

## **Fundamentalisms in Conflict: Religion, Secularism and Identity in Contemporary Pakistani and Bangladeshi Fiction**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how three South Asian novels in English represent the relationship between religion, secularism, national identity, and violence in Pakistan and Bangladesh. It analyses Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2008), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* (2011). The Pakistani novels are read as critiques of state-sponsored Islamisation and of the post-9/11 global order, while Anam's novel is read as an interrogation of Bangladesh's oscillation between imposed secularism and political Islam after the 1971 Liberation War. Using a postcolonial framework, together with the concepts of reactive identity formation and re-orientalism, the study employs qualitative close reading and comparative analysis. It argues that all three novels define fundamentalism broadly, as any worldview that recognises only one source of truth, whether that source is a state-approved Islam, market capitalism, or an intolerant secularism. In each text, rigid ideology fractures families, silences dissent, and falls most heavily on women, children, and minorities. Formally, the novels resist singular authority through polyphonic narration, dramatic monologue, and shifting timelines. The paper concludes that these works advocate a dialogic model of identity in which faith and reason, the religious and the secular, can coexist without domination.

**Keywords:** Pakistani fiction, Bangladeshi fiction, fundamentalism, secularism, national identity, post-9/11 literature

### **1. Introduction**

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 created Pakistan as a homeland for South Asian Muslims, yet the question of what kind of Muslim nation it would be remained unsettled. In 1971, East Pakistan broke away after a brutal war to become Bangladesh, a state that initially declared secularism as a founding principle. The two nations thus began from a shared religious premise and then followed divergent, though equally turbulent, paths. In Pakistan, General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation of the late 1970s and 1980s tied citizenship to a narrow interpretation of Islam (Riaz, 2010). In Bangladesh, the secular constitution of 1972 was gradually reshaped by military regimes that restored Islam to public life (Islam & Islam, 2018). After 2001, both countries were further drawn into the global discourse of the "war on terror," which recast Muslim identity as a security problem.

Contemporary fiction in English has become an important space for examining these histories. Cilano (2013) argues that Pakistani novelists persistently debate the very "idea" of the nation, and Mallot (2012) shows how South Asian writers use memory and narrative to contest official

nationalist history. This paper focuses on three such novels. Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2008) follows a palaeontologist accused of blasphemy under Zia's regime. Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) traces a Pakistani analyst's journey from corporate America back to Lahore after 9/11. Anam's *The Good Muslim* (2011) depicts a brother and sister, both veterans of the 1971 war, who take opposite ideological paths in the decade that follows.

The paper addresses three questions. How do these novels represent the construction of religious and national identity? How do they link ideological rigidity to violence, whether legal, psychological, domestic, or physical? And how do their narrative forms resist singular versions of truth? The central argument is that each novel exposes "fundamentalism" as a structure of thought rather than a property of any one religion, and that each proposes dialogue and empathy as alternatives to ideological absolutism.

The paper is organised in nine sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 reviews relevant scholarship and Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework and method. Sections 4, 5, and 6 analyse the three novels. Section 7 offers a comparative discussion, and Section 8 concludes.

## **2. Literature Review**

Historical and political scholarship provides the essential context for these novels. Gould (2012) argues that religious conflict in modern South Asia is historically produced through colonial categories, state institutions, and electoral competition rather than rooted in timeless antagonism. Riaz (2010) traces how religion became a political resource across the region, with particular attention to Pakistan under Zia-ul-Haq, whose regime introduced the Hudood ordinances, strengthened blasphemy provisions, and privileged a Sunni reading of Islam as the measure of Pakistani identity. For Bangladesh, Islam and Islam (2018) challenge the dominant narrative that the Liberation War was fought for secularism. They argue that the war was primarily a struggle for autonomy and democracy, and that secularism was later adopted by the state without broad popular consensus, creating a gap between a secular state and a largely religious citizenry.

Literary criticism on Pakistani fiction has moved beyond reading novels only as responses to terrorism. Cilano (2013) shows how writers contest the state's narrowing of national identity, while Kanwal (2015) urges critics to read Pakistani fiction "beyond 9/11" and to attend to the diversity of Muslim identities that Western discourse flattens. Clements (2016) analyses how writers including Hamid and Aslam represent Islam from within a South Asian Muslim perspective, resisting both fundamentalist and Orientalist scripts. Chambers and Herbert (2015) broaden this discussion by examining how Muslims are imagined in South Asian and diasporic texts, highlighting tensions between secularism, religion, and representation.

A related body of work addresses Muslim identity in the post-9/11 world. Nagra (2011) introduces the concept of reactive identity formation to explain how discrimination led many Muslims to assert their religious identity more strongly. Hamid (2015), writing as an essayist, insists that Islam is not a monolith and that each believer develops a personal relationship with the faith. Kennedy (2018) reads Changez's shifting beliefs in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* through Hamid's view that fundamentalism means seeing the world through a single lens, a definition that applies to economic ideology as much as to religion. Lau and Mendes (2011)

develop the concept of re-orientalism to describe how South Asian cultural producers represent the East through Western expectations, and later apply it to Hamid's novel and its film adaptation (Lau & Mendes, 2018).

Anam's novel has attracted attention for its engagement with the binary of "good" and "bad" Muslims. Shivani (2013) critiques contemporary literature that sorts Muslims into acceptable moderates and dangerous extremists, a framework Anam's title deliberately invokes. Mallot (2012) situates Bangladeshi and other South Asian narratives within a broader project of remembering national violence against official silences.

Despite this scholarship, Pakistani and Bangladeshi novels are rarely read together, even though the two nations share a history until 1971. This paper addresses that gap by placing Khan, Hamid, and Anam in dialogue, with particular attention to how each defines and critiques fundamentalism.

### **3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The study adopts a postcolonial framework that treats national and religious identity as constructed, relational, and shaped by power. Following Gould (2012) and Riaz (2010), religion is understood not simply as private belief but as a political category that states, parties, and movements mobilise to define who belongs to the nation.

Three concepts guide the analysis. The first is an expanded definition of fundamentalism. Drawing on Hamid's position as discussed by Kennedy (2018), fundamentalism is treated as any worldview that admits a single source of truth and excludes all alternatives. This allows the analysis to include religious dogmatism, market fundamentalism, and intolerant secularism within the same frame. The second concept is reactive identity formation (Nagra, 2011), which explains how external hostility can push individuals towards identities they had previously held lightly. The third is re-orientalism (Lau & Mendes, 2011), which helps assess how South Asian characters negotiate, reproduce, or resist Western expectations when they represent themselves and their nations.

Methodologically, the study is qualitative and interpretive. It uses close reading of the three primary texts, focusing on characterisation, narrative voice, structure, and key scenes of accusation, conversion, and violence. It then applies comparative analysis to identify shared patterns and significant differences across the Pakistani and Bangladeshi contexts. The novels were selected because each places a family or individual at the centre of a national ideological struggle, and because each connects private suffering to public history.

### **4. Science, Faith, and the State in The Geometry of God**

The Geometry of God is set against the Soviet–Afghan war and Zia-ul-Haq's programme of Islamisation. During this period, Islamic militancy was sponsored as a force against the Soviet Union, and domestically the state made one interpretation of Islam the test of true citizenship (Riaz, 2010). Khan (2008) dramatises this context through Zahoor, an elderly palaeontologist who discovers a fossil whale that supports evolutionary theory. For the state-backed Party of Creation, his science is heresy and his rationalism is dismissed as "Western."

From the opening chapter, the novel frames identity as a contest over meaning. Young Amal learns that the first letter of the Urdu alphabet, alif, stands for Allah according to her father, but

for aql, meaning reason, according to her grandfather Zahoor. Zahoor mocks the idea of a "genuine" Pakistani defined by prayer or language, and reminds his critics that Muslim civilisation produced astronomers and physicians long before the modern West. The novel thus rejects the binary of Islamic East versus scientific West, a binary that Cilano (2013) identifies as central to the Pakistani state's self-definition.

Violence in the novel operates first through law. Noman's father, a leader of the Party of Creation, pressures Zahoor's students to testify that their teacher committed blasphemy. The court sentences Zahoor to life imprisonment without a fair hearing, and he is murdered on the day he is due to be released for Amal's wedding. The trial shows how legal institutions become instruments of ideological violence when the state claims a monopoly over religious truth.

Khan narrates the story through three voices. Amal becomes a palaeontologist and faces patriarchal hostility both at home and in the laboratory, where male colleagues insist that a woman's place is in the home. Her testimony works to reconstruct Zahoor's life and restore his reputation. Her blind sister Mehwish reshapes language through inventive puns, turning palaeontology into "pale into logic" and intimacy into "inty-messy," and speaks through an imaginary companion called Clog. Her distorted words become a subtle protest against a regime that banned the protest poetry of writers such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Habib Jalib.

Noman, the third narrator, embodies the crisis of a generation. His name suggests "no-man," and he is caught between his father's dogma and his attraction to Zahoor's reasoning. He admits that he can argue either side of any question and holds no convictions of his own. His eventual resignation from the party's magazine, accompanied by a letter condemning the distortion of memory, marks his turn from complicity to conscience. Through this polyphony, the novel dismantles the state's singular narrative of the "true Pakistan" and replaces it with a plurality of perspectives (Kanwal, 2015).

### **5. Reluctance and Fundamentalism in The Reluctant Fundamentalist**

Where Khan examines fundamentalism within Pakistan, Hamid situates it in the global order. The novel takes the form of a dramatic monologue in which Changez addresses an unnamed American in a Lahore café. Its opening line captures the central tension: "Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America" (Hamid, 2007, p. 1). A scholarship student at Princeton, Changez joins the elite valuation firm Underwood Samson and initially identifies with the corporation more than with his nationality or religion.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 shatter this identification. Changez confesses that his first reaction to the collapsing towers was an involuntary smile, which he later explains as satisfaction at seeing a powerful nation brought to its knees. On his return to New York he is separated from his colleagues at immigration, questioned, and later abused as an "Arab." His decision to keep the beard he grew during a visit to Pakistan illustrates reactive identity formation: hostility pushes him to affirm a Muslim and Pakistani identity he had previously held lightly (Nagra, 2011).

Yet Changez never becomes religiously orthodox. He drinks, has a relationship outside marriage, and does not quote scripture. As Kennedy (2018) argues, following Hamid, the "fundamentalism" the novel critiques is primarily the single-lens worldview of American

capitalism, represented by Underwood Samson's instruction to "focus on the fundamentals." Changez's decisive moment comes in Valparaíso, Chile, where the publisher Juan-Bautista compares him to the janissaries, Christian boys raised to fight for the Ottoman Empire against their own people. Changez recognises himself as a servant of an empire whose economic and military power affects his own country, and he resigns.

The novel's critique has important limits. When he defends Pakistan to his American girlfriend Erica's father, Changez invokes Mughal monuments and past grandeur, including the Lahore Fort and the Shalimar Gardens. Lau and Mendes (2018) argue that such gestures risk reproducing an Orientalist image of a glorious but faded East. Changez also rarely reflects on the class privilege that shields his own family in Lahore, and he initially assumes that racial abuse affects only poor migrants rather than Princeton graduates. These tensions suggest that escaping one fundamentalism can create new blind spots.

Hamid (2015) insists that Islam is not a monolith, and the novel reinforces this by refusing a stable resolution. The open ending leaves readers unsure whether Changez or his American listener is the threat. By withholding closure, the monologue form places the reader in the position of judge, exposing how quickly suspicion attaches to a Muslim speaker (Clements, 2016).

#### **6. Secularism, Islam, and Family Fracture in *The Good Muslim***

*The Good Muslim* is the second novel in Anam's Bengal trilogy, following *A Golden Age*. It is set mainly in the decade after the 1971 Liberation War, during which Bangladesh moved from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's secular nationalism to the Islamising regimes of Ziaur Rahman and H. M. Ershad. The 1972 constitution named secularism as a state principle, but after Mujib's assassination in 1975 successive governments restored Islamic language to the constitution, and the Eighth Amendment of 1988 made Islam the state religion. Islam and Islam (2018) argue that the original secularism was imposed from above without popular consensus, which made it vulnerable to reversal. Anam (2011) translates this national tension into the story of a single family.

The novel follows Maya and Sohail Haque, siblings who fought together as students in the liberation struggle and once shared a vision of a free, secular nation shaped by their reading of Tagore, Rilke, and Marx. After the war, they take opposite paths. Maya becomes a rural doctor who distances herself from religion entirely, having witnessed atrocities committed in the name of God. Sohail becomes a preacher associated with the Tablighi Jamaat, holding prayer meetings on the roof of the family home. Maya returns to Dhaka in 1984 after seven years away, and the narrative moves between this present and the post-war past.

Anam carefully explains Sohail's conversion rather than condemning it. He is haunted by war memories, including the killing of an elderly, Urdu-speaking man who was neither a soldier nor an enemy combatant. His mother, Rehana, offers him the Qur'an as consolation, and he gradually finds in it a means of atonement. However, his faith hardens from an initial openness to many scriptures into a narrow insistence on one book and one truth. This rigidity has tragic consequences. His wife Silvi dies of untreated jaundice because medical care is refused in

favour of prayer, and his young son Zaid grows up neglected, stealing food and knowing Arabic letters but not the Bengali alphabet.

Crucially, Anam does not present Maya as simply the voice of reason. Maya mocks Sohail's faith, calls him a mullah, and refuses to accept his transformation. When Sohail burns his secular library, their mother blames Maya's relentless derision for pushing him to that extreme. The novel thus presents two mirror-image fundamentalisms. Maya sees Sohail's belief as religious extremism, while Sohail sees Maya's contempt as a secular intolerance that intrudes on private faith. Each treats the other as the threatening other, and neither can listen.

Anam also suggests a third possibility that neither sibling sees. During her years in the countryside, Maya encounters a syncretic, devotional Islam very different from the new urban piety. Villagers honour saints alongside the Prophet, Baul singers perform the songs of Lalou that turn the Qur'an into music, and communities still revere Bon-Bibi, the forest goddess of the Sundarbans. This lived religion accommodates plurality rather than policing it. Yet Maya, like the secular state after 1971, fails to recognise that ordinary Bangladeshis fought against a particular Pakistani interpretation of Islam, not against Islam itself (Islam & Islam, 2018). Her secularism, like Sohail's orthodoxy, imposes a single framework on a society whose identities are layered and fluid. The novel thereby implies that national healing requires acknowledging these older, inclusive traditions rather than choosing between two exclusive ones.

The tragedy converges on Zaid. Sohail sends him to a madrasa where he is abused by the teacher, known as the Huzoor. Maya, the self-appointed rescuer, takes him away, but her rescue ends in his death. The boy becomes a symbol of a nation caught between competing absolutisms, unable to protect its most vulnerable citizens. The title's reference to the "good Muslim" becomes deeply ironic: the devout Sohail fails his son, while the secular Maya acts with compassion. This reversal complicates the binary of "good" and "bad" Muslims that Shivani (2013) identifies in contemporary literature. The epilogue, in which Maya accepts that Sohail's wound mirrors her own, offers a fragile hope that understanding, rather than victory, is the only path to national healing (Mallot, 2012).

### **7. Comparative Discussion**

Read together, the three novels share a broad understanding of fundamentalism. In *The Geometry of God*, it is the state's monopoly over religious truth. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it is the market's single-minded pursuit of profit and the West's reduction of Muslims to a threat. In *The Good Muslim*, it appears on both sides of a family and a nation, as rigid religiosity and as intolerant secularism. The common thread is the refusal to admit any alternative source of meaning, which confirms Kennedy's (2018) reading of Hamid's definition. The novels also show violence operating through ordinary institutions and relationships. Zahoor is destroyed through a court, Changez through immigration controls and corporate structures, and Zaid through a family and a religious school. Physical violence is often the final stage of longer processes of legal, discursive, and emotional exclusion. This supports Gould's (2012) argument that religious conflict in South Asia is politically produced rather than spontaneous.

Gender and generation form another shared concern. Amal and Mehwish confront patriarchy in both scientific and religious spaces, Silvi dies because of her husband's convictions, and Zaid pays the heaviest price for the adults' ideological war. Chambers and Herbert (2015) note that debates about secularism and Islam in South Asia are frequently fought over the bodies and choices of women and children, and all three novels make this cost visible.

Formally, each novel resists singular authority. Khan uses three narrators, Hamid uses a monologue that the reader must interrogate, and Anam alternates between timelines to show how the past shapes the present. These techniques train readers in the habit of weighing competing perspectives, which is precisely what fundamentalism forbids.

There are also meaningful differences. Khan's novel ends with loss but also renewal through Noman's reconciliation with Mehwish. Hamid's remains deliberately unresolved. Anam's is the most tragic, yet its epilogue gestures towards mutual recognition. Moreover, the Pakistani novels largely critique an Islamising state and a hostile West, whereas Anam turns the critique inward, suggesting that secular nationalism itself can become exclusionary when it refuses to acknowledge the religious lives of ordinary citizens (Islam & Islam, 2018).

### **8. Conclusion**

This paper has argued that *The Geometry of God*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *The Good Muslim* present fundamentalism not as a feature of Islam but as a structure of thought that can shape states, markets, and families alike. Khan shows how a confessional state turns blasphemy law against reason and dissent. Hamid shows how global capitalism and post-9/11 suspicion push a cosmopolitan Pakistani into a reactive identity he never fully inhabits. Anam shows how the conflict between rigid religiosity and intolerant secularism, both born from the trauma of 1971, destroys a family and mirrors the divisions of a young nation.

Across these differences, the novels agree that ideological absolutism causes the greatest harm to those with the least power, particularly women, children, and minorities. Their polyphonic and open-ended forms answer this rigidity with an ethics of dialogue, in which faith and reason, and religious and secular identities, can coexist without seeking to dominate one another.

The study has limits. It examines three novels in English, and future research could extend the comparison to Urdu and Bengali literature, to Indian and Sri Lankan fiction, and to how readers in each country receive these texts. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that contemporary Pakistani and Bangladeshi fiction does more than reflect ideological conflict. It models the empathy and plurality that a shared regional future will require.

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