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Lead Article

Who is the Reluctant Fundamentalist? Ethical Reading and Alterity

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This essay will do a close ethical reading of Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. By an ethical reading, I mean looking at the moral imperatives that lie behind the critical choices we make as readers of the novel, and this will also especially take into account the specific position of an Indian reader of a novel by a Pakistani author examining the post 9/11 position of a Pakistani migrant in the US. The argument is divided into three sections – the first section will deal with why an ethical reading is determined to be more important in a post 9/11 world, or a world more or less continually ravaged by diverse attacks of terrorist and other forms of violence. The second section deals with the specific narrative strategies and devices used by Hamid in the novel, the functions of the dramatic monologue, the hoax confessional mode and the use of the unreliable narrator. The third (and perhaps most important) section takes the argument back to the ethics of reading, and specifically focuses on the subject position of an Indian reader – the subjectivities and constructions of empathy moving back and forth between post-colonial, South Asian, migrant experiences, the complex relationships between Indian and Pakistani nationalist identities usually constructed as the 'self' and the 'other'.

I

There has been much discussion on how literature can and should respond to contemporary social events and perhaps the single most defining political event or trauma to occur in the western world in the 20th century was the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001, usually referred to in its "bare name-date" form – 9/11. Marc Redfield puts it bluntly: "…the name-date pre-supposes and demands knowledge (…) the year understood, the attack understood, the term 9/11 suggests a new history begins here – at this Calendrical Ground –Zero." [58]. All other associations with the date September 9 have been erased or side-stepped in popular discourse, especially in the United States, a country that sees its status among nations and history as set apart in some special, providential way, which sees history as beginning again with itself and which has always regarded itself as a kind of Adamic figure in the world [35.] I wish to emphasise here, however that this Adamic figure is

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usually cast as innocent, not as one guilty of original (or any other kind of) sin. This form of 'American exceptionalism' as it is referred to in critical discourse also tends to assimilate the terrorist attacks of September 2001 into an easy "sentimental' narrative – "us against them" and one which resulted in the more extreme and nationalist expressions of the 'War on Terror'. This is not to diminish the very real human cost and pain that was the result of the attacks, in any way – 9/11 was a singular event, and so was the attack on the Indian parliament in 2011, the attacks in Mumbai in 2008 (referred to as 26/11) and more recently, the suicide attack on an Indian army convoy in Kashmir in 2019.

The 9/11 attacks created fear and anxiety in a hitherto never experienced way in America – McClintock references Apadurai to suggest, that if the goal of terror is to replace peace with violence as the regulative principle of everyday life, 9/11 succeeded, as the measures of the American state responded to that sense of anxiety, even perpetuated and fueled it and made the country undemocratic in ways it had never been. According to a document published online by the Al Qaeda on the first anniversary of 9/11, the longer the war in Afghanistan lasted, the longer the state of Emergency in the United States would last, signaling that one of the strategic aims behind the attack was to destabilize the democratic institutions of American society. [43]

This destabilization of American society in general, in both institutional terms as well as on the ground resulted in hate crimes as well as racial profiling and detaining of subjects who had hitherto been seen as ordinary citizens, as potential terrorists. According to Banita, the FBI recorded a 17 fold increase in anti-Muslim crimes nation-wide during 2001, with the worst crimes occurring in the months immediately following 9/11 – ranging from vandalism, arson, verbal taunting, employment discrimination and hassling at airports to assault and murder [170].

There seemed to be a single moral paradigm affirmed in this context – a 'good' vs 'evil' (one that I am familiar with, as it follows immediately in India also), a flattening out of all individual or critical choices, and relying on a 'civilisational' binary rather than judgement. Debra Bergoffen has written about how the post 9/11 politics of justice in America is rooted in a concept of innocence derived from the ethical figure of the innocent victims brutally murdered in the attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. She says that American national politics was imbued with a self-righteous notion of collective blamelessness and vindictive entitlement in which violence against the Other was the inevitable outcome. Tracing the history of a relationship with the Other through dialectic, psychoanalytic and existential literature, it is clear that violence is inevitably linked with notions of the Other, however, in order to transcend the violence of the Self-Other relationship, the Self is required to recognize the Other's destabilizing effects as well as to acknowledge that it is experienced by the Other as a threat, not as a result of any concrete action, but as an existential suspicion from which no one is exempt, no one is innocent. If we claim absolute innocence, we reject the ethical. [2008, 75]

The project of innocence in this case is also linked with invulnerability – Bergoffen

cites Martin Shaw who claimed that the desire to initiate the (Just) War on terrorism post 9/11 signified two aspects – the desire to avenge a terrible wrong and also a humiliation. It is unarguable that 9/11 was a terrible wrong, but Bergoffen goes further to conclude that it could only be seen as humiliating if it was viewed through the lens of invincibility rather that ethical judgment. "If the myth of American innocence prior to 9/11 was tied to the myth of an invincible nation on a mission of global redemption, then 9/11, by destroying this myth of invincibility, would be experienced as degrading." [79]

II

This brings me to the second part of my paper, where looking at Hamid's characterization of the American interlocutor through the eyes of Changez, this belief in innocence, self-righteousness and invincibility becomes clear. The novel is structured (cleverly) on the lines of a faux-dramatic monologue and a pseudo-confession. During the confessional narrative framed through the outside narrative of the apparently chance encounter between Changez and an anonymous American, it also becomes clear that Changez is an unreliable narrator. It is important to remember that the story is told entirely from Changez's perspective, as Peter Morey points out, "it could be claimed that The Reluctant Fundamentalist is falsely polyphonic; we "hear" the voices of Erica, Jim, Wainwright et al,. but they are ventriloquized by Changez…"[139]. By promising his "own" story, Changez embarks on a tale that is remarkably general and familiar – the scion of a once wealthy, elite family from Lahore, he goes to an ivy league college in the US on a scholarship, where he is tied into a relationship of self and other with the other students around him. Constantly emphasising his 'difference' from the American students who are his peers, Changez also desperately wants to belong to America, to be acknowledged as a successful American, by American standards.

Michael S Koppisch in his essay on mimetic desire in TRF points out, mediated desire plays an active and crucial role in the novel. Changez does not choose the objects of his own desire – others choose for him – this leads to the subject's loss of something absolutely essential to human existence, control over one's own free will, manifesting itself in a sense of emptiness, of having lost one's identity. [123] Koppisch continues to state: "if the mediator of desire is another human being, that person immediately becomes a rival, and from rivalry to actual strife is a short, virtually inevitable step." [124]

Changez constantly struggles with not just a sense of who he is, but who he wants to be – how he wishes to be perceived by others. At Princeton he sets himself apart yet counts himself amongst the meritocracy that it admitted. Excited at being asked to join a group of students on a holiday to Greece, he is still convinced that his value is that of the 'exotic outsider'. He wants to prove himself by getting a job at Underwood Samson, a much sought-after boutique valuation firm and to be accepted as one of the 'best amongst the best'. Changez constantly has to live up to changing notions of success – from getting the job at Underwood Samson, he has then to repeatedly, every week, prove himself all over again in the evaluations conducted by the company. Ironically it is at Underwood Samson and in New York, that Changez first begins to 'feel at home'. Until this time he has consistently

emphasized his Pakistani identity, usually at the expense of the American, for instance: "When I first arrived, I looked around at the Gothic buildings – younger, I later learned, than many of the mosques of this city but made through acid treatment and ingenious stonemasonry to look older …" [5] Repeatedly Changez finds ways to undercut the promises of America – nothing is quite as it seems, the American students, who, apparently have made it through a daunting selection process, are not as skilled as the non-Americans, just as the buildings are not as ancient.

Despite this apparent sense of superiority in his culture, his social background in Pakistan and his upbringing, Changez's idea of success hinges on American acceptability. He says that "Underwood Samson had the potential to transform my life as surely as it had transformed his, making my concerns about money and status [emphasis mine] things of the distant past." When he joins Underwood Samson, Changez says, that day he did not "think of himself as a Pakistani but as an Underwood Samson trainee"… [19]

What changes this for Changez is not just his own lack of a 'core' (in his words), but also the consciousness with which he sees himself being looked at and judged by others. On the business trip to Manila, he wavers between identifying with the ethnic Americans, and his sensitivity as a 'third world' citizen. He compares Manila with his own city of Lahore, and feels ashamed, he is angry when the locals treat him differently from his American colleagues and he also feels angry and distant from them as he identifies with a local jeepney driver on the streets, instead of with his colleagues in the car.

This 'mimicry' finds its climax, of course, in his relationship with Erica (the heavy-handed symbolism has been much commented on) whose unattainability is a crucial part of her attraction, when, unable to make her respond to himself, Changez tries to "become" Chris – he loses his identity to Erica's dead lover. Though the love-making is more satisfactory with this impersonation, predictably enough it built on a sense of loss – Changes says he felt "at once both satiated and ashamed". Changez feels similarly ashamed when he returns home to Lahore to visit his family, and realizes he is seeing his family and home through American eyes – looking at the dilapidation and peeling paint, rather than the remnants of the social grandeur he has always associated his life with.

Changez's discomfort with the culture of capitalism begins in Manila and is cemented in Chile – his growing disaffection is based not on a religious awakening but a political solidarity. Changez sees himself as a man "without substance", without an identity and without a core – the instability he feels in America as a Pakistani is accentuated of course, post 9/11. Until 9/11, Changez's affiliation with Pakistani culture has been something positive for him – he feels innately superior to the Americans, considering them callow, rude and unsophisticated. Intrinsic to this self-identification is the knowledge of the cultural capital he has in Lahore, coming from the socially elite family he does. Smarting from Jim's identification of him as someone who is dependent on a scholarship and has to work extra jobs to fund his life in college, Changez embarks on a digression at this point of his story to the anonymous American to assert the social position of his family. "I am not poor; far from

it: my great-grandfather, for example, was a barrister with the means to endow a school for the Muslims of the Punjab. Like him, my grandfather and father both attended university in England. Our family home sits on an acre of land in the middle of Gulberg, one of the most expensive districts of this city. We employ several servants, including a driver and a gardener – which would, in America, imply that we were a family of great wealth." [8] This insistence on prestige and social standing is a familiar one to most privileged South Asians, who, resentful of being made to feel like "poor" migrants in America, as a result of global capitalism and political structures, feel the defensive need to re-assert their social standing in their own countries. This is a point I will return to in the last part of my paper.

Changez, always conscious of his family's status, is upset when he is treated as an 'ordinary' Pakistani by Erica's father – secure in the (fragile) sense of his ethnic difference and superior breeding when he visits Erica's home in New York, he is shaken to realize that despite his Underwood Samson employee status, being an elite in Lahore is not the same as being an elite in New York.

The 'fundamentalism' that Changez first identifies with, ironically enough is that of American capitalism. Gilbert-Moore describes this affiliation as: "The aggressive nature of contemporary US capitalism is suggested by the military imagery with which it is consistently represented. Thus Changez's unnamed interlocutor is seen, interchangeably, as a businessman/special agent. As a new 'recruit' to Under- wood Samson, Changez 'reports for duty' to a boss called Sherman, invoking the standard American tank of World War II, and Jim more than once praises his subordinate's 'warrior' qualities [194].

The 'hybridity' that Changez wanted to embrace is demonstrably not possible, as there will always be a (mis) recognition of the Other as caricature, as stereotype. This liminality of belonging and not-belonging, is given specific expression in the narrative form of the novel. "Cast in the form of first-person dramatic monologue, his novella enforces the argument that there is no 'inside' or 'out- side' to the problematic of 'recognition'" … Changez's western guest never speaks directly and everything is reported through a narrator whose account, he himself hints, should not necessarily be taken at face value. This reinforces the claustrophobic nature of the reading experience, aligning the reader with the American, making him/her struggle to gain sufficient distance to make decisions about whether Changez is, indeed, a 'fundamentalist' and, if so, of what kind" [Gilbert-Moore, 195].

Changez also fails in an ethical relationship. He describes to the American listener his reaction to 9/11, after warning him that the American may find the story "rather unpalatable". Changez was "remarkably pleased" and smiled at the symbolism of seeing America visibly "brought to her knees". This moment marks how the two are locked into the antagonistic relationship of Self/Other – the lack of ethical empathy is marked as the American's 'large hand' clenches into a fist and Changez tries to explain his reaction. Pointing out that America too, bombs and destroys her enemies or that Mulsim nations live in fear of attack, invasion or bombing by America is no solution to this historically hostile moment.

This is a classic moment of mis-recognition – as Gilbert-Moore says: “Globalization is viewed as a dispensation characterized not by the more or less harmonious extension of ‘recognition’, whether within western liberal societies or across the world, but of increasing tension and conflict based on a binaristic vision of the Other.” [196] As long as we remain locked into this binary world-view, there can be no real middle ground, no empathetic or ethical recognition.

III

This third and last section of the paper will focus on the aftermath of Changez’s confession and also the positioning of Changez as self and other for the Indian reader.

Changez is, in a sense, divested of his innocence and re-cast as a violent and condemnable subject. The American is certainly filled with a sense of self-righteous innocence and rage, but he is also an existential threat – Changez repeatedly calls attention to his military bearing, his sat-phone, the possibility of his being armed and of course, the ‘purpose’ of his visit to Lahore. Both Changez and the American are thus locked into mutual (existential) suspicion and mistrust, the only result of which can be violence. The ambiguity Hamid associates with both Changez and the American echo Bergoffen’s point about the self’s “reliability and coherence”. [Banita, 33] This also forces the Indian reader to introspect, to mark a critical self-aware position vis-à-vis America’s wounded self-righteousness and Pakistani culpability.

While Changez has been ‘telling’ his story, he functions as a narrator – not just of his own specific experiences, but of a group that has been marked and discriminated against. He constantly asserts that the specific ‘facts’ do not matter and that he cannot remember all the details, nonetheless, his story is true, in the larger sense, even if specifics are ambiguous. There are always two listeners of the narrative – the unnamed American (who does not seem to be building an empathetic understanding), and the reader. The American remains emblematic of the dis-engaged non ethical reader – he is firmly ensconced in his own frameworks and moral paradigms and can/will not understand Changez. The other listener/reader may well take a different position and thus we can see the ethical working of the literary narrative here. Hamid’s ‘purpose’ in writing and/or Changez’s purpose in narrating his story is surely not (simply) a justification of his return to Pakistan or his ambiguous role in radical political activities but perhaps also an attempt to foster an ethical understanding in someone – as another character, in another novel once said “what is the point of stories that aren’t even true?”[†]

Dorothy J Hale said “the novel demands of each reader a decision about her own relation to the imaginative experience offered by novels. Will I submit to the alterity that the novel allows? An affirmative answer launches the reader into a transactional relationship with another agent – the agent defined by its ‘Otherness’. The otherness constitutes formal

[†] Salman Rushdie, Haroun and the Sea of Stories, Puffin, 1993.

narrative choices" [21-22] – Changez's way of speaking, his curious syntax and speech patterns are as important as the content of which he speaks.

When Changez describes his reaction to the terror attack, he also draws attention to the American's response. The reader, at this point, reacts to both responses – what is the 'ethical' reader's response at this narrative point? Do I understand, even theoretically, Changez's reaction as an Asian, as a specific socio-political subject interpellated in positions of global power and capital? Do I equally understand the anger of the American resulting in drone attacks and bombs all over Afghanistan and Iraq? And, by being asked to respond to both reactions at the same time how does the novel make me conscious of my own position, my own guilt and self-awareness as a subject?

This becomes even more relevant when the subject of India is introduced – Changez refers to an "event" which was devastating to the Indian consciousness and which has caused many aftershocks and continues to affect lives today in strange and direct ways. This event occurred on 13 December 2001, a group of five terrorists infiltrated the Indian Parliament in a car bearing Home Ministry stickers and drove the car into the vehicle of the then Vice-President of the country. They shot at security personnel and legislators who were around and attempted to lay siege to the Parliament building. Among the four accused of being involved in the conspiracy were Afzal Guru a Kashmiri separatist and S A R Gilani, a lecturer of Arabic at Delhi University. Pakistan was accused of being behind the attack and the sub-continent teetered dangerously close to a war.

Changez says "Opinion was divided as to whether the men who had attacked the Indian parliament had anything to do with Pakistan, but there was unanimity in the belief that India would do all it could to harm us, and that despite the assistance we had given America in Afghanistan, America would not fight at our side. Already, the Indian army was mobilizing, and Pakistan had begun to respond:… I felt powerless; I was angry at our weakness, at our vulnerability to intimidation of this sort from our—admittedly much larger—neighbour to the east." [57]

The subjectivity of the Indian (the dominant position) at this point was quite the contrary – we saw ourselves as threatened, as being attacked (once again) by the covert operations of our neighbour who constantly caused strife within our borders and who was attempting to divide our country yet again. The attacks on Bombay in 2008, the attacks in Delhi in 2011 and of course, the constant unrest and violence in Kashmir are hard to overcome subjectivity over.

The vacillation of Changez in his aspirational desire to be accepted in America, to gain entry into the same social class that his family was falling out of in Pakistan, is frighteningly familiar to India, however. In many ways Changez is either very much 'like us' or like people we know very well. He is not an "ignorant or brainwashed" product of a radical Islam in a Madrassa nor is he a poor unemployed man seduced as much by dreams of jannat as by allure of power and global impact. Changez's naïve desire to be seen as an 'Underwood

Samson man' a 'Princeton graduate' and thus immune from racial profiling and hate crime is shattered when he is seen simply as a Pakistani – a classless terrorist. The Indian reader similarly has heard of or been subjected to racial profiling, to being treated as the 'Other'. Moving between an identification with Changez and an understanding of the humiliation he faces at airports and the sense of feeling uncomfortable in his own face and a horrified antipathy toward him. In India national identity (in dominant political and mainstream culture) is based largely on the Pakistani 'Other' – it is disconcerting to find oneself understanding Changez's dilemma of wanting to be a successful South Asian man in New York and a New York returned man in South Asia. This brings an interesting complication in the text –implicated, yet not, allied with, yet not, the American and Pakistani by turn.

Changez remarks "it seems an obvious thing to say but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all potential assassins". [81] Suspicion is in the eye and social subjectivity of the beholder – the novel makes the reader accountable in the process of reading – paraphrasing J Hillis Miller, there must be a necessary ethical moment in the act of reading which is neither cognitive nor political nor social nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical. By striving to write and read ethically, we may find the agency for positive political action, by recognizing that the self destabilises the other as much as it is de-stabilised by the other, we may recognize the precariousness of other lives.

I do not wish to reiterate the claim made by many scholars including Martha Nussbaum that reading is an act that builds empathy and thus promotes positive prosocial action. This assignment and privileging of building empathy on the basis of 'sameness' as a (or the) primary task of literature is a claim I am sceptical of. Moreover, as several other scholars have pointed out, there is really no empirical evidence to back up or support such a claim. (Freed) As Freed argues, In contemporary usage, empathy, the ability to "feel with" another, is distinguished from sympathy, or "feeling for," as a state in which one's emotions mirror those attributed to the other. (By contrast, pity, a feeling typically associated with sympathy, is not an emotion one would ascribe to the person being pitied.) But this kind of "feeling with" relies on at least some degree of perceived similarity, some basis for fellow feeling: … The less one has in common with another, the more difficult it becomes to empathize, and the greater the risk of making false or inappropriate assumptions based on one's own experience. As a basis for ethical action, therefore, empathy is most attenuated where it is arguably most necessary: in our interactions with those we define as other. [22]

As the 'Other' to Changez, either as American subject or as Indian, it becomes imperative to not simply identify with him, to feel with him, as it were, but to accept his differences rather than erase them in a gesture of universalism. There may be different aspects of convergence that can be forged with Changez – as postcolonial elite, as misunderstood Asian, as a warrior in a global network of corporate capitalism, as a minority in the Global North; the challenge is to sidestep the necessity of finding commonality and to accept singularity. A similar challenge is to not exoticise (as Erica's father does) or to re-construct him in the image of the familiar (as Erica does). According to Attridge, literature

requires its readers “to respect its otherness, to respond to its singularity, to avoid reducing it to the familiar and the utilitarian even while attempting to understand it.” [11] However, as Freed emphasises quoting Attridge, even this caveat supposes that we need proximity for understanding. Literature may provide this proximity – it may enable a hitherto unimagined and unimaginable access to the inner world of the ‘Other’ – the fundamentalist sitting in a market in Lahore discussing his response to the fall of the Twin Towers and to the potential attack on Pakistan by India. But this is where Hamid’s narrative style comes into its own. Reading the first person narrative by Changez is almost a claustrophobic experience – we have to take his projection, his view; even the dialogue of the American is related through Changez and Changez constantly refers to what the American “must be” feeling. The reader oscillates between accepting the rational and experiential conclusions of racism and bias related by Changez, by the idea of capitalism as a fundamentalist force invading and conquering third world markets and keeping them poor while skimming the cream of those societies for its own ends. At the same time we confront the horror of accepting that there may be (by those very standards) some rational explanation and motivation behind acts of terror and violence.

What, then is the ethical way of reading such difference? There is no easy answer but it certainly does not lie in either binary – of erasing all differences or in celebrating all alterity. Perhaps we need to reconstitute our social imaginations, in Butler’s formulation, to establish more inclusive conditions, to embrace understandings of humanness in non-traditional ways. Rather than attempting to find some kind of redemptive understanding in ways that erase difference in the effort to overcome it, perhaps we need to open ourselves to a radical uncertainty. We must believe that through the act of reading fiction the responsibility to imagine, the act of witnessing will change us, hopefully for the better. As Freed reminds us, imagination, if mistaken for knowledge, can do as much harm (if not more) than good. We need to “reflect on (their) acts of imagination, setting limits on the fictional encounter in ways that respond to the ethical demands of cross-cultural reading. [24] Therefore perhaps, unlike both Changez and the American, the reader is asked to suspend her conclusion on what the action ‘means’, but to think of possibilities of what else it could mean without falling back into easier models of stereotypes and (mis)judgements; in other words, to foster a transformative imagination in ways of dealing with difference in the world.

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