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## Pitfalls of Ambiguity in Contexts of Islamophobia: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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PITFALLS OF AMBIGUITY IN CONTEXTS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA: MOHSIN HAMID'S  
*THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*

AMBREEN HAI

There are occasions when meaning needs at all costs to be nailed down,  
and other times when it may float triumphantly free.

– Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature* 144

The attacks of September 11, 2001, and subsequent US backlash irreversibly changed global politics, international relations, and the macro and micro conditions of life, particularly for those whose lives became more precarious from ensuing developments: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the “War on Terror,” the rise of Islamophobia and neo-Orientalism, the consequent rise of ISIS, the global refugee crisis, restrictions on travel, the rise of Trump, border (in)security, and militancy, among others. While undoubtedly there have been many Islamicist terrorist attacks in major Western and non-Western cities before and since—the “7/7” London bombings on July 7, 2005, Paris attacks between 2015–2018, bomb blasts and orchestrated shootings of civilians in Quetta, Karachi, Islamabad, Bombay, Kabul, among many—none of these has had an equivalent global impact in terms of largescale multinational wars, economic crises, changes in government, international policy, and securitization. At the end of the millennium, 9/11 marked a turning point, and a point of no return.

Twenty-first-century postcolonial novelists, especially those with origins in Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan, have inevitably responded to the fallout of 9/11. Some, like

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*, address it explicitly, making the experience of 9/11 (and US responses) their central concern, the thematic and structural pivot of their narratives. For others, like Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* and *Home Fire*, Nadeem Aslam's *Blind Man's Garden*, and Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Disgraced* and forthcoming novel *Homeland Elegies*, 9/11 becomes the point of departure, even if the event itself is not narrated. (It is worth noting how often the word "home" appears in these titles, as if home is itself a concept thrown into disarray, and up for question.) Still other novels that seem to have nothing to do with 9/11 exhibit nonetheless an awareness of and responsiveness to the changes it instigated, addressing the current exigency of global Islamophobia, the rise of domestic terrorism and extremism among Muslim-majority nations, and global surveillance of Muslims. Even historical fictions set before 9/11, like Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* and Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali*, are shaped by the geopolitics of post-9/11 and speak to issues like state violence and oppression, militancy, and the possibilities of coexistence despite difference. Many, like Fatima Farheen Mirza's *A Place for Us*, about an Indian American family, evince the need to reassure, to provide counter-narratives of Muslims and lived versions of Islam. For all these novelists, the shadow of 9/11 looms large and close, shaping both what and how they write. Taking the "postcolonial" as a broad category that includes not just a response to the legacies of European colonialism, but also an engagement with ongoing Global North dominance over the Global South, and (specifically US) economic, political, and militarized imperialism, I would argue that the postcolonial novel post-9/11 (at least by writers with affiliations to Islam) is indubitably marked by 9/11, even when not ostensibly concerned with the event itself.

If 9/11 has indubitably affected the form and content of the postcolonial novel, it is important to note that writers nonetheless can choose what literary devices and strategies they adopt and adapt, and that those choices can carry unpredictable consequences. In this essay, I focus on Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (hereafter *RF*) as a Pakistani postcolonial novel that explicitly makes 9/11 its center-point. However, instead of offering yet another interpretation of the novel, I want to examine closely and critically Hamid's representational and narrative strategies, particularly his use of ambiguity, in the context of the fallout of 9/11. While affirming that such global postcolonial novels are addressed to multiple audiences around the world, I explore the implications of Hamid's strategies in addressing specifically his Western readership and look at some examples of how actual readers have read this novel.<sup>1</sup> Many reviewers and scholars applaud the ambiguities of *RF* as a marker of its sophistication and ingenuity, without considering possible pitfalls of those ambiguities in the context in which the novel was written and received. Offering a nuanced critique, I argue that, given power inequalities between the Global North and South, the heightened post-9/11 climate of suspicion against Muslims, and the ensuing context of a virulent Islamophobia that is predominantly Western (but not only Western),<sup>2</sup> Hamid's choice to create a central, sustained ambiguity about his narrator-protagonist runs the very high risk of reaffirming readers' pre-existing pernicious negative stereotypes and undermining the apparent goals of the novel itself.<sup>3</sup> While I certainly see the novel as making a valuable postcolonial intervention and response to US imperialism and responses to 9/11, I highlight problems that carry significant consequences given prevalent conditions of global suspicion and anti-Muslim prejudice in an age of fear-mongering and terror.

Hamid's novel has been highly celebrated by literary scholars who have examined it from a variety of approaches—global postcolonial, post-9/11, formalist, narratological,

poststructuralist, comparative. Some explore its connection to literary forebears or other contemporaneous writings. Most applaud its formal innovations and political interventions, but without attending to how lay readers in fact respond to this complex text. While cognizant of *RF*'s strengths, I offer a critique of this post-9/11 novel, of the ways its ambiguities sabotage its own goals, a critique that is based on both postcolonial (and feminist) literary analyses and a reading of actual readers' readings.

### **Problems of Ambiguity: The Duck-Rabbit Phenomenon**

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* clearly sets out to challenge dominant Western prejudices and complacencies, and to offer an anti-imperial critique of US responses to 9/11 domestically and abroad.<sup>4</sup> Many features of the novel—from the title, which attempts to debunk the prevalent notion that fundamentalism can only refer to Islamic religiosity, to the many critiques (overtly voiced by Changez the narrator, bolstered by the novel's moves) of American imperialism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, narrow nationalism—present a powerful alternative perspective and efforts to counter the stranglehold of dominant discourses and practices circulating in the west. However, as I show, the novel, not straightforward in any sense, also obstructs its own move in such a postcolonial direction by making several counter-moves in an opposite one, undermining the credibility of its narrator and hence of his entire narrative. Given that the entire novel is limited to a one-way monologue (what Changez says to his putative American auditor, or in-text addressee, whose occasional words are relayed to us indirectly through Changez's responses), any interpretation of the novel becomes entirely dependent on whether or not its narrator is to be believed. The credibility of Changez is thus the crux of this novel, the hinge upon which it all turns, creating two incompatible, mutually exclusive ways of seeing and reading. The reliability

of Changez as a narrator is thus a matter of high stakes—not merely an issue of character assessment—structuring the entire process of reading and interpretation.

In a very clever but, as I will argue, fraught design, Hamid creates a cloud of doubt, of continuous, sustained ambiguity around Changez and Changez's narration, introducing several interpretive loopholes that enable, indeed invite, unsympathetic or suspicious readers to read him as in fact saying the opposite of what he purports to be saying. In other words, Hamid creates a duck-rabbit phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> To those already predisposed to believe and be sympathetic to Changez (who see the duck), the novel presents a diametrically opposite narrative than to those predisposed to regard Changez with suspicion and distrust (who see the rabbit).<sup>6</sup> And indeed, Hamid does this deliberately, quite brilliantly, to induce all readers to see how they read in accordance with their own predispositions, and to come to see *both* the duck and the rabbit. Arguably, this ultimately is Hamid's salutary, educational, postcolonial, and epistemological goal, an attempt to encourage readers to see differently than in the ways they are predisposed to, and to understand how others might see differently, once they reach the level of seeing how they themselves are prone to see.

However, as I will show, such goals, laudatory no doubt, fail to achieve their purpose, in part because Hamid is over-optimistic about his ability to bring readers to the degree of self-awareness necessary, especially through the means he chooses. One problem is that Hamid fails to take into account, in the context of virulent global Islamophobia, the warp effects of global power imbalances that shape the overwhelming tendency of a more dominant set of readers to see only one way. Hamid perhaps underestimated how much the inequalities of power in the contemporary world order are replayed in the cognitive and interpretive arena, not only at the level of ordinary readers, but also that of reviewers and some scholars, foreclosing the both-and

for the either-or, and inducing dominant readership to see only the rabbit, not the duck, let alone arrive at the requisite self-awareness of how their preconceptions shape what they see. It is a false equation to assume that if some readers see one way, then that is balanced by other readers who see the other way. The dynamics of asymmetric, unequal global power relations prevent such a balance. A second problem is that Hamid uses many techniques that cast doubt on his narrator, further tilting the already uneven playing field. Hamid thus fortifies the skeptical readership already inclined to suspect the Muslim male narrator, and predisposed to see him as the fanatic fundamentalist of the title, further confirming their preconceptions. Third, Hamid's modes of representation make it difficult for even sympathetic postcolonial readers to view *Changez* as entirely innocent or credible.

Literary criticism has a long tradition of valuing ambiguity positively as a sign of richness. Many reviewers praise Hamid's novel precisely for its undecidability, its cleverness in leaving it up to the reader to decide what happens at the end. Yet such readers fail to take into account the political contexts, the global power dynamics of inequality, that tilt readers towards one kind of reading, and the problematic consequences of the kind of ambiguity Hamid deploys. Nor do they distinguish between kinds of ambiguity. In his pathbreaking work *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson defines the literary ambiguity he values as "a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading" (x). This would seem to fit Hamid's use of ambiguity. But Empson's analyses adduce examples of "richness and heightening of effect" where the multiple meanings work together, not against each other to cancel each other out (3). "The fundamental situation" of ambiguity "is that a word or grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once," where the multiple suggestions "must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of

them to hold most clearly in mind” (Empson, 2-3).<sup>7</sup> Empson neither includes nor values the kind of ambiguity Hamid creates, where, instead of the both-and, readers face a diminished set of either-or options that allow readers to choose, based on their own predilections and desires, and confirm their preexisting biases, preferences, and world views.

Indeed, as Stanley Fish reminds us in a foundational essay, literature is to be valued not when it reconfirms our biases and prejudices, but when it challenges and unsettles those beliefs, when it pushes us to rethink the preconceptions we bring unknowingly to a text. Preferring this criterion, he states, “I am drawn to works which do not allow a reader the security of his [sic] normal patterns of thought and belief...literature is what disturbs our sense of self-sufficiency, personal and linguistic” (88). Hamid’s self-stated goal in *RF* was to push readers to see and then rethink their own predisposition to read and interpret along certain predictable directions. But unfortunately, his execution does not advance that goal. In a recent essay, Peter Morey writes, “world literature needs to expose and contest structures of power,” and he argues that *RF* exemplifies such aims (143). My reading of the novel (and of readers reading it) suggests that its ambiguity in fact undermines this goal, and encourages an interpretive relativism.

Terry Eagleton offers a somber reminder of the high stakes of ambiguity, and of the need for caution, particularly in fraught times:

People may stand to lose their livelihoods, liberties or even lives...if a legal document is read in too free a way. Sometimes it is licence one wants and sometimes not, depending on what one might call the regime of reading in question....There are occasions when meaning needs at all costs to be nailed down, and other times when it may float triumphantly free. (144)



In the regime of reading into which Hamid released his book, sadly, meaning is not triumphantly free, but carries powerful material and political consequences. Unambiguity may be desirable not only for prescriptions and road-signs, as Eagleton stipulates, but also for literature when regimes of reading are known to be unduly harsh and unjust. In such circumstances, writers, not only readers, have to be aware of those regimes in their forms of address. Without rehashing old debates about minority writers' burdens of representation, I would contend, in the regime of post-9/11 (which I see as continuing into our present age of Trump and the rise of neo-fascism and white supremacy), postcolonial writers carry responsibilities about the extent to which they allow pernicious prejudices to be reaffirmed through their writing. If the point of art "is not to imitate life but to transform it" (Eagleton 181), it becomes incumbent upon a global post-9/11 novelist to devise techniques that foster art's transformative potential.

### **The Either-Or Scenario of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

To readers trained in postcolonial modes of reading, Hamid's novel appears in many ways to propound a postcolonial, anti-Islamophobia agenda.<sup>8</sup> Almost as a teasing tactic, the title leads (on) unwary readers to presuppose, in accordance with dominant Western discourse, that "fundamentalism" applies to Islamic religiosity and anti-Western militancy, and that Changez, the narrator-protagonist, is the eponymous reluctant convert to Islamic jihadism. But, as many scholars have noted, the novel undoes such assumptions, as the title in fact references the American capitalist *economic* system as an alternate, equally pernicious form of fundamentalism. The novel refers repeatedly to Changez's growing reluctance to pursue the "fundamentals" of financial management he has been taught (98). "*Focus on the fundamentals*. This was Underwood Samson's guiding principle, drilled into us since our first day at work. It mandated a

single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value," he notes (98). However, as he engages in financial evaluations of various corporations, seeking to maximize profits while cutting jobs, regardless of human cost, Changez gradually becomes conscious of his own complicity in the global system of American capitalist imperialism, its financial brutality and militarism, and realizes that he has been a "modern-day janissary," brainwashed to turn traitor against his own people, in the global south (152).

Repeatedly, Hamid's language emphasizes how this American mantra amounts to a form of blind faith, a religiosity that requires callousness towards its victims. Changez describes his early devotion to capitalism as a "creed": "I suspect I was never better at the pursuit of fundamentals than I was at that time, analyzing data as though my life depended on it. Our creed was one which valued above all else maximum productivity, and such a creed was for me doubly reassuring because it was quantifiable" (116). Later, when he realizes how this global neoliberal capitalism is tied to US militarism and imperialism, he becomes an apostate: "I knew...that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power. It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination..." (156). Changez uses the word "fundamentals" for the last time in the act of rejecting what he recognizes as a financial/capitalist/military nexus: "There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine...my days of focusing on fundamentals were done" (152-54).<sup>9</sup> After many experiences of being harassed and othered in post-9/11 New York, Changez shifts, not to Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, or militancy (or so he claims), but to an "ex-janissary's" anti-imperialist stance against American covert espionage and interference in Pakistan (179).

In presenting the story of Changez's disillusionment, Hamid's novel reinforces Changez's critique of the American economic-imperialist system, calling upon the recognizable form of the *bildungsroman* to suggest that Changez comes of age, or grows up (signaled by his growing a manly beard), when he becomes more enlightened about how he has been inducted into a pernicious belief system.<sup>10</sup> Yet all these cues are outweighed by the title, which, in the climate of the "war on terror," heavily predisposes readers to see Changez as an Islamic fundamentalist, a possibility perpetuated in the novel by the oddness of Changez's behavior, the continuing uncertainty that surrounds him, and the lack of any clear indications (other than his own assertions) that he is in fact unconnected to militant groups. Scholars who read *RF* as a powerful postcolonial rebuttal to dominant post-9/11 discourses do not take into account the degree to which it also pulls in the opposite direction.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, while engaging in postcolonial critique, *RF* also provides fodder for reactionary types of anti-postcolonial readings, to the point of self-sabotage. (It is moreover hardly the case that Changez "reluctantly" follows the fundamentalism of neoliberal capitalism: at the beginning, he is eager to join it; by the end, he repudiates it.)

Another key feature of the novel pointing in the direction of its anti-imperialism is Changez's tendency to make forceful, didactic, yet lyrical speeches critiquing American aggression, arrogance, and blindness after 9/11. On a key occasion, for instance, Changez, with exemplary nuance, exempts most Americans from culpability from the wars carried out by a ruling group in their name: "A common strand appeared to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie's concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing the uniforms of soldiers" (178). To postcolonial (and

liberal/progressive American) readers, this may seem a much-needed corrective to binary thinking and a valid critique of state terrorism, calling out the doublespeak of American claims to protect their own while US bombs and drone attacks made Afghan and Pakistani civilians “collateral damage” (178). Or, Changez notes, after 9/11, “America was gripped by a growing and self-righteous rage,” a “dangerous nostalgia” (94, 115). He surfaces historical truths that did not appear in the American press: “Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people’s houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse” (94). Changez himself, despite his class privilege, is viciously threatened in a deserted parking lot by two men, one of whom calls him a “Fucking Arab” (117). (Pakistanis are not Arabs, as Changez instructively points out.)

And yet even in this terrible moment Hamid introduces doubt, setting up the unsympathetic reader to suspect Changez, to read him via a neo-orientalist lens, to confirm the stereotype of the Muslim male with tendencies towards violence and falsehood. First, Changez describes how, shaking with rage, he grabbed a tire iron from his car, ready, in a “murderous” rage, to “shatter the bones of [his attacker’s] skull” (118). Second, he is unable to answer his American listener’s question, “What did he look like,” and replies instead, “I cannot now recall many of the details of the events I have been relating to you. But surely it is the *gist* that matters;...it is the thrust of one’s narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one’s details” (118). To skeptical readers, this reads as further proof of unreliability, indeed a brazen confirmation of the inaccuracy of Changez’s entire narrative, explaining or confessing to how he became radicalized. Alternately, to sympathetic readers, the outrage of Changez’s experience justifies his instinct for self-protection, and explains his inability to remember details as the effect of trauma

and repression. After experiencing such a shock, it is difficult to remember the “particulars” of an unprovoked attack (118). Forgetting details that have faded because of trauma is not in itself an indicator of untruth. As Cathy Caruth famously notes, “traumatic recall...is defined, in part, by the very way that it pushes memory away” (Preface viii). Moreover, Changez does not (or cannot) say that the men who accosted him were white, because to him, and to non-white or Muslim readers, that is understood. To such readers, the interlocutor’s question is beside the point—indeed, as in other cases of assault, his skepticism redoubles the injury for the victim. The text itself, however, lays open these two possible but incompatible readings.

Repeatedly, when Changez voices such compelling statements, Hamid also undercuts them. In a searing passage, Changez finally addresses a collective American readership:

As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums.... Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own. (168)

Demonstrating an exemplary ability to see both the “shared pain” and “interests” of attackers and attacked, Changez here diagnoses, analyses, attempts to find common ground. But even here Hamid pushes Changez’s remarks into that dubious grey area. The comment “America had to be stopped” sounds ominous to his interlocutor, whose question Changez answers with another question, “What exactly did I do to stop America, you ask? Have you really no idea, sir?” (168). Changez’s counter-questioning reveals for the first time that he suspects the American of

knowing more than he lets on—and that therefore Changez is more knowing than he himself has let on, that he too is concealing something.

Changez's subsequent remark is deeply ambiguous, and can be read as either (overtly) reassuring or (covertly) threatening: "You hesitate—never fear, I am not so rude as to forcibly extract an answer. I will tell you what I did, although it was not much and I fear it may well fail to meet your expectations" (168–69). Forcibly extracting an answer is not merely a matter of rudeness—in minimizing the hint of torture, Changez replays the recognizable discourse of the villain who underplays his crime. It amplifies Changez's earlier remark, "I hope you can be persuaded to speak," also readable as either a simple invitation, or a sinister threat (76). Even if he is innocent, Changez is clearly playing with his auditor, telling him that he knows what the American expects, and asserting that the reality is other than what he thinks.

Only at the very end does Changez reveal that he is now a lecturer of economics at Lahore University, an advocate for the disengagement of the US from Pakistan's affairs, and is concerned about the disappearance of one of his students who was arrested for allegedly "planning to assassinate" an American visiting Pakistan for "development" work (181).<sup>12</sup> Hence Changez has protested vocally, on television, against American interference in Pakistan, and been labelled, in the predictably binary mode of Western journalistic discourse, "anti-American" (179). Changez caustically points out the lack of due process, and the collusion of Pakistani and American agencies in apprehending and detaining men and boys based on mere suspicion:

In any case, it was impossible to ask the boy himself about the matter, as he had disappeared—whisked away to a secret detention facility, no doubt, in some lawless limbo between your country and mine....When the international television news networks came to our campus, I stated to them among other things that no

country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America....Since then, I have felt rather like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe....I have been plagued by paranoia, by an intermittent sense that I am being observed.... (182–83)

Via Changez, Hamid delivers a pungent critique of US foreign policy and racialized militarism. The intertextual allusion to Conrad's Kurtz awaiting capture by an agent of empire suggests that the new world order of post 9/11 paranoia, espionage and counter-espionage, mutual suspicion and distrust, of condemnation without evidence or proof, is the contemporary form of the imperial jungle or heart of darkness in which Changez is now mired. In pointing to a Pakistani's real fear of US surveillance in Pakistan, Hamid drew upon fact and, with remarkable prescience, anticipated a subsequent event that caused significant turmoil in Pakistan-US relations. In January 2011, Raymond Davis, an undercover CIA agent, shot and killed two Pakistani men in Lahore, claiming they were trying to rob him, and then claimed diplomatic immunity. The US denied that he was a CIA agent until *The Guardian* broke the news.<sup>13</sup>

Yet again, while denouncing American violations of human rights and law, Hamid undermines Changez as he makes this important critique. Kurtz, after all, was a white man who lived among the Congolese, and collected heads that he displayed on spikes of the fence around his hut. Why would Changez liken himself to Kurtz, if not to suggest that he too, once a most promising Princeton graduate, has returned to Pakistan and likewise gone savage, in some way, turned primitive, mad, or violent, perhaps terrorist? At a key moment, Marlowe realizes, "I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low....[Kurtz] had kicked himself loose of the earth" (Conrad 66). Does this apply to Changez too? Hamid

repeatedly clouds Changez with such signs of dubiousness, making it impossible, even for sympathetic readers, to know whether he is or is not to be believed.

The novel voices, by incorporating within itself, the skeptical reader's suspicion as it shows how the American questions Changez's claims to certainty and truth, implying that Changez could only be certain of the boy's innocence if he had "inside knowledge":

I must say, sir, you have adopted a decidedly unfriendly and accusatory tone.

What precisely is it that you are trying to imply? I can assure you that I am no believer in violence; the spilling of blood is abhorrent to me, save in self-defense.

And how broadly do I define self-defense, you ask? Not broadly at all! I am no ally of killers; I am simply a university lecturer, nothing more nor less. (*RF* 181)

Again, Hamid creates a scenario where readers can see either a rabbit or a duck, but not both at once: *either* Changez speaks the truth (he has no inside knowledge, is not a terrorist, and the American is unduly suspicious) *or* Changez is lying (and is a threat to the American's safety). What is clear is the American's hostility, and that the asymmetric burden is on Changez to prove his innocence. Hamid presents Changez such that even his declared repudiation of violence is conditional, readable as either innocuous or questionable. What for him constitutes self-defense? Why is he so polite, so hospitable to a dubious stranger? Is he trying to avert misplaced suspicion, or find out what game this American is playing? Are they both spies, circling around each other, not knowing what the other knows, trying to determine what the other might do?

Hamid maintains these ambiguities throughout the novel, refusing certainty one way or the other. To some readers, this is in itself an excellent intellectual game. To others, it highlights, as Hamid himself has averred, the climate of "mutual suspicion" and binary thinking that obtains between Westerners and Muslims since the global war on terror.<sup>14</sup> The problem, however, is that



the two sides are not equal, nor on a level playing field. Changez is more prone to be disbelieved than believed by most readers, based on the certainties and influential tendencies of dominant global cultures. From a postcolonial perspective, a particularly unfortunate result of Hamid's continual puncturing of Changez's trustworthiness throughout his narrative is that it undermines the punch and validity of even the well-founded anti-imperial remarks he makes, imbuing them with a miasma of potential militant aggression and threat. Hamid thus himself discredits the important counter-narrative and perspectives he provides that are rarely given space or heard amid dominant discourses in the west.

Throughout, despite what Changez says, Hamid sets up the novel, through plot, generic conventions, and rhetorical tactics, to present Changez as an unreliable narrator. Given that there are degrees and variations of unreliability in narrators—from utter or partial insanity, to deliberate, knowing lies, to the deranged narrator who believes his lies, to the occasional white lie, to unconscious or implicit bias, to unknowing partiality or prejudice, to the mistaken but sincere and well-meaning—it is impossible to know where to place Changez in this constellation of possibilities.<sup>15</sup> I discuss below in more detail some of the ways that Changez is diminished even for sympathetic postcolonial readers, as Hamid tilts the playing field further against his narrator. First, however, I address some other ways, in addition to unreliable narration, that Hamid uses to heighten the ambiguities of Changez's story, and what problems these choices create.

### **Additional Sources of Ambiguity: The Bearded Waiter and the Ending**

Most critics have focused on the dual set of possibilities that depend on whether Changez or the American is the armed militant or secret agent, but few have attended to the silent

presence of the bearded and “burly” Afghan waiter who triangulates this duo, and who continually makes the American nervous as Changez tells his story, and further multiplies the ambiguities of the text (5). Changez insists that the man is not an accomplice, and readers have no way of knowing if Changez speaks the truth. But the waiter could well be a third entity, engaged in some other enterprise of espionage or attack, unknown to Changez. Perhaps Changez suspects the waiter of some nefariousness and tries to protect the American. While the text provides Changez’s narration and the American’s relayed speech, the waiter remains silent, an object upon whom are projected alternative interpretations. At one point, we hear of the waiter’s voice, when Changez replies to the American’s question, “Is he praying,” that the waiter is reciting the menu, learnt by rote (108). Needless to say, the moment exposes only the American’s paranoia and ignorance: a militant disguised as a waiter would hardly pray loudly while serving at a table. (Of course, it is possible that Changez is mad, locked in a madhouse, talking to himself, imagining an interlocutor who is not there. Though that would be a highly off-the-wall reading, Changez’s text does not disconfirm this possibility either. But if we assume that the interlocutor exists, then the waiter exists too, while remaining unknowable.) However, the bearded face of the waiter mirrors the bearded face of Changez himself, aligning the two of them at least superficially against the American, adding to the multiple cues that amplify the suspicions of suspicious readers.

The novel’s ending is perhaps its greatest area of ambiguity. Far from resolving the puzzle, Hamid heightens and multiplies it. As darkness falls, Changez offers to walk the American back to his hotel, offering both reassurance and warning of (or concern about) potential “ruffians” (169). To sympathetic readers, Changez may appear a solicitous host, set on finishing his story, determined to ensure his guest’s safety (or his own); to the unsympathetic, he

may be planning an ambush. The possibilities begin to proliferate wildly as the novel approaches its end. Changez observes that the waiter seems to be following them—either because the restaurant has closed and he too is going home, or because he is coming after them, either for a sinister purpose or to return something they left behind (170). But Changez incites unease, pointing out the dark alleys they pass between deserted buildings: “I find them particularly unpleasant at night, unlit and empty, bounded by those narrow passageways into which one can imagine being dragged against one’s will, forever to disappear!” (171). Or, perhaps Changez is concerned for his own safety.

The suspense and ambiguity build as the American becomes more anxious, quickening his pace, starting at a noise, and asks Changez if he gave a “signal” to the men apparently following them (176). Changez both denies the accusation and flips it around by suggesting that the men may have stopped because “they are wondering why we have paused and whether we mean them ill” (177). At the hotel gates, with the waiter “rapidly closing in,” Changez says goodbye, and the nervous American panics:

I know you have found some of my views offensive; I hope you will not resist my attempt to shake you by the hand. But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are not bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards. (184)

This stunningly abrupt, open-ended ending, far from providing closure, explodes with the sheer infinitude of possibilities, suggesting that only a reader can provide the conclusion, based on how they have read the novel all along. To suggest a few: does the American shoot Changez or the waiter (or both), or does he himself get shot (and by whom)? Does he take Changez hostage? Does Changez witness the American attack the waiter or vice versa? Does the American’s fear

and distrust overwhelm him enough to repudiate the outstretched hand of peace and recent hospitality? Is the “glint of metal” in fact the American’s business card-case, symbolic of his global corporate power, itself a deadly weapon? Or a hint of his mettle? Not only do we not know which one is the terrorist, if any—we also do not know whether the waiter is involved at all. Even Changez’s final words, “I hope you will not resist my attempt to shake you by the hand,” are ambiguous. (He does not say, “will you shake my hand,” but rather, “I will shake *you*”.) Either Changez tries with sincere good will to assuage the American’s distrust, while insisting on his right to protest imperialism, or he warns the American of the futility of resistance.

This resolutely incomplete ending leaves readers to imagine what happens next, opening up a variety of permutations of guilt and innocence. What is clear is that *the novel deliberately refuses to clarify the ambiguities it creates*. We can understand this refusal as a planned strategy on Hamid’s part, designed to mirror back to readers their own preconceptions, to show, like a Rorschach test, how readers can rely on alternate sets of clues to see preferentially what they already presume. Hence, the novel’s hope is to enable readers to see how they see, to recognize their own preconceptions, and to abandon their prejudices when they become aware of the effects of their own reading. And indeed, Hamid has many times confirmed that bringing readers to such self-awareness was indeed his goal. In an early interview, he notes how “mutual suspicion between America and the Muslim world” has been produced and stoked by global media (Yaqin 46). Hence, his ending offers “an invitation” to the reader: “the ending is determined by the way a reader reads it and by the preconceptions and prejudices and fears that a reader has” (Yaqin 46). Subsequently, he elaborates:

[M]y project was...to try to show, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, how feelings already present inside a reader—fear, anger, suspicion, loyalty—could color a narrative so that the reader, as much as or even more than the writer, is deciding what is really going on. I wanted the novel to be a kind of mirror, to let readers see how they are reading, and therefore, how they are living and how they are deciding their politics. (*Discontent* 104).

Hamid's aim, clearly, was not to allow readers simply to confirm those prejudices and preconceptions by reading however they wished. But how far he succeeds remains a question.

### **How Readers in Fact (Mis?)Read**

The problem with Hamid's admirable but over-optimistic goal, as many reviews of *RF* show, is that if readers are not already self-conscious, primed or willing to become self-aware, and if the novel does not actively thwart readers' tendencies to read in accordance with pre-existing biases, it runs the high risk of simply reaffirming those preconceptions and prejudices. Readers' reviews on Amazon, for example, show many appreciative of the ambiguities, some wary of or sympathetic to Changez, others baffled or frustrated by the one-sided monologue and the ending. Many also show a disturbing tendency to reaffirm problematic stereotypes. One reader (B.J.K.) writes that this book helped him/her understand "the thought process of militants such as the college educated and well-to-do men who killed thousands on 9/11."<sup>16</sup> Another (C. Collins) sees Changez by the end as having "learned to shift identity to hide and obscure his true mission." Yet another (Twinkle) views the novel as "propaganda," though adults can enjoy the writer's expertise "without sacrificing their own beliefs." Still another (F. Cada) reads Changez's mind as providing "insight into the San Bernardino massacre and how the killers may have felt

about the American way of life.” Jim Smith writes that the novel is “told from inside the perspective of someone who was treated badly based on the assumption he was a terrorist—until eventually, he realized that was his lot in life, so he became one.” Niamago finds the narrator “mentally unhinged,” while ObiJohnKenobe writes: “I read it, hoping for a good story. I believe the author wrote it in order to tell us what is wrong with America. Instead, I obtained an understanding of what is wrong with much of the rest of the world. I personally didn’t find the protagonist sympathetic because I didn’t buy his justifications, nor did the author allow the protagonist to convincingly argue his justifications.” (I would agree that Hamid does not help Changez be persuasive or credible, least of all to such complacent readers.)

In the *Yale Review of International Studies*, a Yale undergraduate, Abhimanyu Chandra, describes Changez as having “adopt[ed] a rabid path” as a “contemptible” “fundamentalist” and “radical” and “extremist” who inspires “oft-violent political allies.” Chandra objects to the “political message” being extracted from the novel by reviewers sympathetic to Changez: “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is about the twisted, self-righteous, simplistic, and self-serving political path that Changez adopts. He isn’t a ‘reluctant’ fundamentalist. Rather, he is a fairly deliberate and self-deluding one” (n.p.).<sup>17</sup> None of these readers are scholars, but that precisely confirms my point: such readings demonstrate the liability of the novel to play up and into such preconceptions, to foment rather than to disturb or counter them.

Professional Western reviewers are more sophisticated, but many still reveal in subtle ways these tendencies to construct selective, self-serving, self-confirming readings. While many reviewers recognize the ambiguity of the narrator and the ending as directing readers to the climate of self-fulfilling mutual suspicion, they still slip into non-neutral rhetoric that reaffirms dominant Western stereotypes. *Kirkus Reviews* describes Changez as “becoming himself the

bearded, vaguely menacing stranger who accompanies his increasingly worried listener to the latter's hotel" (n.p.). (There is no sense here that the listener may be menacing too.) The *Telegraph* writes, "The book appears to build towards a drastic confession, possibly concerning how and why Changez eventually became a terrorist" (n.p.). But at no point does the text confirm the possibility that Changez is a terrorist, though it also takes no steps to redirect it—indeed it fails to intervene in this dominant mindset. This is my point: *those pre-disposed not to see will not see, nor learn to see differently*. Even nuanced reviewers, like Karen Olsson, in the *New York Times*, notes that Changez is "hardly a radical" at first (pre-9/11), but his "resentment" and "self-loathing" emerge after his "reaction to the attacks...pierces the shell" (n.p.). These are loaded words that exert a simplistic, hostile reading of Changez, as if his innate evil core was just lying dormant, waiting to burst out. There is no evidence that Changez is or was a "radical," whatever that means. In *The Guardian*, Andrew Anthony casts Changez as "the embodiment of the argument that says that America has created its own enemies" (n.p.). But the novel does not confirm this reading—in fact Changez ardently insists that he is a "lover," desirous of helping America recover its best self, offering critique in the hope of positive change (*RF* 1). Anthony further reveals his own bias when he exclusively blames Pakistan and its elites (without naming the US) for the growth of fundamentalism: "the social and political crisis into which Pakistan appears to be sinking ever deeper is at least partly the result of its political class refusing to challenge these unreluctant fundamentalists" (n.p.).

When I teach the novel in an undergraduate course on postcolonial literature, my students' initial responses tend to reveal a disturbing bifurcation: in general, international students from the global south and American students of color tend to see Changez as the victim, while many (though not all) white American students see him as the villain. These first responses

to the novel even in my classroom (as a microcosm of a broader global readership) thus rather depressingly confirm my concern that the novel conduces readers not only not to challenge but to confirm their presuppositions, based on their own experientially conditioned subject positions, to duplicate, not dispel, the climate of mutual distrust.<sup>18</sup> It is my work in the classroom to help students revise their responses, to enable the rabbit-people to see the duck and the duck-people to see the rabbit. But for the average reader who does not have the benefit of classroom discussion, the tendency to continue seeing in the direction they were originally inclined to see, unprompted, is more likely to prevail. Despite Hamid's hopes, readers inclined to see one way do not switch over to the other way of seeing without active prompting. In a classroom setting, discussion, exchange of perspectives, and a teacher's guidance can redirect both kinds of readers to see differently, and to understand those perspectives, and to see the novel as attempting to reveal via mirroring this tendency by readers to read in accordance with predisposition. (Doubtless, that remains a difficult task, for at all times what remains as a heavy gravitational pull on all attempts to provide counter-readings is the inequality of power structures in play, which exerts a warp effect on even such corrective efforts.)

The narrative tactics of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are very clever, but in a dangerous climate of unequal power relations between the west and the Muslim world, I would argue, they are not wise. Hamid lays open the novel to, indeed seems to encourage, a hermeneutic relativism, where whatever the reader thinks goes. Planting evidence for either reading, allowing readers to choose whatever they prefer, and hence to remain unchallenged, becomes a disturbing abstention from authorial ethical responsibility. To be clear, I am not saying that this is the author's intention. It is the result, I suspect, of a miscalculation of his average, predominant readership. In his subsequent remarks, Hamid himself seems baffled by responses to his book, especially by



those who read Changez as an Islamic fundamentalist, and tries to clarify his meaning and intentions. In an important essay entitled “Islam is not a Monolith,” Hamid protests:

There’s no real evidence that Changez is religious....he calls himself a Muslim, and is angry with US foreign policy, and grows a beard—and that seems to be enough. Changez may well be an agnostic, or even an atheist. Nonetheless he is somehow, and seemingly quite naturally, read by many people as a character who is an Islamic fundamentalist. Why? The novel carefully separates the politics of self-identification from any underlying religious faith or spirituality. It sets out to show that the former can exist in the absence of the latter. (*Discontent* 224)

While this belated clarification is important and worthy, it demonstrates a naïve failure to anticipate his readership. Consequently, Hamid has to explain, repeatedly, in authorial commentary that exists outside the text, to counter these common (mis)readings.<sup>19</sup>

Literary scholars tend to focus on their own interpretive lenses to produce highly specialized readings of this novel, which tend on the whole towards the opposite tendency, praising Hamid’s politics and technical innovations, and seeing Changez sympathetically as an unproblematic subaltern figure. However, scholarly readings of this novel altogether fail to look at actual readers reading, and hence reveal a troubling and telling disjunction between their own theoretical insights and the reception of the novel by a majority of non-specialist Western readers.<sup>20</sup> As scholars we need to pay attention both to the political contexts that produce such troubling (mis)readings and to the aspects of the text that encourage them.

### **More Duck Than Rabbit? How Hamid Further Tilts the Case against Changez**

Not only does Hamid fail to anticipate his readership in a context of unequal power, but he also further tilts the case against Changez by means of representational choices that cast further suspicion on him and undermine his credibility and trustworthiness. Indeed, Hamid makes it difficult even for postcolonial readers (like myself) to remain entirely sympathetic or defend Changez from undue suspicion. I want to call attention to four aspects of *RF* that exacerbate the case against Changez and contribute to the problems discussed above: one, formal elements, such as the frame, premise, and genre; two, Changez's instant reaction to 9/11—his infamous smile; three, Changez's highly problematic treatment of Erica and attitudes toward gender and sexuality; and four, Changez's increasingly equivocal needling that stokes fear and suspicion both in his listener and readers. Each of these makes the ambiguity more and more uneven, stacking the case against Changez and casting more suspicion on him than on the American.

First, the implausible set-up or frame for the narrative itself predisposes readers to be wary of Changez as a character and narrator. As the novel opens, Changez accosts an unnamed man in a street in Lahore, assumes he is an American, invites the man to a street café, and, like an Ancient Mariner, proceeds to tell him, willy-nilly, the story of his life. “Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America,” he asserts (*RF* 1). While on the one hand providing overt reassurance, and challenging the stereotypical associations of bearded Muslim men with danger, Changez on the other hand proceeds to identify the American by *his* bodily markers, his “bearing” (2).<sup>21</sup> To readers expecting realist fiction, Changez seems suspicious from the start, reminiscent of a spy novel villain who lures a stranger into a trap. (To Pakistani readers, it is the American who seems suspicious: with a muscular body trained for combat, a high-tech mobile phone that goes off exactly on the hour as if he is himself being watched and protected, he keeps

reaching for a bulge under his jacket that may conceal a gun.) In any case, Changez's intrusive invitation seems not impromptu, but prompted by a reason to waylay this man. Some have argued that the unrealistic conceit of the frame suggests that Changez performs the telling of a Pakistani perspective to American readers (reversing the one-sidedness of dominant narratives) to invite a hearing of alternative versions, and critiques of US imperialism and racism. But simple reversal is never effective: it merely repeats the tactics it seeks to dismantle. Nor is it persuasive. Changez's didactic statement at the end, "you should not assume that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover agents" (183), remains conditional and ambiguous: if the American is an undercover agent, then perhaps Changez is a terrorist. It does not establish Changez's non-involvement with terrorism. Overall, the weight of suspicion created by these textual elements is greater than pointers to the contrary. The burden to prove his innocence lies heavier on Changez than on the American.

In addition to the frame, the novel's call to various genres also predisposes readers towards suspicion of the narrator. If readers expect a thriller (as the cover blurb promises), that itself can predispose readers to look for good versus bad guys, placing a question mark over Changez from the outset. Expectations imposed by other generic markers further tilt readers against Changez, impeding a shift towards trust even if his narrative seems more disarming as he continues. If readers recognize that Hamid has adapted the poetic form of the dramatic monologue, where the narrator unwittingly gives himself away (like the speaker in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" who reveals that he had his wife murdered), then that form as well predisposes us to read Changez's narrative as designed to be unintentionally self-exposing, gradually revealing guilt or malintent. More knowing readers might recognize Hamid's play with

the confessional novel like Camus's *The Fall* (including the second-person address)—and be cued to view the narrator as offering a confession of guilt, regarding a past or imminent crime.<sup>22</sup>

Second, Changez's bizarre initial reaction to the 9/11 attacks is hard for most readers to understand or excuse. When, in a hotel room in Manila, Changez realizes that what he is seeing on television is not a film but the actual twin towers falling, he reports, "And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (72). It is certainly possible that Hamid's goal was to suggest that not all responses around the globe were uniform, that some damaged by US policies may have experienced, at least momentarily, a legitimate twinge of gladness at seeing the oppressive superpower under attack. Changez's explanation, that he smiled, not at the expense of the victims, but at "the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (73), opens up additional problems, highlighting a chauvinistic mindset that views the nation in gendered allegorical terms (as female), revealing his macho (and implicitly sexual) pleasure in bringing "her" down. What Hamid risks, at the very least, is confirming dangerous prevalent notions that Muslims are anti-American and celebrated the terrorist attacks.<sup>23</sup> Nor does it cast Changez in a positive light that he has utterly forgotten about Erica, the woman he supposedly loves and who is at that time in Manhattan, potentially at risk of further attacks.

Third, Changez's self-described interactions with Erica, and his objectifying and sexualizing view of her, also deeply undermine him as a character. For feminist readers, this aspect of the novel is perhaps the most troubling. Not only does he view Erica as a trophy, desiring her for her whiteness and class status, a "field" to be fought over, desiring her for the access she provides to elite white American upper-class circles, making use of her as an avenue to wealth and power (18). He also fails to understand her mental illness, imagining self-servingly

that “the desire of others” (i.e., himself) could effect a cure (141). But worse, he engages in a coercive, deceptive form of sexual intercourse that hovers between consent and non-consent. Shrouded in ambiguity, Hamid’s portrayal does not suggest that Changez simply rapes Erica (as one white female critic reads it<sup>24</sup>), but it does reinforce the stereotype of the aggressively sexual Muslim man who ignores the woman’s confused and confusing signals and her undue passivity to get what he wants, as if he needs no partnership, no mutuality in sex: “She did not respond; she did not resist; she merely acceded as I undressed her....I found it difficult to enter her; it was as though she was not aroused” (89–90). Although he gets her to “acquiesce” by asking her to pretend that he is Chris, her deceased lover (104), his language disturbingly evokes sexual violence: “The entrance between her legs was wet and dilated, but was at the same time oddly rigid: it reminded me—unwillingly—of a wound, giving our sex a violent undertone despite the gentleness with which I attempted to move” (105–06). It is after this that Erica goes into a further decline, and has to be institutionalized.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, none of this links Changez to terrorism. But it makes Changez less able to win over mistrustful readers. Hamid’s representation of Changez’s non-egalitarian mindset regarding women and sex further pushes his protagonist into affirming Western fears of Muslim men as sexually predatory, insensitive at the very least, unable to partner or desire mutuality, and prone to deceive or pretend under a fake persona. Even for non-Western, postcolonial feminist readers, Changez’s repugnant approach to gender and sexuality casts doubt on him, both as a narrator and character, augmenting Changez’s unlikability, prying potentially sympathetic readers away from trusting his overall point of view. Hamid thus unnecessarily undercuts the very character upon whose credibility depends the validity of his postcolonial work.

Finally, fourth, Hamid presents Changez as making increasingly gratuitous, needling remarks to his American auditor, fanning the flames of his fear, which, to readers who view Changez as innocent, seem foolish and unnecessary, and to those who do not, only further confirm his threatening character. From the beginning, Changez introduces alarming ideas while appearing to reassure. As their waiter approaches their table, Changez observes that the American seems “worried” about the “burly fellow,” and asserts, “no need to reach under your jacket,” opening the question of whether the American is reaching for a wallet or a gun (5). But in then confirming that the waiter seems “an intimidating chap,” and assuring his listener of the “sweetness of his speech, if only you understood Urdu,” Changez introduces doubt, highlighting his own advantage and the American’s disadvantage in this context (6). When their tea arrives, Changez observes that the American looks “suspicious,” and, assuring him it is not “poisoned,” switches their cups (11). Again, why, if Changez is innocent, would he introduce and amplify the sense that the American is seen in Pakistan as an enemy, likely to be done in by anonymous hands?

Soon after, Changez notes how the American seems “ill at ease,” jumpy and watchful, like “an animal that has ventured too far from its lair and is now, in unfamiliar surroundings, uncertain whether it is predator or prey!” (31). Changez thus introduces a worrisome strain of imagery of animals in a hunt, preparatory to the kill, keeping ambiguous who is predator or prey. Later, as they smell the aromas of tandoori meat being grilled and jasmine flowers worn by a woman at a neighboring table, Changez urbanely remarks, “It is remarkable indeed how we human beings are capable of delighting in the mating call of a flower while we are surrounded by the charred carcass of our fellow animals” (78). Changez calls attention to their shared humanity, to human beings’ ability to conjoin death and sex, “mortality and procreation,” but also suggests

how humans are predatory animals, eating with relish the meat they kill (78). Intensifying these suggestions, Changez thereafter describes his hunger, the sound from his “unfed” stomach,” as “a muffled growl, as if of a young lion held captive in a gunnysack” (100).

Combined with his remarks about his willingness to use violence in self-defense, such comments cumulatively suggest Changez’s propensity for violence, hinting of an imminent attack on the American as prey. While many of Changez’s earlier remarks may seem ambiguous, and explainable as reassurance or hospitality, Hamid builds up these negative suggestions with Changez’s odd comments about how Lahoris love to eat “delectable” “*predatory delicacies*” in a “carnivorous feast,” how primitive “man” was not as “fearful of his prey” (101). More ominously, Changez continues, unlike Americans, who sanitize their meat, and Indians, who are vegetarian, Pakistanis “are not squeamish when it comes to facing the consequences of our desire” (101). Ostensibly, Changez is talking about barbecued meat, but his comments suggest a bloodthirstiness, aligned with a masculinist, nationalist ethos that glorifies Pakistanis as hunters and predators. It also heightens the suggestion that Changez is talking about his listener as the prey that he is pursuing. Referencing the meat being grilled, he says, “Observe the sparks that fly from the coals, angry and red, as our cook fans the flames,” as if he too is fanning some flames, preparing his guest to be grilled (116). Evoking a language of anger that suggests imminent danger, these comments are hard to write off as merely the other side of an even see-saw. They dispel the trust even of readers initially inclined to view Changez as innocent.<sup>26</sup>

As tension grows over this dinner, Changez announces ominously, “the time has now come to dirty our hands” (123). He could mean literally that they have to eat with their bare hands, not a knife and fork, or, figuratively, that it’s time to get down to business. Hamid continues to heighten the suspicion that the American might be Changez’s prey (or vice versa),

when Changez says, as a warning or challenge, “We have after all spent some hours in each other’s company already; surely you can no longer feel the need to hold back. There is great satisfaction to be had in touching one’s prey” (123). In either case, it incites unease. Finally, under the guise of offering his guest dessert, Changez makes an undisguisedly snide remark: “one reads that the soldiers of your country are sent to battle with chocolate in their rations, so the prospect of sugaring your tongue before undertaking even the bloodiest of tasks cannot be entirely alien to you” (138). There is little pretense now that they are circling each other, gearing up for some kind of bloody “battle.” The question arises, if Changez was the prey, why would he goad his enemy? Even if Changez is trying to force the American’s hand into the open, such a move could misfire. Changez’s comments seem at least unwise, but more heavily suggest that he *is* the predator, engaged in a game of cat and mouse.

Likewise, Changez stokes the American’s alarm about the bearded waiter, pointing out that the waiter is from the mountainous northwest, the region bordering Afghanistan, where he and his “tribe” have “suffered during offensives conducted by your countrymen” and may consequently have taken “a disliking to you” (108). Reminding the American of the hostility induced by drone attacks on Pakistan’s tribal border regions may be a truth-telling move, but it cannot avoid arousing further unease, even panic. Even if he is innocent, Changez clearly takes unnecessary pleasure in unsettling the American. When the waiter brings green tea without being asked, Changez comments, “Remarkable service, eh? He has arrived just as he was required. One would not have thought, sir, that he was watching us so closely” (154). Again, Changez’s words foment suspicion, without tipping into certainty: what “service” does Changez require of this waiter? What is he “required” to do? By whom? None of these remarks confirm Changez’s guilt, but they tilt the interpretive field against Changez, prompting even sympathetic readers to



wonder what kind of game he is playing, and why he would endanger his own safety if he is not involved in some covert enterprise. They become counter-indicators to his innocence, contributing to the already heavy weight of suggestions that pull against him. By this point in the novel, Changez is clearly dissembling about something, and offering deliberate provocation. He does not act merely like an angry, unjustly treated man bent on proving his innocence. If Hamid's goal was to highlight unwarranted *mutual* suspicion between the west and the rest, why does he tilt the balance against one but not the other? Why make his protagonist so unequally, unwarrantably sinister, much more so than the American?

Hence it is not just lay readers who fall into believing Changez is up to no good. At the end of an essay that examines textual ambiguity in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a European scholar concludes:

...apparently neutral, the statements, provocations and questions that Changez intertwines on the double pattern are, in reality, barbed remarks against the imposition of a certain world vision, and evolve into a looming threat. As a matter of fact, the Pakistani's idiosyncratic revenge takes the form of words, and probably actions too, exactly following the willful example of Robert Browning's Duke.... (Adami 301–02)

Starting with ambiguity, this scholar has arrived at certainty. In his reading, Changez is confirmed as the villain bound on “revenge,” “probably” bent on murder. If Hamid wanted his readers to see how they see, his novel seems designed to undo that plan.

## **Conclusion**

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is justifiably acclaimed for its political interventions and its stylistic, formal brilliance. My concern is that the novel risks sabotaging its own goals. Depending on the reader, these unrelenting ambiguities can produce spectacular success in reaching and educating some readers, and spectacular failure with others. Worse, Changez's increased suspiciousness over the course of his narrative nudges readers towards confirming Islamophobic views, and undermines the punch and validity of even the kinds of anti-colonial or postcolonial remarks he makes, which are rarely given space to be heard amid dominant discourses in the west. If it is Hamid's point that the subaltern cannot be heard, then that, to my mind, is an unduly dark one. For there are surely other ways for relatively privileged voices like Hamid's to make themselves heard.

Post-9/11 postcolonial writers have alternatives. A good example that I can only mention briefly here is H. M. Naqvi's 2009 novel *Home Boy*, also about the experiences of educated young Pakistani men in New York City in 2001, also ending with the shattered American dream and the protagonist's return to Pakistan. *Home Boy* is a more modest novel, but more knowing about its readership, adopting very different representational strategies, choosing a savvy clarity over ambiguity. Naqvi disambiguates. Naqvi clearly and unambiguously presents his young narrator as innocent, believable, disarmingly funny, and reliable, and the moment of 9/11 as one of trauma, where the trauma is exacerbated for the Muslim man placed under undue suspicion. Naqvi's cleverness manifests in the constructive humor he uses to do political, cultural, and literary work. Naqvi's novel, by contrast with Hamid's, establishes that while the post-9/11 Muslim male protagonist-narrator must carry the burden of suspicion in the west, it is not inevitable that the writer must augment that suspicion to make his point.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Since this essay offers an overview of global readership, and examines the novel's alternating play with different kinds of readers, I should situate myself as a reader: namely, as a postcolonial and feminist scholar, originally from Pakistan, working in the American academy.

<sup>2</sup> Note, for example, the recent spike in anti-Muslim sentiment in India, and its long history.

<sup>3</sup> To be clear, I understand Islamophobia as not just a fear of Islam or Muslims, but as “a new form of racism, based on assumptions about (and attributions of) inherent characteristics linked with national origin, or other markers such as names, forms of dress” (Naber 303), and as a new mutation of Orientalism, “an ideological formation” emergent from post–Cold War politics, that has accompanied and enabled the rise of US imperialism and globalization (Sheehi 31).

<sup>4</sup> I understand colonialism as a subset of imperialism, and postcolonialism as opposed to both. See McLeod: “imperialism continues apace as Western nations are still engaged in imperial acts, securing wealth and power through the continuing economic exploitation of other nations” (9).

<sup>5</sup> I refer here to the well-known ambiguous 1892 drawing that created a duck-or-rabbit optical illusion and that came to epitomize in psychology and philosophy, as in Wittgenstein's work, two ways of seeing. One can either see only one (duck or rabbit), or learn to see and flip between either one or the other, but it is not possible to see both at once. See for example,

<https://www.sapienism.com/post/what-do-you-see>.

<sup>6</sup> Even this duck-rabbit alternation is not even-handed, as I will show, because even for those inclined to be sympathetic to Changez, it is difficult to remain unsuspecting of him.

<sup>7</sup> Empson goes on to create a taxonomy of seven different kinds of ambiguity, but this early definition covers them all. In fact, as he notes at the end, seven is just an arbitrary number.

<sup>8</sup> I use “postcolonial” here in the broader sense of not just concerned with the legacies of past European colonialism, but as anti-imperialist, concerned with contesting contemporary forms of global imperialism.

<sup>9</sup> The only time the term “fundamentalism” is used in the context of an actual religion (Islam) occurs when Changez’s girlfriend’s white American father denounces the problems of Pakistan: “Economy’s falling apart, no? Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers....the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism” (54–55). Changez bristles but politely refuses to respond. What Hamid makes apparent, though, is the hypocrisy, arrogance, and complacency of the elite white American male who fails to see how his crude and facile description of Pakistan applies even more aptly to his own country.

<sup>10</sup> Many Western reviewers, nonetheless, like James Lasdan in *The Guardian*, see this narrative of Changez’s “disenchantment” and hostility to the west as biting the hand that fed him.

<sup>11</sup> In his important essay, Peter Morey argues that *RF* constitutes a “sly intervention that destabilizes the dominant categories of the post-9/11 novel” (136) since, instead of the simple trauma narrative or the apprehended terrorist’s confessional, “the promise of a true confession is always held in abeyance (140). However, my point is precisely that the uncertainty *enhances* (instead of diminishing) the overwhelming burden of suspicion already imposed on Changez, and reinforces the dominant tendency to see him as untrustworthy and dangerous.

<sup>12</sup> Why, we may well ask, does Changez not reveal any of this earlier? Why does not only Changez string along his listener, all through the novel, but so does Hamid his readers?

Undoubtedly, Hamid's goal is to be instructive, but he takes a dangerous risk that misfires.

<sup>13</sup> Davis was arrested by Pakistani police, and eventually released after the US paid blood money to the dead men's families. See "US gives fresh details of CIA agent who killed two men in Pakistan shootout," Ewen MacAskill and Declan Walsh (21 Feb. 2011, *The Guardian*); "A CIA spy, a hail of bullets, three killed and a US-Pakistan diplomatic row," Declan Walsh (20 Feb. 2011, *The Guardian*); "American who sparked diplomatic crisis over Lahore shooting was CIA spy," Declan Walsh and Ewen MacAskill (20 Feb. 2011, *The Guardian*); "Lahore shooting suspect Raymond Davis 'was CIA'" (21 Feb. 2011, *BBC News*); and "American Held in Pakistan Worked with C.I.A.," Mark Mazzetti, et al. (21 Feb. 2011, *New York Times*).

<sup>14</sup> I would point out that it is possible to highlight the *fact* of mutual suspicion without reinforcing that suspicion. Instead of validating the putative reasons for suspicion, postcolonial writers could challenge them. In "A Conversation with Mohsin Hamid" (back pages of the paperback edition of *RF*), Hamid states, "The form of the novel, with the narrator and his audience both acting as characters, allowed me to mirror the mutual suspicion with which American and Pakistan (or the Muslim world) look at one another....this allows the novel to inhabit the interior emotional world much like the exterior political world in which it will be read." The problem with this sanguine view, however, is that the exterior political world is not an even playing field.

<sup>15</sup> Critics who have discussed the unreliability of the narrator in *RF* tend to valorize the novel for different reasons and fail to distinguish between types of unreliability. Greta Olson, for instance, argues that the unreliable narrator "functions to destabilize dominant Western and US American representations of...9/11...and its aftermath" (156) because the novel undermines "the dominant

representational strategies of...[the] majority [of] 9/11 texts” (157). I would question her romanticizing (and patronizing) claim that the marginalized are by definition unreliable and therefore to be validated, and her failure to scrutinize critically Changez’s problematic gender politics and reaction to 9/11. Olson also assumes a (false) coincidence between the novel’s addressee and the American reader, which also does not allow for non-American readers or reactions. Sarah Ilott argues that Hamid’s novel demands “active readership,” but sees the reader as set up to be an “impartial judge” (572). Somewhat self-contradictorily, Ilott also sees the reader as the addressee of the novel, via “the second-person address” and the variety of genres, “which means that the reader has to choose what he or she believes to be the most suitable generic framework for understanding the novella” (572). It is precisely such a laissez-faire approach to the reader that I find problematic because it validates the novel’s encouragement of readers reading as they wish instead of challenging them. I do not share Ilott’s trust in or sanguine views of contemporary global readership. Moreover, I see the reader of this novel positioned as an onlooker or eavesdropper, not as addressee.

<sup>16</sup> Source of this and subsequent Amazon review quotations:

[https://www.amazon.com/Reluctant-Fundamentalist-Mohsin-Hamid/product-reviews/0156034026/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_d\\_show\\_all\\_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\\_reviews](https://www.amazon.com/Reluctant-Fundamentalist-Mohsin-Hamid/product-reviews/0156034026/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews).

Accessed February 15, 2020. Here I have selected from relatively sophisticated readers, not from those who confuse the author with the narrator.

<sup>17</sup> Chandra is right to point out that Pakistanis have many options, instead of the binary choice between America and Pakistan, but wrongly reads the novel as confirming that Changez has chosen extremism and violence.

<sup>18</sup> See my forthcoming essay on Mira Nair's film adaptation, where I argue that the film makes a strong intervention by dispensing with such problematic ambiguities in the novel and making very clear Changez's innocence as the drama unfolds.

<sup>19</sup> In a striking moment, for instance, Hamid reflects, "People often ask me if I am the book's Pakistani protagonist. I wonder why they never ask if I am his American listener. After all, a novel can often be a divided man's conversation with himself" (*Discontent* 94). Tragically for such a marvelous possibility, the novel is not set up, or cued, to be read in this way.

<sup>20</sup> That said, Western scholars are by no means exempt from such ideologically driven misreadings, as examples below show.

<sup>21</sup> And indeed, Changez's reading of the American has been called "reverse ethnic profiling" by a Western reviewer (Solomon, quoted in Olson 161). By contrast, I read Hamid here as setting up an important difference between the superficial, unthinking dismissal and distrust based on stereotypes of physical appearance versus the observant analysis of clues and bodily signifiers—the particular cut of suit, the close-cropped hair, the muscular body trained for combat—that Changez engages in to assess the American stranger. But my point is that, as an opening gambit, this move is designed to appear contradictory and unsettling. Moreover, by adding the detail about the beard Hamid does not help support Changez's claims or make him seem immediately prepossessing. Most educated, upper- and middle-class Pakistani men do not wear beards. For Changez to choose to grow one right after 9/11 as an in-your-face act of defiance is at once implausible and unnecessary, even to sympathetic readers, and suspicious to less sympathetic ones.

<sup>22</sup> Hamid has explained that he arrived at this form after trying others that didn't work: "I soon had my answers: the frame of a dramatic monologue in which the Pakistani protagonist speaks to

an American listener, and a voice born of the British colonial inflections taught in elite Pakistani schools and colored by an anachronistic, courtly menace that resonates well with popular preconceptions of Islam” (*Discontent* 93). It is astonishing that while Hamid registers his awareness of such Islamophobic preconceptions he still seems bent, through his choice of this narrative voice, on feeding and confirming them, tempting unwary readers to fall.

<sup>23</sup> Many reviewers testify to finding this moment among the most alienating. See also Naydan, who explores various ways to read the smile but sees it as ultimately indeterminate.

<sup>24</sup> Ilott, 579. Indeed, she notes, Changez’s language, which “signifies rape,” becomes so repugnant here as to turn readers against him: “at this juncture, if not before, readers might begin to suspect the narrator’s deceit and therefore adopt a critical attitude towards the reliability of his narrative” (579). I see Changez’s language as highly questionable but ambiguous, but a reading like Ilott’s in itself shows how Changez is liable to be read by white Western female readers.

<sup>25</sup> Some critics (like Ilott, 579) have read this scene as allegorical, as a way, though crude, for Hamid to suggest the difficulties immigrants face in trying to enter America. However, from a postcolonial and feminist perspective, I find such a mode of representation highly troubling. Why should immigrants be imagined via this dubious mode of representation as (only) brown men seeking entry to a woman’s body through her legs? Why should the first “wound” to Changez’s ego be then duplicated and mirrored upon Erica’s genitalia? Hamid’s mode of allegorical representation of a migrant’s relationship to Am/Erica as sexual and mutually violent fails to separate from Changez’s own problematic gender and sexual politics.

<sup>26</sup> I am not suggesting that Hamid presents the American as above suspicion. Clearly, he is not merely a tourist. A particularly telling and indicting moment is his repugnance for, and refusal of, the crippled beggar to whom Changez, by contrast, gives alms (40). The scene highlights the



American's lack of humanity, his inability to feel for others less fortunate, and his liability to suspect even Changez's act of charity. But my point is that the text places a greater burden of suspicion on Changez than it does on his auditor.

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