

ISSN: (E)2790-9808 (P) 2790-9794      Date of Submission: 19<sup>th</sup> March 2022  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37605/ijlts.v2i1.3>      Date of Acceptance: 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022  
Date of Publication: 29<sup>th</sup> June 2022

**SOFT POWER IN *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*  
BY MOHSIN HAMID**

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**Abstract**

This research paper aims at soft power in the novel “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” by Mohsin Hamid. It throws light on the character of Changez, who becomes a victim of soft power of American culture and its policies. Changez is a brilliant student but he strongly supports American culture and tries to become part of it. This research qualitatively analyzes the text of “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” and highlights those events which reveal that America tries to influence Changez. This research follows close reading of the novel. America has strong influence on his mind but it will never accept him as a citizen and a true American. This paper also throws light on the effects of soft power on the personality of Changez and the factors which compelled Changez to realize the soft power of America because of the bias of America against Muslims. The theoretical framework for this research is the soft power theory of Joseph Nye. It concludes that Mohsin Hamid has successfully depicted American soft power.

**Keywords:** *Soft power, Reluctant, Fundamentalist, culture.*

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## Introduction

Mohsin Hamid is a Pakistani novelist born on July 23, 1971 in Lahore. He spent his childhood in United States. His father was a professor at Stanford University. He then came back to Lahore with his family and went to Lahore American school. When he was eighteen years old, he went back to United States for further education. In 1993 he graduated from Princeton University. After graduation from Princeton University, he came back to Pakistan and started work on his first novel "Moth Smoke". This novel was published in 2000. "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" is his second novel which was published in 2007. It is his famous novel and translated into twenty five languages. (Mohsin Hamid, 2007)

This novel is written in the form of a dramatic monologue and the story opens in the street of Lahore in Anarkali Bazaar. Changez is the main character who narrates his story to a stranger, sitting in front of him. Both the stranger and Changez are suspicious of each other. Changez tells the stranger that he was a brilliant student and was given a scholarship to Princeton University America where he studied finance and got a bachelor degree. He admired Princeton University. In a monologue Changez tells the stranger that he is not a poor person. His family was very rich in the past but their wealth has been declined. After he completed his education in Princeton, he applied for a job in Underwood Samson. Jim, boss of the firm, selected him and he joined Underwood Samson. During his job in Underwood Samson he visited many areas like Manila and New Jersey. This novel is a mixture of present and past events. Changez narrates his story in past but also describes present situation with the stranger. Changez, during his stay in America, falls in love with Erica. He is in a continuous struggle to get favor of Erica, to influence and attract her but she is not interested in Changez. She loves Chris and it is difficult for her to forget him. This becomes a kind of barrier for Changez to have a successful relationship with Erica. This relationship of Changez with

Erica symbolizes his love and attraction for America and the never accepting attitude of America for Muslims. He tries hard to settle successfully in America and to be considered by them as a part of their culture but he fails to do so because of the biased attitude of America towards foreigners.

9/11 attack on twin towers of New York brings a shift in the life of Changez. In fact it does bring a change in the life of every Muslim in America. He does not expect this treatment because he feels proud of being a Princetonian and Underwood Samson employee. But even he does not escape the brutal treatment and strong discrimination.

Throughout the novel there are strong influences of American culture on Changez. He even tries to diminish his own cultural identity to be accepted by America. He becomes ready to take the identity of Chris. He is conscious of his identity problem as stated in the novel that “I had diminished myself in my own eyes; perhaps I was humiliated by the continuing dominance” (Hamid, 2007). This is the reason that leads him towards identity crisis. In search for American identity, he loses his own original identity of being a Muslim. Reason for all these problems is the soft power that America exercises on Changez. Soft power of America is the root cause of his identity loss.

In this novel there are various examples of cultural differences between Pakistan and America. Pakistani and American culture are totally opposite to each other. There is a great conflict between the two cultures. An example of cultural difference is the sexual relationship before marriage. In Pakistan it is not in our culture to form adulterous relations before marriage but in America this is a common trend. When Changez goes to America he forms a sexual relationship with Erica and when they just have done a sexual act, Erica asks him about his sexual life in Pakistan and Changez says that he did not experience it before coming to America. Changez also tells about big family systems in Pakistan. He says that when he was a child they all lived in the

same house. He supports this system and says that it gives strength to the family.

## **Soft Power Theory**

Soft power is a term introduced by Joseph Nye in the late 1980's in his book "Bound to Lead: The Nature of American Changing Power". In his book "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" he further developed the concept of soft power. According to Joseph Nye power is that ability by which people are influenced to get favorable results that they want. Power influences others in various ways. Favorable outcomes may be obtained by threats or by payments or by attracting people towards one's own culture. Soft power is to get goals by attracting people. According to Joseph Nye there are three ways in which soft power is exercised namely culture, political values and foreign policies.

Joseph Nye in his "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" published in 2004 says that soft power "is the power which is exercised by indirect means and does not give results immediately but takes years for getting the expected results." Nye argues that both hard and soft powers are needed for successful states.

According to an annual index "Soft Power 30" which was published by Portland Communication and USC Center on Public Diplomacy in 2018, United Kingdom is the most prominent sovereign country in soft power. Other countries which are prominent in exercising soft power are Germany, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, France and United States. The Elcano's Global Presence Report 2017 places United States first among countries which use soft power. According to Capsule Review May/June 2004 issue "United States has the quality to dominate others but it is also triumphant in exercising soft power.

Judith Trunkos and Philip G Cerny say in the afterward of “Spheres of Culture and Soft Power” published in 2019 that after the start of 20<sup>th</sup> century, hard power like wars etc have become ineffective means of controlling other nations. Hard power which is the direct control of other nations, have almost given place to soft power which is to shape the behavior of other people, to have influence on their thinking and perception. After the end of cold war many developed countries focused on the development and promotion of soft power. These countries along with their social media networks like Facebook, propagate their culture and hence increase their influence.

The objectives of the study are to identify Changez as a victim of American soft power, to find out the effects of soft power on Changez's character, to identify the key reasons behind realization of soft power of America by Changez and to point out the extent to which Mohsin Hamid is justified in the depiction of soft power.

This research will highlight true picture of America as depicted by Mohsin Hamid and will make us aware of our mental servitude. This paper will highlight major experiences of Changez's life and through them it will be shown that how Muslims are becoming the victims of American cultural influence.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does the soft power of America influence Changez in “The Reluctant Fundamentalist”?
2. How soft power shapes the character of Changez?
3. What are the reasons that cause Changez to realize the soft power of America?
4. Is Mohsin Hamid justified in portraying soft power?

## Literature Review

Presently there is enough body of existing knowledge about Mohsin Hamid's novel "The Reluctant Fundamentalist". Significant amount of work has been done on themes, symbolism, form and style of this novel.

Joseph Nye in his article "Soft Power and Higher Education" published in (2005) throws light on the soft power of America through higher education. He states that many examiners say that higher education of America produces strong form of soft power for this country. Colin Powell, secretary of the state, said in 2001: "I think that the best profitable way for our country is to gain the alliance of the leaders in future who would be given higher education in our country of America".

.Joseph Nye says that I have selected the definition of soft power which is very similar to the commonly used meaning of this term by laymen—the ability to influence other people and get the desired outcomes. There are three ways to influence other people, coercion, inducement, and attraction. I call the third way as "Soft Power".

Claudia Perner in her article "Tracing the Fundamentalist in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* and *Reluctant Fundamentalist*" published in (2010) says that as the story progresses we come to know that how Changez feels dissatisfaction and anger due to all the prevailing political situations and how he is powerless in America due to political conflicts between America and other eastern Muslim countries including Pakistan. )

Avirup says that "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" is not only a story which narrates of unrequited love of Changez and Erica's coldness but also tells us that how different cultural structures separate people from one another. (2013)

Jenn Brandt in her essay “Gender and the Nostalgic Body in Post-9/11 Fiction: Claire Humaira Tariq in her research paper “Identity at Stake: Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*” published in (2014) says that it is clear from the title of the novel “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*” that it is based on identity crisis. There is combination of two words “Reluctant” and “Fundamentalist”. Fundamentalist is a person who strictly follows his religious codes and “Reluctant” means a person who feels hesitation to do something. So this title itself throws light on identity crisis in the novel.(2024)

Suhana PA in her article “Resetting borders: Transnationalism, identity and home in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*” published in 2018 says that writer of “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*” Mohsin Hamid was Pakistani and he lived a great part of his life in America. He was well aware of the life of a Muslim in America and hence his broad knowledge about American society makes him enable to create the character of Changez.

Amani Sami Salmeen in her research paper “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist: Hybridity and the Struggle for Identity*” published in (2019) says that the first word of the title shows resistance and the second word shows extreme reaction which is not basically religious but it reveals to us the mental condition of Changez.

A lot of work has been done on Pakistan and America relationship and on the character of Changez but this research will focus on how American culture attracted Changez towards itself and how American policies work.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

There are various ways in which one nation gets influenced by the other. For example mostly people are influenced by TV celebrities, politicians, musicians and sportsmen etc. Nowadays, the easiest way to spread one’s culture is media. Culture is rapidly spread through social media, showing

different kinds of exhibitions and modeling. Young generation is likely to get influenced.

Education is a very important resource of soft power. Those countries that possess soft power over other nations mainly focus on their education system. They try hard to improve their education system to use it as a soft power resource. Developed countries have a first rate education system like America, England and other such countries. America has been trying to gain power over the mind of other nations through education. Pakistanis are always under the influence of America. People aspire to have an access to their education system and then feel proud if they go there. It's considered a great success to be there and be educated in those institutions. Same is the case with Changez. He is Pakistani student and like all other students of his country he is under the strong influence of America. He is a brilliant student and hence tries hard to have an access to American institutions. He is very much inspired by them. And when he finally gets there as a student and is given admission in Princeton university, it is like a dream coming true. "Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible" (Hamid 2007). Such is the power of America over the mind of Changez that he happily leaves his own country and moves to America.

In this novel Mohsin Hamid reflects the theme of American policy to attract other nations towards itself. He says that how America gives different kinds of scholarships to the brilliant students of other countries. The brilliant students are invited from different countries and various kinds of incentives are given to them to settle there permanently. Changez's story is based on this process. He is selected among the thousand competent students and then given scholarship to Princeton University of America. When he completes his education there, he is given a prosperous job, good salary and other incentives so that he might settle there and serve America. Changez says that "Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, and mind

you, and invited into the ranks of the meritocracy. In return we were to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining” (Hamid 2007).

At Princeton, I conducted myself in public like a young prince, generous and carefree, but I also, as quietly as I could, three on campus jobs.” (Hamid 2007) This hard struggle symbolizes his strong wish to be completely like them.

While his stay in America, Changez was so involved in American culture and got so much information about their places that he proudly called himself a New Yorker. He tells the stranger that he was so well acquainted with New York that even the tourists asked him for help to find certain places. This is how he proudly says that “On street corners, tourists would ask me for directions. I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker...It still occupies a place of great fondness in my heart.” (Hamid 2007). Changez feelings towards New York are so intimate that he talks of New York as his own country. This shows how much he is under the influence of America. Changez is Pakistani by origin but he feels less a Pakistani and more a New Yorker. The reason behind this is the soft power of American culture and American cities which so strongly affect Changez's mind that he is adopting new identity and is proud of it.

Another important source of soft power is the construction style and buildings of a country. It is evident that developed countries that have good sanitary system, attractive constructions and sky scrapers are always sources of inspiration. It is clear that construction plays a great role in development of a culture. Modern era is the era of sky scrapers. Countries are in competition to have the world's highest buildings. They make a country developed and hence its soft power is increased.

In this novel there is strong influence of the building of Underwood Samson on Changez. When he first entered Underwood Samson to join his duty, he was very influenced by its building. Changez says that he had visited through airplanes in Pakistan and viewed Himalayas but nothing gave him that much pleasure which he got from viewing through the lobby of Underwood Samson. It is an indirect comparison of Pakistan and America. It is one of the most common practices of Western women like America to come on the beach and lie there in bikinis. It is their liberal culture that allows them to be nude on the beach and Changez enjoys it. When he was on a beach in Greece, Changez saw many nude women there, taking sunbath but instead of showing dislike, he said that he whole heartedly supported this thing. This is the influence of American culture on the mind of Changez that he even does not care about his religion and strongly supports nudity on the beach. We can say that such attraction of culture causes soft power to rule the minds of other nations.

He says that “European women nearby were, as usual, sunbathing topless—a practice I wholeheartedly supported...(Hamid 2007). This is how their culture appears so attractive to others and they fall victims and they become ready to do everything to be there and to fulfill that powerful nation’s aims.

In our Islamic culture men and women are not allowed to mix freely. There are different social circles for men and women but Changez experiences something different in America. There is free mixing of men and women which strongly influences Changez. When he is with Erica in Greece, they sit in a bus side by side and Changez feels only an inch distance between them. Legs of Erica are bare and Changez can see them. He says that “I could not help but notice that her bare leg was less than an inch from where I was resting my hand on my thigh.” (Hamid 2007). He notices Erica’s legs and says exaggeratingly that this situation is very different in Pakistan where there is about fifty yards distance between men and women. When he is telling his

story to the stranger, he notices a man standing at some distance from him and tells the stranger that look he is gazing on those girls who are fully covered. Changez says that as he has spent enough time in America so he is aware of the sensation of a female skin. He does like this free mixing of men and women in America which he cannot experience freely in his own country. He says “but still I remained acutely aware of visible female skin.” (Hamid 2007). It shows that he is influenced by American culture of being free to be close and frank with girls as we find him happy when he is close to Erica.

As mentioned earlier that soft power can be exercised by using culture as a resource. Dresses are the core of a nation’s culture. A nation is known by the culture of its people and dressing forms the core element of the culture. Different nations have different kinds of cultural dresses. Jeans and pants are the parts of Western culture. Pakistan has its own kinds of cultural dresses but nowadays we see that most of the people in Pakistan wear jeans and pants. Islam prohibits such kind of dressing but this is the influence of Americans and Britishers that people of Pakistan have now adopted their dressing style. They do not feel even the least hesitation to wear that kind of dresses. Same is in this novel when Changez is with the stranger at a café in Anarkali Bazaar Lahore. Suddenly the stranger’s attention is shifted towards a man who is looking at some girls in bazaar. Those girls wear jeans and T-Shirts. Changez notices the behavior of the stranger and says that if you think that man will scold those girls for such inappropriate dressing then you are wrong. He is not going to scold or taunt them. These girls are comfortable in this dressing and they often come to bazaar. He says to the stranger that “You think he will scold them for the inappropriateness of their dress—their T-Shirts and jeans? I suspect not: those girls seem comfortable in this area” (Hamid 2007). I think Changez is right that the man will not scold them and that the girls are comfortable in it because he is aware that such kind of dressing has caught deep roots in our culture and has become part of it. This is the soft power of Western countries.

Changez considers Erica's family as an influential one. When Changez and Erica return from their visit to Greece, he is invited by her for dinner. He is happy that Erica invited him to her house for dinner but when it is the time to go there he becomes very much concerned about his dress. Here is the clear example of soft power on Changez. He thinks that Erica's family is rich so he must be careful about his dressing. He wants to wear such dress that may be according to their social status. He says that "I knew her family was wealthy, and I wanted to dress as I imagined they would be dressed: in a manner elegant but also casual" (Hamid 2007). He is very impressed by their dressing style and thinks that they wear elegant dresses so he should also be dressed in an elegant way.

In this novel we find Changez as a victim of soft power of America, which is evident from various incidents. One of them includes the comparisons which he makes between Pakistan and America. He is wondered how a rich and glorious past we Pakistanis possess but in spite of our rich and glorious past, still, in the present time we have less power and influence. We had a great civilization at the side of Indus River. This civilization was famous for its cities and drainage system. It was an example for the whole world. While those people who attacked and colonized America, their ancestors were uncivilized and illiterate. Changez says that:

Those people who were famous for well planned cities and excellent drainage system, their generations are now living in unplanned and dirty cities. And America has made such a progress that its educational facilities for one person are greater than our whole national budget for education. He is wondering on such a rapid progress and success of America. These comparisons do trouble him because he feels inferiority.

Changez tells about his training in Underwood Samson that is so much delicate and technical. He is given the training how to deal with a client who is angry and how to deal with a non cooperative officer. They are given "soft

training skills” which are the ways to influence people and get your desired results. This is the same as soft power. This is how to attract people. And Underwood Samson which is symbolic of America strictly focuses on soft training skills. This shows us how America focuses on to attract other people and get the desired results.

While in Manali Changez tries hard to appear like an American. Changez is wearing a three piece suit and have an expense account and most importantly he is among the Americans so that he is totally looking like an American. There is no visible effect of being a Pakistani on the personality of Changez. He feels proud to be among the Americans and not to be look like a Pakistani. This is how powerfully his mind is enslaved by the American culture and people.

At the end of the novel we come to know that although Changez is turned towards his Pakistani identity and he has left America but still there are some ashes of attraction burning in his heart or it may be a sense of something lost, something very special. He confesses to the stranger that although he left America but still he remembers Erica and feels that he has lost something. As stated in the novel “I had returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased. I remained emotionally entwined with Erica...I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to relocate in the city of my birth.” (Hamid 2007). He misses Erica so much that all the time he thinks about her. He regularly reads the magazine *Princeton Alumni Weekly* so that he may get some news about her. In this magazine he also reads about the world which he left and wonders that how it is evolving and making progress. This shows us the strong roots of American soft power that have been perched deeply into his heart. He has given up his American life but its influence is still somewhere in his heart.

## **Effects of Soft Power on the Character of Changez**

As soft power is attracting Changez to adopt the ways and life style of America and it has pulled his heart and mind towards itself, there are certain traits in the character of Changez which has resulted from this soft power. Of course this soft power is meant for the purpose to form certain effects on other people.

As a result of the soft power which America exercises on the mind of Changez, he has gone too far from his own religion, Islam. He is involved in all those acts which are strictly prohibited by Islam. He is involved in drinking wine, going to night clubs, merrymaking with girls and above all having a sexual relationship with Erica. He goes to beach and glances over naked women there and does not have a least repulsion but rather he admires this nudity and sunbathing on the beach.

Throughout the novel there is no description of Changez, as being a Muslim, that he is saying prayer or reciting Quran or doing any other activity which reveals his religious spirit. This is the success of American soft power that made Changez to increase distance from his own religion.

Changez refers to the glorious past of his country and compares it with America. He is influenced by American success that he regrets the present situation of his country and reminds its past again and again and thinks that now it has ruined its beauty and attraction.

Because of spending enough time in America and acquiring American identity, his perspective at looking the things is changed. He has spent a considerable time in American culture that he finds faults in Pakistani culture.

This thing is evident when Changez returns to Pakistan and comes to his home. Everything around him makes him feel disgust and shame. He starts noticing his own house and finds many faults in it. He notices that there are

cracks in the ceiling and walls have absorbed moist and have become damaged. There is no electricity and the furniture of his house is old and needs repair. His house appears to him shabby and old and he feels ashamed of his position in Pakistan.

He notices all these faults and thinks that everything has changed when he was in America. But then he realizes that everything has not changed but he has changed. This is his perspective at looking the things that has changed. It is his mind that has changed and it is his personality that has changed. Everything in Pakistan is the same as it was when he has not yet gone to America. Before going to America he does not realize these faults in his house but it is when he went to America, witnessed highly sophisticated environment that changed his mind and attracted him towards itself, that he finds faults in his house in Pakistan. This is how soft power affected his thinking and perspective. This is clear when Changez says “it occurred to me that the house had not changed in my absence. I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner...that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American...this realization angered me” (Hamid 2007).

Changez by birth is a Pakistani, the identity which he can never withdraw, but at the same time, under the influence of American soft power he aspires to have an American identity, to be looked and treated like an American. This causes a conflict in his personality. He cannot just completely give up his Islamic identity nor can he completely be accepted as an American. He hangs between being a Pakistani and an American. This leads to identity crisis in his personality. As Changez comments “I was not certain where I belonged” (Hamid 2007).

In case of his attraction towards Erica, Changez has lost his self-respect. He is not given that much importance by Erica as he gives to her. So many times she tries to ignore him and also disappears but Changez follows her like a shadow and he is always repulsed by Erica because she is in love with

someone else. This is symbolic of American soft power that although they attract foreigners but never accepts them in a true sense. Changez views his cowardice and questions himself for leaving his country and parents and says “And what was I abandoning them for? A well-paying job and a woman whom I longed for but who refused even to see me” (Hamid 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Keeping in view the modern focus on soft power, its prevalence in our societies and all the above examples in the novel “The Reluctant Fundamentalist”, it can rightly be claimed that Mohsin Hamid has successfully portrayed soft power on the character of Changez. This soft power is more visible at the beginning of the novel. Although, at the end we have some traces of this soft power in the heart of Changez. Mohsin Hamid himself spent time in America and hence he is aware of a Muslim’s life and his inspirations. He is aware of both Pakistani people and Americans and their relationship with each other. Events and characters of this novel may not be real but very close to reality. It is evident that how far eastern people and especially Muslims try to become part of America or western world but they can never be accepted whole heartedly. There is and will always remain a gap between these two sides of the world. In fact Muslims have their own values with which they cannot go forth in America to become like them. If Muslims follow true values of Islam, they will always look different from western people otherwise there will be just hybridity.

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