

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## ***The Reluctant Fundamentalist: The Re-territorialisation of the Encounter between America and its Muslim 'Other(s)'***

Nath Aldalala'a

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid is a novel that explores several issues related to the relationship between America and the Islamic world in the contexts of post 9/11. In this politicised climate of intensified nationalistic attitudes characterised by fear and suspicion of the 'other', Hamid's novel foregrounds the acrimonious encounter between America and its Muslim other(s). The text seeks to reverse the dominant rhetoric of the West, and create a space that allows the Muslim 'other' a chance to speak; a gesture that also illustrates the process of disillusionment. The novel accomplishes these manoeuvres through the literary trope of migration, whereby a story of exile and return becomes a vehicle for new understandings as the homeland is revalorised. The novel's dialogic form further complicates this narrative through its use of a confessional mode coupled with the suspense of a political thriller. The novel's significance within a body of fiction that addresses the contingencies of 9/11 lies in how its engagement with contemporary political and ideological tensions re-positions the dynamics of the encounter. Its success is achieved through its embedding of a political critique within a series of dialogues that reproduce the conversational realism of a chance 'encounter' between a Pakistani and an American in a Lahore teashop.

Hamid's novel takes a rather pessimistic view of global affairs and of the relationship between the two opposing positions it sets out: within the text America and the Islamic world seem caught up in a pervasive mood that mobilises a re-consideration of national and cultural boundaries. As Pakistan is the ground on which the confrontation is ultimately played out, it suggests a movement from the centre to the margin – from America to Pakistan – unsettling the conventional global hierarchies of power. In the tense climate of the contemporary world the protagonist, Changez, drinks tea with an anonymous American visitor, to whom he narrates his experience of living in the U.S. During his time there he becomes a successful business analyst in a New York company after graduating from Princeton, and enjoys the trappings of his capitalist and materialistic lifestyle. The sense of home and belonging experienced by the migrant are complicated in the novel by specific political events which lead the protagonist to a wider examination of his relationship with his adopted home and its place in the world. His unrequited love of Erica, who becomes increasingly introverted and consumed by the mythology she constructs around her dead lover, is a further allegory of this relationship and representative of America's withdrawal and self-protective policies in the post 9/11 climate. Following his denunciation of America, Changez returns to Pakistan to become a university lecturer and his attitude towards his former adopted home becomes increasingly hostile. The return of Changez to his home nation symbolically reasserts Pakistan as a locus of belonging. The gesture endorses Pakistan's cultural and intellectual boundaries. The novel subtly maps out some of the problems that Pakistan faces, whether economic, social or political, yet the narrative is balanced by images of a nation rich in its own culture and vitally aware of its own recent history since

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partition. Moreover, the author's perceptive insights into American society, and its embrace of aggressive capitalism, position him to evaluate the imbalances in the encounter. In Hamid's portrayal of the encounter America is unusually vulnerable.

The attacks on the Twin Towers prompted America to construct its own de-territorialised 'other', thus replacing an inherited or recycled figure of European imperialist discourse. The escalation in aggression towards strangers marks a sinister turn in America's foreign policies and in its posturing of national protection. The novel demonstrates how, in a globalised world of late capitalism and transnational movement, the mechanisms and reproductions of the West's others cannot be seen to merely reinvigorate the preceding centuries of colonialism. Yet there is a sense of irony latent in this contemporary construction of the 'other' by the U.S., as it is in fact a figure that emanates from the same originary spaces. Therefore in the novel the landscape seems simultaneously to have changed and to be static. As the novel stages this paradox it challenges its readers to examine the anxieties and tensions emergent in both the Islamic world and in the West. Hamid's exploration of identity and multicultural integration leads to an acknowledgement of the ever-present underbelly of nationalism. My reading of the novel pays attention to the narrator's evolving cultural and political sensitivities and how voice is conflicted and/or projected by particular intersections of historical circumstances and global and local modernities. The form of the dramatic monologue provides an apt vehicle for voicing the ironic awareness of the transnational subject with his experience of both exile and return.

### Narrative Constructions and Conflicted Voice(s)

The author's choice of narrative strategy is effective in its exploitation of the dialogic qualities of the novel and in its capacity to examine political and cultural boundaries. The opening paragraphs of the novel reveal the tensions embedded in the personal narrative of the central character and in the wider political context into which it is inserted. Dramatic immediacy is asserted in the opening line, when the first person voice kindly accosts the anonymous American visitor, 'Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance?' Yet, this affable politeness is immediately qualified in the next phrase, 'Ah, I see I have alarmed you'.<sup>1</sup> This second utterance registers a set of circumstances whereby both characters are alert to a sense of danger, and the narrator/host is increasingly complicit in heightening that feeling in the American visitor. The narrator identifies the American by what he terms as his bearing, and a sense of unease is conveyed when he questions what the visitor could be seeking in this part of the city, at this time of day. The bathos in his presumption that it could only be 'the quest for the perfect cup of tea' is possibly intended to misguide the visitor, and the reader. Yet, his teasing question 'Have I guessed correctly?' (2) is unsettling. The disturbing nature of this chitchat is amplified as the politics of the situation emerge. In the latter part of the novel, as the tension is rising, Changez says to his guest:

When you sit in that fashion, sir [...] a bulge manifests itself through the lightweight fabric of your suit, precisely at that point parallel to the sternum where the undercover security agents of our country – and indeed, one

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<sup>1</sup>Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007) 1. Subsequent references to this text will be included in parentheses in the text.

assumes, of all countries – tend to favour wearing an armpit holster for their sidearm. (139)

This mixture of an assumed naïveté with worldliness echoes the courtesies of diplomatic rhetoric underpinned with threats of aggression – the hallmarks of international relations. Again, the cynical game of claim and disingenuous counterclaim is performed with the further retort, ‘I am certain that in your case it is merely the outline of one of the travel wallets’ (139). While both characters are wary of the other, Changez is able to appear in command of the situation owing to the territory in which the two men are situated. From this position of control, the narrative then settles down into Changez’s account of being the migrant ‘other’ in America.

Consequently, through the dialogue between the first person Pakistani narrator/speaker and the unnamed American listener, the novel explores, simultaneously, the parameters and contradictions of global politics and the conflicted voice of modernity. Hamid transfers questions about the boundaries of political encounter to the context of literature when he comments that he ‘never really understood the boundaries between genres’ nor had he ever ‘really understood the boundary between the roles of character and reader’.<sup>2</sup> To this end the author involves the reader in the text as a politicised character. If, as might be assumed, the American listener to the first-person narrator occupies a similar subject position to that of the implied reader, the author presents the text as a form of ‘writing back’ to the dominant discourse. Yet the text is deliberately ambiguous here as the reader may identify with either character – or oscillate between the two – as the motives of each become increasingly suspect as night falls. Hamid’s use of the first-person narrator, with its inherent suggestion of unreliability, is further unsettled by being constructed through the mode of the dramatic monologue, a form in which the speaker frequently reveals more about himself than he intended while implicating the reader in moral judgements. This use of a first-person narrative disrupts the conventional sympathetic relationship between narrator and reader as it strikes a tone of intimacy and is also increasingly alienating as the reader is led into imagining a political thriller in which each character is plotting the extermination of the other. Through the dramatic stance of the apparently considerate sentiments from the Pakistani host, intended both to raise and downplay the particular anxieties of his American guest, the reader is able to identify within this interplay of genre and media-produced stereotypes two particular paradigms that are becoming entrenched in the post 9/11 world.

The narrative strategy is a clever and complex device through which the intersection of political interests overlaps with human stories and allows a seemingly confessional narrative to develop into a political thriller. This grants the reader a freedom to explore alternative voices in an era when dominant political and cultural discourses impinge upon textual interpretation. To do so, Hamid successfully exploits the strategy of the dramatic monologue. The nineteenth-century poet Robert Browning developed the form to explore the controversial or taboo voices of disreputable bishops, promiscuous and lustful Renaissance monks and murderous dukes. Here the author applies this strategy in a consideration of the real world of contemporary global politics through the fictional voice of an ambivalent character

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<sup>2</sup>Mohsin Hamid, ‘Guardian Book Club’, *Guardian*, 14 May 2007.

caught up in competing discursive structures. It is also possibly an expedient move in light of the issues of authenticity and representation frequently attached to postcolonial writers. As Salman Rushdie discussed in his essay ‘Minority Literatures in a Multi-Cultural Society’,<sup>3</sup> postcolonial and migrant writers working and publishing in the West are strongly identified with their subject matter and are frequently over-burdened with being ‘representative’ of particular groups, communities or nations. The novel displays an awareness of this when Changez reflects on his immediate response to the attacks on the Twin Towers. Watching TV news while posted to a job in Manila, Changez remembers that ‘I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased’ (72). The confessional mode mediated through the presence of a specific listener also distances the reader from the central character. Yet the protagonist’s own recognition of his perplexing response as inappropriate implicitly registers the difference between a political reaction to the symbolic representation and empathy with the human tragedy. Such moments call for a more nuanced context in which to understand alternative voices.

Thus the first-person narrator implicates the reader in the text. This is resonant through the increasing confidence of the first person speaker, and the effect is complicated by the subject position of the reader. The potency and seductive quality of the speaker becomes clear at the time of his job interview with Jim, the manager at the New York firm Underwood Samson. During this dialogue the reader becomes aware of the imbrications of the slightly sinister first-person narrator/speaker, and his identity as the apolitical, aspirational immigrant, Changez. It is here, for the first time in the novel, the name of the anonymous speaker is revealed. This is some time after the narrative strategy has been established, and the consequent staging of certain expectations in the dialogic encounter between America and its Muslim ‘other’. While the revelation of the speaker’s name suggests a particular identity, as Pakistani and by association a Muslim, the text also draws attention to a commonality in relationships between other non-western nations with the U.S. superpower. Changez’s conflicted relationship with America is demonstrated by his experience of working for Samson Underwood and the episode when he meets the Chilean publishing chief, Juan-Bautista (150-152) is especially illuminating in this respect.

During his trip to Chile certain subconscious reformulations of experience and perception take place to reshape his vision and connection with the world following the events of 9/11. During this visit he becomes more attentive to the exacerbation of the ongoing animosity between Pakistan and India and the ‘tit-for-tat’ tests of ballistic missiles. The capital cities of each nation are being visited by foreign dignitaries in an effort to stem the rising hostility of the rhetoric between Delhi and Islamabad, but Changez’s comment to the American conveys his critical insight:

I wondered, sir, about your country’s role in all this: surely, with American bases already established in Pakistan for the conduct of the Afghanistan campaign, 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 and

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<sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘Minority Literatures in a Multi-Cultural Society’ in *Displaced Persons* ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Ann Rutherford (Aarhus: Seklos, 1998) 33-42.

would be responded to by the overwhelming force of America's military.  
(143)

He accuses America's strict stance of neutrality as being an act of favouritism towards the larger, and at that particular moment, the more belligerent of the two nations. By juxtaposing U.S. foreign policy with the narrator's trip to South America, Hamid makes covert parallels with other political and military interventions undertaken by the world's dominant economic and political superpower.

By interweaving the personal with the political the author illustrates how world events impact at the cultural level. Changez's observations about Valparaiso strike a chord with his reminiscences about his family and home. The melancholic and faded grandeur of the city, economically marginalised by the opening of the Panama Canal, is compared with Lahore. Changez invokes an evocative maxim from his native language, that 'the ruins proclaim the building was beautiful' (144). Earlier in the novel Changez describes the economic and social dislocations that have taken place in Pakistan since the time of Independence. He notes the decline of currency in relation to the rising power of the dollar, and the related impoverishment of the professional classes. With these observations he draws comparisons between the pragmatic efficiency of America and the social structures of traditional cultures. It is while musing on this he sees beyond the inflexible boundaries of capitalist fundamentals to the wider implications of its hard-nosed ideology.

The experience in Chile is the catalyst that mobilises a transformation in Changez. Having arrived in Valparaiso to determine the asset value of an old publishing company, run by the elderly Juan-Bautista, Changez becomes sensitive to the social and cultural effects of his profession. He understands the prospective buyer of the publishing firm will not want to subsidise the loss-making literary division from the profits of the lucrative trade arm of the company. Changez witnesses a conversation between his boss and the publishing chief which is particularly illuminating. Juan-Bautista asks, 'What do you know of books?' to which Jim replies 'I've valued a dozen publishers over two decades' (141). The older man retorts this means he knows about finance, not about books. Juan Bautista is perceptively aware of Changez's changing understanding of the world, instigated by an increasing sense of dislocation since 9/11. In a subsequent conversation between Juan-Bautista and Changez, the old man reminds him of the janissaries – the Christian boys recruited by the Ottomans to fight against their own civilisations. The introspective mood of Changez leads to a realisation that he is a native informant, or rather a modern day janissary (151). In this moment of epiphany Changez questions the fundamentals of aggressive capitalism in which he participates, and thus becomes ambiguously, a reluctant fundamentalist. Notably, when recalling his conversation with Juan Bautista, Changez, for the first time, makes an appeal for the American to believe him that contrasts with the confidence and control in general throughout his narrative. The urgency in this appeal to the American that follows his account of Juan-Bautista suggests a broader critique of America can be discerned from the nature of its conflict with the Muslim world:

But your expression, sir, tells me that you think something is amiss. Did this conversation really happen, you ask? For that matter, did this so-called Juan-

Bautista even exist? I assure you, sir: you can trust me. I am not in the habit of inventing untruths! And moreover, even if I were, there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you. (151-52)

This is a pivotal moment in the conversation between Changez and the American, and in effect, the scope of fiction is registered as their dialogue mimics cultural (mis)understandings and the processes of international relations. His affirmation ‘I assure you, sir, you can trust me’ is an acknowledgement of the nervous mistrust by the U.S. government and its anxieties about being dependent on such ‘friendships’. Thus, the changing characteristic of the narrative voice between the autonomous ‘I’ of the novel’s opening, and the disclosure of the more hybrid identity of Changez the migrant is illustrative of the text’s movement between the collective voices of a real world of contemporary politics and the singularity of human experience represented in fiction. This narrative strategy enacts a reality in which there is a compulsion to take one side or the other in the war on terror. Therefore the mapping of voice through the novel transcends the individual story to engage with the wider implications and global inter-connections. As such, the first person persona provides a spatial framework for this. The claim by the speaker that he is ‘a lover of America’(1) is in fact a condemnation of it. It is more the case that he had once been an admirer of America at the beginning of his story, but the migrant has travelled far from that position by the close of the narrative. The awakening sense of cultural pride is further imprinted when he tells his guest that he was ‘a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war’(152). During this part of the conversation the American becomes increasingly unsettled but he remains hostage as a passive listener. The reflective character of Changez is reconfigured as the agential voice of a speaker cynically aware of a political climate that demands signing up to one side or the other. The possibility of occupying a liminal space is erased by the dogma of the war on terror. A return to the opening sections of the novel supports this. The anonymous American is portrayed as a type, and perhaps, then, a particular paradigm. As noted, he has a certain bearing, and thus his individuality is erased by a collective identity. Changez says, ‘It was your bearing that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation’ (2). This foregrounding of the American as a particular stereotypical figure, sitting opposite to that of another – a Pakistani man with a beard – poses many questions about image, representation and reception. The novel responds to the questions it raises by exploring how particular discursive positions are constructed, shaped and authenticated in relation to the ‘war on terror’. That is, how one might become a fundamentalist – reluctantly!

### **Staging Stereotypes**

The novel sets out to illustrate the reproductions and inflections of the popular stereotypes associated with Islam and Muslim culture, but it also insists on a more nuanced understanding of the geopolitics of Pakistan’s position. This is staged by the narrator’s evolution from the migrant figure in pursuit of the American dream to that of politicised Muslim. The opening scenes demonstrate the performativity of identity.

The moderate Muslim narrator playfully contends that a bearded man is not essentially a signifier of radical Islamic tendencies. When first meeting his American interlocutor the narrator says, ‘Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America’ (1). Further on, the American’s attention is drawn towards another man, one with a beard worn longer than the narrator’s. At various stages in the novel the narrator acknowledges the presence of this bearded man, suggesting to the reader that the American’s eyes are nervously fixated on him (22-6). Thus, the novel opens with a paradox and a discrepancy between image and sentiment, or signifier and signified. For the American, and perhaps the Western reader influenced by popular media, the wearing of a beard does not sit in harmony with a confessed love of America. Coupled with the ambiguous and ambivalent title of the novel, the reader may be unsettled by this apparently moderate voice. Yet, on closer reading the beard does in effect become a signifier of a politicised Muslim. A consistency between image and substance is especially pertinent when the bearded man is in an encounter with an American. Here the formal complexity of the novel projects the ambiguity of the situation. The novel seeks to neutralise the image of a bearded man and distinguish it from that of a terrorist while also sustaining the tension inherent in the meeting between this Muslim figure and an agent of America. It is notable from the tone of the speaker’s declaration of his love for America that the relationship is one way affair, as there is no such equivalent affection by America towards its ‘other(s)’. The American is in Lahore solely for the purpose of his singular ‘mission’, in contrast, the protagonist describes his enthusiastic embrace of American life. The present encounter between these two polarised characters is intensified by and channelled through the prism of 9/11. Furthermore, the repetition of the word ‘experience’ early in the novel acquires a slightly sinister edge that prompts the reader to question the intentions of the first person speaker as he assumes a position of power within the relationship, most notably evident in his continual acknowledgements of the American’s discomfort and unease:

You prefer that seat, with your back so close to the wall? Very well, although you will benefit less from the intermittent breeze, which, when it does blow, makes these warm afternoons more pleasant. And will you remove your jacket? So formal! Now that is not typical of Americans, at least not in my experience. And my experience is substantial: I spent four and half years in your country. (2-3)

By choosing to sit with his back to the wall the American displays nervousness, but he also appears vigilant and completely self-protective. His guardedness is emphasised by his reluctance to take off his jacket as that would indeed make him more comfortable in the heat of the Lahore summer. There is a teasing irony in the narrator’s remarks that such formality is unusual in an American. Through such narrative gestures Hamid examines the dynamic between a superpower and its unfamiliar handmaid. Post 9/11 tension already permeates the narrative as the reader will be alert to the sense of alienation felt by the American visitor and his vulnerability, underlined by his distance from the military powers occupying neighbouring Afghanistan. As the novel progresses, the previous clarity of the power dynamic becomes blurred. The tension between the two men is illustrated by the

narrator's suspicion that there may be a firearm loosely disguised in the American's jacket.

The speaker's voice acquires a more overt sense of national culture as he describes his education at Princeton and his time in New York. Later, in conversation with Erica's father, he bridles at the comments about how the elite in Pakistan have raped the nation and its serious problems with fundamentalism (55). Although it is 'a summary with some knowledge' Changez also notes the 'typically American undercurrent of condescension' that 'struck a negative chord' (55). His descriptions are especially insightful when juxtaposed with acknowledgements of the American's anxiety about the presence of the other bearded man: 'You seem worried. Do not be; this burly fellow is merely our waiter' (5). Changez takes a morbid delight in asserting and undermining the assumed political and cultural stereotypical perceptions of his Western guest: 'Ah, our tea has arrived! Do not look so suspicious. I assure you, sir, nothing untoward will happen to you, not even a runny stomach' (11). These repeated assurances to the American establish a curious inverse of the political relationship between America and Pakistan. It seems here that the Pakistani now commands a position of authority over the American, and offers guarantees for his safety. This subversion of the conditionality of the war on terror is unsettling to America and the West, as conventional battle lines are now indistinct or non-existent. The conflict is actually grounded on a de-territorialised space in which the 'dominant' powers have to learn to decode the signs and actions of the enigmatic 'other'. The enemy has become difficult to discern and the calls by the government of George W. Bush for the world's nations to be with them or against them seem rather inept.

If the novel is read within the context of the macro-politics of the immediate post-9/11 world, then further understandings of the power dynamic between the Pakistani narrator and his American listener can be inferred. Ever since Pakistan found itself thrust onto the world stage it has become a nation with an increasingly conflicted voice, which is replicated by the personal journey of novel's narrator. Embroiled in the U.S. plans to avenge the attacks on their homeland, the ensuing rhetoric fostered a political narrative informed by fiction, and in turn fiction became inevitably political. The encounter between America and its Muslim-Pakistani 'other' was initiated immediately after 11 September 2001. At the political level Pakistan found itself in a position that has some parallels with the discursive positioning of Changez. Writing in his memoir, *In the Line of Fire*, Perves Musharraf describes how on 12 September 2001 he was called away from an important meeting by an urgent phone call from the U.S Secretary of State, Colin Powell:

Powell was quite candid: 'You are either with us or against us.' I took this as blatant ultimatum. [...] our director general of Inter Services Intelligence [...] told me on the phone about his meeting with the U.S. deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage. In what has to be the most undiplomatical statement ever made, Armitage added to what Colin Powell had said to me and told the director general not only that we had to decide whether we were with America or with the terrorists, but that if we chose the terrorists, then we should be prepared to be bombed back to the Stone Age.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Perves Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire, A Memoir* (London: Simon Schuster, 2006) 200-1.

Following this ‘diplomatic’ confrontation between the world’s leaders in the days after 9/11, significant roles were to be established in a long term encounter between America and its ‘others’ characterised as the ‘war on terror’ – or what Musharraf called the ‘war against shadows’.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan has since become the focus of political analysts and literary writers, and the line between the two became hazy. Yet Hamid’s novel seeks to deconstruct stereotypical representations of Pakistani society that are frequently reductive and unhelpful by providing a more complex insight. Implicit in Hamid’s novel is an understanding of Pakistan’s significance to world affairs and to the traditions of literary representation. Within the sphere of international relations, Pakistan must be recognised for having the fastest-growing nuclear program,<sup>6</sup> and most of Al-Qaeda’s leaders are believed to be hiding in Pakistan, as the recent killing of Osama bin Laden suggests. Thus, Pakistan is a strategic ally in the United States’ war on terror.<sup>7</sup> With reference to literary representation, attention has turned to Pakistan’s role in shaping world politics and how this impacts on cultural and political landscapes. Claire Chambers observes that:

Pakistani writers, most of them living or educated in the West, currently feature prominently in the international literary scene as award winners or nominees, best-selling authors, festival speakers and, increasingly, topics for research students and critics. The success, borne out by multiple prize awards or nominations, of such novels as Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohammed Hanif’s *A Case of Exploring Mangoes* [...] has led to bidding wars and high advances for US-educated writers Ali Sethi and Daniyal Mueenuddin.<sup>8</sup>

These writers explore the issues that locate Pakistan at the centre of world politics, while for others a reference to Pakistan has become synonymous with terror and threat. Writers such as Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie both single out Pakistan as a hub of terrorism. Amis states in his 2007 article ‘9/11 and the Cult of Death’ that Islamism has been with us for the lion’s share of a century. He further notes the ‘Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928, and within a decade there was an offshoot in what would soon become Pakistan’.<sup>9</sup> Salman Rushdie’s blunt disavowal of Pakistan is indicative of the malignant rhetoric that often masquerades as informed analysis:

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<sup>5</sup>Musharraf199.

<sup>6</sup>See Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission <<http://www.paec.gov.pk>> Also see Editorial, ‘Storing up Trouble: Pakistan’s Nuclear Bombs’, *Guardian* Thursday 3 February 2011<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentfree/2011/feb/03/pakistan-nuclear-bombs-editorial>>

<sup>7</sup>Musharraf’s memoirs explain in detail the advantages and disadvantages for Pakistan of joining America in the ‘War on Terror’. Musharraf explains his reasons behind his critical decision to join in this war.

<sup>8</sup>Claire Chambers, ‘A Comparative Approach to Pakistani Fiction in English’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47: 2 (2011) 122-23.

<sup>9</sup>Martin Amis, ‘9/11 and the Cult of Death’, *Times Online*, 11 September 2007, <[http://www.martinamisweb.com/commentary\\_files/911\\_cultofdeath.pdf](http://www.martinamisweb.com/commentary_files/911_cultofdeath.pdf)> (Accessed 14 June, 2011).

Pakistan sucks, especially if you are used to India, which is a rich complicated open society full of colours and smells and excess You cross the frontier into Pakistan, which used to be the same place Now, in a cultural sense, you feel a kind of airlessness, people are not allowed to say what they think, they aren't allowed to do what they like, women and men are segregated, there is a gigantic drug culture because it is one of the world's major producers of opium and heroine, there is an exploding AIDS problem which is not looked at because Muslims of course do not get AIDS, there is a highly gangsterised urban society, there is political corruption on both the civilian and military side, there is economic corruption [...] there is enormous regional dislike, everybody hates the Northwest frontier, where they are fundamentalists and pro-Taliban, it sucks.<sup>10</sup>

Rushdie in effect classifies Pakistan as a culture-in-deficit in which Islam is the central problem. This view may be contrasted with those mooted in novels such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that examine the sovereignty of Pakistan and its unique nationalist socio-culture. In the novel Pakistan is a setting of re-territorialisation, and it is also treated as an autonomous space, that is, an independent, colourful cultural setting, as much as the India Rushdie argues for. The education of Changez and the descriptions of his family background provide a glimpse into the history of Pakistan since Partition. These insights also reveal a far more sophisticated and multi-layered image of Pakistan than that depicted by the likes of Amis. While Hamid conveys this image, he also cleverly exploits the pertinent stereotypes, as the Lahore setting for this monologue intensifies the possibilities for tension and mistrust in the encounter. As the politics of this local power dynamic are resonant of the global anxieties, Hamid's text may be cited as a cross-cultural meeting place that seeks to redress cultural prejudice.

As Musharraf states in his memoirs, Pakistan's financial survival is dependent on the U.S. and since the 9/11 attacks the U.S. has provided billions of dollars in aid. Implicit in this agreement is the notion that Pakistan is proactive in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Also implicit is an understanding that America determines the terms of the encounter between the two. At this juncture morality becomes clouded, or problematised, by the competing claims of economics and socio-culture. Hamid's novel attempts a complex understanding of this through the presentation of a successful, educated Pakistani figure, who has been a beneficiary of American socio-economics. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* provides an alternative vision to the first wave of fictional responses to 9/11. Anglo-American writers such as Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Don DeLillo have commented on the difficulty of writing fiction as a means of engaging with or understanding 9/11.<sup>11</sup> Yet when they do eventually turn to this their creative energy is frequently focused on the domestic and the impact that such events have within the narrow confines of their own nationalist culture. This

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<sup>10</sup>Salman Rushdie, Interview, (6 June, 2011) <[www.theforumchannel.tv](http://www.theforumchannel.tv)>

<sup>11</sup>See Martin Amis, *The Second Plane: September 11: 2001-2007* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008); Ian McEwan, 'Only Love and then Oblivion. Love all they had to set against their murderers', *Guardian*, Saturday 15 September 2001 [Accessed 16 June, 2011]; Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, (New York: Simon& Schuster, 2001); Don DeLillo: 'In The Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September', *Guardian*, Saturday 22 December 2001.

generally involves the oblique ‘othering’ of Muslim culture. Pankaj Mishra voices a concern about Anglo-American literature that reveals an increasing recognition of its own fragility and vulnerability.<sup>12</sup> Often overlooked, or un-voiced, is the notion that 9/11 also crystallised feelings of discontent and humiliation experienced by those in the non-western world. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* attends to these imbrications of history, politics and economics from an alternative viewpoint. As the novel charts the milieu of American wealth and privilege, of which Changez is a beneficiary, rather than the marginalised migrant suffering economic and racial discrimination, it complicates the relationship between the West and the Muslim world. Thus an exploration of the competing ideologies and the social and political practices which impact on the inner life of individuals is effectively dramatised. Through this, Hamid’s narrative seeks to privilege the Pakistani narrator, and his identity as a Princeton-educated graduate destabilises the arguments that call on stereotyped invocations of Muslim people and culture. This gesture makes a significant contribution to the debate about the role of literature in understandings of major cultural and political events which reshape and re-define the world.

### **Re-assertion of National and Cultural Boundaries**

This interplay of stereotypes examines the nature and implications of national and cultural boundaries. In Chapter Two the narrator refers to a group of girls walking past the teashop in Lahore wearing jeans sparkled with paint. Changez comments on how they are attractive in their jeans – as much as the girls ‘sitting at the table beside ours, in their traditional dress’ (16). These observations point out the diversity and cohesion in Pakistani society - whether the girls are in jeans or in their national dress, they are integrated within the socio-cultural environment and attest to a blending of tradition and modernity. Such scenes also thwart the misperceptions of the West. The intent gaze of the American conveys a bemused curiosity as the image disturbs the preconceptions of his national culture. Furthermore, Changez draws the attention of his American guest to the institution of the National College of Arts – a motif of culture and modernity – housed not far from where they were sitting. Its presence is a contrast to the claustrophobic setting of the traditional market place, quintessentially conceived as a labyrinth of passageways frequented by bearded men who appear to spend their time plotting against democracy and other imposed Western modernities.

Such ambivalence is illustrated in Changez’s question to the American that perhaps he left behind a lover – male or female. His question, affecting an open tolerance of Western sensibilities is perhaps a veiled insult to the American. Yet, it also invokes Orientalist notions of sexual deviancy prevalent in the mysterious East. To counter the possible inferences in his question, Changez immediately announces that he left behind a woman, Erica, when he returned to Pakistan. There is a double layer of symbolism manifest in the name of his lover. Erica is a feminised version of a masculine name, and it is also a rupturing, or fragment, of Am/Erica. As a result of the stilted love affair with Erica, emotionally a part of Changez remains forever in America. The unrequited love signifies his share, or stake, in the nation – as Erica appears to present a particular dimension of his encounter with America. She is a symbol of American womanhood, as well as an articulation of the American dream.

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<sup>12</sup>Pankaj Mishra, ‘The End of Innocence’, *Guardian*, Saturday 19 May 2007,

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/19/fiction.martinamis>> [accessed 9 July 2011].

Erica is wealthy and beautiful, and has ambitions of being a writer, but her desire is fixated on the mythology she has created around her dead lover. The significance of this as a literary motif is that America is intoxicated by its own historical myths of nation. The author suggests the need for this excavation of a mythological past is exacerbated immediately following 9/11; a gesture that is evident in the strident patriotism that emerged. This nationalism performs a re-territorialisation of American sensibilities after 9/11, and is notable in Changez's increasing sense of inhospitality by those around him. When he returns from Manila soon after the September attacks his run-in with the immigration officer is indicative of the sudden and sharp change in the relationship between America and its 'others'.

The novel explores the possibility of unsettling the traditional power dynamic through the return of Changez to Pakistan, and also in its departure from the conventions of post 9/11 fiction. Peter Morey has commented on how the first response by fictional works to 9/11 often took two particular forms: 'either a "trauma narrative", that is, the attempt to trace the psychological scarring and the mental realignments of characters caught up in the Twin Towers attacks'. The alternative consisted of semi-fictionalised 'Muslim misery memories' which 'often served to underscore the injustices of Islamic rule and justify neoconservative interventionism.'<sup>13</sup> The Muslim Pakistani protagonist here is increasingly inhospitable to his American guest, but any impulse toward fundamentalism is undermined by his assertion of cultural pride on nationalist, rather than religious, grounds.

### **The Encounter: America vs. Muslim 'Others'**

Throughout the text Changez makes numerous comparisons between the two worlds as nostalgia for Pakistan increases alongside the 'impending destruction of [his] personal American dream' (92). Although the narrator recognises the danger of nostalgia and an inclination to exaggerate (21), the ultimate purpose of the gesture is to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse. Changez tells his visitor 'I am, after all, telling you a history' but, as an American especially should understand 'it is the thrust of one's narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one's details' (118). Since 9/11, the relationship between America and the Islamic world has become defined more conclusively by the war on terror – as an encounter between the West and its 'others' that appears limitless and endless. Hamid affirms this understanding when he describes how his concept of the novel was changed by 9/11 from being the personal story of migrant experience to a consideration of the geo-politics that dominates international relationships.<sup>14</sup> In a move which re-sites the staging of American anxieties in the setting of Pakistan the author re-establishes the latter as a space of belonging for the migrant. Yet, the residues of the encounter are embedded within the constitution of identity. Furthermore, Changez confirms how he is forever bound to America through his experience when he states, 'I had returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased' (172). Remarkably, this continued sense of occupation seems grounded on language rather than on any physical or material aspects. Changez states:

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Morey, 'The Rules of the Game Have Changed: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Post-9/11 Fiction', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47:2, 135-146 (p. 136).

<sup>14</sup> Mohsin Hamid 'Guardian Book Club', *Guardian*, 30 April 2007.

I remained emotionally entwined with Erica, and I brought something of her with me to Lahore – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to locate in the city of my birth (172).

The ‘logic’ of loss here is one of permanency. The speaker suggests that any reconciliation and reconstruction of this relationship is unattainable. Yet language remains the property of Changez and here he uses a poetic register that departs from the dominant cynical tone of his narrative. His lament for a time when the permeability of cultural boundaries seemed possible merely foregrounds the impossibility of peace in the shadow of the war on terror:

Often, for example, I would rise at dawn without having slept an instant. During the preceding hours, Erica and I would have lived an entire day together. We would have woken in my bedroom and breakfasted with my parents; [...] we would have sat on our scooter and driven to campus [...] and I would have been both amused and annoyed by the stares she received from the students passing by, because I would not have known how much those stares owed to her beauty and how much to her foreignness. (172-73)

The story being told by Changez captures the ebb and flow of (im)possibility. An encounter between America and its Muslim ‘other’ does indeed take place, and that is the possible. However, the rhetoric of what ‘would have been’ conveyed by the distancing device of poetically rendered dreams of love and harmony can signify only impossibility. It is this movement in the narrative – exile, return, reflection – that conveys the novel’s particular insights. Changez’s daydreams of breakfast with his parents and their approval of a marriage to his American lover – a positive transgression of cultural expectation – signifies an encounter of possibility. While, ironically, at the macro level Pakistan plays the role of reluctant bride in an arranged marriage, recent times have illustrated that the political relationship between the U.S. and Pakistani governments is one in which there is a necessary, but unenthusiastic intercourse between the two. The concluding vision of the novel is one that registers the reverberations of this encounter between America and its construction of the ‘other’. Tension and uncertainty prevails.