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RESEARCH PAPER

Coercive Neoliberalism and Post-9/11 Hegemony: A Critique of Western Power and Resistance in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore how Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* critiques the coercive nature of Western neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, marked by free trade, deregulation, and privatisation, is supposed to benefit Western transnational elites. In the post-9/11 era, dissent against neoliberalism is frequently met with coercion. The United States has spearheaded what can be termed aggressive neoliberalism, enforcing it through political, military, and ideological means. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* engages with these issues, exposing the coercive policies of Western neoliberalism and its impact on Muslim communities. The novel utilizes allegory, symbolism, and the protagonist's opposition to reveal both overt and subtle resistance to hegemonic power. This study employs qualitative textual analysis to interpret the novel as a cultural and political critique, linking its themes to real-world geopolitics. It highlights how neoliberal policies contribute to resistance and anti-American sentiment, offering a basis for further exploration of Anglophone Pakistani fiction and its response to neoliberal globalisation.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Aggressive Capitalism, Disaster Capitalism, Coercion, Unilateralism, Resistance

Introduction

Neoliberalism is widely perceived to protect the interests of affluent states and corporate elites, often at the expense of the poor at both national and global levels (Harvey, 2005). Those who challenge or oppose neoliberal structures are frequently labelled as threats. Following the events of 9/11, the United States and its allies, backed by corporate interests, adopted increasingly coercive strategies to advance neoliberalism, often under the pretext of the "war on terror" (Hadiz, 2006). As Hadiz notes, post-9/11 neoliberal globalisation has entered a distinct phase marked by its disproportionate reliance on coercion, paradoxically undermining the liberal values it purports to uphold (p. 1).

Werlhof (2008) further argues that neoliberalism has become synonymous with aggressive capitalism and militarised expansion (p. 101). The US-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, under the guise of combating terrorism, are interpreted by critics as attempts to enforce neoliberal agendas and open new markets for multinational corporations (Lafer, 2004; Klein, 2007; Smith, 2005; Losche, 2009). These wars, driven by economic interests, reflect a model of "military neoliberalism" (Schwartz, 2011), which merges capitalist expansion with imperial violence. Klein (2007) frames this phenomenon as "disaster capitalism", wherein crises are exploited to impose neoliberal reforms (pp. 307–308).

According to Tabb (2004), the Bush administration's post-9/11 stance presented a binary choice: support US neoliberalism or be associated with terrorism (p. 3). This strategy criminalised dissent and justified regime change in nations unwilling to adopt neoliberal policies. The aggressive promotion of neoliberal values through military means is seen as a key facet of Western foreign policy in the post-9/11 era.

Moreover, the aggressive policies of neoliberalism disguised in war on terror is criticised for fostering Islamophobia and reinforcing a monolithic, often hostile, representation of Muslims (Lazarczyk, 2017). Patten and Wade (2011) highlight discriminatory US policies targeting Muslim immigrants, particularly through laws like the "special interest detainee" provision, which permitted indefinite detention and severe violations of human rights (pp. 8–9).

These coercive measures have provoked significant resistance in the Global South. In particular, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have fuelled anti-Western sentiment and intensified militant responses. Mann (2001) asserts that such militaristic strategies exacerbate rather than diminish terrorism.

In the aftermath of 9/11, neoliberalism emerged not only as an economic doctrine but also as a global political force, closely aligned with U.S. imperial ambitions. While the economic dimensions of neoliberalism—such as privatisation, deregulation, and market expansion—have been widely studied, its coercive and disciplinary mechanisms, particularly in the context of post-9/11 geopolitics, demand further critical inquiry. Pakistani Anglophone fiction, especially Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), offers a compelling site for examining how neoliberal ideology functions as a tool of control, surveillance, and cultural hegemony under the guise of freedom, meritocracy, justice and democracy.

Although recent scholarship has examined elements of neoliberalism in Pakistani fiction, most studies tend to focus on its economic impacts or thematic representations of inequality and precarity. Far less attention has been paid to the coercive aspects of neoliberal politics—its assimilationist demands, its complicity in post-9/11 imperialism, and the ways it enforces conformity under the illusion of choice. Moreover, the theme of immigrant resistance against this coercive neoliberal order remains underexplored in literary analysis. This study seeks to fill this gap by offering a critical reading of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that foregrounds neoliberalism as a coercive political system and highlights the novel's articulation of resistance.

Thus, this research aims at exploring the critique of post-9/11 coercive neoliberal politics in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Literature Review

Neoliberalism, while extensively theorised in Western academia, remains relatively underexplored in Pakistani literary scholarship, particularly in relation to Anglophone fiction. Nonetheless, a few studies have begun to engage with its socio-political and economic implications in contemporary Pakistani narratives.

Shah and Sheeraz (2022) analyze H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* through the lens of leftist critique, identifying its portrayal of neoliberal themes such as economic precarity, lack of social welfare, global inequality, and spatial polarisation. They argue that the novel highlights how neoliberal structures exploit marginalized communities—particularly migrant workers and peripheral societies—leading to resentment and resistance.

Poon (2015) examines Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* as a satirical self-help narrative that critiques the construction of the "neoliberal self" through deception and moral compromise.

Hayat (2014), in part-4 of his doctoral research, compares the Marxist poetics of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Pablo Neruda, revealing a shared critique of neoliberal corporatism and its exploitative impact on underdeveloped nations, including Pakistan and Chile.

Regarding Hamid's work, Raggio (2016), makes use of Judith Butler's theory of precarity and explores how Hamid's post-9/11 fiction—including *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*—challenges the Western assumption that anti-American sentiment in South Asia stems from religious extremism. Instead, he attributes it to the precaritising effects of Western neoliberal policies.

In a parallel study, Shazeb and Khan (2017) explore neoliberal epistemology in Pakistani Anglophone fiction, focusing on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Between Clay and Dust*. They contend that neoliberal logic reduces all value to monetary terms, rendering cultural and educational institutions significant only when they serve capitalist interests. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, they argue, elite U.S. universities co-opt talented individuals from the Global South—such as Changez—into serving corporate power, only for them to realise the exploitative nature of global capitalism. In *Between Clay and Dust*, they show how neoliberal commodification leads to the decline of cultural spaces like the *akhara* and *kotha*, which are discarded by the state in favour of profit-driven redevelopment.

More recently, Shah and Sheeraz (2025) have applied a neo-Marxist lens to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, framing neoliberalism as an advanced stage of capitalism that privileges corporate elites and dominant states while marginalising working classes and peripheral nations. Their analysis reveals how the novel critiques the unequal global order and the socio-economic alienation it generates, especially in the Global South.

While these studies make important contributions to understanding neoliberalism's economic and cultural implications in Pakistani fiction, they remain limited in scope. Shazeb and Khan briefly discuss *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, focusing primarily on education and economic exploitation. Similarly, Shah and Sheeraz concentrate on class-based inequality but overlook the political mechanisms of neoliberal control.

Despite growing academic interest in neoliberalism within Pakistani fiction, the coercive dimension of neoliberal politics—particularly in the post-9/11 context—remains largely unexplored. Existing scholarship tends to foreground economic exploitation or thematic portrayals of inequality, but pays insufficient attention to how neoliberal ideology operates as a system of control, assimilation, and suppression. This study addresses this gap by examining *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a critique of post-9/11coercive politics of neoliberalism thereby offering resistance to it.

Material and Methods

The research method employed in the analysis is primarily qualitative and textual analysis. This method involves the close examination of the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a cultural and political text. The analysis focuses on how the themes of post-9/11 neoliberalism, coercive foreign policy, and resistance are represented within the narrative, drawing connections between the fictional account and real-world geopolitical events. The researcher interprets the text in relation to coercive measures especially of the US neoliberal politics and its consequences in countries like Pakistan. This approach also integrates theoretical frameworks, such as Mann (2001), Klein, 2007, Smith, 2005 and Schwartz' (2011) concept of coercive militarism, to explore the social and political implications of the text. By examining the novel's portrayal of resistance, violence, and anti-American sentiment, the analysis seeks to uncover how the characters' experiences reflect societal struggles and responses to the recent hegemony of neoliberalism. .

Additionally, comparative analysis plays a role in this method, as the researcher compares the events depicted in the novel to historical and political events, particularly the U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and Pakistan relationship with the US as a partner in global neoliberalism. The comparison between the fictional world and the real world allows the researcher to assess the accuracy and relevance of the narrative as an

allegory for post-9/11 geopolitical tensions. This method also draws upon the political and social theories of neoliberalism and post-colonialism to interpret the ideological conflicts represented in the text. The research, therefore, relies on a critical reading of the novel, interpreting both the overt narrative and its subtler commentary on global power structures and resistance movements. By doing so, it provides insight into how neoliberalism's coercive policies foster dissent and extremism, making it a rich field for qualitative inquiry.

Results and Discussion

Although the novel's inception predates 9/11, its writing continued during the traumatic events of that day, which, as the author notes, significantly influenced the novel's themes. Originally, the focus was on the economic dimensions of corporate issues and their detrimental impact on the underprivileged. However, with the occurrence of 9/11, the author's attention shifted towards the coercive aspects of neoliberalism. The economic critique of neoliberalism is explored in our previous research, * A left Critique of Neoliberalism and Resistance in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This study specifically examines the coercive dimensions of Western neoliberalism, particularly as led by the United States. The novel highlights the following aspects of coercive neoliberalism.

Attributing Terrorism to Nation-States

In the post-9/11 world, the U.S. pursued a strategy of enforcing neoliberalism globally by targeting nations reluctant to adopt it. Countries rejecting this agenda were often labelled as terrorist threats to justify military intervention. William Tabb (2004) explains that the Bush administration presented the world with a binary choice: align with American neoliberalism or be branded a terrorist. States refusing to make favourable negotiations were portrayed as threats and invaded to install pro-U.S. regimes (p. 3). Werlhof (2008) adds that neoliberalism significantly increased Western wealth and was then imposed worldwide. Countries resisting it were criminalised as terrorists, and war was waged to convert them to the neoliberal model.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, set in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, critiques this ideological manipulation. The narrator, Changez, explicitly condemns America's association of terrorism with Muslim nations to justify its political and economic interests. He highlights how Afghanistan was first linked with terrorism and invaded, followed by Iraq—despite the lack of evidence connecting Saddam Hussein to Al-Qaeda. Similarly, he mentions the Indian 2002 allegation that Pakistan backed the attack on its parliament, and the U.S.'s subsequent pressure on Pakistan.

The autodiegetic narrator, Changez, argues that these global events reflect a pattern in U.S. foreign policy—framing geopolitical conflicts as a fight against terrorism to serve its elite interests. He remarks:

> A common strand appeared to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie's concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians... This, I reasoned, was why America felt justified in bringing so many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq, and why America felt justified in risking so many more deaths by tacitly using India to pressure Pakistan. (p. 78)

The Western media played a significant role in reinforcing the connection between nations and terrorism, thereby propagating the coercive aspects of neoliberalism. Sultan (2016) states that after 9/11, American media channels framed Islam and Muslims as inherently violent, legitimising state violence against Muslim countries (p. 1). Before and during the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions, Muslims were portrayed as extremists. Smith (2008) notes that post-9/11 neoliberal media created public panic, turning anti-capitalist

resistance and disaster into sources of fear that justified further capitalist control (p. 42). Through images of chaos, media representation became a weapon to manufacture public consent and maintain the status quo.

Likewise, Ejaz Ahmad (2012) observes that U.S. policy is strongly influenced by multinational corporations, many allegedly controlled by Jewish lobbies. These lobbies shaped a post-9/11 media narrative hostile to Muslims, blaming Islam for terrorism and deepening Islamophobia (pp. 55–56). They promoted a one-sided ideology across mainstream platforms, obscuring historical and political complexities and facilitating wars to benefit corporate interests.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist critiques this media-driven distortion. Changez tells his American listener that Muslims are portrayed as "crazies and impoverished radicals," ignoring their intellectual traditions (p. 47). The novel presents the media's portrayal of New York as consumed by patriotic grief after 9/11, with the display of national flags contributing to an atmosphere of polarisation and suspicion towards Muslims (p. 38).

Changez's growing alienation reflects the impact of this ideology. He is disillusioned not just by the government but by the media's complicity: "Affronts were everywhere; the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment in history—not just from the government, but from the media and supposedly critical journalists as well—provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger" (p. 74).

David Harvey (2005) argues that neoliberalism often relies on nationalism for survival (p. 85). This is visible in the novel's depiction of America's flag-waving patriotism, which symbolises a demand for submission rather than solidarity. Changez interprets the flag's omnipresence as an expression of domination, revealing an America that expects obedience and retaliates against defiance (p. 38).

Changez's disillusionment is not religious but political—emerging from America's racialised and imperialist responses to dissent. The novel portrays how linking terrorism with Muslim identity creates resentment among immigrants and fuels alienation.

Scanlan (2010) points out that post-9/11 rhetoric merged terrorism with Islam, allowing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and legitimising the deportation of Muslim immigrants. Even liberal writers and media figures participated in this rhetoric. In contrast, postcolonial works like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *The Country of Men*, and *The Inheritance of Loss* resist this narrative and offer critical perspectives (pp. 266–267).

Consequence of Associating Nation-States with Terrorism. After 9/11, Western neoliberalism portrayed Islam as monolithic, associating nearly all Muslims with terrorism (Lazarczyk, 2017). This had severe consequences for Muslim immigrants in the U.S. and the West. Patten and Wade (2011) argue that the U.S. government enacted laws to target Muslim immigrants, such as the "special interests detainee" law, which led to arbitrary detentions and human rights violations. Most detainees were from South Asia and the Middle East, with many being Egyptian and Pakistani (pp. 8-9).

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid depicts the Muslim immigrants, particularly Pakistanis in the U.S. After 9/11, who are linked with terrorism. Pakistani cab drivers are beaten, and Muslims face FBI raids, arbitrary arrests, and harsh detentions in secretive facilities (Hamid, 2007, p. 44). These policies reflect the illiberal nature of neoliberalism, as Hadiz (2006) observes, Neoliberalism has been distinctly illiberal, if not anti-liberal (p. 2).

Changez, the protagonist, experiences discrimination as a Pakistani immigrant, despite his success in the U.S. At first, he identifies with America, but his Muslim background soon makes him a suspect. On returning to the U.S. from Manila, he is subjected to a thorough

and isolating interrogation at the airport, leading to an uncomfortable flight where he senses passengers' suspicions (p. 36).

Lazarczyk (2017) notes that anti-Muslim sentiment, rooted in neoliberalism, intensified after 9/11. Changez also encounters this sentiment. Although he was once free to move around the U.S., after 9/11, he is treated as a foreigner, even though he is a Princeton graduate working at Underwood Samson. His colleagues are allowed to join the American citizen queue, while he is directed to the foreigners' queue and questioned like a criminal (p. 36). This prolonged interrogation delays him, and he arrives in New York feeling isolated (p. 36).

Post-9/11, Changez experiences overt racism, especially when strangers mistake him for an Arab. In New Jersey, someone calls him a "fucking Arab" (p. 54), leading to an outburst. His reaction reflects how racial discrimination and bullying provoke resistance and violence, even from otherwise peaceful immigrants.

The novel also critiques how Muslims, like Changez, are vilified for growing beards, which are seen as terrorist symbols. Unlike the young Americans who sport beards as fashion, Changez's beard leads to discrimination and harassment, both from his colleagues and the public (p. 59). Muslim immigrants are also increasingly fired from their jobs, with Changez noting that many face rescinded job offers or unfair dismissals (p. 55).

Thus, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* critiques the racial discrimination Muslim immigrants face in the U.S. post-9/11. These individuals are linked to terrorism due to their cultural and religious identity, suffering both governmental scrutiny and public abuse. This discrimination fosters anti-American sentiments, which are not based on religious orthodoxy but are a response to U.S. neoliberalism and its policies of linking nations with terrorism.

Coercion and War

An important critique of neoliberalism concerns its tendency to wage war under the pretext of promoting open market values and advancing self-interest. Consequently, war and neoliberalism have been described as two sides of the same coin (Werlhof, 2008, p. 101). In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Western neoliberalism is perceived to have imposed its values through violence, coercion, and militaristic intervention. Reflecting this dynamic, Michael Schwartz (2011) refers to the phenomenon as "military neoliberalism." Similarly, a number of contemporary leftist scholars—including Harvey (2005), Smith (2008), Losche (2009), and Gregory (2004)—have linked this development to aggressive capitalism and American imperialism. Naomi Klein (2007), a prominent Canadian author, characterises it as "disaster capitalism" and frames it as part of the broader "shock doctrine" underpinning contemporary imperialism.

Following 9/11, the United States—particularly under the Bush administration—adopted a belligerent foreign policy, targeting states and actors perceived as obstacles to the neoliberal order. As Lafer (2004) observes, "both the foreign and domestic policy pursued by the Bush administration under the rubric of the war on terror are in fact best understood as strategies for advancing the neoliberal agenda" (p. 323).

Tabb (2004) notes a significant shift in U.S. policy following 9/11. Prior to the attacks, neoliberalism was largely promoted in the Global South through soft measures such as diplomatic persuasion and economic incentives. However, in the post-9/11 context, the Bush administration began intervening more assertively in states whose governance models diverged from neoliberal principles, thereby imposing neoliberalism through violent and coercive means. Tabb (2006) articulates the central tenets of post-9/11 U.S. neoliberal policy towards the developing world as follows: "The US priorities of free markets

over meeting basic needs in the less developed world, its insistence on neoliberal privatization, deregulation and shrinking government are the economic accompaniment of its diplomacy of hegemony, preemption and unilateralism" (p. 177).

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* critiques the United States' post-9/11 policies, particularly their aggressive and unilateral nature. The novel foregrounds how these policies—especially the so-called "War on Terror"—engender resentment, resistance, and anti-American sentiment among Muslim communities and the nations directly affected by American intervention.

The narrator, Changez, reflects on the shift in the American psyche following the attacks, asserting that the United States adopted an increasingly hostile and dangerous stance, particularly towards Muslims both domestically and abroad. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. government launched its anti-terror campaign by targeting Afghanistan, linking it to terrorism. Changez remarks, "America was gripped by a growing and self-righteous rage in those weeks of September and October" (Hamid, 2007, p. 44). He condemns the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 as an act of reckless violence that results in substantial civilian casualties. He criticizes the disparity in power between the superpower and the fragile Afghan state, describing how the American military, armed with advanced weaponry, launched air raids on "ill-fed and ill-equipped tribesmen below," thereby causing indiscriminate damage to a population without a proper army or defence infrastructure (p. 46).

Changez's disillusionment is further intensified by what he perceives as biased coverage in the Western media, which he accuses of glorifying the military assault. Troubled by the media's portrayal of the conflict, he deliberately distances himself from news broadcasts. His resentment deepens when he watches scenes depicting the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan accompanied by celebratory commentary on the heroism of American troops. The sight provokes an intense emotional response: "I was forced to confront the fact that I was angry," he recalls, "I was furious. I was shaking with rage" (p. 46).

Following the occupation of Afghanistan, Changez argues that the United States begins to interfere in Pakistan's internal affairs. He claims that during a period of heightened tension between India and Pakistan, the United States aligns itself with India and seeks to pressure Pakistan into altering its policies, a move Changez views as further evidence of American interventionism and strategic coercion (p. 66).

The coercive trajectory of post-9/11 American neoliberalism intensifies with the United States' unilateral decision to invade Iraq without United Nations authorization or broad international support. Changez criticizes this move in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, noting that after a brief period of calm—during which tensions between India and Pakistan were mitigated through diplomatic intervention—another conflict was initiated. The United States, he observes, swiftly associated Iraq with terrorism and proceeded to invade: "humanity's respite was brief: six months later the invasion of Iraq would be under way" (p. 78). Changez argues that the United States strategically associates certain nations with terrorism in order to further its own geopolitical and economic interests, while publicly justifying its aggression under the guise of counterterrorism. As he reflects:

> A common strand appeared to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie's concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing the uniforms of soldiers. I recognized that if this was to be the single most important priority of our species, then the lives of those of us who lived in lands in which such killers also lived had no meaning except as collateral damage. This, I reasoned, was why America felt justified in bringing so

> many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq, and why America felt justified in risking so many more deaths by tacitly using India to pressure Pakistan. (p. 78)

Through this reflection, the narrator explicitly critiques American neoliberalism for instrumentalising the War on Terror to advance self-interests under the pretext of fighting terrorism. He expresses his resentment at the large-scale loss of life in Afghanistan and Iraq, suggesting that such deaths are viewed as acceptable collateral damage by a state pursuing aggressive capitalist expansion.

The post-9/11 transformation of American neoliberalism—marked by unilateral aggression—is also depicted allegorically through the relationship between Changez and Erica. Their unrequited love story symbolically represents the dynamic between Pakistan and the United States. As noted by Barillaro (2011), Erica is a shortened form of "America," thus rendering her a symbolic representation of the United States (p. 10), while Changez embodies the Pakistani perspective. Erica thus personifies American neoliberalism, and Changez's romantic attachment to her metaphorically reflects Pakistan's engagement with it.

Prior to 9/11, Erica is depicted as healthy, radiant, and magnetic. She is attractive, amiable, and admired by those around her. Her positive reception of Changez, including her admiration for his traditional Pakistani attire, represents a moment of cultural openness and mutual appreciation. When she compliments him, he smiles, and she "smile[s] back" (p. 26), signalling reciprocity and harmony. This cordiality may be read as indicative of the multicultural ethos and cooperative bilateral relations between Pakistan and the United States during the pre-9/11 period—particularly under the Clinton administration.

Changez further characterizes Erica as possessing a commanding presence and vibrant energy. He remarks: "she ha[s] presence, an uncommon magnetism... a naturalist would likely have compared her to a lioness: strong, sleek, and invariably surrounded by her pride" (p. 13). This portrayal of Erica, as confident and socially engaged, may be interpreted as emblematic of the United States' multilateral engagement in the global arena prior to 9/11—a period during which American foreign policy favoured collaboration and alliances over isolation.

However, after the attacks, Erica suffers a psychological breakdown. Her decline into melancholia and psychosis symbolises the United States' descent into unilateralism and militarism. She is no longer depicted as vibrant and charismatic, but rather as pale, distant, and sorrowful—reflecting the nation's shift towards aggression and isolation. Erica confesses that 9/11 has reawakened memories of her deceased boyfriend, Chris: "The attacks churned up old thoughts in my head… I keep thinking about Chris... Most nights I have to take something to help me rest" (p. 38). Her emotional regression and fixation on Chris, described as "a good-looking boy with what she described as an Old World appeal" (p. 16), is deeply symbolic. As Hartnell (2010) argues, Chris represents the past European imperial order, and Erica's longing for him signifies America's nostalgic desire to revive imperial dominance in a post-9/11 world (pp. 343–44). The death of Chris symbolises the end of classical European colonialism, while Erica's yearning for him reflects America's neo-imperialist ambitions—an effort to resurrect a hegemonic global order under its leadership. Through this allegory, Hamid subtly critiques the United States' invocation of terrorism as a pretext for imperialist interventions aimed at maintaining global supremacy. Erica's descent into grief and madness mirrors the nation's turn towards coercive neoliberalism, militarism, and the abandonment of international cooperation.

After the invasion of Afghanistan, Erica's deteriorating mental condition—symbolising American aggression and unilateralism—worsens, reflecting the United States' increasingly militant posture. Changez observes that her radiant charm has faded, and she appears pale and distant (Hamid, 2007, p. 28). When he inquires after her health, she admits

to having been "going through a bad patch," a path on which she routinely goes since the death of Chris (p. 69). This cyclical pattern of psychological decline metaphorically represents the United States' recurrent turn to military interventionism after the end of classical imperialism that she replaces. Erica's reference to recurring "bad patches" following the death of Chris may be read as an allusion to America's habitual interventions—such as in Vietnam, Korea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Middle East—following the decline of traditional European colonialism. As Changez himself notes, the U.S. has historically undergone such "bad patches" (p. 69), indicating a broader pattern of aggressive foreign policy rooted in imperial nostalgia.

This shift is further illuminated by the U.S. abandonment of multilateralism in favour of a unilateral doctrine after 9/11. According to Tago (2017), unilateralism rejects international cooperation in favour of independent military action, standing in contrast to multilateralism, which relies on consensus and respect for international norms. Shafiq and Perwaiz (2020) argue that the Bush administration formalized this shift through the 2002 Bush Doctrine, which authorized pre-emptive and unilateral military interventions against perceived threats without the sanction of the international community or the United Nations (pp. 260–263). This doctrine enabled the U.S. to frame Iraq as a terrorist threat and launch a war without international approval, thus consolidating its primacy in global power politics. Such unilateralism marks a definitive rupture from previous multilateral consensus and has been widely criticized as an assertion of imperial will under the guise of national security.

Erica's progressive psychological collapse allegorically mirrors this transformation in U.S. foreign policy. Her isolation and retreat into nostalgia for Chris signify America's withdrawal from the international community and its longing for a past era of imperial dominance. Her "disappearance into powerful nostalgia," described as a voluntary and possibly irreversible condition (Hamid, 2007, p. 52), symbolizes America's deliberate turn towards isolationism and militaristic unilateralism. This detachment reflects a neoliberal logic wherein isolation and disengagement from the global community are not only permissible but encouraged, particularly in moments of perceived threat (Rushton, 2019, p. 211). Erica's statement that she frequently thinks of Chris, accompanied by "pretty dark thoughts" (Hamid, 2007, p. 48), underscores a sinister undercurrent: a readiness to use force against those who obstruct her imperial longing. Thus, Erica becomes an allegorical figure for post-9/11 American foreign policy—a critique of how neoliberal imperialism, cloaked in nostalgia and emotional trauma, deploys aggression to maintain global dominance.

Neoliberal states advocate for democratic governance because it aligns with the ideological foundations of neoliberalism. As Whitham (2014) notes, democracy facilitates economic liberalization, privatization, and the expansion of free markets. In contrast, autocratic regimes—such as monarchies in the Middle East, totalitarian states, and military dictatorships—pose obstacles to neoliberalism due to their tendency to nationalize industries and maintain state control over the economy. These regimes undermine core neoliberal tenets like corporate autonomy, individualism, and denationalization. Consequently, Western neoliberalism exhibits an aversion to any governmental form other than democracy, perceiving autocracy as both an impediment to and a threat against neoliberal expansion. In enforcing this economic and political agenda, Western powers often compell non-aligned states to conform: "The neoliberal view is powerfully enforced" (Herreria& Rodriguez, 2016, p. 315).

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, this aversion is illustrated when Changez recounts a dinner with Erica and her American colleagues. When asked to share his aspirations, he jokingly claims that he hopes to become "the dictator of an Islamic republic" (Hamid, 2007, p. 17). His comment provokes immediate discomfort, and the Americans insist he clarify that he was not serious. This interaction reveals a deep-seated American hostility towards

autocratic governance, particularly in the Islamic world, where dictatorships and monarchies—such as in Iraq under Saddam Hussein or Taliban rule in Afghanistan—were positioned as direct adversaries to American neoliberal ideology. The strong reaction also reflects the aggressive stance of Western neoliberalism, which seeks to impose democratic governance on regions seen as incompatible with its economic and political aims.

Tabb (2004) contends that American neoliberalism is motivated by strategic self-interest, especially commercial and geopolitical gain (p. 2). The United States forms alliances and engages in conflicts not on moral grounds, but to serve its economic priorities. Its partnerships are conditional and subject to change if those interests are compromised. A clear example of this is America's relationship with Pakistan during the post-9/11 "war on terror." In recognition of Pakistan's logistical and military support—particularly its provision of bases for U.S. operations in Afghanistan—the U.S. granted Pakistan the status of a Major Non-NATO Ally, entitling it to foreign aid and defence assistance (Javed, 2005, p. 69). However, this alliance proves shallow when viewed through the lens of the 2002 Indo-Pak conflict.

Despite Pakistan's cooperation in the war on terror, the United States adopted a position of neutrality during the military standoff between India and Pakistan. This stance, as Changez points out, implicitly favoured India—the "larger" and "more belligerent" party (Hamid, 2007, p. 14). He expresses disappointment that the U.S. did not invoke its alliance with Pakistan to deter Indian aggression, noting that "all America would have to do would be to inform India that an attack on Pakistan would be treated as an attack on any American ally." Instead, the U.S. prioritized its economic ties with India, the region's largest trading partner. As Teltumbde (2006) highlights, Indo-U.S. trade reached $24.7 billion in 2002, making India highly valuable to American corporate interests (p. 250). This preference is further corroborated by former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who criticized the West's tepid response to human rights violations in Kashmir, attributing it to commercial interests: "India is a big market... that is the reason behind this neutral response" (India Today, 2020).

Thus, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* critiques the United States' selective and tepid foreign policy, which aligns more closely with economic self-interest than ideological consistency. Changez' frustration captures a broader sentiment in Pakistan—that the U.S., despite Pakistan's cooperation, will not risk its commercial relationship with India. As reflected in public opinion, there is a growing disillusionment with America's unwillingness to support its supposed allies in times of crisis (Hamid, 2007, p. 57). Through Changez's disillusionment, Hamid exposes the coercive and self-serving nature of neoliberal alliances, revealing the strategic calculus behind America's support for democracy and selective engagement in international conflicts.

The tepid response of the United States during the 2002 India–Pakistan conflict is allegorically represented through the deteriorating relationship between Erica and Changez, with Erica symbolizing America and Changez representing Pakistan. As Teteck (2012) observes, their personal relationship serves as a metaphor for the political dynamics between the two countries (p. 6). At the height of regional tensions, Erica mysteriously withdraws from Changez' life, mirroring America's political detachment. Changez narrates: "I did not understand where or why she had gone" (Hamid, 2007, p. 60), indicating a sense of abandonment. His repeated attempts to reach her—"my calls went unanswered, my messages unreturned" (p. 50)—symbolise Pakistan's futile appeals for support from a disengaged ally. His desire to share "the turmoil through which [he] was passing" (pp. 59–60) suggests Pakistan's efforts to communicate its precarious situation and seek solidarity, only to be met with silence.

This allegory encapsulates the broader critique of the United States' pragmatic and self-serving approach to foreign policy. Changez ultimately comes to distrust Erica, just as

Pakistan grows disillusioned with America's inconsistent support. He notes that although Erica is physically present in public, she remains emotionally distant—"lost in a world of her own," with "eyes turned inwards" (p. 41). These metaphors capture the inward-looking and self-interested nature of American foreign policy, which prioritizes strategic and economic gain over genuine alliances.

The lack of reciprocity in their romantic relationship further reinforces this critique. Although Changez loves Erica, she cannot reciprocate his affection. Her emotional and sexual detachment—her longing for her deceased lover Chris—symbolises America's nostalgic attachment to its imperial lineage and its preference for allies that reinforce its global dominance. As discussed earlier, Chris functions symbolically as a figure of lost imperial power, suggesting that America (Erica) is more committed to perpetuating Western hegemony than to nurturing new alliances with developing nations like Pakistan. The coldness of Erica's relationship with Changez thus represents the United States' dispassionate and transactional relations with countries it deems expendable or peripheral.

In essence, the novel critiques American neoliberal pragmatism, which prioritizes profit and geopolitical advantage over emotional or ideological consistency. Erica's withdrawal from Changez during his moment of vulnerability allegorizes the U.S.'s abandonment of Pakistan at a critical time, despite decades of cooperation since the Cold War.

A key instrument of neoliberalism is economic coercion. Core nations, particularly the United States, dominate global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), and use them to further their strategic and economic interests. Countries that comply with these interests are granted financial aid or favourable trade conditions; those that resist face sanctions and economic marginalization. In this way, developing nations are made financially dependent, effectively becoming subject to what can be described as financial imperialism.

Perwaiz and Shafiq document how the United States has repeatedly used economic coercion to shape Pakistan's policy decisions. For instance, U.S. aid was suspended in 1975–76 following Pakistan's nuclear programme. However, once Pakistan became a key player in the U.S.-backed war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, sanctions were lifted and generous aid resumed. After the Cold War ended, Pakistan's strategic value diminished, and the U.S. imposed further sanctions, including those under the Pressler Amendment. Additional sanctions followed Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests and General Musharraf's military coup, severely isolating the country. Yet, following 9/11, under the pressure of global conflict, the U.S. once again lifted these sanctions, demanding Pakistan's cooperation in the war on terror.

Hamid's narrator reflects on these shifting policies, describing how the United States leverages its economic power to enforce compliance: "finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power" (Hamid, 2007, p. 69). This statement encapsulates how neoliberalism facilitates economic imperialism, allowing dominant nations to coerce peripheral states into submission under the guise of aid and diplomacy. The conditionality of financial support creates a cycle of dependency that undermines the sovereignty of nations like Pakistan.

Resistance to Neoliberal Coercion. The coercive nature of neoliberal policies has been shown to incite resistance, particularly in countries of the Global South. In particular, the aggressive strategies pursued under the banner of the "War on Terror" have intensified anti-Western sentiments, resistance, and opposition across various Asian nations. Following the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the region has increasingly become a breeding ground for extremism. It is argued that the more the United States and its allies rely on militaristic measures to eliminate opposition and terrorism, the more they fuel anti-

Western hostility and resistance. As Mann (2001) notes, it is irrefutable that the post-9/11 coercive military strategies adopted by the U.S. foster resentment, antagonism, and terrorism rather than eliminating them (cited in Beeson, 2006, p. 80).

As previously mentioned, after 9/11, the Pakistani government aligned itself with the U.S.-led War on Terror in Afghanistan. However, this alliance provoked significant public dissent, particularly among religious fundamentalists, who strongly opposed and criticized the government's cooperation with the West. When their objections were disregarded by the ruling regime, many resorted to violence—leading to the rise of Talibanisation, widespread killings, and atrocities within the country. As a result, anti-American sentiment and resentment towards the Pakistani government intensified throughout the region.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist illustrates this growing resistance by portraying characters from diverse ideological backgrounds—including the protagonist—participating in protests and demonstrations against the Pakistani government's alliance with the United States. The narrator recounts organising protest meetings with his students, aimed at persuading the populace to oppose both the pro-American Pakistani regime and the U.S. itself. Consequently, they are labelled as terrorists and subjected to harsh treatment (Hamid, 2007, p. 79).

Furthermore, the narrator describes a protest held in Lahore, attended by individuals representing a broad spectrum of ideologies: "There were thousands of us, of all possible affiliations—communists, feminists, religious literalists" (p. 79). The demonstrators besiege a building where the U.S. ambassador is delivering a speech, chanting slogans and brandishing placards. The protest escalates into violent confrontation, with effigies being burned and stones hurled at the building. A clash ensues between the protesters and law enforcement, resulting in the arrest of many demonstrators, including the narrator himself, who spends a night in jail due to his involvement in the confrontation (p. 79). This passage underscores that contemporary capitalism—or neoliberalism—is resisted by a range of actors, including feminists, communists, religious literalists, and even former capitalists. It also demonstrates how post-9/11 neoliberal strategies contribute to extremism and instability in developing countries such as Pakistan.

As a coalition partner in the War on Terror, the Pakistani government deployed military forces in the tribal areas, launching operations against Afghan militants and their local supporters. Concurrently, the U.S. conducted drone strikes in the region. Although these actions were intended to eliminate terrorist threats, they resulted in the displacement of millions and the deaths of numerous civilians. Consequently, many of the affected individuals—previously unaffiliated with any militant organisation—developed hostility towards the global War on Terror and its primary architect, the United States. These aggressive policies, therefore, contributed significantly to the rise of anti-American sentiment in Pakistan's tribal regions.

In the novel, the narrator explains that such military operations in the tribal areas fuelled resistance and anti-Americanism. During a dinner scene in a hotel, Changez observes that a waiter glares at the American with intense revulsion, which makes the latter visibly uncomfortable: "puts the [American] ill at ease" (p. 50). Changez interprets the waiter's expression as a consequence of his tribal background, asserting that his animosity stems from the suffering caused by American air raids on his region (p. 50). He urges the American to overlook the waiter's reaction, arguing that the man's disdain should not be equated with terrorism as he is from tribal areas of the North West Paskistan and has developed disliking for Americans because his tribe has suffered due to the American raids on the region (p. 50).

In sum, the narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* demonstrates how the post-9/11 neoliberal policies of the West—marked by militarism and interventionism—provoke

strong anti-American sentiments and resistance among the people most affected by them, particularly in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reveals how post-9/11 neoliberal policies, particularly the U.S.-led War on Terror, foster resistance, anti-American sentiments, and extremism, especially in countries like Pakistan. Through a qualitative and textual analysis, the novel is explored as an allegory for the consequences of aggressive foreign interventions, illustrating how such policies exacerbate societal divisions and inspire movements of defiance. The research highlights the intersection of neoliberalism, geopolitics, and the experiences of marginalized communities, shedding light on the broader socio-political ramifications of coercive global strategies. Ultimately, the narrative underscores the cyclical nature of violence and resistance in the face of hegemonic power, offering critical insights into the enduring effects of U.S. foreign policy in the post-9/11 era.

Recommendations

This research primarily focuses on the coercive policies of neoliberalism, particularly American neoliberalism and its post-9/11 impact on specific countries. Future researchers may explore the economic dimensions of neoliberalism in other contexts to broaden the scope of analysis. Future research could explore literary portrayals of resistance to neoliberalism in regions beyond those examined here, particularly those impacted by the War on Terror, to offer comparative insights. It may also investigate how literature challenges dominant media narratives that conflate Islam with terrorism. Furthermore, examining the effects of securitised environments on second-generation Muslim immigrants in the West could provide a deeper understanding of shifting identities and forms of resistance

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