

Desirous Texts/Texts of Desire: Storytelling and Cultural Prejudice in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes an interdisciplinary reading of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) with an attempt to press the boundaries of narrativity to the broader field of cultural studies. Divided into two parts, it is concerned with the dialectics of desire between text and reader. While part one attempts to explain the mechanics of desire, which steer both text and reader, as theorized mainly by Roland Barthes and Peter Brooks, part two seeks to read Mohsin Hamid's novel in the light of these interpretive models. The second part is mainly concerned with investigating the different manifestations of desire both on the narrative and thematic levels. It relates narrativity to cultural, political and spatial concerns.

KEYWORDS: narrativity, desire, Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks, Mohsin Hamid, 9/11 literature

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This essay looks at Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), a narrative belonging to the post-9/11 genre. Combining the fields of narrativity and cultural studies, the essay takes the trope of desire as a narratological model as well as a cultural metaphor. Desire appears not only in Hamid's novel but also in his interviews and essays, and it is clear in his own description of his amorous relationship with place and space. Indeed, autobiographical sketches in Mohsin Hamid's essays and interviews are often linked to places, and his cosmopolitan life accounts for his spatial preoccupations. "I was born in Pakistan. And I live in Pakistan," he writes in "Why Migration is a Fundamental Right?" (2014). "But when I was three I moved with my parents to Silicon Valley in California. I returned to Pakistan when I was nine for a decade, then spent most of my 20s on the America's east coast and most of my 30s in London." Hamid, however, never hides his particular infatuation with America and Pakistan. His second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, narrates this topophilic relationship, this "affective bond" (Tuan 92) between himself and these two beloved countries. And yet, his rapport with America and Pakistan is highly ambivalent; it fluctuates between desire and repulsion. The novel is an attempt at negotiating this wavering desire: "I wanted to explore in fiction my own growing desire to leave. It was confusing territory for me, because I loved—and still love—so much about America, and yet was still uncertain about staying on. Similarly, I loved Pakistan and yet felt unsettled about returning there" (Interview by Hamish Hamilton). Desire, manifest or hidden in the interstices of the narrative, is at the core of Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Hamid's hermeneutical interventions to explain his own narrative provide pertinent "paratextual scraps (sometimes of prime interest)" (Genette 346), and they did not at all hurt the critical reception of his novel. Indeed, short-listed for the 2007 Booker Prize for fiction, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has enjoyed an enthusiastic reception. Some reviews, however, are very negative, in particular that of Anne Marlowe, who describes the novel as "tripe anti-American agitprop clumsily masquerading as a work of art" ("Buying Anti-American"). More serious critical assessments have attempted to read the different facets of the text. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been mainly read as part of the post-9/11

genre.¹ It has also been approached through the lenses of trauma studies and postcolonial studies.² Approaching the text from the field of narratology, however, has seemed to be an ambiguous project. Greta Olson's reworking of Wayne C. Booth's theorization of narrative reliability is nonetheless an enlightening contribution in this regard. Her essay "Questioning the Ideology of Reliability in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*" seeks a middle ground between classical and post-classical narratological analysis, the former based on a universal and ahistorical model while the latter promotes the "analysis of narrative texts in term of their political commitments" (2). Making clear the narrator's unreliability within the cultural and political context of the narrative, Olson emphasizes the function of such unreliability in shaping the active role of the reader (8).

While this critic favors post-classical narratological analysis, the present essay in fact proposes to fill a niche in the critical assessment of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. It engages in an interdisciplinary reading that attempts to bridge the gap between narratology and cultural concerns, and investigates desire, "one of the master tropes of contemporary criticism" (Clayton 62), as a dynamic force linking text and reader. The essay is divided into two parts: the first part is theoretical while the second part tries to test the applicability of these theories to a literary text. Part one, then, attempts to explain the mechanics of desire which steer both text and reader as theorized mainly by Roland Barthes and Peter Brooks, both of whom are preoccupied with desire as related to the dynamics and effects of narrative. While other narrative theorists have addressed the trope of desire, the majority of them, including Brooks, refer to, build on or contest Barthes' model. Desire, as theorized first by Barthes and developed later by Brooks, is libidinal, erotic and sensual. The text in this model of reading acquires agency: itself providing pleasure to the reader, it decentralizes the author as the locus of power.

The second part of my essay seeks to read Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in the light of Barthes' and Brooks' interpretive models. The novel, written from a rather rare second-person point of view, is

¹ See, for example, Geoffrey Nash's *Writing Muslim Identity: The Construction of Identity* (2012) and Pei-chen Liao's *Post-9/11 South Asian Diasporic Fiction: Uncanny Terror* (2013).

² For trauma studies see Julia Szoltusek's "They Call this 'Organic Shrapnel': Violent Closeness Between 'Victims' and 'Perpetrators' in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*" in *Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief* (2013) and Arin Keeble's *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity* (2014). For postcolonial studies see Elleke Boehmer and Morton Stephen's "Introduction: Terror and the Postcolonial" in *Terror and the Postcolonial* (2010).

clearly activated by the desire to tell/narrate while at the same time instigating in readers the desire to listen/read. Here the different manifestations of desire on both narrative and thematic levels are further investigated, making clear the applicability of Barthes' and Brooks' theorization of desire to Hamid's text while also relating it to spatial, cultural, and political concerns.

I. Playful Texts and Flirtatious Readers

In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Roland Barthes promotes a model of reading based on desirous texts and flirtatious readers. The text in this pattern is libidinally charged and acts as an agent of desire. The act of reading is sexualized in an attempt to procreate meaning. "Significance," according to Barthes, is "meaning, *in so far* as it is sexually produced" (61). *The Pleasure of the Text*, a title deliberately playing on ambiguities, suggests two meanings: first, the pleasure derived from reading a text; and second, the text as involved in pleasure. While the first meaning is a common one, for it presents the text as a passive object consumed by the reader, the second meaning subverts roles, for it proposes an active text, one itself engaged in desire. "The text you write," contends Barthes, "must prove to me *that it desires me*. This proof exists: it is writing. Writing is: the science of the various blisses of language, its Kama Sutra" (6). Barthes' model of reading engages "flirtatious texts" which openly desire and seduce the reader: "the text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability etc." (6). Texts, then, acquire agency as well as authority. They become autonomous, conscious "beings" using and abusing readers who hitherto had believed themselves to control the narrative.

The canny text, which uses eroticism as a tactical maneuver to seduce or baffle the reader, transforms the act of reading into an endlessly displaced and deferred desire. The erotic text, in Barthes' model, has nothing to do with eroticism or sexuality as a subject matter. Eroticism here is a textual stratagem, a metaphorical striptease titillating the reader's desire to consummate the text. This desire, however, keeps being thwarted, frustrated, delayed *ad infinitum*. The playful text languidly denudes itself before the reader-voyeur:

[I]s not the most erotic portion of the body *where the garment gapes*? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no "erogenous zones"; it is intermittence, as

psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweaters), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance. (10)

In his attempt at providing a disruptive, subversive model of reading, Barthes brings the text to the fore, endows it with erotic power, and promotes it as an agent of desire.

Barthes' new configuration of the role of the desirous text has had a great impact on the act of reading and the nexus text/reader. Several critics have aligned themselves with this model wholeheartedly. Linda Hutcheon serves as a pertinent example when she emphatically declares: "all novels are erotic . . . they seek to lure, tantalize, seduce the reader into a world other than his own. Only by forcing the act of reading to become one of imaginative possession, analogous in its degree of involvement and active participation in the sexual act, can literature bring itself to life" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 86). Accordingly, the text is no longer perceived as that passive object yielding to the interpretive penetration of the reader. It is fertilized within a harmonious erotic act shared by a desirous text and a courting reader. Indeed, Barthes' erotic paradigm, based on the elimination of the writer's authority, creates a "dialectics of desire" (10) wherein writer, text, and reader produce and consume desire.

Barthes' model proposes a new dynamics of reading, one recuperated in Peter Brooks' theorization of desire as the motor of narrative. Informed by psychoanalysis, Brooks expands on Barthes' aphorisms on desire in *The Pleasure of the Text*. In his study *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), Brooks purports to investigate "the conjunction of the narrative of desire and the desire of narrative" (48). Like Barthes, he perceives the text as an active space, a negotiating agent. In his introduction, he clearly states that he wants "to see the text itself as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, and desire" (xiv) and fully develops the mechanics of desire in his chapter entitled "Narrative Desire." As the title of his book indicates, Brooks locates desire in the plot. He perceives the "reading of plot [as] a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text" (37) and places desire on two levels: that of reading and that of telling.

The act of reading, according to Brooks, is energized by a libidinous drive. He borrows Freud's concept "Eros" (developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) and applies it to the reading experience. The desire he promotes is "desire as Eros, desire in its plastic and totalizing function" (37). Such a desire is a fundamental impulse that fertilizes the process of reading. It is intricately enmeshed with the plot and motivated by the urge to reach the end of the narrative. This urge is fuelled by the reader's inclination to capture meaning, for "the ultimate determinants of meaning lie at *the end*, and a narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for* the end" (52). This narrative Eros, then, is enmeshed with the other side, the far side of the reading operation: Thanatos or the death drive. This is why Brooks suggests that "all narrative may be in essence obituary" (95). The desire to read leads inevitably to the desire to attain the end, "in human terms . . . the far side of death" (95). At the center of this Eros/Thanatos model lies the reader's hermeneutic desire. But because meaning cannot be captured as it is in a state of perpetual change, desire keeps being fuelled by this absence. Brooks draws an analogy between narrative desire and desire in its psychological dimension, as explained by Lacan who says that desire is "eternally extended towards *the desire of something else*" (56). Like meaning, desire is a process, always displaced and deferred. Like desire, which vanishes the moment it is realized, the narrative is doomed to die the moment its meaning is captured. Brooks thus proposes a model of reading stimulated by a restless desire which sustains the life of the narrative.

The second level of desire vitalizing the narrative is telling. If the reader is driven by an urge to know the story, the writer is motivated by the need to tell it, disclose it. Brooks perceives the desire to tell as the genesis of all narration: "it is in essence the desire to be heard, recognized, understood, which, never wholly satisfied or indeed satisfiable, continues to generate the desire to tell, the effort to enunciate a significant version of the life story in order to captivate a possible listener" (54). Similar to Barthes' dialectics of desire, Brooks' model blurs the lines between reader and writer: is the story generated by a desire to tell or is it activated by the reader's desire to know? Brooks' reference to the *One Thousand and One Nights* provides a pertinent example wherein "narration is seen to be life-giving in that it arouses and sustains desire" (61). Scheherazade's telling of her stories is sustained, not just by her own desire to survive but also by Shahrayar's desire to keep

listening. Barthes' dialectical relationship between text and reader, in which each is immersed in the other, as well as Brooks' desire-based model, with which he proposes a porous zone between writer and reader, are fundamental in refurbishing the roles of reader, text, and author. Both models authorize active texts and readers. Barthes tends to eschew the traditionally active role of the author in this transaction, proposing desire as the sole legitimate basis of the authorial presence: "As institution, the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person has disappeared . . . but in the text, in a way, I *desire* the author: I need his figure . . . as he needs mine" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 27). Brooks, then, recuperates this mutual need of author and reader and places it within the mechanics of desire inherent in the acts of telling and reading.

This role of desire in narrative is essential to the dynamic field of narratology. The triad author-text-reader is not a frozen or hierarchal model: these three components interact, compete or align with one another according to changing and developing models of reading. The type of desire theorized by Barthes and his followers is exclusively libidinal, and so we see the impact of psychoanalysis on narrative theory or narratology. This desire also testifies to the power of literature to infiltrate our lives. The second part of this essay politicizes the otherwise primarily "private" trope of desire. Demonstrating the applicability of Barthes' model to Hamid's text, it brings us out of the confined nexus of text-reader and into a broader cultural context.

II. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: Desire of Narrative/Narrating Desire

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* offers us a pertinent case study of the working of desire in a literary narrative. The text combines desire as theme and desire as narrative drive in both telling and receiving. Combining the relatively rare second-person point of view with a completely silent addressee, the Scheherazade-like narrative employs a network of stories to entice the listener/reader. The latter, a faceless and voiceless American, is conflated with the completely anonymous reader of the novel. To be more specific, Changez subtly forces his story on an American tourist, also suspected of being a CIA agent, who happens to be going for a stroll in the old Anarkali district of Lahore. He invites him to have a drink in one of the numerous cafés in the area.

The narrative navigates between two spaces: New York, where Changez used to work in a prestigious financial company, and Lahore, where the story takes place. Through multiple flashbacks, Changez recreates his love story with both Erica and America and his collapsing dreams after the 9/11 attacks. His reminiscences of America are interrupted by older memories of his childhood, descriptions of the area where the café is located, and the ordering of more food and drinks. As the narrative unfolds, a disturbing feeling of suspicion and distrust continues to grow. While Changez suspects the American of being a CIA agent whose mission it is to assassinate him, the American's defensive reactions, as reported by Changez, betray his suspicions about the Pakistani's terrorist orientations. Meanwhile, the reader is trapped in an insidious game of hide-and-seek and struggles to get clarity on the situation. The ambiguous ending of the novel intensifies the confusion: there is the suggestion of a possible murder with no reference to the identity of the victim. Is it Changez or the American? The reader remains uncertain at the end.

This dissatisfaction resulting from a thwarted desire, an indefinitely delayed ending or resolution, lies at the heart of Hamid's narrative strategies. In several interviews and essays, the writer speaks of his preoccupation with the acts of writing and reading. As he has "never really understood the boundary between the role of the character and reader," he becomes "more and more interested in the interactive nature of fiction." He believes that the power of the novel resides in its capacity to morph the reader into a "co-creator":

If the novel was special because it allowed writers and readers to create jointly, to dance together, then it seems to me that I should try to write novels that maximized this possibility of opening themselves up to being read in different ways, to involving the reader as a kind of co-writer. ("Mohsin Hamid on Writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*")

Hamid's use of the dance trope for the act of reading endows the narrative with a corporeal dimension fundamental to Barthes' embodiment of the text. Hamid also closes his essay with this metaphor of the dance: "I don't intend my novels as puzzles. I intend them as invitations to dance." Such an aesthetic model is also adopted by Geraldine Heng, who explains the "dance" as a gesture of negotiation that aims to create "a delicate balance between

resisting and acquiescing to what we read . . . a dance which acknowledges that agency rests both in the text and in ourselves, in deriving the meaning we find when we read” (“Pleasure, Resistance” 53). This hermeneutical dance that blurs the lines between text and reader echoes that of Barthes’ “writerly” text, which demands active readers who “gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (*S/Z* 5).

Barthes’ model, according to which the writer “must seek out that reader (must ‘cruise’ him) without knowing where he is” (*The Pleasure of the Text* 4), is captured in Hamid’s use of the second person as a narrative voice. He perceives in this voice a great narrative capacity: “I was amazed by the potential of the ‘you,’ of how much space it could open up in fiction” (“Mohsin Hamid on His Enduring Love of the Second Person Narrative”). Influenced by Albert Camus’s use of this narrative voice in *The Fall* (1956), he develops the second person into a strategy of narration that targets an alert and a responsible reader. “I wanted the novel to be a kind of mirror,” he further explains in the same essay, “to let readers see how they are reading, and, therefore, how they are living and how they are deciding their politics.” The second person in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* generates narrative desire, and Hamid creates a porous zone between the desire to tell and the desire to know.

The narrative starts with Changez calling out to the American: “Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance?” (1). This call presents Changez as an articulate subject with the power of telling. It does not take him long to arouse the American’s desire to know. When the Pakistani announces that he was a Princeton student, the American’s curiosity is aroused and the whole story roars into life: “What did I think of Princeton? Well, the answer to that question requires a story” (3). Desire, then, functions as the engine of the whole narrative. While Changez is eager to tell and explain, the American drives the story further. The Scheherazadian trope is recuperated in the narrative as Changez has to keep on telling stories. Indeed, his interruption of storytelling may lead to his own death, as the albeit ambiguous ending of the narrative could suggest: “I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of business cards” (209). Whether it is the glint of a weapon or of something else, it is clear that Thanatos lurks at the other side of the narrative.

Narrative desire in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is corroborated by ruptures and digressions. Changez's story of his life in America, the primary thread of the plot, is interrupted at regular intervals by other sub-narratives frustrating both the American's and the reader's desire to reach the end of the story. Food is one major sub-text that keeps delaying the end while being itself an element of desire. Dawn in the *One Thousand and One Nights* interrupts the King's desire to know the end of the story—his narrative desire replaced each time by the consummation of his desire for the storyteller. Similarly, food serves as a metaphor for consumption in the domains of both life and narrative. "Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating," stipulates Richard Kearney, "for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living" (*On Stories* 3). The relationship between food and narrative is also based on desire, for "one first needs a good desire to eat and read" (Bachelard 75).

Food in Hamid's novel indeed functions as a trope of desire, a strategy for slowing down or stopping the reader's too-quick consumption of the story. Soon after he starts his story about his success at Princeton and his important job interview with one of the most prestigious financial companies, Changez stops to offer his new acquaintance a drink: "Would you prefer a regular tea, with milk and sugar, or green tea, or perhaps their more fragrant specialty, Kashmir tea?" (6). Then he resumes his story only to interrupt it quite soon with another invitation: "Do try these sticky, orange sweets—jelabis—but be careful, they are hot" (13). Chapter One ends with a third invitation: "Allow me to pour you another cup" (17). This pattern is reiterated all through the narrative, thus divesting food and drink of their merely nutritional role. They become a narrative strategy, a rhetorical force that both produces and contains desire. The American's eagerness to know the story of Changez's employment at Underwood Samson is a desire thwarted but hardly forgotten by Changez: "Where were we? Ah yes, Underwood Samson" (6). The American's desire for the "truth" is by turns fueled, thwarted, baffled by the Pakistani's digressions.

Thus while food serves to suspend the narrative, digression structurally counteracts the plot's teleological drive. The creation of sub-plots or metanarratives exacerbates the narrative force of anticipation and expectation, as in *One Thousand and One Nights*. "Pleasure can come from postponement" (103), as Peter Brooks says, and indeed Changez keeps postponing the initial

story by telling other stories. He digresses to attract the American's attention to passers-by: "Do you see those girls, walking there, in jeans speckled with paint?" (18); or to point at details of the city: "You will have noticed that the newer districts of Lahore suited the needs of those who must walk" (36). He also delays his story through flashbacks, recounting episodes from his childhood (89) or describing his feelings when he came back to Pakistan (141). Digression, then, is strategically used to fertilize the narrative, to make it richer and more productive; by slowing down his tale's otherwise too-rapid expenditure, Changez also strengthens his listener's desire to know.

While *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* displays affinities with Barthes' and Brooks' narrative models, it also engages other forms of desire including spatial desire, the desire for space. Like that of Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972), where Marco Polo tells a curious Kubla Khan of the amazing cities he has seen along or near China's 13th-century Silk Road, Hamid's narrative explores the topographies of desire through the memory of cities both desirous and desired. Michel de Certeau's reading of cities focuses on the "erotics of knowledge" derived from "the most immoderate of human texts" ("Walking in the City" 152). As in Barthes' reading model, De Certeau's city is a text of pleasure, an "immense texturology spread out before one's eyes" (153) that generates desire.

Hamid expresses his concern with spatiality within a rhetoric of desire and seduction: "I've had a lifelong love affair with Lahore, but it's been far from monogamous. I'm constantly flirting with other cities" ("Mohsin Hamid on Writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*"). The novelist stresses his particular affection for two competing cities/lovers: New York and Lahore. On first meeting the American man, Changez presents himself as "a lover of America" (1). The deliberate use here of the word "lover" testifies to a spatial infatuation which Hamid goes on to explain: "My novel is the story of a man who comes to America, falls in love with America, and then falls out of love with America" (qtd. in *NPR*). New York has not only realized Changez's dreams (3); it has been "like coming home" (36). Indeed, he has felt "immediately a New Yorker" (37), with "the city at [his] feet" (51).

Hamid's penchant for mixing characters and places accounts for the pervasive spatial erotics in/of the text. "People and countries tend to blur in my fiction," he explains; "both serve as symbols of the other. . . . The countries in my fiction are far from monolithic and are capable of envy,

passion, and nostalgia; they are, in other words, quite like people, and I try to explore them with that sensibility” (“Interview”). Changez’s passion for America is allegorically transferred to his love for Erica, a partial anagram for America. His courting of Erica is based on a delayed and frustrated desire, as she refuses to sever her emotional ties to her dead boyfriend. Changez’s first full and gratifying sexual encounter is expressed via a figure of spatial embodiment, one that seems to parallel his cultural integration in America. The Pakistani Changez manages to infiltrate the American cultural and economic system as a “modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire” (173). This image of the janissary, which refers to captured Christian boys who were trained as faithful soldiers of the Ottomans, fits with Changez’s earlier image of the intellectual prostitute. His description of recruitment day in Princeton includes an erotic metaphor of reified bodies:

Every fall, Princeton raised her skirt for the corporate recruiters who came onto campus and—as you say in America—showed them some skin. The skin Princeton showed was good skin, of course—young, eloquent, and clever as can be—but even among all that skin, I knew in my senior year that I was something special. I was a perfect breast, if you will—tan, succulent, seemingly defiant of gravity—and I was confident of getting any job I wanted. (5)

Thus in his first job interview, Changez has simply to “sell” (7) himself. His desire to enter “the ranks of meritocracy” (4) is presented in a Faustian image: he is bargaining his “talents” (4) for Americanness. His sexual relationship with Erica is similarly tainted with his sense of his own bifurcated identity. Indeed, Changez manages to consummate his desire for Erica only when he changes his identity: “Pretend I am him,” he asks her; “it was as though we were under a spell, transported to a world where I was Chris and she was with Chris, and we made love with a physical intimacy that Erica and I had never enjoyed” (120). Carnal and spatial desires are interwoven in this episode, and Changez can penetrate “Am/Erica” only with a fake identity. New York, like Italo Calvino’s Anastassia, is “a treacherous city . . . you believe you are enjoying [it] wholly when you are only its slave” (*Invisible Cities* 19). The modern-day janissary finds himself trapped in a relationship

with an ill “Am/Erica,” a “treacherous” woman/city who regurgitates him after the 9/11 attacks.

The lover of America is also, and before anything else, the lover of Pakistan. Changez’s passion for Pakistan, however, oscillates between shame and pride. Here it is significant that the extended spatial metaphor in his narrative builds on linguistic reverberations. Describing his feelings after the above-mentioned peculiar sexual act, Changez confesses: “I felt at once both *satiated and ashamed*” (121). It was also a feeling of shame that he felt at the beginning of his stay when he juxtaposed the power of America with the collapsed grandeur of Pakistan: “to be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed” (38). This feeling of cultural confusion, however, disappears later and gives way to a boisterous rhetoric of pride: “*We* built the Royal Mosque and the Shalimar Gardens in this city, and *we* built the Lahore Fort with its mighty walls and wide ramps for our battle elephants. And we did these things when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent” (116). Changez’s fluctuating feelings are inscribed in his strategies of cultural negotiation and retrieval.

Changez’s *desire to tell* is not exclusively libidinally-charged, as in the theory of narrative pleasure; it is also culturally and politically motivated. It is a desire to present Pakistan from the inside as well as an urge to criticize US foreign policy after the events of 9/11. The major part of the novel narrates Changez’s life after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and we see how his love of America starts to wane as the country embarks on a vicious program of violence, retaliation, and revenge that touches his own country, Pakistan. By adopting the stance of a supremely articulate Subject while completely muting the American, Changez is able in effect to linguistically castrate a vast western nation that has hitherto monopolized the powers of representation and classification. In a Caliban-like gesture that announces a subversive use of the Master’s language, Changez declares in the novel’s opening passage: “I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language” (1).

Indeed, Hamid has clearly said that his “intention had been to write a novel that said some difficult things, offered a character’s rather forceful critique of America” (“We Are Already Afraid”). A good example of the difficult things said in the novel is Changez’s initial reaction upon watching

the news reports of the 9/11 attacks: “And I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased” (83). Facing his listener’s evident disgust and clenched fist, he tries to explain this perplexing feeling: “I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to its knees” (83). This sexualized picture of an America “on her knees,” as well as the vindictive smile, echo an earlier episode in which Erica’s father adopts a patronizing tone and says: “I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped the place well and good, right?” (63). Changez felt outraged by this demeaning metaphor, and his smile while watching the breaking 9/11 news expresses a joyous sense of revenge: now it is America’s turn to be “raped.”

Changez’s confession, as well as Hamid’s rather harsh critique of America, demonstrate some degree of audacity, especially since the novel targets an American audience. Laila Halaby reads *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as an act of courage not only “because the author tries out an unproven style,” but also because it “addresses an unpopular theme or allows characters to say things no one wants to hear” (“Return of the Native”). Nearing the end of the narrative, Changez openly vents his discontent with American foreign policy:

It seemed to me then—and to be honest, sir, seems to me still—that America was engaged only in posturing. 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, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own. (190)

Such a passionate tirade encapsulates Changez’s ambivalent feelings towards America. His stern attitude, verging on revulsion, is stimulated by an enormous affection.

Thus Hamid’s desire to write/right cultural prejudices functions as the motor of his narrative, his narration. His preoccupation with the fabricated image of Pakistan as disseminated by the media serves to position his

narrative as a cultural mediator and pacifier. In an interview, he explained his discontent with the cultural stereotypes that had branded his country:

When we continually talk about Pakistan in a security context, when we see Pakistan through the eyes of a Predator drone, we see a pair of crosshairs and a cave. . . . America and Pakistan are similarly complicated places and I think the one thing I would like people to understand about Pakistan is, it is an incredibly rich, diverse, and—I think in many ways—unthreatening culture. (qtd. in “Real Life”)

The same idea is formulated in the novel, when Changez ardently explains that “we were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels but rather saints and poets and—yes—conquering Kings” (116). The novel, then, is an invitation to rectify spatial prejudices, cultural biases, and political wrongs. It is worth noting in this respect that it won the English Speaking Union Ambassador Book Award (2008), an award attributed to outstanding works that advance the interpretation of American culture. Hamid’s work is a complex textual terrain, both playful and deadly serious, whose ultimate goal is to negotiate, to bridge the gap between East and West.

III. Conclusion

The Reluctant Fundamentalist engages desire in all its possible forms and apertures. It opens up wide interpretive venues wherein dwells desire as a libidinal narrative drive and as a narrative thematic. The Scheherazadian-like narrative combines motifs of desire and survival. The listener/reader is trapped in an intricate network of stories that keep delaying the end. Storytelling, laden with latent desire, secures an ever-expectant audience and an opportunity for the teller to explicate. And yet, desire in this text is not only a narrative trope, it is also a cultural and political metaphor. Hamid’s ultimate goal behind this strategy of narration is to forge new routes of cultural and political negotiation and retrieval. Barthes’ and Brooks’ model explore what a text can do to an individual reader. My use of this model locates the act of reading within a broader cultural matrix. The question now becomes that of what a narrative text can do to or for a global reader. Hamid’s playful title raises the deadly serious issue of fundamentalism, yet the reader’s

expectation that he/she will read a story about Muslim fundamentalism, itself becoming an increasingly global concern, is thwarted by another type of fundamentalism, that of the world's financial markets. By juxtaposing these two ideologies, religious and economic, Hamid expresses his desire to redress cultural prejudices. He also succeeds in pushing the boundaries of narrative desire, and desirous, or texts of desire, can trespass personal and local borders as they increasingly engage in a public global dialogue.

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