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Liminal Transformation in the Rites of Passage: Identity Fluidity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Zhao Bin [1*]

[1] School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University
*Corresponding author Email: 2523504240@qq.com
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Abstract: In the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid, the 2017 Booker Prize winner, employs a transnational narrative to explore the fluidity of liminal identity. The protagonist, Changez, embarks on a journey from Lahore to Princeton for education, then works at a top global investment bank, and ultimately returns to his homeland in search of self-redefinition. This multi-layered experience mirrors the three stages of the rites of passage proposed by Arnold van Gennep: separation, liminality, and reintegration. Confronted with fragmented memories of domestic space, disciplinary violence in urban environments, and identity struggles within psychological realms, Changez navigates his growth crisis through ritualistic practices that ultimately resolve transitional identity conflicts and reconstruct a cohesive identity. Hamid metaphorically reflects evolving East-West relations through the subtly shifting dynamics between Changez and an American traveler in the Lahore teahouse. The novel not only reveals the marginality and heterogeneity of transnational identities but also interrogates the construction and negotiation of liminal identities within multicultural intersections.

Keywords: Mohsin Hamid; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; The Rites of Passage; Liminality; Identity Mobility

0.Introduction

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as his first Booker Prize-shortlisted work, carries significant symptomatic meaning within the post-9/11 cultural context. When Muslim identity was reduced to an ideological signifier of terrorist, the novel's literary narrative constitutes a scholarly counter-discourse to this cultural misreading. The protagonist Changez's identity dilemma manifests in two dimensions: at the level of belonging, it appears as a disorder of recognition, while at the level of existential state, it materializes as a liminal in-betweenness—constructed as a model minority cultural specimen when he was part of Princeton's academic elite, yet alienated as a concrete symbol of the oriental threat upon his return to Pakistan's native context. Theoretically Van Gennep's rites of passage is reflected in the novel in the following ways: Changez goes to America (Separation), suffers an identity crisis in America (Liminality), and returns to Pakistan (Aggregation). While Turner's breakthrough is crucial--his revelation that liminality can become permanent in modern societies perfectly explains the dilemma of Changez's eventual failure to aggregation: the United States excludes him, and his homeland sees him as an alien. Combining Geneep's classical rites of passage with Turner's liminality theory to better explain the pseudo-aggregative nature of Changez's identity construction. The title "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" warrants deeper examination: in Western discourse, particularly post-9/11, "fundamentalist" has become a stigmatized label strongly associated with extremism. The qualifier "reluctant" not only underscores the protagonist's resistance to this imposed identity but also reveals the passive constructedness of his Otherness—as a Pakistani

Muslim individual, his identity is not a product of autonomous choice but rather shaped by societal prejudice and political rhetoric. This naming strategy poignantly reflects the identity predicament of Muslim communities in the post-9/11 global power structure: the irreconcilable hermeneutic gap between subjective self-identification and the externally imposed outsider status.

1. Separation: The Disintegration of Domestic Space and the Symptoms of the American Dream in Transnational Migration

From a theoretical perspective, in 1909, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep introduced this concept into the field of anthropology in his seminal work The Rites of Passage. Through the examination and analysis of various rituals in small-scale tribal societies, he formulated the notion of the the rites of passsage, arguing that human life and production are "marked by transitional rites that accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age" (10). These rituals facilitate the passage of individuals or groups through the cycles of life and nature—universal across cultures—following a tripartite structure: separation, liminality, and reintegration. The most crucial phase, the liminality, involves participants detaching from their pre-ritual social structure, shedding their former identities, yet not fully attaining the transformed status that follows the ritual's completion. In this state, they experience spatiotemporal dislocation, namelessness, and social placelessness. Building upon this framework, British anthropologist Victor Turner expanded the application of liminal theory into broader domains, including politics, culture, and social transformation. Turner reconceptualized transition as transformation, arguing that the separation phase primarily entails "symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 279).

In the novel, the aristocratic domestic space of the protagonist Changez exhibits dual characteristics of material decay and symbolic rupture during the separation phase of the liminal ritual. This structural disintegration of the familial space is not merely the decline of a physical setting but also marks the starting point of a fracture in cultural identity, psychological belonging, and social status—paralleling van Gennep's liminal theory, wherein the separation phase entails detachment from one's original social structure. As the material embodiment of traditional Pakistani aristocratic life, Changez's ancestral home once symbolized cultural capital and social standing. Yet, with the passage of time and the family's decline, the deterioration of this physical space carries explicit semiotic significance: "My grandfather could no longer maintain the lifestyle of his father, my father could not uphold my grandfather's stature, and by the time I was to attend university, the family fortune had long been depleted" (9). The sudden erosion of economic foundations dismantled the traditional domestic order, thrusting Changez into identity ambiguity: on one hand, he inherits the cultural memory of aristocratic lineage; on the other, he confronts the stark reality of downward social mobility. From a spatial sociology perspective, the desolation of the familial home and Changez's admission to Princeton University jointly constitute the dual driving mechanisms of the separation phase. As "one of only two Pakistani students admitted to Princeton that year" (10), this acquisition of educational capital aligns with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, while also serving as a pivotal opportunity to rupture existing socio-spatial structures. Turner's tripartite liminal ritual theory in The Forest of Symbols posits that the separation phase fundamentally involves "the detachment of individuals or groups from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a set of cultural conditions" (339). Here, Changez's acceptance letter functions as a dual signifier: materially, it acts as the vehicle for geographical displacement; culturally, it becomes a symbol of social identity deterritorialization—by embedding himself within the elite educational field of America, he attempts to reconstruct familial prestige through narratives of individual achievement, thereby symbolically transcending his decaying aristocratic identity. This spatial practice resonates with the core mechanism of liminal theory: when the aristocratic identity and social status embedded in traditional familial space dissipate due to economic decline, geographical migration becomes a necessary path for identity dissolution and reformation. Education, as institutionalized cultural capital, mediates this process, enabling the traversal of class and cultural boundaries. From a postcolonial

lens, this process also reflects a quintessential strategy of marginalized groups seeking identity decolonization through spatial relocation in a globalized world—when the legitimacy of identity in the native space is destabilized, institutional recognition from the center is leveraged to reassert subjective agency, temporarily transcending the liminal state. Simultaneously, the Princeton acceptance letter serves as his golden ticket to pursue the American Dream.

In the eyes of Changez, the allure of the American Dream extends far beyond mere aspirations for success and prosperity, or the opportunity for self-reinvention. More fundamentally, it lies in its function as a liminal passage that facilitates transitional transformation. Drawing on van Gennep's ritual theory, when individuals enter the separation phase, they must demarcate themselves from their former identities. The American Dream provides Changez with both justification and sanctuary for this identity transformation. In this process of transitional identity reconstruction, he appears to bifurcate into two selves: on one hand, he retains the essential markers of his Pakistani aristocratic identity while in a foreign land; on the other, as an outstanding Princeton student, he circulates effortlessly within elite American social circles. The most seductive aspect of the American Dream is precisely its illusion of enabling Changez to achieve a painless transition between two radically different cultures and identities. Turner's interpretation of the separation phase emphasizes that "the process whereby individuals become detached from their original environment, identity and culture serves as the prelude to entering new environments and constructing new identities" (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* 39). Changez's American experience vividly embodies this conceptual framework. Through interactions with elite classmates and conscious efforts to integrate into mainstream American society, he strives to establish himself in this nation of global influence. As he progressively adapts to his American identity, he unconsciously internalizes its cultural values, gradually constructing a new identity cognition. This identity reconstruction essentially represents the self-adjustment and metamorphosis he undergoes during the separation phase to adapt to an entirely new environment. The process is not merely a superficial adaptation, but rather a fundamental shedding of old identity markers, akin to a serpent sloughing off its outgrown skin—a necessary yet inherently disruptive transformation. This phenomenon resonates deeply with contemporary postcolonial discourse, wherein the liminal space between cultures often produces such bifurcated subjectivities. The American Dream, in this context, functions as both a psychological salve and a cultural paradox—promising seamless integration while simultaneously demanding the suppression of original identity markers. Changez's experience exemplifies the inherent contradictions of this liminal passage, where the promise of transformation inevitably entails the trauma of cultural dislocation and identity fragmentation. The transitional phase, though theoretically temporary, often leaves indelible marks on the subject's psyche and social positioning, problematizing straightforward narratives of assimilation or resistance.

However, Changez's identity transformation is fraught with tension and contradiction. His skin color, name, and unconsciously expressed Pakistani cultural traits construct an invisible cultural barrier in American society. At the dinner party hosted by Erica's parents, the "typically American sense of superiority" (45) implicit in her father's comments about Pakistan not only triggers Changez's cultural defense mechanisms but also exposes the power asymmetry inherent in cross-cultural encounters where the liminal subject remains an outsider. Significantly, when Erica attempts to mediate this cultural conflict, Changez finds himself plunged into a deeper crisis of identity—unable to freely express his genuine feelings of offense while simultaneously struggling with the psychological burden of cultural inferiority. Changez's state of identity ambiguity perfectly encapsulates the essential characteristics of the separation phase: he can neither completely sever ties with his native environment nor successfully take root in new cultural soil. The resulting identity anxiety and existential loneliness constitute the existential dilemma he must confront during this process of adaptation.

Erica functions as a potent symbol of American cultural barriers in Changez's identity crisis. Her inability to reciprocate his love authentically — fixated instead on her deceased American boyfriend — mirrors America's exclusionary nostalgia and resistance to true cultural integration. Changez must literally impersonate her past to

achieve intimacy, foreshadowing the self-erasure demanded of immigrants assimilating into post-9/11 America. Their relationship remains perpetually superficial; Erica sees him as a consolation,reflecting America's conditional acceptance of outsiders as utilitarian assets rather than equals. Her eventual disappearance crystallizes Changez's disillusionment: just as Erica vanishes into her unreachable grief, America retreats behind walls of suspicion and nationalism after 9/11. Their failed romance thus parallels Changez's journey from aspirational belonging to profound alienation, proving that Erica's Americaness—defined by unbridgeable memory and emotional barriers—ultimately reinforces his status as a perpetual outsider.

2. Liminality: Violent Reconfigurations and Suspension of Identity in Post-9/11 Urban Spaces

The cataclysmic events of September 11, 2001, served as a pivotal fracture point, abruptly transforming America's self-perception and its engagement with the world. Overnight, the nation's narrative shifted from aspirational inclusivity to defensive exclusion, manifesting in heightened nationalism, pervasive suspicion, and institutionalized profiling targeting Muslim and South Asian identities. This seismic cultural realignment profoundly reshaped the landscape for transnational individuals like Changez. Where he initially navigated America as a space of meritocratic promise, the post-9/11 climate rendered him hyper-visible yet fundamentally unseen—a potential threat rather than a welcomed participant. This collective retreat into fortified identity mirrors and intensifies the deeply personal barriers embodied by Erica.

Prior to 9/11, America appeares to Changez as a Promised Land brimming with hope—its ostensibly open and inclusive ethos leading him to mistakenly believe he has found a true sense of belonging. Beneath this veneer, however, the American Dream is packaged as a universal ideal, its hegemonic reality obscured by the glitter of consumer culture and narrative discourse. Upon entering the liminal phase, Changez—arms with his Princeton pedigree and identity as a financial analyst—seems to transcend geographic and class boundaries, yet his identity remains suspended in an awkward transitional state. No longer purely Pakistani yet never fully embraced by American society, he occupies an interstitial space. When the prestigious investment firm Underwood Samson offered him a position as a senior analyst, this ostensibly marks the successful initial construction of a new identity, granting him access to the periphery of America's mainstream. Yet the contradictions and struggles underlying this identity clung to him like a shadow. America's illusion of openness ensnared Changez in the cognitive myth of the American Dream, conflating professional achievement with class mobility and identity reconstruction. This cognitive dissonance aligns with Lacan's mirror theory—the glass facades of skyscrapers reflected not his authentic self but rather an idealized projection, reshaped by the dominant cultural narrative. By internalizing this illusory image as his identity, Changez unwittingly completes the process of cognitive alienation, transforming from a subject rooted in his native culture into a disciplined object of assimilation. This misreading of identity resonates with Turner's description of liminal subjects in The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure as existing in a state of suspension, "neither here nor there, betwixt and between" (56). Pre-9/11 America conceals its cultural hegemony behind a utopian mask of equal opportunity. This land, functioning as a peculiar liminal space, constructed a bidirectional power dynamic of mutual gaze: within the glass confines of corporate offices, Changez is both an observer of American society and a subject scrutinized by its institutional discourse. This ambiguity of subject-object relations exposes the deeper paradox of liminality—it is simultaneously an experimental ground for individual identity reconstruction and a medium for the covert discipline of cultural hegemony. Beneath its transitional facade lies an undercurrent of structural tension and conflict.

The unexpected attack of the 9/11 incident placed Changez in the liminal space of East-West confrontation, and his identity collapsed along with the bubble of the American dream and the Twin Towers. The Promised Land before 9/11, as a typical form of globalized liminal space, constructed a seemingly open secular utopia through the psychedelic visual symbols, the discipline of consumer rituals and narrative discourse. After 9/11, the United States fell into the circle of "the myth of naïve country" (Hughes 6), the whole country was wrapped up in anti-terrorism, and the attitude towards Islamic countries was drastically changed, and Changez suffers from exclusivity and

marginalization in his work, love, and life. 9/11 is not only the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in terms of the physical space, but also the point of fracture of Changez’ s identity. The pseudo-integrated parathoracic state of the Wall Street elite is completely torn apart, exposing the precariousness of the threshold person as a postcolonial subject within the liminal structure.

The 9/11 attacks serve as a liminal trigger, thrusting Changez from a state of quasi-assimilation into permanent liminality, where his identity remains perpetually unfinished amidst the competing power discourses of East and West. Prior to this, though he had diligently constructed an American identity, the catastrophic event plunges him into profound confusion about belonging as Eastern and Western narratives violently collide. When the Twin Towers collapse, the resulting anti-Islamic sentiment in American society paradoxically reawakens his long-dormant Pakistani cultural consciousness. This violent tug-of-war between identities gradually erodes his coherent sense of self. A particularly charged moment in the novel lays bare his inner turmoil: “Watching the towers fall, I smiled. Yes, this sounds vile, but my immediate response was to feel satisfaction” (54). This complex reaction reveals the fragility of his carefully cultivated American persona when confronted with reality, even suggesting a cathartic release of long-suppressed emotions. Like a blade cutting through pretense, 9/11 exposes the xenophobia beneath America's veneer of inclusivity. The promised land he once envisioned transforms overnight into hostile territory. This radical shift not only illustrates the immense psychological and social pressures predicted by liminal theory during identity transitions, but more crucially, exposes the root of his identity crisis. The day after the attacks, during his return flight from Manila to New York with colleagues, Changez’s experiences intensify this crisis: “At the airport, an armed guard leads me into a room where I’ m ordered to strip to my boxer shorts.....When I board the plane, fellow passengers shower me with concerned looks. Throughout the flight to New York, my face burns with awareness: I feel their suspicion like physical weight, feel criminal in my own skin” (56). These humiliating encounters force upon him the stark realization that his Muslim identity has become an object of scrutiny and distrust. The paradoxical collapse and reconstruction of his identity plunges him into spiraling self-doubt - a textbook manifestation of the uncertainty characteristic of liminal subjects. Where he once moved confidently through corporate spaces, he now exists as a walking contradiction: professionally accomplished yet racially marked, Western-educated yet Eastern in appearance, intellectually elite yet physically vulnerable to random searches. The glass towers of finance capitalism that once reflected his aspirational self now mirror back only fractured possibilities.

In the face of identity crisis and social exclusion, Changez does not choose to remain silent and give in. Instead, he begins his struggle and resistance, where the official discourse of the United States makes full use of the myth of naivety and condemns the terrorists harshly after the 9/11 attacks. Under the influence of the official patriotic discourse, the public “viewed 9/11 as a criminal act against humanity and humanity committed by a group of people who hated the American system of democracy and freedom” (Zhang Helong 21), equating Islam with terrorism and Muslims with terrorists. “America is seized by a growing and self-righteous rage. Your country, as I expected, is greatly enraged like a beast, but what I don’t expect that it would be directed toward my home, toward my family in Pakistan”(66), and in the United States, Changez is in a state of constant fear that the war will spread to Pakistan and hurt innocent people. The weak Changaz expresses his protest against America’ s indiscriminate retaliation against the unity of the Islamic state by growing a beard, from a daily shave with 0.3 millimeters of stubble on the jawline, to the deliberate creation of “a disturbed, heavily bearded Pakistani” (115), who expresses his protest against America’ s indiscriminate retaliation against the unity of the Islamic state in the form of his behavior. his behavioral style to express his displeasure with the malicious retaliation of the United States. Changez’ s beard growth is not only a symbol of what he perceives as Islamic fundamentalism from a Western perspective after 9/11, but also a reconnection of Changez’ s self-defined cultural roots after he loses his stable identity in the liminal phase. Although his hometown provides him with a temporary escape from the reality of his predicament, it cannot fundamentally solve his identity crisis.

After the outbreak of the 9/11 incident, the xenophobia of the American society spread like a tidal wave, and the land in Changez's eyes degenerates from a place of aspiration into a hostile abyss. At the liminal stage of his identity, he is forced to face the violent identity shock, and the American identity that he once tried to integrate into collapses, which instead prompts him to redirect his attention to his own cultural roots and national origins. The intense collision and tearing between Eastern and Western cultures constantly stings his perception of identity and pushes him to reconstruct his identity coordinates in the threshold fracture zone. This change of identity is not only an instinctive resistance to the reality, but also an inevitable way for him to find a way out and achieve self-redemption in the identity gap. In the midst of contradictions and struggles, he tries to find a new pivot point and belonging for his identity in the border zone between two cultures.

3. Pseudo-Aggregation: The Dilemma of Repatriation in Psychological Space and the Incompleteness of Identity Hybridisation

In the traditional ritual process, the stage of aggregation marks the ritual transition through which the subject acquires a secure belonging to a new identity. However, Changez subverts this paradigm - his nostalgia for his home country is not a return to cultural roots, but a polyphonic writing of liminal memories.9/11 exacerbates Western misconceptions and stereotypes of the East, and the postcolonial discourse of Orientalism and dichotomies induced the American public to believe that "Muslims, Arabs, and Communists are the terrorists" (Morton 36), and that any retaliation against the United States, as an innocent victim of a terrorist attack, is out of righteous self-defence. Said points out that after 9/11, terrorism has been fuelled by the Western media to "make people feel scared and insecure as a way of justifying what the United States is doing globally", stating that "the greatest source of terrorism is the United States itself and some Latin American countries, not Muslim countries at all" (Said 2001). In the context of the dichotomy that surrounds terrorism, the Muslims of Islam are crudely categorized as them, as beings who are at odds with us and constitute a security risk to us. In 9/11 and the Literature of Terror 2011, Randall states that this us versus them dichotomy "allows for a simplification of 9/11 that is very dangerous" (Randall 7). In this dichotomy deliberately created by the United States, Changez has fallen from a Pakistani social elite in the United States to a victim and prey of the dichotomy for no apparent reason.

Before moving towards the process of identity aggregation, Changez is caught in a painful dilemma: whether to give up the wealth and status he has earned in the United States and return to his homeland to be with his loved ones, or to continue to endure humiliation and pursue the American dream that is gradually being shattered? On one side is a foreign country that offers material rewards but is full of discrimination, and on the other side is a troubled homeland that needs to be guarded. This is a difficult choice, just like being asked to choose between one's biological mother and one's adoptive mother. In the midst of this tearing, Changez's perception of identity is thrown into chaos. He confesses that "I feel like a ghost floating in the air, belonging neither here nor there" (123), just like a lone boat without an anchor in the ocean, losing its direction in the waves. According to Turner, identity aggregation should be a process of 'reintegration' in which an individual "regains a clear place in the social structure and cultural categorization through a series of rituals or symbolic acts" (Betwixt and Between 340). However, Changez's experience breaks this theoretical presupposition: after experiencing the tearing of the separation stage and the wandering of the threshold stage, his identity does not move towards convergence in the traditional sense, but rather derives from a pseudo-convergence practice of identity full of contradictions and struggles, with the persistent state of liminality as its root.

Hamid's ingenious use of metaphors in the novel gives the text a rich symbolic meaning. The name of the main character, Changez, harmonizes with the English word "change", which is not accidental, but implies that his life is always in a state of fluctuating thresholds: the decline of his family has caused him to fall in social status, studying abroad has brought about the reshaping of his cultural identity, and the elite education in the United States has altered his way of thinking, while the events of 9/11 have caused him to be rejected and isolated by the mainstream society. The events of 9/11 have made him suffer from the rejection and isolation of the mainstream society. In

addition, the Lahore teahouse plays a special role in the story, which is like a laboratory for East-West dialogue, witnessing the silent resistance of the liminal individual to Western hegemony. The dialogue between Changez and the American travellers in the teahouse is in fact a microcosm of the cultural collision and dialogue between East and West. As the conversation draws to a close, Changez extends his hand in a friendly manner, only to find the other man poking his hand into his jacket, his alert movements contrasting sharply with the cold light of the flashing metal. Slightly sarcastically, he asks, "But why do you put your hand inside your jacket, sir? I see a cold flash of metal. Given that you and I have developed a mutual intimacy, I believe that would be your card holder" (128). This tension-filled interaction, which ultimately ends unhappily, is an apt metaphor for the unbridgeable divide and crisis of trust in East-West relations.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid takes the identity dilemma of Changez as a starting point to profoundly show the complexity of the identity construction of transnational diaspora groups under the wave of globalization. The protagonist, who initially travelled to another country with the longing for the American dream, gradually awakens to be a cultural hybrid in the midst of cultural collision, and the evolution of his identity is always wandering on a blurred border: neither can he be truly accepted by the American hegemonic culture, nor is it possible for him to return to his homeland's original state of cultural purity. The continuous transformation of Changez's identity is in fact a vivid interpretation of the threshold theory. His experience breaks the framework of traditional nationalist single identity and explores a brand new path of identity politics--in the seam of East and West cultures, he neither blindly adheres to a certain side nor succumbs to any hegemonic discourse, but rather searches for the possibility of transcending the intrinsic cultural boundaries in the continuous flow of identities, an exploration that offers an understanding of contemporary transnational identities, and this exploration provides a highly inspiring perspective.

4.Conclusion

In Strangers in a Lahore Tea House, Hamid uses the three key spatial migrations of Changez to tear open the cracks in the traditional framework of liminality theory. According to Van Gennep and Turner's classic statement, identity transformation follows a linear trajectory of separation- liminality- aggregation, but in the post-colonial context, this logic has been challenged by reality. At the beginning of the novel, Changez leaves Lahore to study in the U.S. This seemingly active stripping of identity is in fact a passive choice pulled by the narrative of the American dream. He thinks he has broken free of his aristocratic identity, but he unexpectedly steps into a deeper identity maze, and the 9/11 incident becomes a pivotal point, turning the once glorified land of angels into a hostile land of demons. Trapped between the high pressure of a New York interrogation room and the native atmosphere of a Lahore teahouse, Changez is completely reduced to Turner's propertyless transitional body, losing his clear identity coordinates in the gap between culture and power. And the aggregation of identities in Changez is nothing more than a false appearance. The Lahore teahouse does not serve as a gateway for him to return to a stable identity, but instead witnesses the eternal unfinished nature of identity construction. Through the unclosed narrative structure, Hamid conveys a profound reality: for transnational migrants, the essence of identity is precisely the state of continuous mobility. In the fracture where power discourse and cultural differences are intertwined, perhaps the only way to find one's own spiritual dwelling place in the ever-changing world is to accept and hold on to the ambiguity of this liminal zone.

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