

Deconstructing Terror: Interview with Mohsin Hamid on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)

Conducted via telephone on November 12, 2010¹

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Mohsin Hamid is a Pakistani novelist who holds British citizenship. He is the author of *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Hamid's first novel was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway award, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* became an international best seller. It was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, and won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and the Asian American Literary Award. The *Guardian* selected it as one of the books "that defined the decade" ("What We Were Reading"). The story of an ambitious Pakistani immigrant disenchanted with American life after 9/11, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a significant literary intervention in both form and content.

You have characterized the immigrant, particularly yourself, as a mongrel. It is a characterization that contains both freedom (not being constrained by notions of belonging) and abandonment (no one wants the mongrel).

Well, first of all I intended a mongrel in a positive sense. Obviously a mongrel is a mixture of what otherwise would be pure breeds. I like the word mongrel because it generally has the connotation of being bad and inferior to a purebred dog. And again I think the word is actually appropriate now, and I would apply it to myself, because it does seem that these sorts of hybridized identities are under attack. It is harder to be someone with a Muslim-sounding name coming into the John F. Kennedy Airport, and it's also hard to be someone with avowedly secular politics and liberal values writing in Pakistan.

The mongrel identifier is something I would embrace actually, and I don't think it's at all impossible to be a mongrel—in fact, I think most people are mongrelized. But my case is more obviously so than many others. If you come from Lahore, which is thirty kilometres from the

border of India, there is clearly a blurring that takes place. A bit of blurring that there would be in Peshawar, which you know is a hundred kilometres away from Afghanistan.

In The Reluctant Fundamentalist, you write that Lahore is the last outpost in an unbroken series of Muslim habitations, or Muslim states, thus connecting it to something larger than the Pakistani state. Yet, when Changez goes back to Pakistan and the tension builds with India after the attack on the Parliament, the narrative is also situated as very local and not just a hybrid free-floating mongrelized voice. Some of the ways in which Changez feels are very local, very specific.

Well I think Changez is a mongrel who resists his mongrelization. I personally don't, so the quote you quoted me as having said would apply to me, but it may not be what Changez may say about himself. Although he does realize in the long haul that it is very difficult to re-excavate the Pakistani identity for him, yet he is someone who reflects on his mongrelizing identity as I think many people do. I think mongrelized identities, when the world around you is nurturing, supportive, etcetera, can be more easy to embrace and more difficult when things are hostile.

An article by you in the Independent is rather positive about the pledge of allegiance that Britain, following the United States, has included in its citizenship ceremony. I wonder what you thought about when writing, and whether the history of the Brick Lanes and the Muslim ghettos of London or the history of colonialism play into that. And, of course, now you live in Lahore as a Pakistani-British national. Have your views of citizenship and its privileges changed?

Well, you know, I am somewhat agnostic about the notion of citizenship. I don't deny that it has meaning and that it is a thing of significance, but I don't solely purport to understand what it is, or even entirely believe in its existence. When I think about myself, I am a citizen of the United Kingdom, a citizen of Pakistan, but not a citizen of the U.S., even though I spent more time in the U.S. than I did in U.K.. So, in some senses my identity is more American than it is British. Because I am a British citizen I don't sit back and think of myself as a Briton. In

fact, in that relation and in that history, I think of myself as a brown guy being colonized and not as a white guy coming and colonizing, regardless of my citizenship. That will be my immediate response in thinking about that historical moment.

But on the other hand, you know there were a couple of things going on. One was that I was living in the U.K. and at that time I didn't know my intention; in fact I didn't have any plan to leave soon. Becoming a citizen of the place where you live seems right and natural to me. I would actually be happy being accepted as a British citizen, Pakistani citizen, and anywhere else where I could pick up citizenship willingly as well. For me the status of citizen is someone who enjoys equal rights and privileges with other citizens and has the opportunity to express themselves through the political process, should they choose to do so. In my world all long-term residents would be citizens of wherever they were residing for a long term.

There is something very practical about citizenship. Having a British passport allows you to travel more easily than having a Pakistani one. If a new government in the U.K. decided to make it difficult for Pakistanis to stay, one would presumably be exempt from that. So these kinds of practical considerations play a part. I don't necessarily feel I am taking on a kind of historical identity as a Briton. Rather it is someone who has chosen to settle in Britain but brings their own sovereign identity with them, yet accepts the laws of the society in which they live.

In fact you are really talking of citizenship as a civil and legislative category rather than as a cultural and historical one, right?

Right. Yes. And also an egalitarian category. Once you accept citizenship one is equal. The idea that we are not equal is vaguely repugnant, actually more than vaguely repugnant to me. And in my personal case I would equalize that wherever possible. So in the U.S. I don't have to be a citizen of the U.S. to live there. I didn't move to the U.K. and give up my green card because I rejected U.S. citizenship, but because of life choices and the bureaucratic nightmare. I would have had to move back to the U.S., spend five years there, etcetera. I don't live my life in order to acquire citizenship. But had there been a time when I could have

gotten citizenship I would have gotten it. Because I think I should be equal to all residents of the place where I reside—we all should be. At the moment citizenship is something that enables all kinds of discriminatory behavior. But if you look at it, why is citizenship above all more unjust than any other kind of discrimination? Why is it that a non-citizen immigrant citizen can be treated in this way whereas discriminatory behavior to somebody with a different religion, gender, sexual orientation would never be tolerated in the U.S. and U.K.. So, I find it puzzling, and I am always drawn towards the notion of becoming a citizen, and making it easy for other people to become citizens.

Could we segue here to the notion of a secular Westernized person? For many people, disenchantment with the West, especially the kind characterized in The Reluctant Fundamentalist, contradicts secular thought. The idea that a secular Westernized person would feel conflict with the U.S. or American politics is puzzling to many American readers. But Changez's disenchantment in The Reluctant Fundamentalist is rooted as much in his unrequited love as it is in his political distance from 9/11. Could you talk a little bit about the intertwining of narrative here—of the love story and the political story?

The personal is political and the political is personal. In Changez's case—I mean in all of our lives, politics affects us in a personal way. When our parents can't come to see us because we live in New York and because they can't get a visa, then politics are very personal. Similarly if you are in love with someone from, let's say, India and you are from Pakistan, then that can radically affect your view of politics and social context. In Changez's case unrequited love does play a huge role, or partially requited love and then unrequited. Or an oddly-configured love—because he is a man who is both so intimately accepted and intimately spurned. And I think that creates in you an empty space. The things he hates most tend to be things that he could have possibly loved. So, in the case of India and Pakistan—there is so much animosity. Now clearly there are no other two countries in the world that have more similarities between them than these two, except the U.S. and Canada I suppose, but it is very unusual to find two countries like that—and the possibili-

ties of connections suddenly yanked away can create a kind of opposite momentum. That is why so many love stories degenerate into hate-love stories or violent stories. In *Changez's* case, I don't think it's just spurned love that takes him to where he goes. But I suspect he might be quite miserable and vindictive about it. He might still have gone to Pakistan, or perhaps feeling differently, been in a very different place and not gone to Pakistan at all.

Talking about 9/11, do you in any way feel that 9/11 has had some overarching effect on contemporary fiction, or would it be fair to say that in some ways it has changed the audience more than it has changed the genre?

Well, if you are speaking in a formal sense, what are the formal responses to 9/11? I don't know what forms of writing were enabled or catalyzed by the event. Maybe it's too soon to say, but I think maybe it is the wrong question. It's almost like saying how did Pearl Harbor affect fiction—maybe Pearl Harbor didn't affect fiction at all. But the Second World War certainly affected fiction, as the First World War did. Even if 9/11 itself didn't affect fiction, it affected the world so dramatically—the wars in Iraq, in Afghanistan, the Indo-Pak standoffs, the profiling at the airports, the sense of fear involving multiple vulnerable populations has changed the world narrative. And because the world narrative has changed, I think fiction changed as well. So I wouldn't focus on 9/11 as the spark of a change in literature, but I would focus on 9/11 as a spark of a change in the world, which then of course is reflected in literature.

Initially the novel was set, as you said, before the events of 9/11, so as to not eclipse the narrative. However, you also mentioned in some interviews that towards the end, as you began to work more on it, 9/11 and the events around it became the catalyst for the story. Could you talk a little bit about this transformation, or the process?

Well, the novel originally was a story about a man working in corporate America, who is a Muslim man from Pakistan, who then goes back to Pakistan. It was also a failed love story, and that certainly didn't work out, in the sense that it's the same novel it is now, but it didn't have the close involvement with 9/11. But it took place in an environment

where, of course, the degree of mistrust was much less so. It was the story of a man's encounter with capitalism as practiced at the very beginning of the twenty-first century and a man who comes from one culture to work in another. But then 9/11 took place and it sort of completely overwhelmed my secular narrative—and for a while I reacted to what had happened by not reacting to it, or at least by trying to keep 9/11 out of the novel because it would potentially overwhelm the novel. But as the year passed I couldn't keep 9/11 out, I didn't want to, and I shouldn't. Enough time had passed to deal with it in a fictional sense. So the novel evolved to take that on board. I mean you know this isn't just talking about the first draft and the last draft. And I think in a way I was dealing with a feeling of conflict and tension that existed in me well before September eleventh happened. And of course that made sense. September eleventh didn't come out of the blue. 9/11 is an event in a long history of conflict, and the first draft of the novel was reacting to that history in a way.

The last question, and it is about language and the ambiguity of the novel's end. The cadences of the language, in the exchange between Changez and the unnamed American, have a poetic formality, which contrasts with the conversations Changez has with people in corporate America—the poetic formality of courtly Urdu versus the capitalism of American English in some ways. The lack of closure at the end then sets up a standoff between the opposing linguistic affiliations as well as the interpretive paradigms they represent. Were you hoping for this effect, or is this really my reading of it?

Well, I think the voice in which the novel is written—Changez's voice speaking to the American—I find it really comes out of the quasi-Victorian, elite, private schooling voices that one can hear in Pakistan to this day. It has a strange quixotic element in English and Urdu as well. If you meet certain people of a particular generation who went to Aitcheson or the Doon school you will hear voices like Changez's. And I like that voice, one, because it talks with an entire socio-cultural kind of background for the character, and two, because its courtly anachronism and formality carries for me connotations of how Islam is perceived in mainstream Western culture. In television and movies—you get the feeling

that here is a thing of the past, a kind of ancient, anachronistic, greatly menacing, overly-strict civilization. And Changez's voice seems to me to really pick up on those kinds of preconceptions, and a lot of that was amplified in how his voice was constructed. On the other hand, when he speaks within the story, as when dialogue takes place, the setting of the dialogue of course, sounds like dialogue. And for dialogue I trust my ear. Changez's speech in conversation is cut up more, so it's not just the reflexive kind of tonalities of corporate speak, of a corporate actor, but also that is how people speak. But the fact that he would speak the same narrative, the novel narrative, in a different voice than the way he speaks when talking at the workplace also reflects the novel's shift to reality. For me *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is not an exercise in straight-out realism. The scenario in which Changez and the American actually sit down for several hours with Changez pontificating at great length is a hyper-real scenario. It wouldn't actually happen like that. It's a stylization—you know it's a fiction and not just like all fiction—it is a fiction that presents itself as fiction and invites the audience to sort of suspend realism and enter into this world. So that is the frame, and the frame out of which the novel is told. And within that frame of course is the actual story. And the story purports to be real, so the novel is real in the sense that what happens to Changez is real—but the strain between a non-real formal structure and a realist narrative is one that I am very interested in. Opening up the form so that the relationship with the reader can be played with across a different canvas. Who knows what one can or cannot achieve in realism, but certainly when one expands beyond the realist form it allows for relationships with the readers to open up. So in both of my novels the reason for doing this, for having a realist story inside an unreal frame, is that it creates echoes and dissonances and a jangling in the reading. How do you read the text? Do you relate to the text as a work of fiction? But you can't entirely do that—and even if you want to try to do that, the use of the constant second person 'you' is constantly being thrown at you and is throwing you off-balance. So what do you do—how do you interpret this, how do you read this, how do you position yourself truly? So if something presents itself as realism, you either accept it as real or you don't accept it as real, but if something

presents itself as realism within a cocoon of unrealism, you can't just say it's just real. You have to enter the process of determining what is real for you, what is not real—or whether or not you can. And that for me is a very rich game. Because when you are talking about moral issues, it is far more interesting than presenting a moral position of what is right or what is wrong. That doesn't strike me as a particularly interesting function of a novel, or one that I find very compelling. What is much more interesting is to engage the reader in the process of making a decision that carries moral weight for themselves, and coming to realize as the novel progresses that they had made certain moral decisions and thus are being presented with their reading. Because the unreal frame means that there isn't only one reading; there is a degree of individuality to the reading that gives meaning to the reader. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is read differently by different readers, and so that's why I think it's a rich space. And it's something that I think that fiction has a unique power to engage in. Unlike a film or a television program, where the acting is done for you, in a novel we are just seeing visual characters. And the translation of those characters into words, into thoughts, into imagery, into feelings is one that has a larger imaginative component on the part of the reader. And because it is a lot for the reader to imagine, it seems to me that one of the interesting things a novel can do is to explore the way in which readers imagine—to reveal to the reader how they imagine, and to show through the imagining, to reflect it back to the reader what they believe, and what their predispositions are and what their presumptions are. So that is what I am trying to do in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and that is why you do hear the different voices between Changez speaking and the frame of the novel, and that is how the novel operates both in a true realist frame and also in a not-real frame.

Notes

- 1 Interview edited by the author with Mosin Hamid's permission; additional edits made by *ARIEL*.

Work Cited

"What We Were Reading." *Guardian*, 5 December 2009, Review sec.: 2. Print.