



'The Treatment of '9/11' in Contemporary Anglophone Pakistani Literature: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a Postcolonial Bildungsroman'

Author: Khan, Gohar Karim

Source: *eSharp*, Issue 17: Crisis (2011), pp. 84-104

URL: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/esharp>

ISSN: 1742-4542

Copyright in this work remains with the author

eSharp is an international online journal for postgraduate research in the arts, humanities, social sciences and education. Based at the University of Glasgow and run by graduate students, it aims to provide a critical but supportive entry to academic publishing for emerging academics, including postgraduates and recent postdoctoral students.

esharp@gla.ac.uk

The Treatment of '9/11' in Contemporary Anglophone Pakistani Literature: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a Postcolonial Bildungsroman

Gohar Karim Khan (University of Warwick)

Revolutionary action explodes with the same force and the same facility as the writer who has only to set down a few words side by side in order to change the world....Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment when 'life endures death and maintains itself it' in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech. – Maurice Blanchot (1995, p.322)

Traditionally, the conception of 'crisis' in literature has echoed the Greek notion of textual 'climax' – the point at which the maximum level of interest and emotional reaction is attained. In an Aristotelian context, it is defined as a turning point, something of the nature of an epiphany, after which the progress of a play or novel is dramatically and enduringly altered. This paper stems from the premise that in the recent trajectory of Anglophone Pakistani fiction, the historical moment of 'crisis' was marked on a date that is now legendarily termed '9/11', representing terrorism on a scale unprecedented in history. Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2009), Faryal Ali Gauhar's *No Place For Further Burials* (2008) are but a few examples of the recent literary production of Pakistani fiction in English that offers intervention on the subject of '9/11' and the 'war on terror' that ensued in its wake. Using Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant*

Fundamentalist (2008) this paper explores specific and significant ways in which this crisis has been addressed. Suggesting that Hamid's novel offers a unique and alternative discourse to the more commonly found expositions on contemporary terrorism and Islam, I argue that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* attempts to disrupt current and hegemonic anti-Islamic discourses that tend to posit a cause and effect relationship between Islam and terrorism. The paper also expresses the urgency of addressing the reductive and politically flawed binary that increasingly divides Muslims between 'moderates' and 'extremists', 'safe' or 'dangerous'. I offer a reading of the protagonist's story as a Postcolonial and post-terrorist bildungsroman – a microcosmic representation of the recent alienation of Muslims around the world, and one that maps the transformative growth of a young American Muslim man into a nationalist, anti-colonial radical.

The terrorist attacks launched against America in September 2001 reinstated the regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as some of the world's most dangerous countries in the popular American consciousness, associating them with the iniquities of violence, religious extremism and criminality. While these nations acquired notoriety as breeding grounds for terrorists, diasporic Muslims all over the western world felt the impact of racial misgivings and anti-terror resentment in one way or another, directly or secondarily. Though terrorism as an expression of danger and violent aggression is an age-old phenomenon, the last decade has been particularly preoccupied with the notion of 'terror'. As a singular date, '9/11' has served to demarcate time and history – political discourse, particularly in the media, speak of the world pre- and post-'9/11'. From a Muslim perspective, one of the chief consequences of '9/11' was the dispersion of negative feelings about Islam, a religion that has progressively become labelled as menacing

and aggressive. Muslims, young males in particular, became images of irrational threat and fear amongst the general public, arguably leading to an escalation in extremist behaviour. Regions of the world which had remained hitherto uninteresting (even unknown, in some cases) to the citizens of many Western countries, rapidly gained a notoriety, with the terms 'Afghanistan', 'Pakistan', 'Iraq', 'Al-Qaeda' and 'Islam' becoming part of everyday vocabulary. The western media has made a significant contribution in promoting the presence of this ubiquitous and invisible phenomenon – terror – that somehow the more 'civilized' nations of the world had to undertake, perpetuated no doubt by 'the belief that having struck once, terror will do so again, at the same place' (Boehmer and Morton 2010, p.1).

At this political watershed, I am predominantly interested in examining the role of the Postcolonial intellectual; what might be expected of writers, critics and poets in such a moment of crisis, and what diagnostic tools does the field of postcoloniality itself employ to examine, explain, interrogate or narrate the phenomenon of terror? I argue that fictional narratives based on factual realities are an alternative response to the forces of colonialism and neo-colonialism, which have arguably fuelled the American-led war against terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. Postcolonialism has conventionally performed this undertaking in two somewhat dichotomous ways: first, by offering the possibility of Postcolonialism as a transnational phenomenon, a field which is 'allowed' to be assimilated into the global canon instead of existing as a separate, perhaps exotic, entity in itself. In this version, Postcolonialism would be treated synonymously with transnationalism and cross-border exchange. The other approach presents Postcolonialism as a subversive field geared towards resistance and, under this banner, is commensurate with resistance and subversion to the existing structures of power.

Moreover, these two possible approaches towards Postcolonialism become more challenging when critics such as Elleke Boehmer contentiously argue, 'From this perspective, unnervingly to some, Postcolonialism aligns more closely with some of the theories and significations of 'terror' (as in anti-colonial violence, for example) than it does with globalisation.' Both the hybridized and resistance-based post-colonialisms deal directly, or indirectly, with the notion of 'belated empire', but the chief task of the latter is to 'keep watch on these hegemonic centres and borders, to sabotage, subvert and balk them if necessary, and also to explore alternative yet co-existent locations and lineages of meaning and survival.' (Boehmer 2010, p. 60-65)

In their timely book, *Terror and the Postcolonial*, Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton suggest that the vast body of writing that has emerged after 9/11, especially in the West, is complicit with the global counter-terrorist agenda; it schools people in the manner of a conversion, albeit disguised, by telling them exactly what they *should* think. Contemporary discourse on terrorism is faulted for its predominantly orientalist dimension, along the lines of what Spivak calls 'metalepsis', where terrorism, which is actually an 'effect' of colonial power and oppression, is instead presented as a 'cause'. (Boehmer and Morton 2010, p.11) It appears then that Postcolonial Studies has a great and grave responsibility in this context of contemporary terrorism: 'What is the critical vocation' Boehmer appositely asks, 'of Postcolonial Studies during and beyond the 'war on terror'?' She suggests that in the age of current terrorism and counter-terrorism the 'anti-imperial, decolonizing agenda of Postcolonial studies has become ever more pressing.' (Boehmer 2010, p.141-147) Reiterating a long feared notion that globalisation is rapidly transforming into imperialism and giving way to a new

sense of 'Empire', Boehmer stresses the need that Postcolonial studies should not, wittingly or unwittingly, convenience this agenda. Contemporary Pakistani writing in English is an intriguing example of the kind of fiction that results from a climate of heightened social and political sensitivity. Pakistani novelists are playing a role in literarily projecting a country fraught with violence, discrimination, insecurity and, perhaps most importantly from the point of view of this study, a notorious reputation. I find that there are powerful and compelling agendas at work in the fiction that is being produced in Pakistan currently; contemporary Anglophone Pakistani fiction, I would argue, is more a matter of business than leisure. It reflects, to a significant extent, the concerns that dominate Pakistan's society and her national and foreign politics, including a growing religious militancy, acts of internal violence and the forces of terror which pose a major threat to the country's regional and domestic peace. Critics such as Sarah Brouillette and Graham Huggan have continued to express a somewhat cynical suspicion about the traditional function of Postcolonial writing, and are especially concerned about the 'Coca-Cola-like' and label-packed status of English language fiction produced by Postcolonial writers. Having found its way into the capitalist schema which functions on the materialist dictates of supply and demand, Postcolonial literature, they argue, is 'consumed' by the West with great relish. Though these arguments bear some weight in Pakistani Anglophone fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, I propose that '9/11' has contributed significantly towards shifting the scope of English language fiction from Pakistan. Anglophone Pakistani writers are dealing not just with resisting the forces of counter-terrorism and neo-liberalism, but are simultaneously confronting the might of religious fundamentalism. The notion of double-consciousness that results

from many such writers' diasporic status in the West makes their position further problematical and challenging.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist squarely confronts the position and treatment of Muslims around the world after the terrorist attacks in America on September 11, 2001. One of the most popular novels written by a Pakistani writer in recent times, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores the psychological and physical consequences of '9/11' on a diasporic Muslim youth, and investigates the process of alienation triggered by this international moment of crisis. The narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* unfolds in the form of a monologue, addressed to an unidentified American visitor in Lahore's famous Anarkali Bazaar. The novel's position on the terrorism witnessed on '9/11' is an unusual one, expressive of profound complexity and encompassing a range of sentiments from ecstasy and awe to disgust and disenchantment. What is of particular significance is the novel's depiction of the dichotomous ways in which the tragedy of '9/11' affected Americans, particularly members of the Muslim community who are shown to have hitherto embraced the 'American dream' without reserve. For the novel's American-Pakistani protagonist Changez, '9/11' marks the date on which this dream is fatally wounded, as he witnesses the status of diasporic Muslims altering quickly and perhaps irreparably. In a short article, ironically entitled *Focus on the Fundamentals*, Hamid takes the following stance, explaining the background to his disillusionment with the West, though having once assimilated into it with no professed links to his original cultural heritage:

When I arrived at Princeton, I looked around me at the Gothic buildings—younger, I later learned, than many of the mosques of Lahore, but made through ingenious stonemasonry to look older—and thought, this is a dream come true. The university inspired in me the

feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible. Looking back now, I see the power of that system, pragmatic and effective, like so much else in America. We international students were sourced from around the globe, sifted not only by well-honed standardized tests but by painstakingly customized evaluations until the best and the brightest of us had been identified. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. And for the most part, we were happy to do so. I certainly was, at least at first. (Hamid 2008, p.178)

The Reluctant Fundamentalist problematizes the nature of diasporic existence, particularly in America, and investigates the social and cultural complexities faced by individuals and groups who inhabit two cultures simultaneously. Particularly interesting is Hamid's interpretation of the implications of being a diasporic American, and the degree of success to which American multiculturalism stands the test of a crisis of the epochal proportions of '9/11'. The ambiguity of Changez's position as a Pakistani migrant in America after '9/11' summons a number of vital questions: has his absorption into American culture, society and nationalism been adequate enough for him to overlook or indeed condone American political manoeuvres against his home country? When America declares an indiscriminate war on terror in Afghanistan, which happens to be a neighbour of Pakistan, is Changez for all purposes still American, or does he then become the outsider, the subaltern? Does the education imparted at Ivy League institutions serve the purpose of undiluted westernisation or does it leave room for independent thought and patriotism? Inhabiting a crises-stricken world in which Islam is increasingly associated with extremism and violence, and where Muslims are classified as either 'moderate' or 'extremist', Changez's response to '9/11' unfolds itself in a process of deep-seated and tragic alienation. In the novel Changez's self-loathing, triggered by what he regards as

his infidelity to Pakistan, leads him at one point to consider himself a Muslim ‘Janissary’ – as someone who ‘battled’ against his own civilization by embracing another. This metaphor is particularly potent as it not only aligns him with the young Christian boys captured and trained by the Ottomans to battle for the Muslim army, but in a sense makes his own betrayal even more indefensible:

The janissaries were always taken in childhood. It would have been far more difficult to devote themselves to their adopted empire ... if they had memories they could not forget (Hamid 2008, p.173).

In an article provocatively entitled *The Empire Strikes Back* – a pun no doubt on Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin’s treatise on Postcolonial thought and literature, *Empire Writes Back* – James Lasdon calls the novel a fable of ‘infatuation and disenchantment with America’ and invites the reader to explore Hamid’s implied definition of ‘fundamentalism’, a term which he suggests is just as befittingly applied to American capitalism as it is to Islamic extremism (Lasdon 2007). Changez’s employer at the American firm Underwood Samson encourages his workers to relentlessly ‘focus on the fundamentals’, but the irony of this much more subtle version of ‘fundamentalism’ occurs to Changez at a much later stage of his employment. It is in the final stages of Changez’s psychological metamorphosis that the more sinister agendas of Underwood Samson’s dogged adherence to its fundamentalist economic principles become apparent to him, and after which he declares,

It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision. (Hamid 2008, p.177)

In contemporary discourse and fiction, broadly speaking, the focus on violence and terror is portrayed as one dimensional – a third world and Islamic phenomenon. This paper is interested in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* willingness to explore violence three dimensionally, instead of facilitating and encouraging the more convenient stereotyping of the relationship between Islam and terrorism, endorsed fervently by elements of the Western media. The narrative is particularly clear in its intention to enable access to a hitherto neglected area and enter into an alternative discourse on terrorism, which provocatively suggests that violence, terror and fundamentalism are all intricately and inextricably connected in a relationship of cause and effect; that 'Islamic' terror is both 'affect and effect' (Robert Young 2010, p.307) and as such its historical origins of any act of terror must be examined. Why, for instance does Changez unwittingly rejoice as he watches the news on television while away on a business trip to Manila? Though on surface inflammatory and inexcusable, it is just as important to probe this reaction as it is to condemn it:

I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realised that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased. (Hamid 2008, p.83)

Changez's instinctive pleasure at this act of catastrophic terror requires further investigation, appearing somewhat incongruous given his own admiration and loyalty for America, and his commitment to the American dream. It is immediately clarified to his American listener, whose body language tenses and becomes more aggressive, that he has never personally been 'at war' with

America – far from it, he is the product of an American university, earning a ‘lucrative American salary’ and romantically involved with his American girlfriend, Erica. What he is celebrating clearly is not the slaughter of innocents or the plight of the victims of ‘9/11’; it is this very paradox, initially confusing even to him, that leads to a sense of loathing and ‘profound perplexity’ within him. In Changez’s mind, this act of violence carries a far more symbolic and figurative value: it is the uncanny and entirely unforeseen realisation that ‘someone had so visibly brought America to her knees’ (Hamid 2008, p.83).

Changez’s ‘reluctant’ animosity with America is initiated at this point of crisis, and as he returns to America the new reality of diasporic American existence confronts him unexpectedly, commencing at the point of airport immigration checks where, unlike his ‘genuinely’ American colleagues, he is asked to strip down to his boxer shorts; an order that leaves him feeling humiliated, incensed and instantly less American. The following exchange between Changez and the American immigration officer is particularly effective in its suggestion that for him, and many such others like him, life in America had changed irrevocably:

‘What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?’ she asked me. ‘I live here,’ I replied. ‘That is not what I asked you, sir’ she replied. ‘What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?’ (Hamid 2008, p.86)

While America was engulfed with panic, revulsion and paranoia, Changez felt ‘the crumbling of the world around [him] and the impending destruction of [his] personal American dream’ (Hamid 2008, p.106). After this humiliation, he confesses, ‘I rode to Manhattan that evening very much alone’ (Hamid 2008, p.86). A substantial part of Changez’s disillusionment stems from his

realisation that many Americans began to lose that very same sense of empathy for innocent Muslim Americans, that the terrorist attackers accusingly also lacked for Americans on '9/11'. His tone is accusatory but also one of disappointment in a people he had grown to admire over the process of his cultural assimilation:

As a society you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you [...] the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. (Hamid 2008, p.190)

The novel explores the fabric of post-'9/11' anxiety and fear in significant detail, inviting attention to the increasingly altered state of American life in the aftermath of this crisis. The sudden and inexplicable disappearance of Pakistani cab drivers from places like the Pak-Punjab Deli are shown to become regular incidents and their absence left open to dreadful speculation. The narrative offers a dark and urgent visual description of the sense of panic that ensued with the realization that Muslims, ordinary New Yorkers, were beginning to bear the wrath of '9/11':

Pakistani cab-drivers 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 centres for questioning or worse. (Hamid 2008. p.107)

Though Changez on his part naively reassures himself that this show of American wrath and counter-violence was reserved for just 'extremist' Muslims and that such a target list could not possibly include a successful and highly 'Americanised' Princeton graduate, it is only a matter of time before he too becomes a victim of American counter-violence. After a series of less significant incidents, such as

car tyres punctured and telephone lines disrupted, Changez finally experiences a physically threatening show of aggression first hand:

I was approached by a man I did not know [...] just then another man appeared; he, too, glared at me, but took his friend by the arm and tugged at him, saying it was not worth it. Reluctantly, the first allowed himself to be led away. 'Fucking Arab,' he said. My blood throbbed in my temples, and I called out, 'Say it to my face coward, not as you run and hide.' (Hamid 2008, p.134)

Changez's previously collected and reserved demeanour is abandoned in this particular moment of crisis as he is shown to retrieve a tyre iron from his boot and feel 'fully capable of wielding it with sufficient force to shatter the bones of his skull.' The men remain in this position for a 'few murderous seconds' (Hamid 2008, p.134). This new physical distancing from his fellow countrymen in America compounds the emotional and psychological deterioration in his relationship with colleagues at work and his social network of friends and acquaintances. Arguably, it marks his formal transition into anti-American sentiment, which later develops into a broader anti-West political activism. Hamid is cautious and restrained in his depiction of the transformation in his protagonist from 'a lover of America' and an admirer of its ideologies to a cynical and 'reluctant fundamentalist'. As readers we watch this transformation unravel analogously to the changes in the mood of American nationalism, which, as Changez observes, was famous for its ability to 'look forward', but is now determined to 'look back.' To him there is something 'undeniably retro' about the sudden proliferation of flags and uniforms, speckled with the terms 'duty' and 'honour' so much so that 'living in New York,' Changez describes, 'was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War' (Hamid 2008, p.130-131). Chagrined and humiliated at the prospect of continuing to

facilitate the American ‘Empire’ of finance which enabled this nation to dominate the world so comfortably, Changez realises: ‘I was no longer capable of so thorough a self-deception’ (Hamid 2008, p.114). He finally confronts a hitherto suppressed political sentiment:

I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country’s constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role. (Hamid 2008, p.177)

Whilst ‘9/11’ has demonstrably debilitated Changez’s cultural and nationalistic bonds with America, another significant effect is the reaffirmation of his nationalistic links to Pakistan and the realisation his affiliative ‘duty’ to the transnational Muslim Ummah. His desire to distance himself from America is accompanied by a sense of urgency, for instance, he feels no hesitation in purchasing a first class ticket to leave America for Pakistan, for ‘home’. The process of his re-assimilation into Pakistan, as narrated to his mysterious American listener, is noteworthy, being implicit of the transformation in his relationship with the two countries.

Changez’s first visit to Pakistan is of crucial importance, not only because of its structural positioning in the narrative – taking place in the winter after ‘9/11’ – but also owing to the relatively more rapid transformation of his own identity affiliation in Pakistan. As he explains to his American listener, a re-visitation of ‘home’ after a prolonged period of time requires a ‘different way of *observing*’– ‘I recall the Americanness of my own gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing’ (Hamid 2008, p.140). One of the first manifestations of this American gaze appears in the

feelings of shame and sadness at the dilapidated conditions of his parents' home:

I was struck at first by how shabby our house appeared, with cracks running through its ceilings and dry bubbles of paint flaking off where dampness had entered its walls [...] This was where I came from, this was my provenance, and it smacked of lowliness. (Hamid 2008, p.141)

Changez's initial reaction of disappointment and embarrassment are however fairly briskly replaced by a much graver realization that his house had remained largely unaltered in his absence:

I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country's elite. (Hamid 2008, p.141)

It is a realization that manifests itself in a physical and psychological self-loathing, whereby Changez is disgusted even by his reflection in the mirror and the 'unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed' (Hamid 2008, p.141). The use of language here is noteworthy – Changez speaks of himself as having become 'possessed', thereby associating his 'Americanness' with a kind of dreadful and overpowering occult power – a curse from which he needed to be exorcised. It is at this point in the narrative that Changez's identity position is more seriously challenged; his family home and its physical design and décor, become a sort of primary or primal site on which this crisis plays itself out, filling him initially with a sense of despair and degeneration but later with an overwhelming sense of pride, followed by self-chastisement at his own blindness and lack of generosity in appreciating the structure:

It was far from impoverished, indeed it was rich with history [...] I was disturbed by what this implied about myself: that I was a man lacking in substance and hence easily influenced by even a short sojourn in the company of others. (Hamid 2008, p.142)

It is only upon physically landing at Lahore airport and embracing his older brother that Changez is struck but the reality of his own youth – ‘an almost childlike twenty two’ – as opposed to the state of ‘permanent middle-age’ associated with a man ‘who lives alone and wears a suit in a city not of his birth’ (Hamid 2008, p.142). Changez has previously speculated about the difference of ‘worlds’ that separates a nation like America from one like Pakistan, but on visiting Lahore this notion is reinforced more forcefully than in the past. Despite his family’s desire to learn details of his life in New York, Changez senses a kind of unnaturalness in speaking of ‘that world here, as it would be odd to sing in a mosque’ (Hamid 2008, p.143). Changez’s homecoming is reminiscent of the African-American abolitionist and journalist Martin Delany’s 1859 Official Report of the *Niger Valley Exploring Party*, a poignant account quoted by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*:

The first sight and impressions of Africa are always inspiring, producing the most pleasant emotions. These pleasing sensations ... are succeeded ... [by] a feeling of regret that you left your native country for a strange one; an almost frantic desire to see friends and nativity ... when an entire recovery takes place, the love of the country is most ardent and abiding. (Cited in Gilroy 1993, p.24)

As a final mark of his personal war against America, Changez eventually leaves New York to live in Lahore, to work as a radical lecturer at a local university, where he ‘made it [his] mission to advocate a disengagement from [your] country with [his]’. The monologue hints at the mysterious disappearance of one of his

students, who Changez believes has been mistakenly linked to a terrorist plot and ‘whisked away to a secret detention facility, no doubt, in some lawless limbo between your country and mine.’ (Hamid 2008, p.206) First World governments in countries like America, Changez resentfully speculates, are not susceptible to the same interrogative processes as the rest of the world; their recent lawlessness being excused on the pretext of anti-terror measures. Changez is no longer capable of silently overlooking what he regards as national and political hypocrisy – he unequivocally and vehemently derides America’s use of violence to procure a safer world. He is fearless enough to state on an international news channel that ‘no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America’ (Hamid 2008, p.207). As part of his resistance to the insincerity of America’s war against terror, Changez defiantly leads caucuses and demonstrations demanding greater independence for Pakistani politics; his endeavours, however, are quickly deemed anti-American and hence illegal.

Towards the very end of the monologue, upon shaking his unidentified American listener’s hand, he detects a ‘glint of metal’ in the American’s jacket pocket (Hamid 2008, p.209). The reader is not made privy to whether this object is in fact a confirmation of the American’s ‘undercover assassin’ status or merely a sophisticated card case. In either case, Changez takes pains to assure us that: ‘I am a believer in non-violence; the spilling of blood is abhorrent to me, save in self-defence [...] I am no ally of killers; I am simply a university lecturer, nothing more or less’ (Hamid 2008, p.206). He promulgates his views against America’s political exploitations through allegedly non-violent means – by using the same rules and

laws of reason, education, and logical good sense that western nations have historically prided themselves upon.

Additionally, it is worth bearing in mind that Changez's transition from a 'lover of America' to a 'reluctant fundamentalist' is neither abrupt nor uncomplicated; in the manner of a bildungsroman it is a complex and problematic process which originates considerably *before* the tragedy of '9/11' and does not necessarily (and simplistically) culminate with his return to Pakistan as an anti-American activist. He remains 'connected' to America in a number of ways, primarily through his unflinching devotion to Erica, even after the distinct possibility of her death. His relationship with Erica is atypical from its inception, particularly in view of the fact that she never quite recovers from the psychological breakdown caused by the death of her former lover, Chris. However, Erica is one of the few figures in Changez's American life that is able to both perceive and appreciate his Pakistani origins, and detect an element of the positive in his sensitivity regarding Pakistan. Following her father's comments to Changez about Pakistan being a country which has 'serious problems with fundamentalism' (Hamid 2008, p.63) for instance, Erica observes to Changez, 'you're touchy about where you come from. It shows on your face [...] and it's good to be touchy sometimes. It means you care' (Hamid 2008, p.64).

However, Changez's 'aborted attempt to make love to Erica is the corollary of what is clearly an aborted love affair with America itself' (Hartnell 2010, p.342). As they lie shoulder to shoulder, united but not quite, Changez observes to himself, "She did not respond; she did not resist" (Hartnell 2010, p.342). It is her impenetrability, both literal and metaphorical, that serves to deepen "the growing wound this inflicted on my pride" (Hamid 2008, p.89). By extension, this impenetrability is paralleled in his growing inability to

be accepted in an altered America, which, as he observes with considerable disappointment, was ‘unwilling to reflect upon the shared grief that united you with those who attacked you’ (Hamid 2008, p.190). Taking the metaphor further forward, critics such as Hartnell suggest that ‘while Erica is initially quite charmed by her idea of Changez’s family life in Pakistan, her interest in him is merely transitory, fleeting’ (Hartnell 2010, p.342). Towards the end of the narrative Changez recognizes Erica “had chosen not to be part of my story; her own had proven too compelling” (Hamid 2008, p.167), again, a notion distinctly corresponding to America’s rejection of him.

In the face of his unrequited love from Erica, and despite it, Changez continues to subscribe to the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* in order to keep abreast with the lives of those he has left behind but always with particular attention to the remote possibility of an update on Erica. He continues to send her emails until finally her account becomes inactive and eventually resorts to posting her a letter every year, which is invariably returned to him. He subsists on a self-delusional relationship, with a woman who is almost certainly deceased, and is able to find comfort only in imagining a life which includes her:

Often, for example, I would rise at dawn without having slept an instant. During the preceding hours, Erica and I would have lived an entire day together [...] Such journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. (Hamid 2008, p.195-197)

This unwillingness and professed inability to ‘reconstitute’ himself as an autonomously separate being, results not just from his relationship

with Erica, but with America at large. It is a comment directed towards establishing the permanent nature of this latter relationship, which is altered but not terminated by '9/11' and the events that ensued in its wake. As Changez explains, in a tone that fuses relief with resignation, 'Something of us is now outside and something of the outside is now within us' (Hamid 2008, p.197). He clarifies that his explanation does not amount to suggesting that they are 'all one', explicating that he is 'not opposed to the building of walls to shield' himself from danger, but implicit in his suggestion is a kind of determined fluidity that refuses to ground itself too firmly in notions of nation or culture. It is interesting to then connect this sentiment with his very first words spoken to the American gentleman, which at a cursory glance may appear sardonic, or ironic, but in retrospect gather a far more genuine and earnest quality:

Excuse me Sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened of my beard. I am a lover of America. (Hamid 2008, p.1)

I suggest that this seemingly dichotomous position, metaphorically contained in the symbolic value of his bearded appearance and his professed love for America, offers a possibility and hopefulness for a transnational existence in the narrative. Changez's physical distancing from America is important – as he enlightens us towards the end of his monologue, his account was mainly borne out of the desire for certain aspects of (his) behaviour upon his return – but equally valid and vital are the means by which he remains allied and associated with America, including its values, traditions, institutions and people.

Keeping these questions in mind, I conclude by returning to the crises of identities explored in Hamid's narrative, and the exacerbation of these crises in the context of '9/11'. Towards the end of the novel, as Changez and the unnamed American rise to

leave the now deserted Anarkali Bazaar, the latter expresses continued fear of his surroundings. In response to this, and now unable to camouflage his anger with politeness, Changez brusquely retorts:

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 undercover assassins. (Hamid 2008, p.209)

It is beyond the scope of this essay to speculate on the scrupulousness or sincerity of the narrator's proclamation – and Hamid remains similarly silent on this matter. Here, it is more useful to acknowledge the narrative as an act of literary and political intervention at a moment of international crisis that attempts to deconstruct the socially constructed binaries of terrorist and terrorised, lawlessness and order, centre and periphery.

Bibliography

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. 2002. *The Empire Strikes Back*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Aslam, Nadeem. 2008. *The Wasted Vigil*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 1995. *Literature and the Right to Death in The Work of Fire*, Lydia Davis, trans. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Boehmer, Elleke and Morton, Stephen. 2010. *Terror and the Postcolonial: A Concise Companion*. London: Blackwell.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hartnell, Anna. 2008. 'Moving through America: Race, place and resistance in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46: 3, 336-348.
- Hamid, Mohsin. 2008. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 2nd edition. London: Penguin.
- Hamid, Mohsin. 2008. 'Focus on the Fundamentals', *The Paris Review*, Fall.178.
- Lasdun, James. 2007. *The Empire Strikes Back*. *The Guardian*, 3rd March.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/03/featuresreviews.guardian.html>
- Said, Edward. 1988. *The Essential Terrorist, Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*. London: Verso.
- Shamsie, Kamila. 2009. *Burnt Shadows*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 2004. Terror: A Speech after 9/11. *boundary 2*, Volume 31, Number 2. 81-111.