

Nwamaka Amobi

Professor Wyn Kelley

Multi-Ethnic Literature in America

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Where's the Melting Pot?: The Lack of American Integration in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant*

Fundamentalist

“And if the word “integration” means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.”

—James Baldwin, *A Letter to my Nephew*

The United States of America is known for being a melting pot of numerous cultures, backgrounds, and identities. The country touts its original national motto, “E Pluribus Unum,” meaning “out of many, one;” however, it has a history riddled with racial issues. Those outside of the middle-class white majority (denoted by the term, “other”) have faced discrimination throughout the history of the US, and that discrimination continues into the present. Many of the racial tensions in the US reached their highest point since slavery during the 1960s; the country established several integrationist policies like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in order to solve its racial problems (Farred). These laws were only effective at the surface level as “new forms of monoculturalism eventually created a situation of “integration” in which minorities were forced to be privately ethnic yet publicly American” (“Multiculturalism”). Over fifty years later, many of the cultural tensions of the 1960s persist within the country today, to the extent that Baldwin’s comments on the lack of integration in American society are still relevant: “We are really one people—and this is part of our problem in fact—we spend all our time denying it” (Brendese).

The pertinence of Baldwin's statement in the present is problematic because it reveals that little progress has been made in truly integrating the various cultures of the US into American society.

What does integration of different cultures into a society look like? The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term, integration, as "the bringing into equal membership of a common society those groups or persons previously discriminated against on racial or cultural grounds." On the basis of this definition, groups that were discriminated against in the 1960s and are still being discriminated against today are not officially integrated into American society. The noun's Latin origin dates back to 1620, when it was used to refer to a "restoration to wholeness" ("integration, n"). In this context, the lack of integration in the US shows how fractionated the country remains post-Civil Rights Movement. Author and literary scholar, Ayana Mathis, attributes these cultural divides to the fact that "integration was never earnestly attempted" in the 1960s. In order for integration to be earnestly attempted, we need exposure to the diverse experiences and ethnic backgrounds of the "other." Multicultural literature provides readers with a "lens through which they can view the cultures of others" in order to start taking steps towards bridging cultural divides in American society (Stallworth et al.). Multi-ethnic novels, like Mohsim Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, align with Baldwin and Mathis's claims about the lack of cultural integration in American society; in fact, Hamid highlights this lack of integration through the use of narrative voice and the depiction of white American characters.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid portrays his protagonist's unsuccessful integration into American culture through many layers of irony in his narrative voice. As the protagonist, Changez, tells his American story to his American visitor, he tries to appeal to the American man by declaring that he is "a lover of America" and by inviting the man to tea and dinner (Hamid 1). Meanwhile, he continuously criticizes aspects of American culture by

narrating someone's "typically *American* undercurrent of condescension" and describing how his American guest "will agree, [that] it is the thrust of one's narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one's details" in history (55, 118). Hamid seamlessly weaves these criticisms of American tropes into the story with the narrator's polite and diplomatic tone, such that the reader may not notice the extent to which American customs are antagonized. Changez maintains his ironic tone in a moment where he describes how he spilled molten wax on himself when he was young:

"In America, this would have been the start, in all likelihood, of a protracted bout of litigation with the manufacturer for using candle-wax with such a high, and unsafe, melting point; here, it resulted merely in an evening of crying and the rather faint, if oddly linear, scar you see today." (47)

In a matter-of-fact tone, Changez describes how, in America, such an ordeal would be twisted into an attempt by one American to profit off of another via lawsuit, portraying Americans as selfish and dramatic. He boldly contrasts this fact with how he handled the situation in Pakistan by dealing with the pain and quickly moving on, allowing the wound to heal without any litigation drama. Changez's integration into American culture was so shallow that he left the country with more criticisms than admiration of the American way of being.

Hamid also reveals Changez's negligible integration into American culture through how he writes Changez's American story. Throughout the story, Changez continues to try to appeal to his American guest by displaying how American he is with several popular culture references to movies like *Top Gun*, *Star Wars*, and *Grease* (Hamid 35, 38, 64). Nevertheless, Hamid purposefully has Changez tell the story in an accent that is distinctly non-American, despite the fact that having Changez sound more American could make his guest trust him more. Hamid

punctuates Changez's lack of integration by having Changez maintain a formal, accented tone while telling his story, rather than adopt a more laid-back, American voice. Contrastingly, the case could be made that Hamid presents a kind of integrationist narrative because he never segregates the framed story with any visual breaks when switching from the American past to the present Pakistan. Although Hamid has Changez transition between settings effortlessly, the transition back to Pakistan is often made after Changez takes note of the tension in the American guest's face: "But why do you flinch? Ah yes, the bats; they are circling rather low.... I can see that I have offended you, *angered* you even" (75). Therefore, the degree of integration in how the novel was written does not extend beyond surface level, which is similar to the shallow integration Changez had into American society; even this feigned structural integration in the novel presents a level of tension between the Pakistani narrator and his American guest.

The primary reason why Changez is not able to integrate into American society is because he fell in love with America, and America refused to accept him. In *A Letter to My Nephew*, Baldwin explains that those classified as "other," like Changez, "must accept [the white majority] and accept them with love." Changez surely employs this mode of action in his love for New York, as the city "still occupies a place of great fondness in [his] heart" after he only lives there for eight months (Hamid 33). He also develops a love for his job at Underwood Samson, and there he "did not think of [himself] as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee" (34). However, Baldwin explains how this form of integration is problematic because "there is no reason for [Changez] to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept [Changez]" (Baldwin). Changez tries to act "more like an *American*" because it allows him to make advances in his career (Hamid 65). Baldwin advised against this form of superficial integration because the act does not ensure that

he will be accepted by American society. This concept helps clarify the difference between integration and assimilation: “Where assimilation typically regards the disempowered group as the only subjects in need of change, capacious visions of integration aim at altering the habits, prejudices and stigmas of dominant groups” (Brendese). Changez succeeds at assimilating into corporate America, but he is never fully integrated into American society. His rejection is clear after 9/11 when his co-workers show “considerable—although often partially suppressed—consternation” towards him when he returns from Pakistan with an unshaven beard (Hamid 130). The beard is a threat to the uniform “army of clean-shaven youngsters” because suddenly Changez refused to assimilate (130). Hamid chooses to make his change in hairstyle enough for Changez to be considered “other” again and to be discriminated against in his workplace. This minor change in hairstyle illuminates Baldwin’s idea that one-sided assimilation into dominant culture does not yield deep-rooted and substantial integration.

Similarly, Changez is not accepted by Americans outside of his workplace either. He is called a “fucking Arab” by a random man in the parking lot who falsely judged him on the basis of his appearance (Hamid 117). When asked to describe the man who mocked him, Changez “cannot...recall the man’s particulars” and assures that only “the *gist* [of the story] matters” (118). By omitting these details, Hamid allows that random man in the parking lot to contribute largely to the reader’s view of the generalized, nondescript American characters who act as opponents to integration in the story. Hamid uses this random man to reinforce Changez’s rejection from American society in order to portray the racial tension during the post-9/11 period. At that point, the development of non-integrationist rhetoric made “living the American Dream as an immigrant from Pakistan [seem] no longer possible” (Golimowska). A source of the non-integrationist rhetoric was the “George W. Bush’s administration, as demonstrated in a

quote from one of Bush's public speeches: "Either you're with us or you're with the terrorists" indicating that if one does not support the US, one automatically becomes its opponent" (Golimowska). Such rhetoric emboldened Americans to act out against those that they classified as "other," like Changez, and had the effect of reversing any progress made in the form of American integration.

Several of the other white American characters in the novel also work against Changez's integration into American society with their concept of fundamentalism. In Underwood Samson, the phrase "focus on the fundamentals" lends fundamentalism to be associated with the Westernized ideals of capitalism and "single-minded attention to financial detail" (Hamid 98). In contrast, the Islamic form of fundamentalism from the perspective of the US "has become virtually interchangeable with terms such as "extremist" and "terrorist sympathiser" (if perhaps not quite "terrorist" itself)" (O'Gorman). The stigma associated with Islamic fundamentalism comes up when Erica's father describes his knowledge of Pakistan: "I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism" (Hamid 55). Erica's father represents another white American character in this novel whose ignorance and condescension develops into a bias for the American form of fundamentalism and against any "other" form of fundamentalism. When Changez gives himself up to the Underwood Samson lifestyle in the beginning of the novel, he begins to lose those core fundamentals that make him Pakistani and to assimilate to Westernized fundamentalism. On the contrary, whenever Changez leaves the US and is no longer surrounded by white Americans he slowly regains his fundamentals. For instance, after being glared at by a Filipino man in Manila and sharing "a sort of Third World sensibility," he observes his American coworker's "fair hair and light eyes, and most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of

[their] work—and thought, [he] is so *foreign*” (67). In this moment of disconnect with his American colleague, which occurs again when he travels to Pakistan and to Chile, Changez becomes less seduced by the American form of fundamentalism, and this disillusionment becomes finalized in his final trip back to Pakistan.

Another aspect of American culture that disillusions Changez is the immense sense of nostalgia that America falls into after 9/11 where “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*” (115). This post-9/11 America that Hamid describes perfectly aligns with the America that Baldwin characterizes in 1962 when he writes that “they are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it” (Baldwin). Both Baldwin and Hamid write about America in these different time periods with a sense of pity as Changez wonders if this history is “fictitious,” and Baldwin writes that the people caught in this nostalgia “have no other hope” (Hamid 115, Baldwin). Baldwin suggests loving America in order to cure the country’s sense of hopeless nostalgia; contrastingly, Hamid asserts that Baldwin’s love is ineffective in restoring America to an integrative present with his portrayal of the relationship between Erica and Changez.

Hamid characterizes Erica in the form of an allegory in order to convey how America shut Changez out when the country became caught in its nostalgia. When Erica starts “disappearing into a powerful *nostalgia*,” becomes institutionalized, and presumably commits suicide, it becomes more evident why exactly Hamid and Baldwin speak of America with such pity (Hamid 113). The human portrayal of America in this light makes the country seem more helpless in dealing with this nostalgia; yet, Hamid never officially clarifies whether or not Erica

is dead which allows readers, like Changez, to remain “in the grip of a certain, probably irrational, *hope*” that America can kill off this “dangerous nostalgia” (114-5). Hamid explicitly states that only Erica (and therefore, America) can choose whether or not to return from the nostalgia. In the novel, Changez offers Erica love in the form of social accompaniment, sexual intimacy, friendship, and space so that she can shake off her desire for the past. The problem lies in the fact that there is no role for Changez to play in her idealized past. The only way for Changez to have a part in Erica’s life is to talk to her about her past relationship with Chris or to pretend to be Chris. The analogy carries over with Changez having to act like an American in order to fit into American society at Underwood Samson. Again, this form of assimilation cannot develop into meaningful integration into a society or into a relationship. In Pakistan, Changez dreams of being with a form of Erica that actively tries to integrate to Lahori culture by learning Urdu (173). As long as Erica and America remain in that gripping sense of nostalgia, this form of integration can never occur, and this explains why so little progress has been made since the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.

Hamid’s representation of America through Erica shows how toxic the country’s nostalgia can be to itself, but does not fully convey how deadly the nostalgia can be on the world stage. Changez comes to this realization after 9/11:

“America was engaged only in posturing. As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least by my family, now facing war thousands of

miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interest not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own.” (Hamid 167-8)

Hamid presents the idea America coped with the pain caused by 9/11 by retreating into a sense of nostalgia for the past when the country was safe and secure, because it was such a dominating world power. Abandoning the reality of the attack in this way does not only lead to retaliation against the terrorist group, but it affects the lives of civilians in the countries neighboring war, “with so few apparent consequences at home” for Americans (131). Therefore, the need for integration of ideas, cultures, and perspectives needs to occur within America so that the country can have alternative coping mechanisms besides nostalgia, and work towards preventing an event like 9/11 from occurring again without inciting more conflict. Baldwin states this idea of integration being necessary in order to move away from nostalgia when he states that “if the word “integration” means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (Baldwin). Changez is determined to force Americans to change their ways and embrace integration, but he is not acting on the basis of love.

Different aspects of the story demonstrate that Changez is not trying to bring about integration on the basis of love for America. At the end of the novel, Hamid reveals that Changez has been advocating for “a disengagement from [America] by [Pakistan]” and has been organizing anti-American demonstrations in Pakistan (Hamid 179). Also, Changez loses credibility as he signals to the men following him and his American guest after dinner, but states that he does not know their intentions (176). He even states that “perhaps you are convinced that I am an inveterate liar” and takes no steps to deny the statement (183). Now that his credibility is gone, his claim that he is a lover of America and his story of American experiences could no

longer be true. Hamid also chooses to write *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* entirely from Changez's perspective, which shows a hypocritical lack of integration within the text. The only details the reader receives about the American guest are based on Changez's observations, which may be largely biased and inaccurate. One could consider an alternative perspective where the American guest is an American spy sent on a mission to take out a terrorist threat. From this standpoint, the American could be seen as a hero for traveling to an unsafe place to defend the safety of his country; Changez would be the villain. It is difficult to make value judgments of the characters in the story because our narrator has proven himself to be unreliable. Furthermore, Hamid frames the story where Changez is pampered in America by Americans until it is clear after 9/11 that America never truly accepted him; conversely, Changez entertains his American guest in Pakistan until it is revealed that he intends to detain him for being an undercover assassin. Based on the parallels between each story, Hamid implies that Changez intends to force change on America without any form of love, like was done to him by America. In this case, Hamid's portrayal of Changez does not reflect Baldwin's idea of the necessity of love; but the two writers still see the lack of integration in America as a problem.

On the whole, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* aligns with Mathis's idea that integration has not been earnestly attempted in American history, and shows clear examples of how difficult it is for those classified as "other" to integrate into American society. The novel agrees with Baldwin's assertion that substantive integration cannot be achieved until America rids itself of its chronic nostalgia for the past. However, the way that America will be able to shed this nostalgia and move towards an integrative future is still largely undecided. Ayana Mathis suggests that along with Baldwin's idea of love, America can start to become more integrative at the level of education. Through education, we can begin to teach younger people about acceptance of other

ideas and expose them to a diverse array of experiences as we move towards a more ethnically diverse future.

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