

Neo-Orientalist Discourse and Identity Negotiation in The Reluctant
Fundamentalist and The Kite Runner

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Abstract

This paper critically examines *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini through the lens of Neo-Orientalism, focusing on how these texts construct, challenge, and subvert post-9/11 representations of Muslim identities. Both novels engage with dominant Western narratives that often exoticize, marginalize, or vilify Eastern subjects, particularly Muslims, in the wake of global terrorism discourses. The analysis centers on the protagonists' complex negotiations of identity within Western spaces Changez in New York and Amir in California and their eventual return to their Eastern roots. The paper argues that the West is portrayed as a paradoxical space: initially idealized as a land of opportunity, it is later revealed to be exclusionary and conditional in its acceptance. Conversely, the East emerges as a spiritual and cultural repository, offering belonging, tradition, and moral clarity. The study also interrogates how Occidental identity reconstructs itself in a post-9/11 world through surveillance, racial profiling, and cultural dominance, further marginalizing those seen as 'the other'. Through close textual analysis and postcolonial theory, the paper highlights how both authors analyzes the binaries of East/West, self/other, and modern/traditional, offering more nuanced understandings of diasporic identity, home, and belonging. Ultimately, the novels serve as acts of resistance, reclaiming narrative agency and exposing the limitations of Neo-Orientalist frameworks in representing Muslim experiences.

Keywords: Neo-Orientalism, Post-9/11 literature, Postcolonial fiction, East-West relations, Diaspora, Occidental identity, Cultural representation.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction:

The events of September 11, 2001, irrevocably reshaped global socio-political landscapes and intensified the scrutiny of Muslim identities, particularly in Western media, politics, and literature. In the wake of these attacks, new forms of cultural representation emerged—forms that often echoed the logic of classical Orientalism but adapted to a contemporary, securitized world. Scholars such as Lisa Lau and Hamid Dabashi have termed this evolution Neo-Orientalism, a renewed discourse that positions Muslims either as threats to the Western world or as culturally backward subjects in need of rescue and reform. In this context, literature written by Muslim or South Asian authors navigating Western spaces offers a vital counter-discourse. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) serve as rich literary texts that both engage with and analyze these dominant narratives.

Both novels center on protagonists Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Amir in *The Kite Runner*, who straddle the cultural and psychological borderlands between East and West. Their stories unfold within diasporic and postcolonial frameworks, shaped by dislocation, memory, and a continuous negotiation of identity. Importantly, both characters experience the West as a space of opportunity and reinvention but gradually confront the limitations, alienations, and exclusions embedded within its structures. The novels problematize idealized images of the West by exposing the conditional nature of belonging, the impact of racial and cultural profiling, and the subtle mechanisms of power that define the post-9/11 Occidental self.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist offers a dramatic monologue by Changez, a Princeton-educated Pakistani man whose admiration for the United States erodes after the 9/11 attacks. His growing disillusionment is catalyzed not only by the shifting attitudes of his colleagues and peers but also by his realization of the ideological and imperialistic ambitions of the West. Through Changez's narrative, Hamid analyzes the façade of meritocracy and multiculturalism in the West, uncovering the latent xenophobia and ethnocentrism that define the post-9/11 political climate. Similarly, *The Kite Runner* follows Amir, an Afghan immigrant in America, who wrestles with guilt, loss, and cultural dislocation. While America offers Amir physical refuge and professional success, it fails to provide emotional or cultural reconciliation. His eventual return to a war-torn Afghanistan becomes both a quest for redemption and a symbolic re-engagement with his cultural and spiritual roots.

These texts reflect a broader thematic concern: the tension between the globalized promise of the West and the lived experiences of those from the Global South, especially Muslims and immigrants. This research explores how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* construct and challenge Neo-Orientalist representations, particularly in their depiction of Eastern and Western identities, power dynamics, and postcolonial subjectivities. The paper asks: To what extent do these novels reinforce or subvert Western-imposed stereotypes of Muslim and Eastern identities? How do the protagonists negotiate their sense of self amid conflicting cultural frameworks? By applying a Neo-Orientalist lens to these narratives, this study aims to uncover the layered complexities of identity formation in post-9/11 fiction. Both novels offer valuable insights into the experience of conditional belonging, racialized visibility, and cultural othering that many Muslim and South Asian characters encounter in Western contexts. Moreover, the works demonstrate how Eastern identities

are reclaimed and redefined not through assimilation, but through acts of return-both literal and metaphorical-that reassert cultural memory, familial ties, and spiritual depth.

Ultimately, this paper argues that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* act as powerful literary interventions that challenge simplified binaries of East versus West. They foreground the voices of marginalized individuals and communities, offering a counter-narrative to the dominant Neo-Orientalist discourse. In doing so, they encourage a more nuanced, empathetic, and critically aware understanding of Muslim identities in an increasingly polarized world.

Thesis Statement:

This paper argues that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini both construct and critically challenge Neo-Orientalist representations of Muslim and Eastern identities in a post-9/11 context. Through their protagonists' experiences of cultural dislocation, racialized suspicion, and eventual spiritual return, the novels subvert Western-imposed binaries of East and West, revealing the limitations of Occidental identity and offering a more nuanced understanding of belonging, identity negotiation, and postcolonial subjectivity.

Research Questions:

- 1) How do *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* engage with and subvert Neo-Orientalist stereotypes in their portrayal of Muslim and Eastern identities post-9/11?
- 2) In what ways do the protagonists' experiences of migration, alienation, and return negotiate cultural identity and challenge dominant Western narratives of the East?

Research Objectives:

- 1) To critically analyze how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* engage with Neo-Orientalist discourse by examining their representations of Muslim and Eastern identities in a post-9/11 context, and to evaluate how these texts resist or reinforce stereotypical Western perceptions.
- 2) To explore the narrative arcs of Changez and Amir in relation to migration, cultural alienation, and return, and to assess how their personal identity negotiations serve as a critique of dominant Western narratives about the East and the Muslim world.

Significance of the Study:

This study is significant in its contribution to the growing field of postcolonial literary criticism, particularly within the context of post-9/11 representations of Muslim and Eastern identities. As global discourses around terrorism, immigration, and Islamophobia continue to shape public perception and policy, literature serves as a powerful medium through which dominant narratives are both reproduced and challenged. By analyzing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, this research highlights how contemporary Muslim authors engage with, analyze, and subvert Neo-Orientalist frameworks that often simplify, essentialize, or demonize Eastern cultures.

The study's relevance lies in its exploration of identity negotiation, cultural dislocation, and the politics of belonging, themes that resonate with millions of individuals navigating life between cultures in an increasingly polarized global environment. Through its close examination of Changez and Amir's experiences, this research foregrounds marginalized

perspectives, offering deeper insight into how diasporic voices resist monolithic Western portrayals of the East. Furthermore, this study contributes to broader academic debates on transnational identity, postcolonial subjectivity, and literary resistance, encouraging more nuanced readings of South Asian and Muslim narratives. It also serves as a critical resource for educators, scholars, and students seeking to understand the cultural implications of fiction produced in the shadow of global conflict and racialized surveillance. Ultimately, this research affirms literature's role as a site of ideological struggle and reclamation, challenging readers to reconsider inherited binaries of East and West, self and other.

Research Methodology and Literature Review:

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis rooted in postcolonial literary theory and Neo-Orientalist discourse analysis to examine *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. It is a comparative study that explores how these two post-9/11 novels by Muslim authors represent and negotiate Muslim identities within the broader framework of East-West cultural and political dynamics.

The primary method involves close reading of the novels to analyze: characterization and identity formation, narrative structure and voice, symbolic representations of the East and West, responses to racial profiling, imperialism, and marginalization post-9/11. The analysis draws upon Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and its evolution into Neo-Orientalist critiques, especially the work of Hamid Dabashi, Lisa Lau, and Ziauddin Sardar. It also references Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity and mimicry, which offer insight into the fragmented identities of diasporic subjects navigating Western cultural expectations.

Secondary sources, such as scholarly articles and critical essays on the novels, are incorporated to support the interpretation and to position this study within ongoing academic debates. The research is interpretive and theoretical rather than empirical, emphasizing how narrative and language serve as ideological tools in representing identity and power. The body of scholarship on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* is extensive, reflecting their global relevance and popularity. However, specific studies focusing on their Neo-Orientalist subversion and their post-9/11 representations of Muslim identity remain comparatively less explored in a joint comparative framework. This study addresses that gap by synthesizing postcolonial readings and orientalist critiques.

Edward Said's foundational text, *Orientalism* (1978), laid the groundwork for analyzing how the West constructs knowledge about the East in service of imperial power. Said argued that the Orient is portrayed as irrational, inferior and exotic, a construction that served colonial domination. In the 21st century, this discourse evolved into Neo-Orientalism, a term that reflects the post-9/11 cultural moment where Muslims are re-stereotyped either as terrorists or as docile victims. Hamid Dabashi (2009) analyzes this shift in *Post-Orientalism*, arguing that even well-meaning liberal representations tend to reduce Muslim identities to simplistic binaries.

Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes (2011) provide a more focused definition of Re-Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism, asserting that even Eastern writers can internalize and reproduce orientalist tropes under Western publishing pressures. However, this study posits that both Hamid and Hosseini subvert rather than conform to such frameworks by reasserting agency, complexity, and voice in Muslim characters. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, numerous scholars have analyzed Changez's shifting allegiance and the novel's dramatic monologue structure. For instance, Pnina Werbner (2013) reads Changez's

narrative as an act of symbolic resistance to Western hegemony. Priya Kumar (2008) focuses on the ambiguity of Changez's final stance, emphasizing the tension between assimilation and resistance. However, many of these readings center more on political radicalization than on the cultural and psychological negotiation of identity, which this research foregrounds through Neo-Orientalist critique.

The Kite Runner has been explored through trauma theory and diaspora studies, but fewer scholars examine its position within post-9/11 racial politics. Elizabeth Jackson (2010) and David Jefferess (2009) discuss Amir's guilt and redemption arc, but this study argues that his journey also analyzes the Occidental myth of the West as a space of salvation. Amir's emotional and cultural alienation in America, coupled with his spiritual reawakening in Afghanistan, problematizes the notion of American moral superiority.

Other relevant contributions include Peter Morey's work on Muslim narratives post-9/11, where he emphasizes the literary challenge of articulating Muslim subjectivity without falling into the traps of stereotype or defensiveness. Morey (2011) notes that authors like Hamid and Hosseini navigate this space carefully, neither demonizing the West nor romanticizing the East. This study extends Morey's argument by showing how both authors resist dominant narratives through their characters' refusal to fully assimilate into Western frameworks.

Moreover, Homi Bhabha's theories of ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity are crucial in understanding the protagonists' identity struggles. Both Changez and Amir are hybrid figures educated in the West, but culturally rooted in the East and their narratives reveal the painful tension of occupying that in-between space. This hybridity is not celebrated uncritically; rather, it is depicted as a source of conflict, estrangement, and eventual reorientation toward the East. While much critical attention has been given to each novel individually, few studies place *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* side-by-side within the specific framework of Neo-Orientalism and post-9/11 identity politics. This research contributes to the field by offering a comparative, intersectional analysis that foregrounds how both texts deconstruct Orientalist binaries and offer alternative visions of Muslim subjectivity, cultural belonging, and resistance.

Discussion and Analysis:

The novels *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini offer critical literary responses to post-9/11 cultural anxieties, specifically regarding the Muslim identity in a globalized and increasingly securitized world. Both authors employ personal narratives as sites of ideological contestation, using their protagonists—Changez and Amir—to interrogate, complicate, and resist the reductive stereotypes propagated through Neo-Orientalist discourse.

Neo-Orientalism and the West as a Paradox

One of the central ways these texts challenge Neo-Orientalist assumptions is by deconstructing the myth of the West as a utopia of freedom, meritocracy, and acceptance. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez's initial admiration for America mirrors a common postcolonial aspiration toward Western modernity. Princeton University and Underwood Samson stand as symbols of American excellence and opportunity, fulfilling the promise of upward mobility for talented outsiders. However, following the 9/11 attacks, this admiration deteriorates as Changez becomes hyper-visible, racialized, and ultimately alienated. The subtle shift in how he is perceived no longer as a valued employee but as a potential threat illustrates the conditional nature of belonging in the West.

This disillusionment parallels Baba and Amir's experiences in *The Kite Runner*. Baba, once a powerful man in Kabul, is reduced to working at a gas station in the United States, an emasculation that underscores how Western acceptance is often tied to economic and cultural assimilation. The West, while offering material safety, becomes a space of cultural erasure and social marginalization. Amir's attempt to reinvent himself in America ultimately fails to suppress his emotional and cultural trauma, further emphasizing the gap between Western promises and immigrant realities.

Thus, both novels depict the West as a space of paradox simultaneously liberating and alienating, offering inclusion while reinforcing cultural hegemony. This representation subverts Neo-Orientalist narratives which typically portray the West as a natural refuge from backward or oppressive Eastern societies.

The East as a Site of Memory, Culture, and Spirituality

In contrast to the West's portrayal as ideologically rigid and racially selective, the East in both novels is depicted as a space of emotional, moral, and spiritual anchoring. While neither Hamid nor Hosseini romanticizes the East—they acknowledge war, inequality, and violence—they use it as a complex site of cultural return and identity negotiation.

Changez's return to Lahore is not merely geographical but philosophical. As he reconnects with his homeland, he rediscovers a sense of purpose, community, and ideological clarity absent from his American life. He reflects on the beauty of traditions, the rhythm of daily rituals, and the intellectual freedom that Lahore affords him a far cry from the oppressive corporate nationalism he experienced in New York. His cultural re-rooting challenges the Neo-Orientalist binary that associates the East with regression and the West with progress.

Similarly, Amir's return to Kabul serves as a symbolic journey toward redemption and reconciliation. Although war-torn and politically unstable, Afghanistan becomes a place where Amir reclaims his moral agency and reconnects with his heritage. The act of rescuing Sohrab, Hassan's son, becomes both a personal act of redemption and a broader restoration of fractured cultural continuity. The East, then, is not merely a backdrop but an active space of healing and moral transformation. By portraying the East as complex, dynamic, and essential to the characters' growth, both authors undermine Neo-Orientalist tendencies to frame it as stagnant or spiritually inferior.

Occidental Identity and the Politics of Exclusion

Post-9/11, the Occidental (Western) identity undergoes a radical shift, becoming increasingly defensive, surveillance-oriented, and exclusionary. Both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Kite Runner* analyze this shift by highlighting the protagonists' alienation within Western cultural frameworks. Changez's experience in the U.S. becomes emblematic of the wider racial profiling and securitization of Muslim bodies. He is no longer judged by merit but by ethnicity, appearance, and perceived religious affiliations. Even his romantic relationship with Erica is fraught with symbolic meaning. Erica, who clings to the memory of her dead American lover, can never fully embrace Changez, a metaphor for America's emotional and cultural unavailability to the other. Her mental decline and ultimate disappearance reflect the failure of multicultural engagement, exposing the limits of Western liberalism when confronted with genuine cultural difference.

In *The Kite Runner*, the Occidental gaze is also present in the immigrant experience. Baba's pride and dignity are eroded in a society that reduces immigrants to laborers or exotics. Amir, despite his efforts to adapt, remains internally divided. The West may tolerate his presence, but it never fully integrates his history, trauma, or cultural depth. The Occidental identity in

both novels is thus not universal or inclusive; it is built on exclusion, surveillance, and conditional hospitality.

Narrative Agency and Resistance through Storytelling

Another crucial way in which the two novels resist Neo-Orientalist constructs is through their narrative form and perspective. Both authors reclaim voice and authorship a critical act in postcolonial literature. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the narrative is framed as a dramatic monologue, with Changez telling his story to an unnamed, silent American. This literary device reverses the power dynamics of Orientalist discourse. The Eastern subject is no longer observed; he observes, narrates, and interrogates. The American, by remaining voiceless and possibly suspicious, becomes a symbol of the Western reader who is being watched, judged, and interpreted.

Similarly, *The Kite Runner* is structured as a memoir, with Amir reclaiming his past through confession, memory, and storytelling. By narrating his own story, Amir contests dominant narratives of Afghan identity shaped by war and terrorism. His act of writing becomes a means of cultural preservation and resistance, allowing the East to speak for itself rather than being spoken for. These acts of storytelling are vital in challenging Neo-Orientalist discourse, which often strips Muslim characters of voice and complexity. By giving their protagonists narrative agency, Hamid and Hosseini invite readers to see the East not as an object of Western interpretation, but as a subject of its own truth.

Conclusion:

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini are not merely post-9/11 novels, they are critical interventions in the global discourse on identity, power, and cultural representation. This study has examined how both texts engage with and challenge Neo-Orientalist stereotypes, offering nuanced portrayals of Muslim and Eastern identities that resist the reductive binaries often perpetuated by Western media and literature in the aftermath of 9/11. Through the lived experiences of Changez and Amir, the novels reveal the deep contradictions within the Western ideal of inclusivity. Both protagonists encounter the West as a space that promises freedom, meritocracy, and reinvention, yet ultimately functions through conditional acceptance, cultural erasure, and ideological control. Their gradual disillusionment underscores the racialized and politicized nature of belonging in contemporary Western societies.

Conversely, the East while not romanticized is presented as a site of moral clarity, spiritual depth, and cultural continuity. The protagonists' return to their homelands is both literal and symbolic: a reconnection with memory, identity, and the ethical frameworks from which they had been distanced. These returns represent a form of resistance not only to the West's dominance but also to the internalized shame and fragmentation that come with assimilation. Furthermore, the narrative structures of both novels reassert the agency of the Eastern subject. By allowing Muslim voices to speak for themselves whether through Changez's dramatic monologue or Amir's memoir Hamid and Hosseini reverse the Orientalist gaze, reclaiming the right to define their histories, traumas, and transformations.

Findings

- 1) The West is portrayed as both attractive and alienating offering opportunities but ultimately excluding those who don't fully assimilate, especially Muslim and Eastern characters.
- 2) Both novels subvert Neo-Orientalist stereotypes by presenting Muslim protagonists as complex individuals rather than one-dimensional victims or threats.

- 3) Post-9/11 Western societies become spaces of suspicion, where Muslim identity is viewed through the lens of security, leading to racial profiling and cultural marginalization.
- 4) The East is not shown as backward, but as a place of emotional, cultural, and spiritual depth that provides the protagonists with moral clarity and a true sense of belonging.
- 5) Migration leads to identity conflict, with characters caught between two cultures, struggling to reconcile their Eastern heritage with Western expectations.
- 6) Narrative voice and storytelling are used as tools of resistance, allowing Changez and Amir to reclaim control over how their identities and histories are portrayed.
- 7) Both novels criticize the power imbalance in East-West relations, challenging Western dominance and encouraging more balanced, empathetic cross-cultural understanding.

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