An Analysis of Ethnocentric Bias in Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist

In a world shocked by the horror of death and calamity that came from 9/11, Mohsin Hamid allows us to listen to the voice of a Pakistani-American during this tumultuous time. While many novels about the terrorist attacks of September 11 occupy themselves in exploring the aftermath and traumatic effects on the white population, The Reluctant Fundamentalist's story circulates around the critical stance of a Pakistani-American who momentarily fell victim to the powerful and imperialistic American system. The protagonist, Changez, is a promising young man who receives an Ivy League education and earns himself a position in one of America's top management consulting firms in 2001—Underwood Samson. Despite his hard work and success, he is racially stigmatized and a target of irrational abhorrence because of his race and origin. Hamid challenges readers to reevaluate their preconceived notions and

prejudices of people who are different from themselves. Edward Said addresses similar ideas in his work Orientalism. Said offers a critique of the discourse of orientalism, a notion that resonates very closely with the “us versus them” dichotomy that Hamid addresses. Throughout the duration of the novel, Changez grapples with how society views him and consequently distances himself from his cultural heritage in an attempt to assimilate with American society. By following Changez’s perspective, the author articulates a reflective narrative through Changez to critique the hegemonic construction of orientalist practices in Western society and expose the dangers of binary thought. Therefore, Changez is used as a representation of the discourse with one’s cultural identity within the conditions of the 9/11 hysteria that greatly influenced America at the time.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist forces readers to engage in the confrontation of racial discrimination against the Middle Eastern

population that accompanied 9/11 by following the narrative of the protagonist Changez. Many readers are often sympathetic towards the protagonist due to the discrimination that he faces, and how hard he has to work to earn his place in society. However, the author inserts subtle details about his mannerisms that indicate a less amiable and appealing impression of Changez. As a Pakistani man trying to assimilate to the conventions that regulate American life, Changez desperately tries to embody the demeanour and appearance of an American. The novel follows the protagonist's confessional narrative, set in a cafe in Lahore where Changez has a conversation with a stranger, telling him about his time in America. It is clear that Changez is a diligent, hardworking, and chivalrous man. However, Changez may not be a reliable narrator, as the audience is only shown the text as a monologue from his perspective. Every detail provided is filtered through his interpretation. Nevertheless, we are compelled by his youthful demeanour, not by the question of the veracity about his experiences. Changez's narrative often comes

off as mildly hubristic and laced with nostalgia; when describing his first interview at Underwood Samson, he states: “I am not poor; far from it […] we employ several servants,” and that he was from a “family of great wealth” (Hamid 9–10). Changez often discusses his family’s past wealth, which seems to provide him with some solace with all that was lost. His mentioning of this detail can also be viewed as the fear of being seen as lesser than, and a futile attempt to naturally integrate with the American way of life. Having tasted privilege already, Changez is painfully aware of his fragile standing in America, and pines for the idealized life that he once had.

The protagonist’s need to belong is noticeable right from the beginning when he first moves to America. While studying at Princeton, he conducted himself like a “young prince, generous and carefree,” but also “quietly” held down three on-campus jobs at infrequently visited locations (Hamid 11). Changez’s dire need to

conform comes at a high cost; he takes on jobs at “infrequently visited” locations as a means to avoid his colleagues, and maintain his “princely” persona. Coming from a foreign background, where he does not have the same financial support from his parents like many of his colleagues, Changez feels the need to sustain a similar lifestyle to his companions, but has to do so with his own merit. Conforming to the likes of his classmates and colleagues was not the only concern that occupied Changez’s time. He is also consumed by his need to belong in front of the general public as well: “I suspected my Pakistaniness was invisible, cloaked by my suit, by my expense account, and— most of all—by my companions,” Changez thinks to himself as he notices that he is the only non-American in his workgroup (Hamid 71). The concern and fixation that Changez exhibits is a testament to his growing unease about being a foreigner. By hoping that his “Pakistaniness [is] invisible,” he speaks to the stereotype that many people from his country are poor. Changez’s belief that his “suit” and “expense account” mask his cultural

heritage is further evidence of his endeavour to be perceived as an "American." Being immersed in American culture has pressured the protagonist to mimic the behaviours of his peers and those around him. The protagonist's tenacious desire to assimilate is problematic because it has led him to perpetuate the same stereotypes and stigmas that the North Americans have against foreigners such as himself. Changez noticeably feels a sense of shame surrounding his heritage, so much so that he wants to be unrecognizable in terms of his ethnicity and envelops himself in material luxuries, such as his suit and expense account, to do so.

Changez's desperate behaviour can be explained by Edward Said's account in Orientalism. The cultural critic accentuates the political significance in social creation and how the colonist's creative mind is engendered by Western ideals (Said 14). Representations of the so-called 'East' have continuously been western-centric: a biased

view that favours European culture as opposed to non-Western civilizations. Therefore, being immersed in western society has caused Changez to become insecure about his position in society and to portray a false and insincere enactment. Hamid underlines the precarious situation of Orientalism and its asymmetrical image: the East is well informed of the West, but the West is only familiar with the stereotypical representations of the East and knows relatively little. This is notable when Changez first arrives in New York and feels a surprising sense of familiarity when he enters the subway. Later, he realizes that he owes his sense of familiarity with the many films that had used it as a setting (Hamid 48–9). This scene exhibits how foreigners are familiar with America due to the large exposure of their culture through the media, in contrast to countries in the greater Middle East such as Pakistan that are unfamiliar territory for most Americans. Orientalism constructs the cultural and spatial stereotypes that are often connected to imperialism. Lau and Mendes describe Changez as “the voice of a character who has been

Western-educated and is now performing an identity for the Western audience" (Lau, Mendes 2016). I concur with this statement because the protagonist is hyper-attentive to the way his peers and superiors view him, which is evident through his conversation with Jim and how he deliberately conceals the multiple jobs that he has from his colleagues. Changez's voice seems like it is being channelled through a performative lens, as if he is aware of being constantly viewed through a Western lens and judged by the West under orientalist scrutiny.

While working at Underwood Samson, Changez is at the top of his league and is generally loved and respected by his peers and higher-ups. Aspects of Underwood Samson's imperialism cause Changez to exhibit similar traits. "I could, if I desired, take my colleagues out for an after-work drink—an activity classified as 'new hire cultivation'—and with impunity spend in an hour more than my

father earned in a day!" (Hamid 37). He does so with youthful exuberance, demonstrating his enjoyment of the opulent life that such wealth bestows him. Changez compares the small sum of money that his father earns in a day as opposed to the impressive salary that he earns to further distance himself from his origins and magnify the lengths that he has achieved to get to the place that he currently resides in (Hamid 37). Moreover, during the aftermath of 9/11, he notes that he tries to "ignore" the rumours that "Pakistani cab drivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people's houses," and tried to "reason that these stories were mostly untrue" (Hamid 94). At this time, Changez realizes the connection between the crumbling of the world around him and the destruction of his American dream. He attempts to dissociate himself from the others that have had to face this abuse and claim that such brutality only affects the "hapless poor" and not "Princeton graduates earning 80 thousand a year" (Hamid 95). Changez's avoidance and neglect about these public attacks give

evidence to the immense importance that he places on his position in society. The narrator undoubtedly perceives himself to be of greater importance. The labelling of himself as a “Princeton graduate earning 80 thousand” accentuates his disengagement with his cultural heritage and how he sees himself on a greater level than the other Muslims in America. The author initially characterizes Changez in this inconsiderate and pretentious manner to parallel some of the traits that we could see in ourselves. His desire to integrate with America is evident, but this aspiration fused with his individualistic motivation to stand out noticeably exudes his developing sense of entitlement. The emphasis is on Changez’s self-congratulation of belonging to a more privileged class rather than having sympathy for those that do not share in his security and education. Hamid grew up in Lahore, Pakistan, and attended Princeton and Harvard; with this close resemblance between Changez and the author, one can assume that the author formulated this novel around similar events from his own lifetime. Hamid is no stranger to the types of feelings that Changez

feels: the desire to belong and to be accepted in a new country. Drawing parallels from personal experience, the author offers a critique upon immigrants who may have had similar experiences and is further demonstrating the distinctions between the two cultures that were merely fabricated by colonialism. The author demonstrates an uncharitable view towards Changez's disconnection from his heritage which is exhibited through the protagonist's negligent behaviour towards those who are targeted in the War on Terror.

Changez's inner turmoil between his newfound status in America and his cultural origins is rendered most evident by the American invasion of Afghanistan that same year, just a month after 9/11. He is initially evasive, "preferring not to watch the partisan sports-event-like coverage given to the mismatch between the American bombers with their twenty-first-century weaponry and the ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesmen below" (Hamid 99). Changez has difficulty

witnessing this tragic attack because of the way it is broadcasted: the "sports-event-like coverage" exhibits this event in a fashion for the purpose to entertain, where one side, the Americans, has the upper hand against the Afghan tribesmen who are "ill-equipped and ill-fed" (Hamid 99). The narrator's avoidance implies his unwillingness to take a position on this issue; more deeply, it expresses his agony to have to choose between America and Afghanistan—a country he favourably views as "Pakistan's neighbour, our friend, and a fellow Muslim nation" (Hamid 100). It is disheartening for Changez to see Afghanistan in this vulnerable and defeated position because of its close resemblance to Pakistan, his home country. At this moment, Changez begins to disengage the American side of his identity and realizes the ties that he has almost severed and forgotten since coming to America. Where other New Yorkers were busying themselves with "last-minute purchases" during the holiday season, Changez was bound for Lahore (Hamid 121), signifying his newfound concern over his homeland.

Issues around cultural foreignness and familiarity are of particular importance in Hamid's novel. The series of events and relationships depend on the perception of the audience and how they connect with this collection of personal and fictional dimensions. During the televised Afghanistan attack, the "sportsman-like" portrayal accentuates the overpowering role of mass media and the lack of morality that they have for these real-life situations. The author exposes the US' unjust portrayal of the Afghanistan invasion and draws attention to Changez's realization of the injustice and bias against him and his people. Hayati affirms that identities owe their formation and position in society to the operation of social, economic, cultural, and political forces (Hayati 2011). I contest this point, however: my reading looks closer at the effects of colonial domination and Changez's relationship to the imperialistic system. The author illustrates the immense military and financial power that the US wields against the rest of the world. The tactic of military

power is exhibited through the force imposed on countries such as Afghanistan, and the financial power is what coerces talented young students such as Changez to study and work in their country. Changez is dismayed when he realizes that he is aiding the country that is targeting other countries for takeover: " I was a modern-day janissary," he observes, "a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine…" (Hamid 120). The author criticizes America's consumerist society and the imperialistic practices that they use to assimilate foreigners and conform them to their customs. At first, Changez is accepted as an equal member of society, then moves up the rank and enjoys the material and psychological benefits of his new life in America. However, after the 9/11 attack and beginning of the War on Terror, Changez realizes that his supposed privileges—his job, his residence, and his expense account— act as the chains that bind him in service to America.

Hamid confronts this issue by drawing attention to the uncomfortableness of foreigners, such as Changez, being forced to view themselves through the eyes of another culture. Hayati believes that Hamid's close attention to the artifice of the lens is his way of countering the metanarrative that views Orientals on a lower level than the 'civilized' West (Hayati 2011). This hierarchical thinking establishes structures of hegemony and imperialism that reinforces the notion that the orient is the 'other'. On a similar sentiment, Edward Said asserts that the Western colonialist subjects feel entitled to manipulating the Eastern perception: "a white middle-class Westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it, just because by definition 'it' is not quite as human as 'we' are" (Said 108). Said demonstrates how there is a fabricated distinction between the Eastern and Western populations. By referring to the orient as 'it' indicates that Westerners undervalue them and view them in opposition to themselves. Through the process of orientalism, the cultures and

societies concerned are marginalized and insulted, while the imperialism and moral superiority of the West is legitimized. In this passage, Said emphasizes the importance of confronting the metanarrative and describes it as “dehumanized thought” (Said 108). Thus, the cultural obliteration of the East is made possible with the negation of the nation’s reality, and the expropriation made by the colonizers to the colonized people. Even though Changez was initially desperate to attain a sense of belonging from American society, he soon recognizes the unjustified animosity that Westerners have against people like himself.

During his brief return to Pakistan, Changez has an insightful realization. At first, he is struck by the shabby appearance of his house and remarks it as a sign of “lowliness” (Hamid 124). However, as Changez re-acclimatizes to his surroundings, it once again becomes familiar and the narrator realizes that he has been looking with the

“eyes of a foreigner,” one that was an “entitled and unsympathetic American” (Hamid 124). While the news broadcasts of the invasion of Afghanistan, and the discrimination endured by fellow South Asians, only nudged his consideration towards his heritage, returning home made him directly confront his culture. This forced him to reflect on the drastic and disturbing character change that he had undergone. It is notable that Changez is “angered” by his realization of looking through an American lens. Especially being from a more privileged background, he feels the insult more acutely when he catches himself taking an Orientalist stance. Lau and Mendez reason that reaction to be a denial of his identity and thus a further offence to his pride (Lau, Mendes 2016). I believe that this negation is caused by how accustomed Changez is with American culture: after witnessing the crude behaviour that many others from the East experienced after the 9/11 attacks, he feels guilty for engaging with that discriminatory perception as well.

A pivotal moment during Changez's development is when he prepares to leave, and his mother reminds him to shave his beard before he leaves as a means to protect her son. As a sign of protest, he does not, despite the stigmatization that he will receive upon his arrival in America (Hamid 128). It is evident that the protagonist's mother is aware of the public abuse that he will receive in America with his beard. After 9/11, facial hair was a symbol of radical Islam and thus undesirable. Changez's beard designates an affiliation with being Pakistani, and his decision to keep it can be seen as him reclaiming his cultural identity, even though earlier on he fought so hard to fit into American society. In this section, Hamid symbolizes the "us versus them" dichotomy where each side is distinguishable from the other by their appearance. Changez's refusal to shave is a challenge to the Orientalist or Islamophobic assumptions that many Westerners make. By Edward Said's account, "[t]he more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily one is able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and

generosity necessary for true vision" (Said 259). This quotation by Said dismantles the Western perception of the East moulded by the West, and critiques the caricatured interpretations of culture in the Eastern Hemisphere. The notion that "detachment" and "generosity" are needed to form a true vision is also paralleled in The Reluctant Fundamentalist. Changez is only able to see the true nature of his home when he takes a step back to formulate an objective perspective in order to understand the true nature of his culture, rather than being misguided by American prejudices. The notion of binary thinking is exhibited as harmful in this passage by Said. One must navigate through the chasm that exists of two different ends and recognize the spectrum of options between them. Cultural identities cannot be ascribed to pre-given, scripted, cultural traits that define the conventions of ethnicity. Nor should the "colonizer" and the "colonized be viewed as independent entities. These misconceptions come from the mistrust and alienation of different

cultures. In order to progress as a society, it is essential to discard these stereotypes that limit us to a single form of thinking.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist addresses much more than the terrorism of 9/11 and religious tensions. Hamid delicately fabricates this novel to encourage readers to resist a single, moralistic interpretation of what they assume about Pakistani and American people. Hamid's collection and personalization of these traumatic events take a confrontational stance against the stigmatization of the Eastern culture that came after. He does this while also using the events in the story to mirror the migrant's experience of the unknown and the unfamiliar. The author highlights these actions to expose a similar sentiment that may be shared with other immigrants who have also travelled to a country with an immensely different culture; it is a novel meant to be read with the eyes that reflect the place you came from. Changez is a character who is constructed with

traits that closely resemble our own, or with those who share a similar migrant experience. The author brings forth a lesson that is ultimately not about choosing between your identity of being an American or our own cultural heritage, but rather to commemorate our provenance.