

Tracing the Fundamentalist in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Claudia Perner

For some time we have witnessed the emergence of a generation of “postcolonial” writers for whom (post)colonialism has become an increasingly distant family memory. They understandably find it rather tedious to be read first and foremost as representative of a certain cultural and national context. In contrast to this, Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid appears to willingly accept the ambitious task of “explaining” his country to his readers. Meanwhile it seems that at least Western audiences continue to be in desperate need of such explanation, given the limited knowledge about other parts of the world that prevails in the West. Pakistan is often perceived as merely one of those far-away places that serve as breeding grounds for extremism and violence. Hamid’s acceptance of his position as a mediator—though clearly not the only significant feature of his work—is visible in most of his writing. For example, it is also prominent in his journalistic opinion pieces featured in Western newspapers, articles such as “Pakistan Must Not Be Abandoned” (in *The Guardian*), “Pakistan’s Silent Majority Is Not to Be Feared” (in *The New York Times*) or “Why Do They Hate Us?” (in *The Washington Post*). The strong public interest in Hamid’s second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as well as the nominations for major literary prizes that it garnered, underlines the extent to which this novel speaks to issues troubling the contemporary reading public.

Assuming that it is also the “fundamentalist” of the title that is drawing a larger audience, I will examine the ways in which this figure of the fundamentalist is negotiated in Hamid’s two novels. The starting point of my consideration consists of a question and an observation: The very “fundamental” question (which has been hotly debated in recent years, leading to a large number of conferences and an even larger number of publications dedicated to the very topic) is this: What is fundamen-

talism? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “fundamentalism” refers to the “strict adherence to ancient or fundamental doctrines, with no concessions to modern developments in thought or customs” (“Fundamentalism” 267). Applied to modern fundamentalism, much of this very basic definition is debatable, most notably the claim that fundamentalism makes “no concessions to modern developments in thought or customs.” The organization and structure of many fundamentalist groups as well as their use of modern technology and media imply otherwise. Positioning oneself in ultimate opposition to modernity in the contemporary world appears, in fact, to include a rather strong ‘concession’ to the rule of modernity (or to what I would rather call the rule of *modernities*). Taking into account the generally problematic quality of the term “fundamentalism,” I set out to detect “the fundamentalist” in Hamid’s novels.

Hamid originally submitted his first novel *Moth Smoke* from writing he did at Harvard Law School. When somebody inquired about this in an interview, Hamid explained: “A trial is about trying to come at truth through competing, contradictory narratives, and I wanted to write a book that explored the same ideas” (Thomas). I will focus what follows on these two topics: the figure of the fundamentalist and the process of “uncovering the truth.”

I will begin by looking at *Moth Smoke*, where fundamentalism may not, at first glance, strike us as a central issue at all. *Moth Smoke* is the story of one man’s career of drug abuse and crime, which ultimately leads to a scandalous trial. Fundamentalists appear as figures in the background, whom the protagonist Darashikoh “Daru” Shezad and his wealthy, fashionable friends in upper-class Lahore call “fundos” and mock. However, Daru and his increasingly violent resentment against precisely this rich elite may yet mirror the sentiment growing among the country’s religious fundamentalists. Hamid has pointed out that Daru is “the violent backlash to the system. He’s **secular, but his angry reaction** stands for Pakistan’s religious movements, its violent crime” (Patel). Though dismissive of their extremist convictions, Daru ultimately shares the violent anger of “the great uncooled” (Hamid, *Moth* 103), that part of Pakistan’s population that cannot afford air-conditioning. In the end,

he largely agrees with the fundamentalists' complaints though he may be just a little too caught up in his own misery, drug addiction, and self-righteousness to understand this connection.

There is a certain irony to the fact that towards the end of the novel one of those "fundos" tells Daru that what Pakistan needs is "a system ... where a man can rely on the law for justice, where he's given basic dignity as a human being and the opportunity to prosper regardless of his status at birth" (Hamid, *Moth* 225). The trial against Daru, which frames the novel, does not offer him such luxuries as justice and dignity. It is instantly clear that Daru is typecast in it as a "man capable of anything and afraid of nothing." He is "the terrible almost-hero of a great story: powerful, tragic, and dangerous" (Hamid, *Moth* 8). The judge is confronted with a case which the prosecutor holds to be beyond doubt:

The balancing of scales awaits, Milord; redress for wrong is to come. Tender humanity screams in fear, confronted by such a monster, and conscience weeps with rage. The law licks its lips at the prospect of punishing such a one, and justice can shut its eyes today, so easy is its task. (Hamid, *Moth* 8–9)

At this point, the reader has learnt that nothing in this story, told to us mainly by its drugged and generally untrustworthy protagonist, is quite as clear as the prosecution would have it. Daru is not a fearless anti-hero and menacing monster. However, in contrast to his own claims, neither is he precisely innocent. As Anita Desai has pointed out in her review of the novel, "[o]ur antihero is denounced not for the crime he committed but for the one he did not. Of course it hardly matters since he is guilty, guilt being a blanket term for [his deeds'] many permutations." Indeed, even though he is probably innocent of the crime in question, Daru has gradually transformed into a raging lunatic who might easily kill the next person just to release his increasing sense of hysteria: "[M]y mouth is dry and I'm zoned on hairy [heroin], so I don't know how well I can talk. If they ask me what I'm looking for, I might shoot them. I think shooting something might calm me down. I feel hysterical" (Hamid, *Moth* 232).

This sense of chaos is mirrored in the political developments that take place in the background of the novel. It is the year 1998, the summer Pakistan detonates its first nuclear bombs to compete with its neighbour, India. The young and fashionable crowd of Lahore throws “Armageddon parties” to welcome each other to the “nuclear club” (Hamid, *Moth* 122). At this moment in history, it is not only the fundamentalists in the streets who agree that if everyone else has the nuclear bomb, “[w]hy should we [the Muslims] be the only ones without it” (Hamid, *Moth* 134). It is during this first “nuclear monsoon” (Hamid, *Moth* 212) that a smouldering nervousness has taken hold of the country, feeding into public expressions of political and religious anger and rendering any neat distinctions between right and wrong impossible.

It is during this unstable time that Daru’s personal downfall takes place. Individual chapters of the novel, in which we are offered the perspectives of other characters, do nothing to release the tension or to restore a sense of moral stability. In one of these chapters, Murad Badshah, Daru’s **partner-in-crime**, lectures us on the wrongness of killing. In another, Daru’s friend-turned-enemy, Ozi, gives us his very personal explanation of why his family is entitled to its stolen riches, pointing out that

People are pulling their pieces out of the pie, and the pie is getting smaller, so if you love your family, you’d better take your piece now, while there’s still some left. That’s what I’m doing. And if anyone isn’t doing it, it’s because they’re locked out of the kitchen. (Hamid, *Moth* 185)

The novel closes with the despairing image of a protagonist, a city, and a country at a moment of crisis, a moment when individuals are adrift, and frustration is likely to feed into the politics of anger. As Daru’s trial draws to an end, we are reminded of the words of the prologue: “None present were innocent, save perhaps the judge. And perhaps not even he” (Hamid, *Moth* 4).

Turning to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, we encounter a very different type of novel. Whereas *Moth Smoke* leads its reader through a narrative maze of conflicting voices and perspectives, *The Reluctant*

Fundamentalist offers a simple narrative setup: During an evening in Lahore, Pakistani Changez expounds his life story to an unnamed American listener (and by extension to the reader). We are told the story of the narrator's genesis as a fundamentalist, or are we? His habit of drinking alcohol, his "wholehearted support" (Hamid, *Reluctant* 23) of topless sunbathing, and lack of religious activity hardly seem to fulfil our expectations of a religious fundamentalist. Is the novel, as Marina Budhos has suggested, an "intentional misnomer," its protagonist "not a reluctant fundamentalist, but a reluctant anti-American"?

Indeed, many readers have wondered how to interpret this character, as well as how to read the ambiguous ending. While some readers may close the book convinced that the story ends in a violent act of fundamentalist aggression, others may perceive the narrator as a kind of "radicalised Scheherazade" (Murphy), telling his story in order to ward off a life-threatening situation. Hamid has refused to clear up this question, stating: "The novel is not supposed to have a correct answer. It's a mirror. It really is just a conversation, and different people will read it in different ways" (Solomon). In the end, it hardly matters whether the narrator is indeed involved in fundamentalism or terrorism. What is much more important is that his story explains the type of anti-American sentiment that may grow among even some of those who have come to live and succeed in the US.

The story starts out as the chronicle of an all-American success story, a young and smart Pakistani named Changez who excels at Princeton, and subsequently heads to a prestigious job at a valuation firm in New York City. He feels proud, valued for his abilities, "a veritable James Bond—only younger, darker, and possibly better paid" (Hamid, *Reluctant* 63–64). The first seeds of Changez's later resentment against the splendour of the American Dream, however, are already present in these glamorous beginnings. He struggles to make his peace with the world's most advanced civilization while his own country, formerly part of a wealthy empire, appears reduced to global irrelevance. Burdened by his heightened sense of cultural self-consciousness, Changez finds that even the initially pleasant encounter with his American girlfriend's parents quickly turns sour when Changez is angered by the "typically

American undercurrent of condescension” (Hamid, *Reluctant* 55) that he detects in the father’s **generally accurate assessment of Pakistan’s current political situation.**

The events of September 11, 2001 constitute a decisive turning point for Changez and his attitude towards his host country. It is interesting to note that Hamid had begun to write *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* before September 11 and for some time afterwards continued writing it as a story taking place before that day. However, considering the cataclysmic importance that 9/11 ultimately ended up having for Changez’s development, it is hard to imagine the kind of novel that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* would have been if Hamid had not changed his plans. The moment Changez watches the World Trade Center towers collapse live on TV is also the moment he realizes that he is in fact quite pleased about “the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (Hamid, *Reluctant* 73). This realization, of course, throws him into considerable confusion, which, soon begins to dwindle in the face of the increasingly hostile and distrustful face that America offers her over-achieving Pakistani guest. He gradually becomes more uncomfortable with the atmosphere of “self-righteous rage” (Hamid, *Reluctant* 94) and “dangerous nostalgia” (Hamid, *Reluctant* 94, 115) that has come to rule his host country. He also finds it harder and harder to apply his employer’s guiding principle and “[f]ocus on the Fundamentals” (Hamid, *Reluctant* 98), namely the pursuit of maximum profit. As his personal American dream begins to crumble, it becomes clear that the romantic relationship with his American friend is also falling apart. Changez is left to witness her withdrawal into her memories of a former boyfriend who died of cancer. The close connection between this story of romantic loss and the demise of Changez’s **attachment to the US is highly significant. It adds an emotional dimension to a process of disenchantment that otherwise might be read simply as a consequence of Changez’s anger about America’s political actions.** Understandably, Changez cannot see very much that is glorious in the bombing of “ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesmen” (Hamid, *Reluctant* 99) and resents the US for failing to support Pakistan in its conflict with India.

As we follow Changez's story, we grow to understand his feelings of anger and powerlessness in the middle of political tension and personal and public disarray. We may even sympathize with his motivation for growing a beard as a sign of protest and a visible symbol of his Pakistani identity, although we anticipate the problems this creates in his American everyday life. Changez ultimately comes to the conclusion that he has spent most of his life serving the American Empire as a "modern-day janissary" (Hamid, *Reluctant* 152). He resolves to do something to stop this American Empire "in the interest not only of the rest of humanity, but also in [America's] own" (Hamid, *Reluctant* 168). The question of how far exactly he is willing to go to stop America remains unanswered and accounts for part of the reader's **uneasiness about the novel's narrator**. However, even when Changez describes his own behaviour as that of "an incoherent and emotional madman" (Hamid, *Reluctant* 167), his narrative voice is perfectly reasonable and flawlessly polite. Step-by-step we have grown to understand a person who may have only appeared to be a fundamentalist.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the over-polite narrative voice that does not allow the reader to relax. Like the American listener, we are never quite able to let down our guard. The predatory imagery which peppers the passages in which the narrator directly addresses his American listener keeps the reader wondering who will in the end turn out to be the hunter and who will find himself to be prey (Sooke).

Despite its ambiguous ending, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a novel that offers insight into the motivations and sentiments of a person who in the West might all too easily be dismissed as a fundamentalist. As the narrator points out, "[i]t 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 under-cover assassins" (Hamid, *Reluctant* 183). At the same time, it is one of the strengths of the novel that it does not altogether exclude the possibility that this particular speaker might still turn out to be what the novel's title suggests. In his essay "My Reluctant Fundamentalist," Hamid explains that both *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* were born out of shifts in perspective that

occurred as a consequence of his travelling between a life in the US and his home in Pakistan:

Moth Smoke had for me been a look at Pakistan with a gaze altered by the many years I had spent in America. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I thought, would be a look at America with a gaze reflecting the part of myself that remained stubbornly Pakistani.

What unites both novels is their interest in the complicated anatomy of contemporary Pakistan and in those feelings of resentment and deficiency that continue to grow among Hamid's countrymen. The protagonists of his two novels are not "fundamentalists" according to the dictionary definition of the term. They certainly lack the amount of religious dedication that we might expect in a prototypical Muslim fundamentalist. At the same time, this might be one of the common misconceptions that Hamid's novels succeed in unveiling. Might it not simply be wrong to think that what today is commonly called "fundamentalist" is always connected to religious commitment? If we take our clues from Hamid, we come to the conclusion that fundamentalism can also be inspired by commitment to one's country, to one's own dreams, to one's career, to one's failures or to one's very personal disappointments. We have to start distinguishing between religious fundamentalism proper and a feeling that can clearly be related but is in no way the same: a reactive aggression born out of an inability to govern one's own life and to make one's own rules. It is likely that actual religious fundamentalists will continue to be outnumbered by the more secular type. As a consequence, it is probably time to reduce those inquiries into the religious origins of Muslim fundamentalism and to think a little more deeply about what creates the resentment that sparks fundamentalist violence. I expect that Hamid will continue to contribute his part to this endeavour.

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