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**Focusing on Fundamentalism: The Triumph of Ambivalence in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

**Amir Riahi Nouri** (PhD Candidate in English Language and Literature, Alborz Campus, University of Tehran, Tehran, I.R. Iran)

**Ali Salami** (Assistant Professor, University of Tehran, I.R. Iran)

The fellow novelist Robin Yassin-Kassab extols the merits of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and describes the novel as "the most successful recent novel born out of a desire for dialogue post-9/11" (143). While the initial responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in fiction were confined to "trauma narratives" and "Muslim misery memoirs", Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* portrays "a sly intervention that destabilizes the dominant categories of the post-9/11 novel, undercutting the impulse to national normalization through the experience of its protagonist" (Morey 136). Defining trauma as "a recalibration of feeling so violent and radical that it resists and compels memory, generating stories that cannot, yet must, be told", Richard Gray complains about a spate of the representations of trauma in fictional rhetoric in his "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis" (129).

Contrary to the rampant traumatic fictional representations of 9/11 attacks, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* delineates the experiences of its Muslim protagonist prior to and in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The novel is written in dramatic monologue and is inspired by Albert Camus's *The Fall*. Indeed, the manipulation of dramatic monologue makes the narrative profoundly ambivalent. Generally, as Byron emphasizes, dramatic monologue culminates with the "absence of any clear guiding authorial voice"

and, as a consequence, galvanizes the reader into generating their own response (2003:21). What is more, the presence of the reticent "auditor", in the words of Byron, "serves to challenge the apparently monological voice, to dialogise the speech and imply the possibility of other perspectives than the one we are offered by the speaker" (2003:20).

From this viewpoint, one may suggest, exploiting dramatic monologue makes the reliability of the novel's narrator a matter for debate. To illustrate, as it is concerned with Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the reader's suspicion grows once Changez detects a note of skepticism in the American's expression about the reliability of his narrative, and therefore, asks his silent interlocutor to trust him and maintains that "I am not in the habit of inventing untruths! And moreover, even if I were, there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you" (Hamid, 2007b:173). Or elsewhere, Changez tells his American listener that "I see from your expression that you do not believe me. No matter, I am confident of the truth of my words" (Ibid.,181). Indeed, the reader encounters several situations in which Changez discerns a high level of suspicion in the American auditor's face. Last but not least, Mohsin Hamid evades providing his readers with a definite conclusion at the end of his novel and leaves *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* an open text that resists a fixed interpretation.

On the other hand, the manipulation of dramatic monologue in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* provides the reader with a second space so as to delve into the beliefs and viewpoints of the novel's third world Muslim protagonist. In other words, exploiting dramatic monologue makes it possible for Mohsin Hamid to delineate how a non-American –a Pakistani Ivey League graduate– perceives and inveighs against America and its foreign policy in the turbulent aftermath of the terrorist attacks on The World Trade Center and the Pentagon. What is more, unlike such highly acclaimed novelists as Don DeLillo and John Updike who shrink visibly from portraying ordinary Muslims and deal merely with the Islamist extremists – like those who razed the Twin Towers to the ground, Mohsin Hamid's

The Reluctant Fundamentalist depicts the narrative of an ordinary Muslim "with differing political and religious perspectives" (Scanlan 267).

It is particularly remarkable that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* relates a deeply ambivalent story. Indeed, Mohsin Hamid acknowledges this inherent ambiguity in an interview and enunciates that the novel is "a half-conversation, a-half story" (2007c n.p.), and it is the reader's role to endow the story with its other half. We need to ask ourselves who the silent American is; what he does in America, and whether he is a tourist or an assassin. Not surprisingly, Mohsin Hamid retorts to a reader's question, "if you believe one is a terrorist, or one is a CIA agent, or one harms the other, that is something determined by you" (Ibid., n.p.). Furthermore, Changez's metamorphosis manifest in his resignation from Underwood Samson and his retreat to Pakistan is open to debate.

Interestingly enough, the title of Mohsin Hamid's novel is imbued with ambivalence. In fact, the title makes the reader wonder what fundamentalism is, and who the reluctant fundamentalist of the title is. Is Changez transformed from a market analyst in prestigious Underwood Samson into an Islamist fundamentalist in Lahore? Is Changez's silent interlocutor a fundamentalist who is concerned with the inexorable fundamentals of the W. Bush administration's the War on Terror and plans to assassinate the so-called anti-American Pakistani lecturer? At the end of the novel, it also remains an impenetrable mystery whether Changez's reticent auditor is reaching for a business card or his potentially lethal weapon.

On the one hand, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is likely to be read at first glance as the story of a gifted Pakistani Underwood Samson market analyst who grows increasingly disillusioned with America and succumbs to ennui and despair. From this vantage, the novel recounts the story of the protagonist's retreat into the realm of Islamist fundamentalism and terrorism. Anna Hartnell, as an instance, declares that Changez is likely to be identified with a stereotypical Islamist terrorist, i.e. "a highly educated migrant from the Muslim world disaffected

by a sense of rejection on the part of the West" (2010:345). In a similar vein, David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith assert that Changez "returns to Pakistan to facilitate the end, if not the means, of Al Qaeda" (2010:940).

Likewise, Animah Kosai deprecates Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* owing to the fact that the narrative is little more than a stereotypical representation which is not unfamiliar to the Western reader. Kosai inveighs against the novel on account of its failure to provide the reader with a satisfactory explanation of how a Muslim "so seduced by the West would perform such an about face and turn to fundamentalism" (Jones and Smith 944). Moreover, Munos stresses that Changez's fundamentalism burgeons once he leaves the United States and goes back to Lahore. From this viewpoint, Munos points to Changez's abortive love for America and contends that his "post-9/11 disillusionment" precipitates "his return to Pakistan and his turning to a 'reluctant' form of fundamentalism" (2012:400).

On the other hand, while it might be true, this reading of the novel is far from infallible. Indeed, this interpretation of Mohsin Hamid's novel is remiss in the fact that Changez's awakening in the second half of the novel cannot be regarded as a religious one. Similarly, it is a falsehood to think that he undergoes a metamorphosis from a market analyst into a religious fundamentalist. Changez evinces no religious passion and enthusiasm throughout the novel. He drinks alcohol before his metamorphosis and never declares to have any sympathy for Muslim fundamentalists.

Besides, Changez finds a job as a university lecturer after he returns to Pakistan and becomes embroiled in anti-American non-violent demonstrations although his effective nationwide campaigns attracts the attention of a myriad of audiences with a wide range of social and political ambitions and inclinations. As an example, he fondly recalls an occasion in which manifold Pakistanis from various groups including "communists, capitalists, feminists, religious literalists" (Hamid, 2007b, 179) surrounded an American building in Pakistan where the American

ambassador planned to deliver a speech.

Intriguingly, Hamid eschews using the term fundamentalist so as to address radical Muslims, and instead makes use of such phrases as religious literalists. On the contrary, he uses the term 'fundamentalism' every time he points to Underwood Samson as a perfect embodiment of America's political and economic global domination. It would potentially be helpful to discuss briefly the distinction Jean Baudrillard makes between globalization and universalization. According to Jean Baudrillard, the global corresponds to such notions as technology, market, mediatization and tourism whereas universalism is associated with ideas like liberty, democracy, human rights, and culture. He emphasizes that globalization is "irreversible"; on the contrary, universalism is dead. He writes that

the idea of freedom, a new and recent idea, is already fading from the minds and mores, and liberal globalization is coming about in precisely the opposite form—a police-state globalization, a total control, a terror based on 'law-and-order' measures. Deregulation ends up in a maximum of constraints and restrictions, akin to those of a fundamentalist society (Baudrillard, 2002b:32).

Many pro-globalization thinkers such as Douglas Kellner regard globalization as a "matrix of market economy, democracy, technology, migration and tourism, and the worldwide circulation of ideas and culture" (2005:3). Baudrillard, however, takes issue with "police-state globalization" and sympathizes with anti-globalization factions due to the fact that he feels globalization deters human rights and freedom. Contrary to Kellner who sees concurrent "homogenization" and "hybridization" in globalization, Jean Baudrillard avers that globalization impoverishes singularities and motivates "homogenization" and hegemony.

Berating liberal democrat globalization in countless occasions, Jean Baudrillard writes an account of his journey to the United States in his book entitled *America* in which he expresses his strong disapproval of the US political and economic system, and complains about the harsh treatment of the destitute and underprivileged groups. He states that the poverty-stricken people are doomed to silence and marginalization in the USA. While it is undoubtedly true that the

utopia has achieved in America, avers Baudrillard, it belongs to those individuals who are affluent and privileged. Hence, the people who are not a part of this process are condemned to oblivion and complete annihilation.

But this easy life knows no pity. Its logic is a pitiless one. If Utopia has already been achieved, then unhappiness does not exist, the poor are no longer credible. If America is resuscitated, then the massacre of the Indians did not happen, Vietnam did not happen. While frequenting the rich ranchers or manufacturers of the West, Reagan has never had the faintest inkling of the poor and their existence, nor the slightest contact with them. He knows only the self-evidence of wealth, the tautology of power, which he magnifies to the dimensions of the nation, or indeed of the whole world. The have-nots will be condemned to oblivion, to abandonment, to disappearance pure and simple. This is 'must exit' logic: 'poor people must exit.' The ultimatum issued in the name of wealth and efficiency wipes them off the map (Baudrillard, 1989:111).

Jean Baudrillard deems New York in his America the center of the world. He also writes in his *Symbolic Exchange and Death* that Manhattan's edifices embody an "architectural panorama that is the image of the capitalist system" (1993:69). Nevertheless, he stresses that this image has undergone alterations in recent years. He argues that New York buildings are no longer "obese" but are deployed next to one another in such a way that they resemble the columns of a graph. In his view, the emergence of this new architectural style symbolically signifies the termination of a competitive system since "competition has disappeared in favour of correlation" (Ibid. 69).

Ergo, this monolithic architectural "graphism" brings a halt to all competition and represents monopoly and domination. In this regard, the World Trade Center's towers are the US economic domination par excellence. He also proclaims in his *The Singular Objects of Architecture* that the World Trade Center "expresses, signifies and translates, in a kind of full, constructed form, the context of a society already experiencing hyperreality" (2002a:4). In short, the World Trade Center Twin Towers are the apotheosis of globalization and the USA's global domination. In response to his self-raised question that why the World Trade Center has two towers, Baudrillard declares that there is a signification of the United States' dominance and hegemony in the parallel mirrored towers.

Baudrillard, moreover, maintains that the United States has remained almost intact in comparison with manifold European countries which were struck in the political agitations of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, after the Vietnam War— a “television war, with no understanding of the world’s condemnation of their action” (Baudrillard, 1989:108) —insists Jean Baudrillard, America’s power becomes extremely fragile and flimsy. According to Baudrillard, America’s power is “now [during Regan’s presidency] power as a special effect” (Ibid.,107) although Regan seems to retain America’s political and cultural paramountcy after the Vietnam War.

Denouncing Reganism for “dissocializing” and “disfranchising” under the guise of “socializing” and “participation”, Baudrillard sees the writing on the wall for a violent overthrow. To corroborate his claim, Baudrillard argues that the USA is in a vulnerable “meta-stability” by virtue of the “evaporation” of its serious opponents. As a consequence, America is “an over-protected mechanism” which only becomes susceptible to “the loss of immune defenses” (Baudrillard, 1989:117). Interestingly enough, Baudrillard ascertains the irony in Regan being struck down by cancer. In short, the overprotection of America and the global world order makes the system of globalization be struck by similar “antibodies” which surge forward from the within in a “silent reversion”. Thus, as the body becomes vulnerable and defenseless to itself, the world global system is inclined to become destabilized and devastated by the individuals who benefit from globalization.

Interestingly enough, in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the firm’s initial is reminiscent of the United States. Indeed, Underwood Samson can be deemed the system of globalization par excellence, namely a valuation firm which appraises the asset of manifold unprofitable businesses around the globe. Indeed, Changez’s delineations of Underwood Samson as a firm which promotes “systematic pragmatism”, “professionalism” and “maximum return” epitomizes the fundamental principles of the system of globalization. Changez avers that Underwood Samson “ceded its primacy to efficiency” (2007b:37) and proceeds to emphasize that the firm identified “maximum productivity” as its first and major

priority.

It was a testament to the systematic pragmatism—call it professionalism—that underpins your country's success in so many fields. At Princeton, learning was imbued with an aura of creativity; at Underwood Samson, creativity was not excised—it was still present and valued—but it ceded its primacy to efficiency. Maximum return was the maxim to which we returned, time and again. We learned to prioritize—to determine the axis on which advancement would be most beneficial—and then to apply ourselves single-mindedly to the achievement of that objective (Hamid, 2007b: 37).

Consequently, Underwood Samson whose core principle can be summed up in the slogan "focus on the fundamentals" (Ibid., 14) is far more apposite to modern-day capitalist fundamentalism. Hence, the system of globalization which is personified as Underwood Samson in Hamid's novel appears more inclined to whet fundamentalism on account of its implacable endeavors, in Richard Gray's words, to "dominate the world with its own form of economic fundamentalism" (2011:63). Interestingly, in his job interview, Jim told Changez that he was obliged to sell himself to the system if he wanted to be recruited by the firm. The slogan "focus on fundamentals" can be interpreted as strongly indicative of the economic fundamentalism which resides in the system of globalization. In a word, Changez confesses that he was a consummate economic fundamentalist when he worked for Underwood Samson and stipulates that his departure from America brought a dramatic end to his "days of focusing on fundamentals" (Hamid, 2007b:154).

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—and hence knowable—in a period of great uncertainty, and because it remained utterly convinced of the possibility of progress while others longed for a sort of classical period that had come and gone, if it had ever existed at all (Hamid, 2007b:154).

Mohsin Hamid depicts Changez's moment of epiphany after he arrives in Valparaiso, Chile in order to ascertain the value of a publishing company. In Valparaiso, Juan-Bautista the manager of the unprofitable publishing company told Changez about the janissaries – the Christian boys who were captured and

trained in their childhood by the Ottomans so as to fight in a Muslim army.

Juan-Bautista explained that the janissaries were intrepid and fierce. More importantly, they were staunch advocates of the empire and remained completely faithful to the Ottomans. The janissaries fought in the Muslim army in order to annihilate their own civilizations.

Being inspired by Juan-Bautista, Changez realized in Chile that he was indeed a relentless agent of the global empire, or in his own words, someone who "fought to erase their own civilization". He perceived that he 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 and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war" (Hamid,2007b:152). Changez poignantly describes his revelation as below

I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain. (Ibid.,152)

Thus, in a stark contrast with a large number of Western citizens, who have a penchant to employ the term 'fundamentalism' to describe Muslims (e.g. Erica's father's identification of Pakistanis with Fundamentalists), Mohsin Hamid is not content to liken fundamentalism with Islam. Hence, Changez's epiphany in the second half of the novel, I suggest, is a kind of political revelation. Changez works as a university lecturer after his departure from New York and becomes engrossed in anti-American non-violent protests. He emphasizes that he "made it [his] mission on campus to advocate a disengagement from [America]" (Hamid, 2007b:203). As it has been proclaimed in the novel, Changez never countenances violence and vehemently stipulates that "I am a believer in nonviolence; the spilling of blood is abhorrent to me ... I am no ally of killers; I am simply a university lecturer, nothing more nor less" (Ibid.,181).

Once seeking complacency and great solace in the fundamentalist ideology of the American empire manifest in Underwood Samson, Changez expresses great

disdain for the emperor's children's deep immersion "in the structures of [this] professional micro-universe". He admits that he used to get obvious pleasure from the firm's strong recommendation of focusing on the fundamentals. However, he came to the painful realization that the solid economic fundamentals of Underwood Samson would pay no attention to "the critical personal and political issues that affect one's emotional present". In short, after the coming off of "the blinders" (Hamid, 2007b:165), Changez can be considered as a reluctant fundamentalist who abjures the fundamentalism which abounds in Underwood Samson / the US as the epitome of the contemporary global world order.

Afterwards in the second half of the novel, Changez wore a full beard as the inevitable corollary of his political awakening in order to underscore the point of his otherness to and alienation from the system of globalization. Indeed, he wears a beard not least because he loathes being identified as an empire's janissary. In short, his bearded face is "a form of protest on [his] part, a symbol of [his] identity" which distinguishes him from "the army of clean-shaven youngsters" (Hamid, 2007b:130) who assist the American empire in largely retaining her imperial domination all over the world. In other words, his abhorrence of being a modern-day janissary is made perfectly evident in his new appearance although he was fully cognizant of the adverse impact of his new appearance on irate American citizens in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on The World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As a consequence, growing a beard helps Changez to exhibit his repudiation of the fundamentals of the global world order.

It is equally remarkable that Jean Baudrillard gives the appellation of "singularity" to the terrorist attack of September 11 on the grounds that it profoundly changes our perception of the world. He asserts that the attacks of September 11 take place in return for the terror and violence disseminated by globalization. Baudrillard contends that globalization is terroristic and violent. In his viewpoint, the system has monopolized the situation and condensed all functions. Therefore, stipulates Baudrillard, it is the system of globalization which propagates violence and fundamentalism in the world "by seizing all the cards for

itself" (2002b:9).

Hence, the collapse of the Twin Towers following the terrorist act of September 11, 2001 is specifically required to be scrutinized with recourse to America and the global world order prior to the attacks. From this vantage, the attacks of 9/11 ought to be traced in America's remarkably intact and overprotected status after the decline of the Soviet Union. Ultimately, as Changez suggests, it was America's overwhelming feeling of superiority that provoked the terrorists to perpetrate the 9/11 attacks. Changez addresses his silent auditor that "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" (Hamid, 2007b:168). In other words, it is the surfeit of the system's immune defense that makes globalization succumb eventually to its own liquidation. In a word, the terror and violence generated from the global world order after the liquidation of all rivals is the primary reason for its annihilation.

What is more, Hamid delineates no religious motivation in Changez's transformation in such a way that Changez forges no special bond to religion after his return to Lahore. Alternatively, he feels moral obligation, in the words of Hart and Hansen, to "the fundamentals of shame and anger: anger at American indifference to the victims of U.S. military reprisals, shame for Pakistan's place in the world; anger at the death of his immigrant dream and shame for his complicity in American empire" (Hamid, 2007b: 509). He declares that he constantly takes umbrage at the "manner in which America conducted itself in the world" (Ibid.,156). Changez goes into prodigious diatribes against America owing to the fact that his reticent interlocutor's

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, 2007b:156).

It is particularly noteworthy that Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is not a laudatory narrative of globalization and the hybridization it proffers. Conversely, the novel portrays the ways through which the system promotes covet for the capital and enables the capital to "enter every conceivable space and convert such space into a habitat for market logic" and results in the internecine devastation of both "statist and non-statist forces". In other words, the novel addresses the adversary and inhibitions of the current global world order such as "the limits of cosmopolitan space and of the possibilities of the enactment of deep violence within it, transversal romance, and transnational capitalism" (Mukherjee, 2011: 121).

Thus, very similar to Jean Baudrillard, Changez takes careful note of the fundamental importance of finance in late capitalism and the contemporary global world order. He declaims against the system and specifies that "I knew from my experience as a Pakistani—of alternating periods of American aid and sanctions—that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power" (Hamid, 2007b:156). In brief, it might be true to allege that Changez was welcomed by the system of globalization as a modern-day janissary not only to facilitate America's project of domination but to annihilate his own civilization. Nevertheless, he resists fiercely after his painful epiphany in the wake of September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and realizes that he can no longer remain an economic fundamentalist. Changez explicitly expresses his despise from the fundamentals of the single world order, and therefore, decides to leave Underwood Sampson (the US).

**Amir Riahi Nouri** is a doctoral candidate at University of Tehran, Iran. His dissertation focuses on Post-9/11 fiction and examines Jean Baudrillard's theories on 9/11 and terrorism. He is writing his dissertation under the supervision of Professor Ali Salami and Professor Fredric Jameson.

**Ali Salami** is an Iranian writer, lexicographer, literary translator and Professor of English literature and Translation Studies at University of Tehran. An internationally published author, Salami has written extensively on gender and discourse, Shakespeare and postcolonial literature.

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