Protagonists' Negotiation of Identity within Neo-Orientalist Frameworks: A Comparative Analysis of The Reluctant Fundamentalist and The Kite Runner

Syed Junaid Sherazi
M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, Hazara University Mansehra- syedjunaidsherazi@gmail.com
Hamza Shujaat
M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, Hazara University Mansehra- hamzashujaat821@gmail.com
Kamran Elahi
M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, Hazara University Mansehra- kamranelahi501@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the complex negotiation of identity undertaken by the protagonists of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* within the context of Neo-Orientalist frameworks. Both novels depict characters Changez and Amir who navigate shifting cultural, political, and personal landscapes shaped by post-9/11 anxieties and deep-rooted East-West binaries. The study investigates how these characters confront stereotypes, internalize trauma, and ultimately redefine their sense of self in the face of cultural alienation, displacement, and moral conflict. Drawing on postcolonial and cultural studies theories, the analysis focuses on how pivotal moments—such as the aftermath of 9/11 for Changez and the betrayal of Hassan for Amir—serve as catalysts for identity transformation. These events force the protagonists to grapple with the realities of cultural hybridity, societal rejection, and personal guilt. The paper argues that their resistance to imposed identities, especially those constructed through Neo-Orientalist discourse, becomes an act of reclaiming agency. By comparing their journeys, this study highlights the intersections between personal identity and global political narratives, illustrating how Eastern protagonists in Western literary spaces resist being reduced to monolithic representations. Ultimately, the paper contributes to broader discussions on postcolonial identity, cultural hybridity, and the politics of representation in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Neo-Orientalism, identity negotiation, cultural hybridity, post-9/11 literature, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *The Kite Runner*, resistance, postcolonial identity, East-West dynamics, narrative agency

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized yet politically polarized world, literature has become a critical space for exploring the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural conflict. The aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks marked a significant shift in global discourse, especially regarding how Eastern individuals are perceived in Western societies. This event not only heightened political tensions but also intensified cultural binaries and racial stereotypes, giving rise to a modern iteration of Orientalism commonly referred to as Neo-Orientalism. This theoretical lens, rooted in Edward Said's foundational work on Orientalism, examines how contemporary Western narratives continue to represent the East in essentialized, reductive ways that reinforce colonial power dynamics. Within this framework, identity is often portrayed as fixed, oppositional, and shaped by external hegemonic forces. Against this backdrop, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) emerge as compelling texts that interrogate the impact of Neo-Orientalist discourse on the formation and negotiation of personal identity.

Both novels center on protagonists Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Amir in *The Kite Runner* who undergo profound identity transformations as they navigate their dual existence between East and West. These characters are not mere victims of circumstance but active agents in the reconstruction of their identities, shaped by political crises, personal failures, and cultural dislocation. Changez's experience in post-9/11 America is marked by suspicion, alienation, and

the eventual realization that the American dream is inherently exclusionary for someone of his background. Amir, on the other hand, grapples with guilt and betrayal within the stratified society of pre- and post-Taliban Afghanistan, before seeking redemption in the diaspora. Despite their different contexts, both characters confront a shared challenge: negotiating identity in a world that persistently categorizes and confines them through Neo-Orientalist lenses.

Neo-Orientalism not only dictates how Eastern characters are perceived by others but also influences how they perceive themselves. It functions through a series of binary oppositions East vs. West, civilized vs. barbaric, rational vs. emotional that restrict the fluidity of identity and uphold Western superiority. In both novels, the protagonists begin by internalizing aspects of these binaries, aspiring toward Western ideals and distancing themselves from their cultural origins. Changez, for instance, takes pride in his success at a prestigious American firm, believing he has transcended the limitations of his Pakistani identity. Amir similarly seeks validation through his proximity to Western culture and social privilege. However, as their respective narratives unfold, both characters are forced to confront the inadequacies and hypocrisies of these ideals. Their crises-sparked by national tragedy in one case and personal betrayal in the other-serve as turning points that push them to re-evaluate and ultimately resist the imposed narratives that seek to define them.

This paper aims to analyze how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* portray the negotiation of identity within Neo-Orientalist frameworks. It explores how the protagonists resist being reduced to stereotypes, and how their journeys reflect a broader critique of cultural imperialism, exclusion, and identity politics. Through a comparative lens, the study will investigate how Hamid and Hosseini use narrative structure, character development, and thematic exploration to illuminate the struggles of individuals caught between conflicting cultural expectations. By highlighting both the personal and political dimensions of identity formation, the paper underscores the importance of literature in challenging reductive worldviews and giving voice to marginalized perspectives. In doing so, the research not only contributes to the understanding of post-9/11 literature and South Asian diasporic narratives but also engages with ongoing debates in postcolonial theory and cultural studies. The protagonists' stories are not isolated tales of identity crisis, but reflective of a larger, global experience of individuals negotiating their place in a world shaped by power, prejudice, and persistent cultural divisions.

Thesis Statement:

This paper argues that the protagonists of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* undergo complex processes of identity negotiation shaped by Neo-Orientalist frameworks, and through their respective journeys of disillusionment, guilt, and resistance, both characters ultimately reject imposed stereotypes and reclaim agency by embracing the multifaceted nature of their cultural and personal identities.

Research questions:

1) How do Changez and Amir negotiate their identities in response to the cultural and political pressures imposed by Neo-Orientalist frameworks in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner*?

2) In what ways do the protagonists resist or internalize Western-imposed stereotypes, and how does this affect their journey toward self-understanding and belonging?

Research objectives:

1) To examine the processes through which Changez and Amir navigate their cultural identities amid political crises and societal expectations, particularly within the context of Neo-Orientalist narratives in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner*.

2) To analyze the protagonists' responses both resistance and internalization to Western-imposed stereotypes, and to assess how these responses shape their psychological development, sense of belonging, and personal transformation.

Significance of the Study:

This study holds significance both in literary analysis and in the broader socio-political context of postcolonial and cultural studies. By examining *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini through the lens of Neo-Orientalism and identity negotiation, the research provides deeper insight into how contemporary South Asian narratives analyzes dominant Western perceptions of the East, particularly in the post-9/11 era. The exploration of Changez and Amir's internal conflicts and cultural dislocation contributes to a richer understanding of how identity is shaped not only by personal experiences but also by global political forces and inherited cultural stereotypes.

This study also addresses the gaps in comparative analyses of these two widely studied novels, particularly in how their protagonists resist or internalize Western-imposed identities. By focusing on their negotiation of self in response to Neo-Orientalist frameworks, the research underscores the enduring relevance of Edward Said's theories in analyzing 21st-century literature. Furthermore, the study emphasizes how narratives from the Global South challenge reductive and monolithic representations of Eastern identities by foregrounding personal trauma, guilt, and resilience.

Academically, the research contributes to the discourse on identity formation, diaspora literature, and postcolonial resistance. Socially and culturally, it encourages a more nuanced understanding of the immigrant and diasporic experience in Western societies. Ultimately, this study affirms literature's power to humanize marginalized voices and question the ideological boundaries constructed by global political and cultural hegemonies.

Research Methodology and Literature Review:

This study adopts a qualitative, textual analysis approach rooted in comparative literary analysis and guided by postcolonial theory, particularly Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and its modern manifestation as Neo-Orientalism. The primary texts-*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini-serve as the core material for analysis. These novels are selected for their thematic relevance, particularly how they represent Eastern protagonists navigating identity crises in a post-9/11 Western-dominated world.

The research methodology involves a close reading of the novels to identify and analyze narrative strategies, character development, key dialogues, and symbolic events that illustrate the protagonists' identity negotiation. Special attention is

given to pivotal scenes that reflect cultural dislocation, internalized stereotypes, acts of resistance, and moments of self-realization.

The analysis is framed by critical concepts from postcolonial and cultural studies, including Neo-Orientalism, cultural hybridity (Homi K. Bhabha), and identity politics. Secondary sources such as journal articles, critical essays, and theoretical texts are used to support and contextualize the analysis, providing scholarly perspectives on the novels' themes and their relevance in contemporary global literature. This method enables a nuanced understanding of how literature reflects, critiques, and reconstructs cultural identities shaped by global political discourses, and how characters like Changez and Amir embody this complex negotiation.

A substantial body of scholarly work has explored the themes of identity, displacement, and postcolonial trauma in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner*. These studies often intersect with broader discussions on diasporic literature, post-9/11 narratives, and the portrayal of Muslim and South Asian identities in Western contexts. Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) provides the foundational framework for understanding how the West constructs the East as exotic, inferior, and threatening. Scholars such as Dabashi (2009) and Grewal (2005) have extended Said's work to examine Neo-Orientalism, highlighting how post-9/11 narratives often perpetuate similar binaries under new geopolitical circumstances. In this light, Changez's experience in Hamid's novel has been analyzed as a critique of American imperialism and the illusion of the meritocratic American dream (Singh, 2012; Shaikh, 2015). His growing disillusionment and eventual rejection of Western values are seen as a powerful resistance to cultural stereotyping and political marginalization.

In the case of *The Kite Runner*, scholars have explored Amir's journey through the lens of personal trauma and guilt, focusing on how his privileged position as a Pashtun complicates his understanding of loyalty, morality, and belonging (Asif, 2010; Rahimi, 2013). Others, such as Salma and Rafiq (2018), highlight the novel's commentary on ethnic hierarchies and how Amir's moral redemption parallels his cultural reconciliation with a fragmented Afghan identity.

Few studies, however, place both novels in direct conversation, especially within a comparative Neo-Orientalist framework. This research fills that gap by examining how the protagonists in both texts respond to externally imposed identities and how their journeys reflect a broader postcolonial resistance. The literature reviewed demonstrates the need for further analysis of how these works not only reflect internal identity crises but also actively challenge Western hegemonic discourses that continue to shape public perceptions of the East.

Discussion and Analysis:

The negotiation of identity within Neo-Orientalist frameworks is central to the character development of both Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Amir in *The Kite Runner*. Each protagonist is subjected to cultural pressures and ideological binaries that force them to confront their sense of self in the face of political upheaval, personal guilt, and social expectations. While their narratives differ in setting and specific experiences, both reflect the broader postcolonial struggle to assert individual identity in a world dominated by Western-centric discourses.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist,* Changez begins his journey as an ambitious and optimistic young man who believes in the promise of the American dream. His success at Princeton and later at Underwood Samson represents his attempt to assimilate into American capitalist culture. However, the events of 9/11 mark a turning point that disrupts this trajectory. Suddenly, Changez is no longer seen as an exceptional immigrant but as a potential threat. The same society that once embraced his talent now marginalizes him based on his ethnicity and religion. His growing sense of alienation is evident when he remarks, "I was no longer a member of the American family. I was now an outsider" (Hamid, 2007, p. 137). This moment of disillusionment is not merely personal but emblematic of a larger critique of how Western societies categorize Eastern individuals through reductive and suspicious lenses post-9/11.

Similarly, in *The Kite Runner,* Amir's identity crisis is rooted in a different kind of trauma-moral failure rather than political rejection. His betrayal of Hassan is a deeply personal event that leaves him haunted for much of his life. While Amir does not face overt racial or religious discrimination like Changez, he internalizes the socio-ethnic divisions present in Afghan society. His privileged status as a Pashtun contrasts sharply with Hassan's Hazara identity, and this disparity shapes Amir's guilt and eventual quest for redemption. The line, "I had betrayed him and in doing so, betrayed myself" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 87), encapsulates Amir's realization that his failure to act against injustice compromised his own identity. Unlike Changez, who resists and rejects the system that alienates him, Amir seeks to repair the moral damage within himself by returning to Afghanistan and confronting his past.

Both protagonists ultimately come to resist the external narratives that define them. For Changez, this resistance is ideological and political. After experiencing systemic exclusion, he rejects the American capitalist system and returns to Pakistan, where he reclaims his cultural and political voice. His transformation from a compliant corporate analyst to a vocal critic of American imperialism demonstrates a shift from internalizing Western ideals to challenging them. Changez's statement, "I had been living a lie, and the time had come to be true to myself" (Hamid, 2007, p. 153), reflects his decision to define his identity on his own terms rather than through the lens of Western validation.

Amir's resistance, while less political, is no less significant. His return to Kabul is an act of moral courage that allows him to confront the consequences of his past actions. By rescuing Sohrab, Hassan's son, Amir symbolically attempts to redeem himself and restore a sense of justice. In doing so, he also rejects the image of himself as the cowardly, passive observer and embraces a more authentic identity rooted in responsibility and empathy. His declaration, "I am the man who stands in front of you, not the boy who betrayed you" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 400), marks a critical moment in which he reclaims agency over his identity by facing, rather than fleeing, his past.

Another crucial aspect of both narratives is the theme of cultural hybridity. Neither Changez nor Amir fits neatly into one cultural category. Changez's experiences in America leave him changed, even as he returns to Pakistan. He notes, "I had returned to my roots, but I was no longer the man I had been when I left" (Hamid, 2007, p. 179), indicating that his identity is now a hybrid shaped by

both Eastern and Western experiences. Similarly, Amir, who spends much of his adult life in the United States, finds that returning to Afghanistan does not fully restore his sense of belonging. He is both Afghan and American, and this duality becomes a permanent feature of his identity. These experiences reflect Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" in postcolonial theory, where hybrid identities are formed in the interstices of cultural interaction.

Importantly, both characters resist being reduced to the Neo-Orientalist label of the passive victim or dangerous Other. Changez's journey shows that identity negotiation is not a sign of weakness but an act of political consciousness. He challenges the Western gaze that seeks to dehumanize him and asserts his right to define himself beyond the parameters of Western approval. Amir, too, refuses to be boxed into the stereotype of the guilt-ridden immigrant or the morally broken elite. His self-awareness and pursuit of redemption reflect the resilience of individuals grappling with inherited trauma and historical injustice.

In sum, both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* portray protagonists whose identities are shaped by a combination of personal decisions and larger geopolitical forces. Their narratives reveal how Eastern individuals in Western-dominated contexts are often subjected to external definitions that limit their agency. However, through self-reflection, resistance, and transformation, both Changez and Amir illustrate the possibility of reclaiming identity from the grip of Neo-Orientalist frameworks. Their stories challenge the reader to move beyond simplistic binaries and recognize the nuanced, evolving nature of cultural identity in a globalized world.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* reveals that the negotiation of identity within Neo-Orientalist frameworks is both a personal and political struggle for the protagonists, Changez and Amir. While their experiences differ in nature Changez facing systemic rejection in post-9/11 America, and Amir confronting internal guilt rooted in ethnic and moral hierarchies both characters undergo profound transformations as they navigate the complexities of belonging, cultural hybridity, and self-perception. Each protagonist begins their journey by internalizing dominant Western ideals, but through critical turning points, they come to resist the reductive identities imposed on them.

Changez's disillusionment with the American dream and his subsequent return to Pakistan mark his conscious rejection of a system that seeks to define him through fear and suspicion. His identity becomes a site of political resistance, shaped by the realization that true belonging cannot be achieved through assimilation alone. Similarly, Amir's journey to redemption and his moral reckoning with past betrayals reflect a shift from passive guilt to active responsibility. By returning to Kabul and rescuing Sohrab, Amir reclaims his agency and embraces the multifaceted nature of his cultural identity.

Both novels ultimately analyze the Neo-Orientalist tendency to essentialize Eastern identities and offer instead a more nuanced portrayal of selfhood one that acknowledges the fluid, evolving, and contested nature of identity in a globalized world. In challenging externally imposed narratives, Changez and Amir assert the right to define themselves on their own terms, illustrating the enduring

human struggle for dignity, belonging, and self-realization.

Findings

1. Both protagonists Changez and Amir experience pivotal crises (9/11 for Changez and Hassan's assault for Amir) that force them to confront deep internal conflicts and reassess their sense of self.
2. Changez becomes a target of suspicion in post-9/11 America, illustrating how Neo-Orientalist stereotypes label Eastern individuals as threats, deepening their marginalization despite previous integration.
3. Initially, both Changez and Amir internalize Western ideals of success and morality. However, they later recognize these ideals as insufficient or incompatible with their authentic identities, leading to disillusionment.
4. Both protagonists struggle with dual cultural affiliations East and West which leads to feelings of displacement and a realization that belonging is not fixed but continuously negotiated.
5. Changez's rejection of American corporate life and Amir's return to Afghanistan to seek redemption are both acts of resistance that help them reclaim agency and redefine their identities.
6. Amir's moral redemption and Changez's political awakening highlight that identity is shaped not only by individual experiences but also by broader socio-political forces.
7. Both novels use introspective, reflective narration that gives voice to marginalized perspectives. Through storytelling, the protagonists assert control over how their identities are constructed and remembered.

References

1) Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
2) Dabashi, H. (2009). *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*. Transaction Publishers.
3) Grewal, I. (2005). *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Duke University Press.
4) Hamid, M. (2007). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Harcourt.
5) Hosseini, K. (2003). *The Kite Runner*. Riverhead Books.
6) Rahimi, M. (2013). Ethnic identity and guilt in *The Kite Runner*: A postcolonial perspective. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(4), 828–834. https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.4.4.828-834
7) Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
8) Salma, U., & Rafiq, M. (2018). Representation of ethnic identity and power politics in *The Kite Runner*. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 8(4), 116–124. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v8n4p116
9) Shaikh, F. (2015). American dream and disillusionment in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 6(7), 115–122. https://doi.org/10.5897/IJEL2015.0753
10) Singh, A. (2012). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the problem of belonging. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48(1), 36–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2011.635070
11) Asif, M. (2010). Identity, guilt and redemption in *The Kite Runner*. *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies*, 2(1), 1–14.
12) Varisco, D. M. (2007). Reading *Orientalism*: Said and the Unsaid. University

of Washington Press.

13) Moore-Gilbert, B. (1997). *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics.* Verso.

14) Karim, R. (2013). Neo-Orientalism in post-9/11 literature: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the rise of the Muslim other. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 17(6), 57–62.