoia. America's invasion of Afghanistan makes him tremble with fury. It seems to him that America was in the grip of dangerous nostalgia which is similar to that of Erica – pining for her departed sweet heart Chris – resulting in probable suicide. The flag bedecked state following the 9/11 attacks reminds him of a place after Second World War.

This reminds us of W.H.Auden's description of memoirs after Second World War in his poem September 1'1939'. Changez recognizes himself as one of the janissaries, the Christian boys captured by Ottoman, the Muslim empire, who were trained to fight against their own people with utmost loyalty. "I was a modern day Janissary" he observes "a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine" (Hamid 2007:152). This recognition induces him to leave his cushy New York job and to take up a teaching position in Lahore where his mission on campus is to advise against Pakistan's total dependence on America.

At the end of the novel – when distrust seems to brew between Changez and listener, he asserts repeatedly, that he will not harm him because he says 'I am believer in non-violence: the spilling of blood is abhorrent to me, save in self defense (Hamid 2007:181) The novel concludes with a confrontation between Changez' who suspects his American listener might be America's under cover assassin and the American listener, perhaps to be murdered by Changez's fundamentalist

disciples.

From the very title till the tense atmosphere at the end between the American and Changez, the reader expects Changez to move towards fundamentalism, though reluctantly. But it can be inferred that real fundamentalism is that of US capitalism which is practiced by his employer Underwood Sampson, whose motto is to “focus on fundamentals. This was Underwood Sampson’s guiding principle drilled into us since our first day at work.” (Hamid2007:98). Changez’s decision to quit this job signals his movement away from financial fundamentals and back to a place whose current economic and sociopolitical situation is in a state of flux.

### **Central Characters**

The central characters in these two novels are juxtaposed. Updike’s teenager hero, high school student is a serious minded person with no interest in life. He also looks at his Imam for guidance whereas Hamid’s hero is a highly educated, corporate executive who approaches life with zeal and zest. He treads his path in a very careful and mature manner. Updike, like all other westerners seems to have stereotyped the notion that all Muslims are terrorists whereas Hamid has given a fitting reply and sends a strong signal to the west through Changez who says “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 2007:183)

### **A Study of Strained Relationship**

In the aftermath of 9/11 the international political landscape is filled with distrust, **suspicion** and confrontation. Both these novels successfully explore the straining relationship between the east and the west and the continuing cost of ethnic profiling. They deal with American society, morality and terrorism which can be seen as an evidence of the clash of civilizations as observed by Huntington: “Violent conflicts between groups in different civilizations are the most likely and most dangerous source of escalation that could lead to global wars: the paramount axis of world politics will be the relation between the west and the rest”. ([www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/acrobat/huntington\\_clash.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/acrobat/huntington_clash.pdf)).

### **Repose Their Faith in Multi-Culturalism, Secularism and Nonviolence**

Though both the characters seem to be a possible threat to the society, towards the end they repose their faith in multi-culturalism, secularism and nonviolence. This is the significant message the writers offer through literature. Political theorist T.N. Srinivasan opined that:

Resort to a single religious identity is self-defeating in a multi-religious society. Secularism is not just the confrontation between religion and the state. It requires new initiatives by the state and by the citizens in relation to the essentials of a secularized society. If citizenship is to be the primary identity, it will have to place other identities of class, caste, religion, gender and language in their appropriate places, and will have to define the identities that go into the making of

citizenship.” (Srinivasan 106: 2007)

Updike and Hamid humanize this theory by emphasizing the value of freedom which is knowledge. Auden’s words at the conclusion of World War II are particularly significant:

There is no such thing as the State  
And no one exists alone; ...  
To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.

“September 1, 1939”, W.H Auden

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