**(Un)tolerated Neighbour: Encounters with the Radicalized Other**

**in**

***The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Submission***

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The time will soon come when we will not be able to remember the horrors of September 11 without remembering also the unquestioning technological and economic optimism that ended that day. (Berry 1)

Wendell Berry opens *In the Presence of Fear* by announcing the end of liberal optimism. The accuracy of this statement manifested itself in the aftermath of 9/11 and the ensuing ‘war on terror.’ The discourses on respect for otherness and liberal tolerance are immediately undercut by raising voices that are getting alarmingly close to fascism. State discourses of security over freedom are promoted by government officials as well as mainstream media to justify even the use of torture. However, while the concept of the Other is thus radicalized, it paradoxically gets so opaque that encountering it at a mundane level becomes almost impossible. The profound sense of loss and grief surrounding the trauma makes the phenomena even harder to articulate. It is equally difficult for the subject, that considers its *self* as liberal, and the “tolerated” Other to place themselves within the shifting parameters. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* differ from several post-9/11 works as they choose to expose the intricate layers inherent in this paradox.

In spite of a broad variety in medium, literary responses to September 11 often take the form of trauma literature dealing with the event as the author’s personal and protagonists’ individual trauma to be worked through, or a collective catastrophe to be commemorated. Others treat 9/11 as an opportunity for oblique social satire.[[1]](#endnote-1) Most of these texts are indifferent to the image of the Other, tolerated or otherwise. Richard Gray, in *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, argues that such works “assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures. The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated... public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists” (30). What I would argue is that Hamid and Waldman’s texts attempt to exceed this domesticating attitude and locate the crisis in, what Gray calls, “an interstitial space”(65). With a representation of the post-9/11 world in which the tolerated other gets increasingly radicalised, these writers create a space in which “[binary] oppositions are contested: a site where a discourse founded on either/or distinctions is interrogated and even subverted” (65).

By framing the narrative as the dramatic monologue of the Pakistani “reluctant fundamentalist” and by placing the silent American listener under his constant surveilling interpretation, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, adopts an “awry” perspective on the matter of the victim and the assailant. *The Submission* assumes a similar stance; in this case, by delving into the problematics of American perceptions after the attacks. Among several complex relations and issues raised in the novel, the question that drives most of the action in *The Submission* is ‘where does the meaning of an art work lie?’ By asking Mo what the memorial design means, Claire assumes an age-old standpoint in literary criticism: the authorial intention. However, the whole process turns out to be a tangle of endless readers’ response and a very messy one which allows Waldman to present several perspectives and pit them against one another. Though Waldman’s novel appears to be focusing more on the matters of ‘the home front’ than Hamid’s, each work reveals the impossibility of a liberal discourse of tolerance in emerging representations of both self and the Other after September 11.

In an attempt to understand the underlying implications of this change, Slavoj Žižek’s concept of the Other as Neighbour may prove particularly useful. In *Violence*, Žižek explains how in late-capitalist societies the adoption of an attitude of “liberal tolerance,” a respect for otherness, creates an uneasy relationship between the host society and what he calls the Neighbour. This politically correct tolerance is rather hypocritical as it holds a potential to turn into hostility at any time. This potential is due to the closeness of the Neighbour to the self and hence, posing a threat to the internal psyche, and the very core of personhood.

By utilizing Žižek’s concept of the Neighbour, the first part of this essay proposes to point out how aesthetic engagements, such as *The Submission* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*,with the world of the radicalized Other may provide a critique of the current condition, and in doing so, perhaps contribute towards an alternative look on the scope and affect of 9/11. Since Waldman’s novel is also interested in how the process of Othering operates in experiencing crisis and working through trauma, the second part will introduce concepts of mourning and memorial in addition to the idea of tolerance. The analysis of *The Submission* within the framework of Butler’s discussion of grievability aims to reveal how the work adopts a multifaceted approach instead of a path of inwardness to engage with 9/11. And, in the context of the endings of both novels, the final part of the essay will analyse whether both novels offer an alternative to the liberal discourse of tolerance.

Žižek begins *Violence* by arguing that a direct confrontation with “the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims” (4) would cloud our vision and prevent us from thinking; thus, he offers—what he calls “a sideways glance” at the issue.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* seems to be taking such a sideways glance by not focusing on the sentiments of the Western victim psychology but the perspective of the Pakistani “reluctant fundamentalist.” Tracing Changez’s transformation, from an up-and-coming executive in an American company to an anti-American political activist, Hamid’s work tells the story not only of Changez’s realization of himself as the tolerated Neighbour but also his realization of the sense of ‘Americannes’ as the tolerated Neighbour in him.

Žižek, drawing from Freud and Lacan’s critique of the Judeo-Christian dictum “love thy neighbour,” argues how the figure of the Neighbour is more problematic than it seems. This seemingly universal empathy and compassion involves exclusion and the denial of this exclusion. He explains the inherent paradox that exists possibly in every ethical stance since each ethical principle involves what he calls a “fetishist disavowal”—ignoring, forgetting or refusing to see some sort of suffering or otherness—and focuses on the abstract possibility which gives hope.[[2]](#endnote-2) Žižek concludes that “the more universal our explicit ethics is, the more brutal the underlying exclusion is” (*Violence* 54). Based on this premise, he also argues that “Christian [inclusionist] motto ‘all men are brothers’ also means that those who do not accept the brotherhood *are not men*… [Therefore,] Christian universalism tendentiously excludes non-believers from the universality of humankind” (*Violence* 54-55).

Changez, a twenty-two-year-old Pakistani educated in one of the Ivy League American colleges, gets drafted by a multinational corporation that is most offensively capitalist: a valuation company that claims to focus only on the base financial fundamentals. Right at the beginning, Changez willingly positions himself as what Juan-Bautista will later call a “modern-day janissary.” In a way, he *is* a janissary carefully sifted by a meticulously pragmatic system from among the best and the brightest around the globe. However, this system of assimilation seemed to work with mutual consent, at least to a certain degree. Changez feels that Princeton made it all possible for him and when he was successful at Underwood Samson, he said: “I felt bathed in a warm sense of accomplishment. Nothing troubled me; I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet” (Hamid 51). He felt he belonged to the ‘brotherhood.’ The liberal all-encompassing tolerance of globalised capitalist economy presented opportunities for inclusion of maximum multiplicity. Accordingly, his fellow team members are a carefully selected ‘diverse’ group consisting of a woman, a black man, a Pakistani, and a gay white American but Changez notices they were not diverse at all, they were “virtually indistinguishable” with their similar Ivy League education, self-confidence and presentably fit bodies. More importantly, all were chosen because of their efficiency—the most valued merit in capitalism (Hamid 42-43).

Žižek criticises this hypocritical veneer of diversity in the politically correct liberal discourses on “respect for otherness.” He argues that:

the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive, insofar this Other is not really other ... My duty to be tolerant towards the Other effectively means that I should not get too close to him, intrude on his space (*Violence* 41)

Changez notices this point in the way Erica’s father appears to respect his belief by asking him whether he drinks. Changez can also sense what he calls the “typically American undercurrent of condescension” (Hamid 63) in the father’s *Wall Street Journal* remarks about the failing economy, corruption and rising fundamentalism in Pakistan. But in return, Changez also exploits and utilizes his own foreignness to his advantage by often playing what he calls the “ethnic exception clause” (Hamid 55). But the moment his ethnic otherness seemed to move closer to the limits of accepted distance, he feels the awkwardness of his situation as the tolerated Other. For instance, at one point, one of his friends was asking everyone at a dinner table their dream about what they would like to be, Changez jokingly reveals his dream to be “the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear power” (Hamid 33), and the air immediately gets tense. His joke was pushing the boundaries of political correctness hence shocks the ‘tolerant’ others at the table.

This instance seems to convey the thin line between what Žižek calls “figure of the Neighbour as the imponderable Other” (*Violence* 55) and the category of the “absolute Other.” The first one could be tactfully respected, but the second one is totally foreign therefore less than human; hence, could be excluded from universal humanly brotherhood and compassion, i.e. could be harassed, tortured and killed. There seems to be a fine line between the two and the imponderable Other can, at any time, become the absolute Other. Indeed, in Changez’s case we see how quickly his politically correct tolerated position turns into a bizarre, unwanted and dangerously alien one.

What is so problematic in the figure of the Neighbour according to Žižek, is that it seems as the materialisation of the uncanny in us. By projecting all that is not me, i.e. all the secret exclusions I make, onto the figure of the Neighbour and keeping it at a respectable distance, I am also distancing the inhuman dimension of the Neighbour in me. This can also be associated with the idealised dimension of the Real, the desired but never achieved potential with its uncanny ghostly presence. According to Žižek, what makes the Other so threatening is this proximity of the “dimension of the Neighbour” to the self (*Violence* 45).

Changez also seems to feel the uneasiness of the ambiguity of his situation. He is fascinated by proudly living the ‘American dream’ and at the same time deeply bothered with certain aspects of this life such as spending more than what his father earns in a day on a couple of after-work drinks, or ordering around the elderly employees in the companies they value.

When they are valuing companies in the ‘Third World’ countries, these conflicting feelings cause him “to act and speak … more like an American” (Hamid 74). This ‘mimicry’ of the American executive often causes Changez to feel ashamed. It becomes more disturbingly apparent at a particular instance in the Philippines when he catches, from his limousine, the “undisguised hostility” in the gaze of a Filipino on the street. Changez afterwards thinks a lot about why this instance “got under his skin.” Insignificant and momentary as it may seem, this gaze haunted Changez for some time and he tells us how he shared with the Filipino “a sort of Third World sensibility” (Hamid 77) that urged him to view his colleagues as foreign and himself as play-acting. Similarly, he is annoyed by the “Americanness of his own gaze” when he visited his home shortly after September 11. His initial reaction was to see how shabby, gloomy and dated his home is. Then, once he cast away this judgemental and patronizing gaze, he realises that it had not changed much since he was gone (Hamid 140-142).

Changez’s gradual estrangement to the system is immensely accelerated after 9/11 attacks. He is angry about the aggressive U.S. policies in general and frustrated about his own ineffectiveness regarding the situation of his country. Moreover, he is burdened with the sense of guilt and betrayal for his in-between position which gives him a sense of complicity.

But more notably the rage Changez feels seem to be to the awakening of the Otherness within him, the realization of his situation as the Neighbour which he always intuitively felt but never so acutely realized. He very easily adopted and entertained the idea that he is a New Yorker succumbing to—what he calls—the “open-mindedness and –that overused word—the cosmopolitan nature of New York” (Hamid 55). He says that he used to “have the feeling of seamlessly blending in” in the New York subway where his skin colour fell in the middle of the spectrum but now he is subjected to verbal abuse, and is at the centre of “whispers and stares” because of his beard (Hamid 148).

As much as Changez is a tolerated Neighbour, he and we realize something significant: that Americans—maybe rather the Americanness as an attitude than actual persons—are the tolerated Neighbour for him. This attitude can best be seen in the objectified status of Changez’s American listener. Being the silent addressee of the dramatic monologue, the American is constantly under Changez’s gaze. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* appears to be primarily about Changez’s endeavour to explain himself; however, it is as much about his interpretation—through constant deductions—of the silent American. Throughout the narrative, we only have Changez’s input and his version of the American, and despite his over-conscientious and hospitable remarks, we sense a passive-aggressive cynical tone in Changez’s voice; thus, our impression of the American is entirely shaped with this preconception.

Indeed Changez’s realization that Americanness as an attitude is the tolerated Neighbour for him comes as a surprise, maybe more to the reader than to him. He was harbouring resentment for the aggressively liberal values he was adopting which ultimately caused his initial reaction to the terrorist attacks: to smile at the collapse of the twin towers. He says: “Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased … I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (Hamid 83). At the same time he was having difficulty in understanding “why a part of [him] desired America harmed” while he is a “product of an American university, earning lucrative American salary and infatuated with an American woman” (Hamid 84).

This quite controversial reaction is likely to cause serious resentment and even disgust in the reader as can be seen in the reactions of the silent American—Changez’s listener. And indeed in a BBC radio show aired in March 7, 2009 an American reader commented on this scene as thus: “Changez’s smile brought us [the members of the Princeton book club] to a full stop; we lost sympathy with him and read the rest of the novel very cautiously.”[[3]](#endnote-3) But, Hamid, during a telephone interview, quoted in Fred Kaplan’s *The New York Times* article, said that the instance is based on his observation of Londoners in a local gym, where he happened to be when the first tower collapsed on a live broadcast. Hamid remarks that: “I looked around and saw that some people were smiling. These weren’t people who looked like me; they were white people. For days, I saw this recurring, people happy, people joking. If I mentioned the human suffering to these people, some said they were ashamed of the way they felt. It was the symbolism of the act that pleased them.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Terrifying as it appears to be, Changez’s reaction is very much like the mixed sentiment that dominated non-American media during the immediate aftermath of the attacks. On the one hand, there was extensive coverage of the tragedy of those who died in the attacks: repetitious running of the movie-like collapse of the twin towers, interviews with the survivors, mourning and memorial ceremonies held on the spot that came to be known as the ground zero; but on the other hand, there was the underlying notion that somehow ‘the United States reaps what it sow’ for its foreign policies in general and for its former support of the Afghan fundamentalists against Russia in particular. These critical sentiments increased especially after images and news of first the American retaliations to Afghanistan, then Guantanamo and finally the occupation of Iraq began to flood TV screens. At an individual level, one still had the capacity to feel compassion for the victims of the terrorist attacks, but at another level that is when ‘America’— the gigantic capitalist power that is oppressing the greater part of the world—is objectified as the Other, one’s ability to feel sympathy seemed to diminish.

This paradox can be explained by Žižek’s argument of how the Neighbour is the materialization of the feared other within us and how the devastating act of violence is tapping onto the deep-rooted sentiments and anxieties about the gap between the lacking Real and reality in our psyche. The devastating shock of the 9/11 attacks was partly due to the seeming suddenness and the lack of immediate reason for a violent outburst of this magnitude. According to Žižek, “the fundamental systematic violence of capitalism” is uncanny because it is purely objective and anonymous and not attributable to concrete individuals. Therefore, when reaction comes in the form of what he calls the subjective violent outbursts; it seems as if appearing out of nowhere. This internalized uncanny dimension of capitalism is what Changez’s smile seems to be reacting.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also invites us to draw parallels between the political situation and the love relationship it depicts. The dysfunctional love triangle that Changez finds himself in and the extreme reactions after September 11 seem to be triggering the same emotional response. Žižek explains the uncanny resemblance of the loved one to the Neighbour as thus: “the position of the beloved is so violent, traumatic even: being loved makes me feel directly the gap between what I am as a determinate being and the unfathomable X in me which causes love” (*Violence* 57). The lover idealizes by attributing what is not there and excluding negative aspects of the beloved. And in letting someone to love us, we are lowering our defences, making ourselves vulnerable to the Other.

Erica seems to be suffering because of her inability to distance herself from the other she let in that is now gone. She is broken with an acute sense of longing for the absent lover. She feels “alive” only when she is talking about Chris and Changez draws the similarity between himself becoming alive when talking about home and her becoming alive when talking about her dead lover. Similarly, parallels are drawn between 9/11 evoking repressed thoughts about Chris in Erica and about Pakistan in Changez.

The narrative openly relates the nostalgia felt for a missing beloved and the kind of political nostalgia America is engaged in after 9/11 attacks. Changez notices the “retro” feel in the proliferation of flags, uniforms, generals on TV, the emphasis of duty and honour in the headlines. He says he is not sure what the Americans longed for: “a time of unquestioned dominance? of safety? of moral certainty? I did not know” (Hamid 131). Both nostalgias seem to be arising from a longing felt for a lost/lacking object of desire which prove to be dangerously destructive.

To be able to understand the destruction her nostalgic infatuation brings on Erica, it is useful to answer a seemingly irrelevant question: What is Changez for Erica? In the beginning an object of scrutiny perhaps: foreign, exotic and interesting; or rather a safe-haven. But then, he came too close to touching the untouchable dimension of the Neighbour in her. Changez becomes the physical surrogate for that ghostly Other she lost and in his unobtrusive affection—rather paradoxically—he gradually breaches that tolerated respected distance one keeps between the self and the other.

Their triangular sexual experience is both surreal and uncanny with the dead rival haunting both of them. It is extremely intimate and intense but at the same time, as Changez expresses, felt violent and violating. The wound association in imagery gives it an especially violent undertone. Changez feels ashamed in a complex amalgamation of feelings: done Erica harm, betrayed himself etc. The experience increases Erica’s desperate nostalgia pushing her into a more severe depression from which she could not recover. And in return, Erica’s disappearance caused a similar strong feeling of nostalgia in Changez. He too often withdrew into a fantasy world where he imagined a whole life with her. Changez explains his mood as thus:

it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, something of outside is now within us. (Hamid 197)

Any encounter with the ghostly dimension of the Neighbour seems to be a very internal act of violence for the psyche and the very core of personhood.

Another work that deals with various aspects of this ghostly dimension of the Neighbour especially in relation to mourning and the idea of a memorial is *The Submission*. It depicts how the traumatic event changed the individual lives of its protagonists but places that change in the web of relations where different discourses, in Gray’s terms, “reflect and refract, confront and bleed into one another” (55). Waldman’s novel is about the result of an anonymous competition for the design of the 9/11 memorial. When the jury members—consisting of a group of intellectual, legal and bureaucratic experts as well as a family member— finally come to a conclusion after long debates and negotiations, they were all daunted to find out that their finalist design belongs to a Muslim American, Mohammed Khan. The bickering and the arguments raised against the result within the jury foreshadow the tempest to come; and, once the information is leaked to the press, all hell breaks loose.

Khan is a promising and ambitious young architect working for a multinational construction firm. However the public hysteria that followed the leak turned him from a professional New Yorker with a bachelor’s apartment and occasional pretty girlfriends into a bitterly disappointed recluse. Likewise, as the only jury member who lost a loved one in the attacks, the growing controversy affected Claire Burwell’s life in a manner similar to that of Khan. Even though once she firmly defended “The Garden,” Claire slowly begins to question not only the meaning of the design but also the designer’s intentions. Her frustration with Khan’s refusal to explain himself is as much to do with Claire’s exasperation by her own life. Claire is the widow of a WASP businessman. Soon after Dartmouth and Harvard Law, she married into money and became the stay-home mother of two. Losing her husband in the attacks and becoming entangled in almost impossible decisions, gradually cause her to question all her life choices as well as the principles on which she acts. Thus, the media circus led by the journalist Alyssa Spier and the right-wing radio host Lou Sarge turn Khan’s life into hell and Claire, gets her share of the misery. The events following the breaking news reveal the designer’s position as the tolerated Neighbour as well as cause the shattering of the widow’s projected self-image as the tolerant liberal.

In the process, Mo—the narrator’s adopted nickname for Mohammed—is disillusioned with the American dream like Changez but their circumstances are not exactly the same. The impact of the realization of the precariousness of his position as the Neighbour is more devastating for Mo. In his case, it exactly is the shattering of the dream as he not only feels American like Changez does but *is* one until he is not. We are given the ‘story’ of the Khan Family in the form of a background-check report read by the jury chairman, Paul. Emigrated from India in 1966, Mohammed’s parents became a typical upper-middle class family with respectable intellectual jobs and a mortgage to pay. Thus, Mo’s initial reaction against being detained at the airport a week after the attacks is that of incredulity. While waiting alone in the cell-like room, he keeps thinking how absurd this all is. Not only he is a law-abiding American citizen but also—being the son of “parents ... [who] made modernity their religion, [and were] almost puritanical in their secularism” (Waldman 28)—he is almost a nonbeliever. However, as he is waiting, we see him gradually moving from feeling misunderstood and in-desperate-need of explaining himself to being offended in the face of unjust treatment he received and finally falling into an angry, almost hostile, silence with the Kalima on his mind. This instinctive gush of faith, which he himself finds ironic, keeps growing as the attacks against his work and his identity increase. He first grows a beard, then for the first time in his life, begins fasting during the Ramadan. However, these instances appear to be acts of protest rather than that of faith; a protest as much against his own attitude which “had become gingerly, polite, careful to give no cause for alarm or criticism” (Waldman 25) as against the way he is being treated.

Mohammed and Changez’s reactions to the situation appear to be similar as both choose to leave the U.S. as a result of growing frustration not only against them but also within them. However, while Changez has a home to return and there becomes an Anti-American political activist, Mo loses his home. In the course of events, he moves from his apartment, begins living out of a suitcase, gradually gets alienated from his friends, his girlfriends and even from his parents. Thus, partly due to circumstances, partly by his own doing, all his attachments break one by one until there is nothing to hold him in the country.

In addition, even though it is triggered by the turn of events after 9/11, the cause of Changez’s disillusionment seems less related to the immediate violence of September 11 than the general practices of aggressive capitalist fundamentalism. In fact, his epiphany occurs in Chile—a non-Muslim Third World country. However, even though Khan leaves America to become a “global citizen, American only in name” (Waldman 286), he continues to practice for “rich patrons, undemocratic governments, Gatsby nations…” (Waldman 286)—i.e. for top money—on behalf of the U.S. based company he owns.

*The Submission* also reveals that the position of the tolerant liberal is as precarious as the tolerated Neighbour. Claire begins the process as the most avid supporter of the design but ends up being the one who shuts it down. When challenged under pressing conditions, the liberal humanist discourse of tolerance became dysfunctional in either projecting one’s identity or interpreting and responding to the identity of another; suggesting it was possibly illusionary to begin with. The psychological stages Claire moves through during the process cause her to question her past decisions and to realise the influence of others in her life-choices. It is shocking for Claire to discover what she thought inherent in her character is cracking under pressure to the extent that she feels:

all these different Claires, who just happened to look alike, seemed to rest inside her, so that every argument, no matter how contradictory, found sympathy. Each time she thought she had reached the last Claire, the true and solid one, she was proved wrong. She couldn't find her own core. (Waldman 235)

To be able to better understand why Claire could not find “her own core,” one needs to focus on some of the larger questions the novel deals with; such as the implications of mourning and memorial and how these concepts become the site for conflicting discourses to interact with each other and in doing so also resonate to the concept of the Neighbour.

The entanglement of private and public loss in the idea of a memorial may be a good place to begin. Judith Butler, in her *Precarious Life*, explains and questions the notion of public grievability. She begins her argument by pointing out the politicising nature of mourning:

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. (22)

A memorial is a structure built to remind a significant event or a dead person; yes but to whom? Memorials are the aesthetic pronunciations of both private and public loss. Especially, the memorials of a large-scale tragic event are simultaneously symbols at a very intimate personal sense for the family of the dead and national and international statements, often of a political kind. And these two different needs may sometimes clash as in the case of “The Garden” and “The Void”—the two finalist designs of 9/11 memorial contest in Waldman’s novel. In fact, the designs appear almost antithetical: an organic garden—flexible, alive, peaceful, welcoming, and in-need-of tending—versus a gigantic granite monument—cold, rigid, lifeless, aggressive, phallic, and distant. Despite its name, we are told that “there was nothing void-like about it. A towering black granite rectangle, some twelve stories high, centered in a huge oval pool, it came off in the drawings as a great gash against the sky” (Waldman 4).

To Ariana, the sculptor, and to those jury members who did not actually lose a loved one in the event, the memorial is a monument, a symbol, that should stand both as a reminder of the “visceral, angry, dark [and] raw” (Waldman 6) aspects of the day and as a national statement about the power and resilience of the country, intimidating the ‘enemy.’ And in this case, a garden would be too soft and hence too weak a symbol. But for those, like Claire, whose losses are more intimate “such abstraction [as a memorial] worked when humans could lay their hands on it, draw near enough to alter the scale” (Waldman 4). As it stands for the lost relatives, a memorial should provide a tangible medium, a spatial marker where families can mourn their loss—much like a gravestone would do. And in this case, the memorial will literally be the gravestone as it will be built on ground-zero where the fragments of the victims exist.

Besides the implications of the idea of a memorial, Waldman’s novel also deals with the concept of grieving itself. *The Submission* portrays how in the months following the event, the families of the dead came to possess a quasi-magical iconic power. This aura is partly due to the mythologizing process carried out by the media feeding off of the image of the suffering widows and family members, playing the footage of their grief, comments, and feelings over and over again; and partly due to the imposition that one has to adopt the politically correct manner and be respectfully polite about their suffering. Claire is one member of the jury but somehow her ideas count more than others, somehow her mourning is more legitimate than others as can be understood from one of the earliest comments of the narrator: “They'd all lost, of course lost the sense that their nation was invulnerable; lost their city's most recognizable icons; maybe lost friends or acquaintances. But only she had lost her husband” (Waldman 3). However, the novel deals with this sense of entitlement to the right to mourn by asking who is entitled and to what extent?

As the chosen voice of the families, Claire seems to have a privilege not only among the jury but also among the family members. The ‘inequality’ among them is manifested in the founder of the Memorial Support Committee Sean Gallagher’s semi-sexual aggression against Claire. What seems to resonate in the clashing stratification amongst the family members at this point is class difference. Gallagher is the brother of a fallen firefighter. As a community college drop-out, a part-time plumber, and a border line alcoholic; Sean is haunted by his brother’s achievements. The anti-Muslim/anti-design campaigns he leads give him, maybe for the first time in his life, a sense of belonging and purpose. However, the wealthy young WASP that she is, Claire is deemed to be more entitled to act as the spokesman for the entire group than a man of blue-collar Irish descent like Sean. However, regardless of the social stratification, *The Submission* questions whether grief licences anyone to assault Muslim women or stalk fellow-family members as Sean Gallagher does, or legitimises a catechizing attitude towards others like Claire assumes towards Mohammed. More importantly, the novel lays bare the complications involved in the issue of entitlement by focusing on the kind of loss that the American public is not willing to recognize. “How could you be dead if you don’t exist?” (Waldman 70) This is the question Waldman’s novel use to introduce Asma Anwar, the pregnant widow of a Bangladeshi illegal immigrant who was cleaning offices in the towers during the attack.

Butler’s arguments in *Precarious Life* may shed light on this question. She explores public grieving in the form of obituaries, and discusses the issue at an ontological level by asking the question “what *makes for a grievable life*?” (20). Butler argues that those who do not fit in with “the normative notion of the human” which has been determined by what she calls “the contemporary workings of [Western] humanism” are ontologically considered unreal (34). Then she goes on to discuss how this process of “derealisation” occurs first at the level of discourse which then triggers physical violence. To argue this point from a backwards process, she discusses how millions of lives lost as a result of American air strikes in Iraq and Afghanistan who lacked faces and names were denied obituaries on any form of main-stream media.[[5]](#endnote-5) Butler points out the implications of this denial and how it is an extension of the derealisation process:

If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition … I think we have to ask again, and again, how the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes noteworthy. As a result, we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building. The matter is not a simple one, for, if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already unburied if not unburiable. (34)

And this is exactly what happens in Asma’s case. The authorities first refused to accept that her husband Inam is dead. Of course, how could he have died? He did not exist in the first place. But Asma keeps reminding that he must have existed from the point of how anyone exists for the government as he paid his taxes regularly. Then the authorities agreed to grant a monetary compensation in a rather hushed manner. But all this is not enough for Asma. When the discussions for the memorial began, there were heated arguments about whether the names of those illegal immigrants should be included among the names of the deceased or not and the narrator thus explains Asma’s feelings:

The prospect of her husband's exclusion gnawed at Asma. It would be the final repudiation of his existence-as if he had lived only in her imagination. He had to be named, for in that name was a life … she couldn't shake the sense … that history had only narrowly made room for him. (Waldman 77)

Her loss nevertheless demands recognition like all the family members[[6]](#endnote-6) who—in spite of their “competing views” (235), in spite of the class stratification and in spite of all the very complicated personal agendas— strive for one thing in common. And Asma has a right to demand that one thing: acknowledgement of the life of her loved one. The lack of it, as Butler argues, would mean that those lives were not grievable, not worthy of a note, perhaps not even lives at all. What is at stake is not just remembrance but the validation of the existence of those lives as human.

Another major question *The Submission* revolves around is what is involved in making the meaning of Khan’s design; aesthetic and otherwise. Does the meaning lay in the aesthetic statement of the design itself, in the purpose of the architect, or in the responses of the people? The intricate web of emotions, ideologies and agendas involved make these questions almost impossible to answer. However, Claire obsessively seeks an answer.

At a desperate moment, she remembers a conversation she had with her deceased husband Cal over a Picasso painting. When she commented on the possibly cruel circumstance in which the painting has been created, Cal reminded her that great art should not “require a morally pure artist” and added "you judge the paintings as works of art, and Picasso as a man. There's no inconsistency in loving one and reviling the other” (Waldman 272). Claire wanted to do this, wanted to see the Garden free of all associations, free of its designer but no matter how much she tries, she cannot shake the urge to know what his intentions are. Thus, even though Cal’s formalist approach may be aesthetically valid; it does not work in the case of a memorial when emotional investments are as intimate as Claire’s. But despite her insistence on authorial intention, the debates following the leak turn the whole process into a giant muddle of readers’ response.

Among all the debates, what appeared to make things really worse is a seemingly intellectual article on the *Times’* Arts section.[[7]](#endnote-7) The article commented on the Islamic influences of Mo’s design and from then on it was an easy step for the rest of the media to claim that "the memorial design may actually be a martyrs' paradise (Fox News),” a “Victory Garden! (*The New York* *Post*),” "an assault on America's Judeo-Christian heritage, an attempt to change its cultural landscape ... [or] a covert attempt at Islamization (*The* *Wall Street Journal*)” (Waldman 116).

The controversies that followed these accusations generate endless interpretations regarding the meaning of the design. One of the best moments that illustrate this perpetual meaning-making is the public hearing held before the finalist design is approved. In the hearing, we have a series of different readers’ responses on Khan’s Garden: One speaker argues that the design is beautiful but he has worries on the difficulty of maintenance, while another one claims just the opposite by saying it is the need to maintain a garden that makes it a perfect design since “it's a beautiful metaphor for tending the memory of this tragedy.” A third one suggests that a garden is all right but its walls are “un-American;” while, another speaker states the garden is an expansionist move to bring Islam on Manhattan. Then, the author of a book on Islamic gardens remarks that “Khan's design [is] Islamic-but only if the buildings [are] Islamic, too” since the façade of the collapsed towers had Islamic details even though their architect is not a Muslim. Just before her, an Ex-CIA expert on the Middle East asserted that “the Garden itself … barely merited a mention”but it should nevertheless be accepted because its designer is Muslim and rejection gives Muslim nations cause for accusation (Waldman 221-223). These remarks ranging from why the Garden is the perfect design to why it does not even “merit a mention” reveal the ineffectiveness of the process in maintaining a consensus as well as the impossibility of pinning down a single meaning. At this point, once all these connotations are introduced, turning to the designer for answers does not work. In any case, Khan refuses to offer any appeasing elucidation.

He denies an explanation regarding the meaning of his work but there is enough information in Mo’s remarks to suggest that he designed the Garden to contribute to the healing process as he believes it has “the right balance between remembering and recovering" (Waldman 63). He tries to explain his design to Claire by drawing lines on a piece of paper. Claire thinks the lines first look like a cross, then an x, a window, and finally the city. She says: “maybe Manhattan-it looks like a grid” (Waldman 269). Elsewhere, Khan explains Paul Rubin why the geometric layout of the design matters:

The Garden has order, which its geometry manifests … it's an answer to the disorder that was inflicted on us. It's not meant to look like nature. Or like confusion, which is what the attacks left behind. If anything, it's meant to evoke the layout of the city it will sit in. (Waldman 139)

Hence, the horizontal water canals that are claimed to be the rivers of Quranic paradise are indeed meant to bring a sense of order and meaning into the strain of chaos the attacks caused. They are also essential in Mo’s design to form the grid, a geometric shape adopted by Modern artists including Mondrian, Mies, Agnes and countless others. Therefore, his refusal to change the design, which appears to be pointless obstinacy, is indeed as much a reaction against sacrificing the healing essence of his design as against the associations people bring—to what he thinks “the quintessential modernist form”—just because he is a Muslim (Waldman 269).

As one of the characters say, “a garden's just a garden until you decide to plant suspicion there.” (Waldman 202) But once it is planted, the situation gets messy to the extent that, the design actually becomes the “victory garden” regardless of its initial implications. It is imbued with a meaning, maybe not as sinister and terrifying as the martyrs’ paradise; but nonetheless, negative enough to carry on the bile-bitter, even poisonous, aftertaste of the controversies; so much so that it becomes impossible to build the Garden. Mohammed had no choice but to eventually withdraw; however, he resented, even after twenty years, the fact that he was not allowed “to design structures that borrowed as freely from Islamic architecture as others borrowed from the Greeks or from medieval cathedrals” (Waldman 287).[[8]](#endnote-8)

Mohammed’s refusal to explain himself, justify his design and make concessions on it appear to cause the situation to get tenser but we are given the sense that he has every right to do so. First and foremost, as he asks Claire: “why should [he] be responsible for assuaging fears [he] didn't create?" (Waldman 268) Goaded by the media, it is the reader/viewer who read that meaning into his design and as the author/designer he should not feel obliged to defend his work. But more importantly, he believes that justifying his design would suggest some guilt to be excused. Khan reminds Claire of how “[Asma] was saying terrorists shouldn't count more than people like her husband. But [Claire’s] questions-the suspicions they contain-make them count more [and adds:] You assume we all must think like them unless we prove otherwise” (Waldman 268). Thus, it is on this account Mo refuses to answer Claire’s question.

This refusal to answer taps on to the deeper issues involved in the idea of tolerance. Mohammed does not have to answer as he is suggesting and, if genuinely sincere, the question should not even be raised in the mind of the addresser. But, at this point, one should also keep in mind that the addressee might not be offended by the question under different circumstances. However, the experienced trauma and the resulting paranoia render things so complicated that all this becomes impossible. Tested under extreme conditions, respect for the Other proves false and the liberal idea of tolerance collapses as seen in the final dialogue between Mo and Claire:

"Wouldn't you assume that any non-Muslim who entered this competition thinks the attack was wrong? Why are you treating me differently? Why are you asking more of me?"

"Because you're asking more of us!" she said. "You want us to trust you even though you won't answer questions about your design-what it means, where it came from."

"But you're only asking those questions because you don't trust me."

''And I don't trust you because you won't answer, so we're stuck." (Waldman 270)

Yes, it is asking *more* of both sides. And yes, it is very difficult, almost doomed to fail, as it did in this conversation, but that is exactly what is necessary to move beyond the veneer of tolerance: taking a chance and assuming the best in a given situation. This does not mean a support based on principle (like Ariana’s), or a liberal-minded gesture (like Jack’s). Romantic, even utopian, as it may sound, it only works if it could be done ‘just because.’

At this point, what I have in mind is the Turkish word which is often inadequately translated as tolerance but it literally translates as ‘fair sight’ or rather ‘seeing someone/something fairly.’ The word draws its meaning from Sufism.[[9]](#endnote-9) Contrary to recent attempts to mystify especially Rumi’s Sufism to become an Orientalised manifestation of liberal tolerance, the idea of  is indeed this act of moving beyond the veneer of tolerance. It stems from a feeling of respect for all creatures, including humans, for what they are since they all carry particles of God; hence, refraining from offending or harming them because of that. It also involves an awareness that, in a given situation, one has the potential to perform the same behaviour one receives from another; thus, not being offended from the words and actions of the one before us. Therefore, instead of a tolerated permitting or condescending forgiveness, this set of mind would bring an intuitively neutral attitude, if not of full acceptance, at least of giving someone the benefit of the doubt. However, the idea of is not to be treated as a naive, romantic ideal or a spiritual, religious activity but as a very practical way of engaging with the world. The intuitively neutral attitude of would only work if we adopt it as a general mind-set in our daily lives not just to engage with those whom we recognize as the Other but with our parents, siblings, friends, bosses, colleagues and the like.

In a situation like Claire and Mo’s, the choice between adopting a cynically suspicious or intuitively neutral attitude may perhaps mark the line between perpetuating or breaking out of the stalemate. This attitude does not mean to categorically empathise with everyone or every act including those of violence. All acts of violence should be unconditionally and firmly condemned but while doing that, one should also resist getting caught up in the paranoia of seeing terrorists everywhere and persecuting people like Mohammed who simply “awaited credit for his refusal to agree that the attack justified America's suspicion of its Muslims any more than it justified the state's overreaching” (Waldman 287).

Considering the ending of both narratives within this context of assumptions may be helpful in determining whether they suggest an alternative to the discourse of tolerance or not. The end of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is left open for the reader to write. We may assume that the “metal glint” is from a gun and Changez is assassinated by the American or Changez’s Pakistani followers intervened to save him. Alternatively, we may choose to believe that the glint is indeed from the business-card case as Changez claims. The situation seems to be left to our ability to assume the best or the worst in a situation. However as discussed earlier, since we are limited with Changez’s remarks about the American, choosing to believe in one or the other ending appears to be testing more of our trust in Changez’s sincerity than in the American’s intentions.

Similarly, *The Submission* is equally open-ended. Twenty years have passed in the final chapter and two have come to interview Khan for a documentary on the competition. In this chapter, we see what appears to be a wrap-up of all the loose ends, and hear more of Mohammed’s feelings, perhaps more than ever in the book. However, what ends the novel is the Garden. Mo has actually built it as a private commission and apparently wanted Claire to see it. And this can be read in two ways, as Claire did: a “gift” or a “taunt” (297-8). Khan has finally realized their once-shared dream, and in a way telling Claire that this sanctuary for her husband exists. The Garden is almost the same except two details: the steel trees are upside down and instead of the victims’ names, the wall contains verses from the Quran. These two changes may be read sinisterly as to the initial meaning of the Garden or at best as a manifestation of Mohammed’s disappointment in Claire and all the others who, like the inverted steel trees, inverted the Garden by forcing the idea of martyrs’ paradise on the design. However, in spite of the ambiguity, having heard Khan’s feelings and ideas, the reader may come to agree that if there is anything sinister, it is in the eye of the beholder. Mohammed is definitely bitter about the whole thing and, consciously or unconsciously, he may have acted with spite but he asks Claire to “use [her] imagination” and we are told that: “She had, and with it assumed the worst” (Waldman 298). In fact, other viewers, namely the interviewer Molly and the cameraman William—who happens to be Claire’s son—used their imagination positively. William saw the Garden of his childhood and personalized it by building, in a corner, a cairn for his father. However, his efforts went unnoticed by his mother, the very person who taught her children to build cairns, inspiring them with hope. In a sense, the endings of both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Submission* are testing the assumptions of the reader. After portraying the deadlocks of the notion of tolerance, they invite the reader to use their imagination and leave it up to them whether to assume the worst or the best.

Thus, by laying bare the hypocritical nature of the idea of tolerance as well as admitting that certain liberal discourses are dysfunctional and by insisting on the contestation and convergence of multiple and at times conflicting discourses, Hamid and Waldman’s works may be pointing towards a formative response to crisis and may even suggest an alternative direction literature could take after 9/11. In consequence, what I would also like to propose is however difficult as it may be to maintain, the intuitively neutral attitude of  could be the only candid alternative to the tolerated permitting or condescending forgiveness of tolerance. Adopting a cynically suspicious or an intuitively neutral attitude may perhaps mark the line between perpetuating or breaking out of the stalemate that feeds both acts of terrorism and the so-called ‘war on terror.’

1. **Notes**

   The range of artistic medium includes avant-garde comix, mainstream comic books, and News Paper memorializations as well as plays, poems and novels. Other artistic media such as sculptures, installations, photography, etc. could also be included to the list of various media employed. As for content: Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* is its author’s personal account of the day, while Don De Lillo’s *The Falling Man* and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* trace the individual traumas of their protagonists. New York Times’ “Portraits of Grief,” and Marvel’s *The Amazing Spider Man* Issue 36 are very good examples of how the mainstream media reifies 9/11 as a monumental national catastrophe. Among the novels that offer a critique of late capitalism is Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* whose characters are offered as self-centred and hollow individuals of consumerist culture. Similarly, in spite of its attempt to portray the mind of a terrorist, John Updike’s *Terrorist* remains largely as a criticism of distraught lives in contemporary America. For a further discussion of both the variety of artistic media and its possible implications see Keniston and Quinn’s collection of essays *Literature After 9/11*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Among Žižek’s examples of disavowal are the spectatorial position of the Western sympathisers of communism, non-involved sympathisers of the French Revolution, the forgetting involved in those who can go on eating meat after visiting a slaughter house or living mundanely after watching torture, and even the universal indifference offered by Zen Buddhism. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Harriet Gilbert Talks to Mohsin Hamid,” Min. 24.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In situations like these, the ethically right attitude, however, is to resist this urge to pit the number of lives lost in the attacks against the number of lives daily lost elsewhere in the world as a result of aggressive capitalism. The inability to feel the same kind of sympathy for the victims of one catastrophe that is felt for the other not only suggests hypocrisy, but also undermines the suffering of those supposedly advocated since it allows the argument that certain acts of violence are more understandable/justifiable than others. For a detailed discussion of how to put things into perspective without getting involved in what Žižek calls “the obscene mathematics of guilt” see his *Desert of the Real* 51-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This becomes even more striking when one thinks about The New York Times’ “Portraits of Grief” where each victim of the attacks is individualised/reified with personalizing biographical details and a photo. For a brilliant discussion on the implications of this project see Simon Stow’s “*Portraits 9/11/01: The New York Times* and the Pornography of Grief” in *Literature After 9/11*, 224-241. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. But it should be pointed that Asma’s seemingly similar fight is in fact quite different from the others’ in terms of what is at stake for her. On the one hand, she is fighting desperately to get some recognition for her dead husband; on the other, trying to avoid deportation until she gives birth to his son in America. Her fight triggers a series of events which rapidly escalates from ostracism to facing deportation and culminated in her violent death. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. By referring to a *Newsweek* magazine column titled “Time to Think about Torture,” Žižek claims that “such debates, such exhortations to ‘keep an open mind’, should be the sign for every authentic liberal that the terrorists are winning” (104). For further analysis of the danger in entertaining ethically controversial ideas with an ostensibly intellectual, hypothetical manner see Žižek’s *Desert of the Real* 102-111. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. At this point, one cannot help but ask why Amy Waldman feels the need to devote an entire chapter about Khan’s visit to Bagh-e Babur, Babur’s garden, in Kabul. The chapter feels more like an interruption in the story than a flashback and adds nothing to the plot or the main issue of the novel other than proving that Mo is indeed influenced from oriental gardens in his design. It appears as if Waldman fell into the trap of the need for clarity that she is critiquing. And I believe this need to explain weakens the very strong stance the novel is taking. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 13th century Sufi mystic Yunus Emre’s couplet  which roughly translates as “See the creature fairly by reason of the Creator” is possibly the best lines that manifest the metaphysical stance underneath the word.

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