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Muslim Identity Fluidities and Ambiguities: A Focus on Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

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Abstract—Identity as the definitive factor of one's individuality has been extensively explored from the sociological, psychological, and political perspectives. Of particular importance is the prevailing realization of the pervasiveness of the concept of identity and its fluidity, especially concerning the transcendence of cultural binaries and spaces. According to T.S. Eliot, the discourse of aesthetics is defined by constitutive dialects and is doubly-encoded in the specific and concrete. Thus, aesthetics in literature provides a theory of senses in which production, presentation, and reception of identities, cultures, and other social phenomena can be understood and defined. Within Islamic contexts, therefore, the pursuance of a true identity definition becomes an intricate issue that necessitates the incorporation of both historical and contextual perspectives, as well as the pursuance of aesthetic expressions and experiences at the individual level. With these insights in mind, the current analysis utilized a comprehensive analytical framework that applies Eliot's assumptions within the interactionist framework with the aim of mapping identity fluidities and ambiguities in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*. The findings indicate that Muslim cultural contexts bear apparent aesthetic experiences and ideological multiplicities at the individual level that cut across a variety of spiritual, political, social, and geographic domains. The fluidity and multiplicity of the resulting identities, thus, necessitates the application of suitable identity signifiers to ensure the rational and practical reportage of Muslim identities.

Index Terms—identity politics, Islamic studies, Muslim identities, aesthetic studies

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of identity has evolved over the past few decades to become one of the most debated topics in most study fields. Within the sociological and cultural spheres, interests in the concept of identity are driven by the apparent programmatic breaks with traditional conventions due to the evolutionary aspects of modernization, multinational capitalism, and globalization, as well as accompanying identity ambiguities and evolution. For convenient coverage of the broad topic of identity, related texts have tended to adopt varying perspectives and approaches, with focuses that cut across numerous historical epochs. While earlier analyses of historical texts on cultural aesthetics and experiences emphasized the formation of the “me” element and various ways in which the sense of self is modelled, recent literature suggests a shift to the broader “collective” paradigm. Consistent findings, in this regard, have accentuated the “fluidity of identity,” further dispelling initial assumptions of a fixed “self.” Apparently, identity is formed and influenced by the discursive formations and experiences of the contexts within which it is submerged at any given time. Thus, regardless of the vigor of the “holding” conventions, identity, as a disposition quality, is subject to change. As one of the major and most enduring religions, Islam has been extensively explored as an identity-underpinning spiritual movement, whose doctrines exert perpetual, life-cutting influences on its membership. Hence, as Zuriet and Lyausheva (2019) assert, conceptualization of the Islamic identity from both sociological and cultural perspectives necessitates the pursuance of authentic experiences as per the conventions of the prevailing religious doctrines and expectations. In analyzing identity ambiguities, therefore, the emphasis should be directed toward the identification and definition of emergent differences concerning religious beliefs, practices, attitudes, and behaviors across individuals (genders, age, etc.), periods, and historical conditions. With this in mind, the current analysis pursues an understanding of Islamic identity ambiguities by utilizing Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* as case studies. To this end, the current work initiates by developing a theoretical background by reviewing existing definitions of terms and related concepts. This will be followed by the compilation of an assessment procedure that combines T.S. Eliot's assumptions on aesthetic experiences with the parameters of the interactionist framework to be applied to individual key characters in the selected texts. The hypothesis, in this case, is that the depiction of

Islam/Muslim culture in literary texts amplifies an underlying imagery of identity ambiguity and fluidity, which is accentuated by the varying embodiments of *nafs*' (self), ideological predispositions, and levels of religiosity among the key characters.

A. Theoretical Foundation

In current literature, the concept of identity has been analyzed extensively from different perspectives. Most notably, related texts have consistently emphasized the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. In his text on the "...Fixity, Fluidity" of identities within the postcolonial context, Hasan (2014) traces the complexity of the phenomenon to its diverse definitions and the associated influencing factors. The author observes that identity reflects the "totality of social experience," (p. 77) which entails a direct product of culture and shared history. Norton (2010) expounds on this aspect of identity by suggesting that when individuals speak using a shared dialect, they are deemed to be conveying and re-conveying their senses of self within the broader social world, while also reorganizing their relationships with others across time and space. Among other aspects, the resulting identity conveyance process incorporates the aspects of gender, class, and ethnicity. While analyzing the process of identity construction, Cerulo (1997) employs the historical perspective to explore the aspect of identity as a product of imagined communities. In the discussion, the author affirms the centrality of identity in the process of social transformation in consistency with identity change and social transformation theorists. In doing so, Cerulo (1997) suggests that identity transformations are direct outcomes of resources redistribution and broader social processes, as well as emergent changes in socio-political aspects. Hall (1997) adds to the social construction discourse by linking the development of identity to cultural heritage in which a shared history and ancestry is rooted. In such cases, the development of rigid identity can be achieved through the pursuance of a strong sense of cultural awareness and extreme nationalism. Nevertheless, the achievement of rigid identities is usually challenged by the development of resistances, courtesy of external influences and struggles for power. In the typical social sphere, resistance manifests as a consequence of globalization, modernization, and multinational capitalism, which underpin the permissiveness of fluid multicultural spaces of hybridity.

Post-modern theorists have consistently held that identity is a continually evolving personality quality. Howard (2000) and Hasan (2014) are among the sociology experts that have persistently accentuated the fluid, personalized, and multidimensional nature of identity in the postmodern context. Hall (1997) asserts that identity should be regarded as a "production" that is never complete – it involves a continuing process that is constituted within. Identity denotes the tags that individuals are positioned by, and position themselves within, the broader social circles. Rapport (2012) summarizes the ambiguity and variability of identity by asserting that it cannot be defined on homogeneity basis, and neither can it be predetermined. Within the modern context, the concept of a transcendental identity has also manifested. In this version of identity, qualifying individuals are considered international persons, having transcended nationalistic, religious, and cultural boundaries. Often, transcendental identity is reserved as a tag for individuals who have socially and psychologically embraced multiple, interweaving cultures simultaneously. Such cosmopolitan identities bear markers and symbols drawn from diverse cultural backgrounds, most of which have been construed as identity signifiers. It is under these conditions that the concept of identity crisis is introduced by modernist theorists. Apparently, identity crisis arises as a consequence of culture's emergent role as a "primary carrier of modern values and globalization," (Rapport, 2012, p. 66) often resulting in the continued dislocation and contestation of individuals' "true" ethnic, religious, and national identities. As Hasan (2014) observes, the emergence of global cultures presents the biggest threat to the sustenance of authentic identities as it serves to erode the essence of individuals' "true" cultures. From this perspective, globalization surfaces as an imperialistic force that drives identity shifts by compelling individuals and communities to adopt dominant identities to become part of the collective. In such cases, symbols drawn from diverse religions, nations, and ethnicities become identity signifiers for existential identity at the individual level.

B. A Framework for Assessing Religious Cultural Identity

Culture can never be wholly conscious...and it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background of all our planning...it is a socially generated and historical framework that structures our most private thoughts and gives them a language without which they could not be articulated or thought. (Eliot; cited in Shusterman, 2002, p. 143)

As one of the leaders of the Modernist movement and influencers of the Anglo-American culture, Thomas Stearns Eliot reflects that aesthetic experiences underpin the theory of senses in which production, presentation, and reception of identities, cultures, and other social phenomena can be understood and defined. Eliot recognizes that just as society is affected morally and spiritually by material conditions, self (identity) is also molded by society. The theorist goes on to assert that aesthetics concepts enable the assessment of programmatic breaks with traditional conventions as professed by modernists and the resulting necessity to renegotiate (Eliot, 1957). He situates and explains individual culture in the larger anthropological framework of the broader society's culture, reiterating that the former cannot be understood fully without the latter. Specifically, the theorist's emphasis on the incorporation of aesthetics concepts in making sense of social phenomena (in this case, cultural identity) concerns their ability to facilitate "focus on the object while all other objects, events, and everyday concerns are suppressed" (Eliot, 1957, p. 54). As such, the current analysis incorporates Eliot's perspectives on aesthetic experiences within the interactionist framework as a means of mapping identity

fluidities and ambiguities in the selected texts. Thus, the assessment framework will focus on the manifestations of unique predispositions and interactions (aesthetic experiences) of the key characters (objects) relative to the prevailing socio-cultural (Muslim traditions and religious principles) and ideological factors as basis for modeling identity categories. The interactionist framework provides the necessary tools for performing causal analyses for identified relationships, as well as the assessment of the development and evolution of various religious and socio-political phenomena.

For convenience purposes, the typology of religious identity is usually formulated based on the extent or degree of religious-worldview certainty, with related categories ranging from low to weak and fanatical to radical. It must be noted, however, that the multilevel classification of religious identities based on individual religious factors entails a markedly complex task that necessitates an in-depth understanding of the associated expectations and convictions at the individual level. As it stands, insights concerning the substantial components of religious identity are distinctly inconsistent and ambiguous. Nevertheless, some authors, such as Rakhmatulin (2018), indicate that the topological categorization of Muslim identities can be achieved by identifying and defining aesthetic expressions and experiences as a measure of conformity to doctrinal components among regional Islamic cultures. This latter aspect derives from related findings suggesting that different Muslim ethnic groups tend to exhibit varying attitudes and aesthetic experiences, denoting differences in the buildup to ethnic and religious identity. Thus, applying Eliot's aesthetics assumptions within the interactionist framework at the individual level is necessary to determine the underlying attitudes and aesthetic experiences as a basis for modeling and cataloguing the various manifestations of Muslim identities in selected Islamic contexts.

II. DISCUSSION

A. *Elif Shafak's the Forty Rules of Love*

Elif Shafak's book, *The Forty Rules of Love*, tells a tantalizing narrative that ties together two separate plots – one set in the contemporary context and the other in the thirteenth century. At the core of the two plots are the characters of Ella Rubenstein, Aziz Zahara, Shams of Tabriz, and Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose engagements and interactions depict a Bildungsroman narrative buildup. For the character of Ella, Shafak builds a narrative that follows both the internal and external struggles of a typical complacent wife and mother whose consequent enlightenment sends her in pursuit of love, passion, and contentment, which she finds in Aziz and *Sufism*. The fictionalized biography of Ella is also merged with a decontextualized account of Rumi's transformation from a deeply pious and ascetic preacher-cum-teacher to a legendary *Sufism* poet and philosopher. The reader is introduced to the story of Shams and Rumi through a sentimentalized narrative dubbed *Sweet Blasphemy*, which, ultimately, enlightens Ella and drives her to meet Aziz. Of particular importance to the current study are the intrigues that characterize Shams's escapades and his consequent meeting and interactions with Rumi. Having journeyed across far-flung lands, Shams comes to a realization that his maturity in Islam and love is tied to Rumi. As a result, he redirects his preaching priorities and travels to Konya to meet the then famous Islamic scholar, Rumi. His meeting with Rumi results in a metamorphosis of high-level *Sufi* teachings that sees the two received with admiration and hostility in equal measures. Expectedly, hostile receptions of Shams and Rumi's teachings are led by a host of Muslim scholars whose rudimentary understanding of *Sufism* drives them to associate the two with *Satanism*. Thus, despite Shams positive messages, he continues to make enemies in Konya. His discordant personality and attitude and consequent possessiveness of Rumi turns the latter's son, Aladdin, into his principal enemy. It is this concluding development that leads to Shams' murder, which, in turn, transforms Rumi into a sorrowful mystic poet.

Thematically, *The Forty Rules of Love* functions more as an identity development and clashes narrative than a typical love story. As indicated by Gray (2020) Shafak utilizes the relationship between Shams and Rumi to illustrate the emanationist, perennialist, and universalist *Sufi* dialect ethics that underpin the inner meanings of the Holy Quran. Following his introduction to the plot, Shams provides an overview of the topological characterization of Muslim believers.

Each...reader comprehends the Holy Qur'an on a different level in tandem with...his understanding. There are four levels of insight. The first...is the outer meaning...the one that the majority of the people are content with...the Batm [is] the inner level. Third...is the inner of the inner...fourth level is so deep it cannot be put into words and is...indescribable. (Shafak, 2010, p. 38)

For him, the majority of Muslim believers qualify as those bearing the "outer" meanings of the Quran. His assumption is that *Sufis* and saints have the "inner" or *Batm* and the "inner of the inner" meanings, respectively. The prophets who are the closest to God have the capacity to grasp the fourth level of the Quran's doctrinal connotations. From Eliot's assumptions, the resulting understandings and definitions of religious doctrines are what govern an individual's behavior and predispositions in the larger Muslim society. His assumptions, in this regard, are particularly evident in Sham's *Sufism*-guided interactions with other Muslims. For instance, his brief encounter with the high Judge at the Baghdad dervish lodge accentuates his aversion of egocentric Muslim characters. Apparently, the Judge's domineering character denotes an individual who is obsessed with his *Sharia*-accorded authority to the extent of using his powers to punish those that attempt to oppose him – he is contented with the "outer" meanings of the text. This encounter denotes the first of several identity clashes highlighted by Shafak (2010) in her coverage of the thirteenth

century Muslim context. Shams's remarks concerning those who "forget where [they] are headed and instead concentrate on the candle" (Shafak, 2010, p. 135) is reserved as a description of the lowest tier of the Muslim culture. Within this lower tier, a variety of identity classifications also manifest along the ratio of fidelity to religious traditions and conformity to socio-cultural and socio-political expectations. Seemingly, the domestication and assimilation of Islamic doctrines and practices in regional cultures (both Baghdad and Konya contexts) has yielded in an identity fluidity in which age and religious status are key determinants. This aspect is particularly evident in the manifesting hierarchies defining cross- and intra-generational religious mentorship roles. Thus, the interactions among Shams, the Baghdad lodge master, the lodge's cook, the novice, and eventually Rumi unveil various aesthetic qualities designated for Muslim leaders, mentors, and students. Shams puts this cultural propensity in perspective while advising the novice.

There are more fake gurus and teachers...than the number of stars...Don't confuse power-driven, self-centered people with true mentors...genuine spiritual master[s] will not direct your attention to [themselves]... and will not expect absolute obedience or admiration from you, [they] will help you to appreciate...your inner self...True mentors are...transparent...They let the Light of God pass through them. (Shafak, 2010, p. 61)

By applying Shafak's descriptions of the practices and interactions among leaders, mentors, and students in the covered Muslim cultures to Eliot's (1957) aesthetics discourse, it becomes apparent that an individual's identity (self) is defined by their ability to overcome the all-consuming issues and imperfections of human existence (evident in one's aesthetic experiences and expressions) to achieve ontological unity with God. To achieve this level of unification and spiritual perfection, one must pass through the various successive spiritual stations (the four levels identified by Shams), often through proper guidance and mentorship. In his analysis of the Rumi character, Gray (2020) describes the journey to harmonious unity as one in which man must purge his *nafs*, the bestial basis of man's nature, to facilitate mystical advancement. To this end, it is imperative for man to overcome the deceitfulness of *nafs* that drives cravings for earthly material and joys and the misleading power of limited intellect. Success in this regard allows for the achievement of untarnished spiritual essence, the "true" Islamic identity – the soul is free from *nafs* and partial intellect control. The fluidities and ambiguities of the Muslim identity are formulated along this spiritual journey by taking into consideration individuals' successes and deficiencies. As per the interactions in the text, however, besides Shams, Rumi, and Aziz, the other characters seem to be stuck at different points in the first level designated for those with the outer meaning or basic understanding of the Quran's doctrines.

B. Mohsin Hamid's the Reluctant Fundamentalist

Published in 2008, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores the turmoil associated with the Muslim identity in Western cosmopolitan contexts. Using a combination of framed and flashback narratives, Hamid tells the story of Changez, a Muslim of Pakistani origins, and his encounters with an anonymous American in a Lahore café. The flashback narrative is strategically used as an incremental tale to fill up important details about the protagonist's past life. The resulting first-person, dramatic monologue provides the reader with markedly revealing insights about Changez's unfruitful struggles to assimilate a foreign cultural identity. In the plot build up, Changez approaches a suspicious American character and ends up initiating a lengthy conversation with him over a cup of coffee. Subsequently, the reader learns about the protagonist's educational, romantic, and professional life, most of which takes place in America. Changez works extremely hard and manages to impress his teachers, coworkers, and fiancée's parents. However, just when things seemed to be working out fine, the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attack occurs. The reader then learns about Changez's "concealed" abhorrence of America when he states that he was pleased by the attack, not because of the resulting damages and loss of lives, but because the U.S. has been attacked in a rather humiliating manner. The events that follow the attack seem to eradicate whatever sentimental attachment Changez has with America. Despite living in America for several years and identifying with the country in his overseas assignments, he finds himself relegated to the status of a "suspect" foreigner. Being from a Muslim background, Changez finds the American context markedly hostile as he is subjected to strip-searches at airports and accorded painful and suspicion-filled looks by other passengers. The events that follow see him abandon all his endeavors in America and return to Pakistan. It is here that Changez transforms to a "reluctant fundamentalist," choosing to advocate for the nonviolent opposition of American foreign policies that tended to undermine the sovereignty of Pakistan. American interests in Changez begin when one of his students becomes involved in an assassination attempt against an American dignitary. The plot then returns to the beginning where Changez is seated with the anonymous American. The ending is suspense-filled as the American, on sensing that he was being pursued, reaches into his pocket for a "budging" item. Whatever followed is left to the reader's imagination.

Reading the *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* provides the reader with a clear impression of the implications of globalization and cosmopolitanism on cultural identities. In this case, Hamid explicitly portrays the disillusionment endured by individuals from Muslim backgrounds as a consequence of the contemporary ideological and political tensions. In doing so, the author extends the discourse on Muslim identity fluidity and multiplicity beyond the typical religious realm to incorporate the global socio-economic and geopolitical aspects. Rather than focusing on identity multiplicities within the Muslim culture, Hamid adopts a broader perspective as he delves into the murky discourses on American fundamentalism, stereotyping in Western cosmopolitan metropolis, and radicalization. The resulting narrative gives a clear insinuation that, given the current state of globalization, the Muslim culture and the associated identities cannot be discussed in isolation from other cultures. Changez's character defines a cosmopolitanism trend in which

individuals from Muslim backgrounds strive to separate culture from religion to adopt perceived universal social identities. The tendencies by individual to assimilate other cultures have been extensively researched with scholars such as Reicher (2004) stating that:

Personal identity defines our uniqueness relative to the individual...distinctive social identity is what marks us out as different...Social identities are defined in comparative terms...group members indulge in social comparison between their in-group and relevant outgroups. (p. 929)

That is, individuals introduced to new cultural contexts strive to adopt new identities, provided that such identities offer improved life-benefits and experiences. These sentiments are evidenced by Changez's initial reverence of the American identity and its promise of a better social life. Once introduced to American life, Changez observes that:

This was how my life was meant to be...rubbing shoulders with the truly wealthy in such exalted setting... my Princeton degree and Underwood Samson business card were sufficient to earn me a respectful nod of approval. (Hamid, 2008, p. 85)

Essentially, this realization leads Changez to separate his cultural identity from his religious identity, which enables him to embrace the American identity while at the same time retaining his Muslim religiosity. It is his continued identification with the Muslim background that drives him to retain his concealed abhorrence of America, especially due to the inherent contemporary ideological and political tensions that have characterized the relationship between the two groups. Although he strives to conceal his distrust and abhorrence of America's foreign policies and activities, the events that follow the attack on the twin towers drive him to the extreme. The fiction of his American identity is made apparent when he smiles in satisfaction following the attack – "then I smiled...my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (Hamid, 2008, p. 72). From this point onwards, Changez's admiration for the American social identity continues to deteriorate as he bombards the anonymous American with satirical remarks and questions about the candidness of the country's philosophies and foreign policies. The country's predisposition on issue of terrorism pushes him further as his Muslim ethnicity exposes him to the jeopardies of the "otherness" identity. His attempts to grow a beard as a means of reconnecting with his "true" identity only earns him more trouble as he ends up being branded a *jihadi*. Consequently, he decides to return to Pakistan to regain his "true" identity and, visibly, reorganize and teach his fundamentalist philosophies: "It was right for me to refuse to participate in this project of domination...the only surprise was that I [took] so much time to arrive at my decision" (Hamid, 2008, p. 157). Overall, Changez narrative depicts a systematic shift in identity in which the aspects of convenience, tolerance, rejection, resistance, and retribution manifest as key drivers. In the resulting identity shifts, it becomes apparent that Changez, as with other Muslims that venture into Western multicultural contexts, is compelled to reevaluate and readjust his cultural identity to avert the pressures and intrigues of being the "other." This development reflects Eliot's (1957) assumptions that the element of "self" is developed and influenced by society in which an individual is situated. Sensibly, this aspect of Changez's character is a necessity that affects most individuals from minority cultures in cosmopolitan contexts.

C. The Nature and Drivers of Muslim Identity Fluidities and Ambiguities

The interactionist framework unveils that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Forty Rules of Love* present vast aesthetic experiences and expressions that reflect Muslim identity fluidities and ambiguities. Specifically, the two narratives unveil two distinct dimensions through which Muslim identity fluidities and ambiguities are constructed. Concerning Shafak's narrative, the imbedded historical *Sweet Blasphemy* account accentuates the manifestations of Muslim identity fluidities and ambiguities along the path of religious maturity by covering the representative interactions, expressions, and predispositions of several characters. Considering emphasis on the domestication of religious philosophies and doctrines among historical and conservative Muslim cultures, spiritual self-determination emerges as a key determinant for identity development. Applied to Eliot's (1957) assumptions, individuals' experiences, expressions, and ideological predispositions, thus, become the key qualities making "sense" of one's spiritual self-determination. As Kudryashova (2017) asserts, Muslimness in conservative Islamic contexts entails a combination of qualities and values acquired through articulation and mentoring to create a sense of belonging to the Islamic tradition. Thus, it can be perceived that Muslim identity is not a static phenomenon since it exists in a realm of interfaith relations in which modification of behavioral patterns and norms is a continuous process. This is particularly evident in the emphasis accorded to both cross- and intra-generational mentorship in Shafak's presentation of the thirteenth century context. Cross-generational mentorship is apparent in the relationship between the cook and the novice, while the intra-generational version can be constructed by following the interactions between Shams and Rumi. Thus, as implied by Zuriet and Lyausheva (2019), classification of identity in highly conservative Muslim contexts should follow the recognition of the Quran's values and doctrines and the subsequent application of the acquired knowledge in one's dealings in society. While Sham identifies four levels in this regard, Shafak's characters' aesthetic experiences and expressions reflect rankings in the two lower categories. Shams, Rumi, and, to some extent, Aziz identify as those with *Batm*, having mastered the "inner" meaning of the Quran to overcome their *nafs* to become *Sufis*. Despite their various age- and status-related identities, the other characters fall in the first broad identity category due to their obsession with the Quran's "outer" meaning. As Sham informs the Judge, the novice, and several other characters, they are all victims of partial intellect and are, therefore, bound by their *nafs*. Thus, their socialization aesthetics embody the representative identity of the Muslim culture.

On his part, Hamid utilizes his prodigy, Changez, to highlight potential Muslim identity shifts and multiplicities in the contemporary globalized world. Rather than fixating on the conservative attributes of regional and historical Muslim cultures, Hamid immerses the Muslim identity in the muddles of post-modern cosmopolitan contexts in which deep-seated ideological and political tensions underpin stereotyping and radicalization tendencies. At the core of Changez's interactions is what Reicher (2004) describes as the imperialistic force of globalization on identity formation and shifts. Seemingly, Hamid's projection of Changez's escapades in America before, during, and after the September 11 attacks serves to portray the potential Muslim identity crises and shifts in globalized, multicultural settings – response of “self” to changes in the broader society (Eliot, 1957). In this case, Changez adopts the dominant American identity for convenience purposes and the need to identify with the collective to access the benefits of perceived imperialistic culture. However, since he does not relinquish his Muslim identity, he ends up embracing two cultures, resulting in a state of identity multiplicity that underpins his philosophical turmoil in America. Changez's decision to embrace a double-identity aligns with Zuriet and Lyausheva's (2019) assumptions that Muslim identity can be combined with national, ethnic, gender, status, and professional identity signifiers to facilitate effective responses to emergent social patterns and norms, albeit, in accordance with Islamic doctrines. Throughout the narrative, it is apparent that although Changez embodies several American identity signifiers, his heart (ideological predispositions) and “true” self remain with his Muslim identity. For instance, besides feeling a sense of satisfaction following the twin towers attack, he is infuriated by America's invasion of Afghanistan – “Afghanistan was...our friend...a Muslim fellow nation...its invasion...caused me tremble and fury” (Hamid, 2008, p. 51). Zuriet and Lyausheva (2019) proceed to note that crisis of identity often develops with the buildup of crises in society, especially alterations in the socio-cultural environment that threatens one's “true” identity. In the case of a religious identity crisis in a multicultural setting, pressures from the adopted identity signifiers or other cultures can result in instances of resistance, which can either be constructive or destructive.

For Changez, the transformations in America's socio-cultural environment following the twin attacks and its imperialistic foreign policies initiated a sense of resistance that invoked his fundamentalist tendencies. Sensibly, the choice of stance taken following the development of Muslim identity crises depends on one's interpretation of the Quran doctrines. This aspect reiterates the issue of *nafs* accentuated in Shafak's text by Shams. As a Muslim identity signifier, *Sufism* is presented as a key stage of self-determination and spirituality. Despite being intimidated by developments in his immediate socio-cultural environment, Shams, having embodied the *Sufism* signifier in the Muslim identity group, opts for the constructive approach to resistance through instruction and guidance. Thus, when applied in the context of conservative Muslim cultures, Changez can be accommodated in the lower Muslim identity group that bears the outer meaning. Visibly, his rigid and antagonistic judgment of the “otherness” based on the prevailing ideological and socio-political tensions suggests susceptibility to the deceitfulness of *nafs*. In this case, it can be asserted that conceptualizing identity within the Muslim culture necessitates a multidisciplinary evaluation of how the elements of religiosity and nationality interplay within the prevailing socio-cultural and socio-political contexts to influence individuals' attitudes, predispositions, and general interactions.

The current literary analysis unveils two distinct definitive factors demarking the degree and nature of Muslim identity ambiguities and fluidities. Considering the underlying emphasis on religious traditions and spirituality in Muslim cultures, the lifetime journey to spiritual self-determination and ontological unity with God – gaining inner truth of the Quran to achieve sufficient intellect to purge one's *nafs* – manifests as ultimate measure of Muslim identity. Statuses and titles emerge as mere signifiers within the four broad levels (identities) listed by Shams in *The Forty Rules of Love*. The emergence of globalization and its imperialistic force only served to increase the scope and variety of identity signifiers by expanding individuals' exposure to a broader array of ideological, socio-cultural and socio-political factors. This latter aspect explains the apparent increase in Muslim identity variations and fluidities as illustrated by the character of Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

III. CONCLUSION

With the emergence of globalization and the constantly-changing ideological, socio-political, and socio-cultural contextual factors, the conceptualization of cultural identity has evolved to become a markedly complex endeavor. The complexity, in this regard, is further reinforced where religious and national identities intersect constantly in multicultural settings. Combined, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* provide an apparent illustration of the potential fluidities and ambiguities of Muslim identities in both conservative Islamic and globalized context. By applying the interactionist framework, the analysis reveals a vast array of aesthetic experiences denoting identity qualities along the path to self-determination and spiritual maturity, as well as the proliferation of identity signifiers, courtesy of globalization and cosmopolitanism. Most importantly, the interactionist framework unveils the inadequacies of the typical broader binaries of identities, such as Islamic vs. Western civilizations, in reflecting “true” character distinctiveness at the individual level. As unveiled in the two texts, there exists a broad variety of Muslim identities that can only be covered comprehensively by mapping unique and aesthetic experiences and interactions at the individual level. Going by the interactionist framework, the vastness and diversity of characters in the first level of spiritual growth necessitates the assignment of different identity signifiers to establish suitable identity categories. This latter aspect puts into perspective the impracticality of establishing conclusive binaries

for the varieties of Muslim identities across all the regional, historical, and contemporary contexts. Simply put, Muslim identity entails a fluid, ambiguous, and continuously evolving concept.

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