Cosmopolitanism as an Antidote to American Nationalism in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

This essay explores how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid offers a potential cosmopolitan antidote to the myths of American nationalism which allow the United States to pursue self-interested policies abroad that consequently deny the humanity of those who are seen as commodities or collateral damage. Using Richard T. Hughes’s insights into the myths that underlie American nationalism, and Thomas Bender and Anthony Kwame Appiah’s theories of cosmopolitanism in practice, I will show how cosmopolitanism can be an alternative to exclusive American nationalism defined by capitalism. I demonstrate how the protagonist Changez uses storytelling to permeate boundaries of nationalism that isolate the United States from the world through a process of osmosis by allowing an American to know the Other and himself, thereby eliciting a way of being in the world that allows for more flexible and multiple loyalties.

**Keywords:** cosmopolitanism; American nationalism; Mohsin Hamid; 9/11, AK Appiah
“America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also your own” (Hamid, 190). So says Changez, the protagonist of Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as he tells his story to an American he meets in a market in Lahore. But Changez also tells the story of his love affair with America as a young immigrant lured by the promises of the American Dream. Sensing a wall of suspicion between himself and the interlocutor, Changez assures the man that he is still a “lover of America” (Hamid, 1). How can we reconcile these two statements, that he wants to bring down America and that it is an act of love? And, most importantly, what exactly does Changez do to stop America? With a title like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, one might expect a confession revealing how Changez converted to radical Islam steeped in anti-Americanism and possibly an answer to that oft-uttered question in America after 9/11: “Why do they hate us?” While he does admit to being an active and vocal proponent of Pakistani disengagement with America, his reasons have more to do with another kind of fundamentalism: American nationalism defined by capitalism that consistently denies the humanity of the Other: those who are seen only as commodities or collateral damage.\(^1\) We learn that Changez is initially completely committed to the pursuit of his American Dream but begins to realize that the exclusive American nationalism beneath the surface of that dream will not allow him entry. He cloaks himself in an armor of denial in order to hold onto his American Dream but an encounter with one of the casualties of American capitalism gets through that armor

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\(^1\) Fundamentalism as defined by Merriam–Webster: “a movement or attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles.”
causing Changez to have a shift in alignment from the absolutist national to the flexible and global. By telling this story to the American, Changez tries to recreate that process by inviting him to know the Other and see himself through the eyes of a perceived enemy, thereby potentially permeating a seemingly impenetrable membrane of nationalism and bringing about a cosmopolitan shift. My analysis of The Reluctant Fundamentalist will explore the dynamics of nationalism and cosmopolitanism as two perhaps opposing but related ideologies: nationalism as an ideology that tends to exalt the status and interests of one group over all others, and cosmopolitanism as a way of being in the world that accepts loyalties and commitments can be varied and hybridized and allows for more dialogue and understanding across boundaries.

According to Adnan Mahmutovic, much of the existing scholarship on The Reluctant Fundamentalist has explored the novel “overwhelmingly as an allegory of Pakistani-American relations” and US-led global capitalism within a post-colonial theoretical framework, for instance, Elia, Hartnell, Kiran, Morey, Waterman, Daily, and Lau (Mahmutovic 2016, 4). The gist of these arguments follows closely the ideas expounded upon by Lau and Mendes: “The narrative of The Reluctant Fundamentalist appears to imply a continuous ‘loop’, where Western modernity is still reliant on orientalizing the East, which in turn is dependent on reacting against or responding to Western perceptions to define even its modernizing self” (89). Mahmutovic argues that the discourse surrounding the novel on global capitalism and Pakistani-American relations can be a springboard for “deeper inquiry in notions of civic life and citizenship” and that “a concern with the meaning of citizenship in a changing, increasingly globalised world lies at the core of Hamid’s tale” (2016, 2). He contends that the novel examines the problematic nature of individual engagement in the economic, social and political realities of citizenship in a globalised world and suggests the novel looks toward the “emergence of a new understanding of citizenship as something defined in terms of global rights and duties, something achieved through transnational osmosis” (2016, 4). It seems given that issues surrounding identity in a globalized world seem unavoidable for any interpretation of The Reluctant Fundamentalist, but an analysis of the text as a cosmopolitan reaction to American nationalism has stayed just at the periphery of the criticism so far. It is from this position I put forth my reading of the novel as setting up a cosmopolitan experience as a potential remedy for isolationist American nationalism in the focal light. This essay examines the underlying structures of The Reluctant Fundamentalist using, as a theoretical
framework, the inclusivity of cosmopolitanism as an antidote to the dangers of exclusive nationalism with a particular focus on the American context post 9/11. I will argue that Changez’s story attempts to reach across boundaries of nationalism that isolate the United States from the world while allowing it to pursue dubious and damaging foreign policies by trying to elicit a cosmopolitan shift to a way of being in the world that allows for more flexible and multiple commitments.

The structure of my argument is as follows. First, I will outline how the novel pushes us to understand the distinct nature of isolating, exclusive American nationalism that is upheld by myths of American superiority. Second, I will show how a modern understanding of an old idea, cosmopolitanism, put into practice, could present an antidote to that exclusivity. Third, I will demonstrate how the narrative itself is offered as a cosmopolitan antidote to nationalism through storytelling. Finally, I will explain how Changez’s story works to create a shared intimacy with the American by inviting him to know the Other and see himself through another’s eyes in order to infiltrate deeply ingrained myths of American superiority and entitlement. In analyzing these elements, we will ultimately have an answer to the question “what does Changez do to stop America?”

The Myths of American Nationalism

Changez goes through a transformation in the novel from being drawn toward the exclusivity of American nationalism defined by capitalism and the promise of the American Dream, to a crisis of identity as he realizes the dangerous way that exclusivity denies the humanity of the Other—those who are seen only as commodities or collateral damage. Hartnell argues that the push and pull of American nationalism is the contradicting premise at the heart of The Reluctant Fundamentalist as Changez is “simultaneously drawn to the isolationist and exceptionalist currents of the American national narrative” (336). While this is certainly true and central to my own argument, Hartnell reads this contradictory premise as an exploration of America’s post 9/11 rejection of multiculturalism and a hope for a “national politics that might enable the transcendence of racial difference,” my reading sees it as the clash between absolutist and Othering nationalism and a cosmopolitan call for more fluid loyalties and alignments (337). Initially drawn to the isolationist and exceptionalist nature of American nationalism in the form of his relationships with the elusive Erica and the
dynamic corporation Underwood Samson that promise so much, the myths of American superiority make Changez question his sense of self as he has to confront the implications on his own life.

While most nations have national myths to give meaning to their nation, the myths underlying American nationalism create the dangerous idea that America is endowed with special blessings that justify its damaging foreign policies. In *Myths America Lives By*, Richard T. Hughes presents a historical account of five myths that steer American nationalism and contribute to the belief that the American people have been chosen “for special blessings and privileges in the world” (6). The five myths are the Chosen Nation, Nature’s Nation, the Christian Nation, the Millennial Nation, and the Innocent Nation; all five of these contribute to the belief that the American people have been *chosen* and are somehow set apart from the rest of the world (Hughes, 6). While these national myths help to explain why Americans love their country and assert the very meaning of the United States, when they are absolutized, as they often are, they also do some dangerous things. American nationalism defined by these myths legitimizes capitalism through a lens of social Darwinism and justifies predatory American global economic expansion that denies the humanity of the rest of the world (Hughes, 133). These myths are the backbone of isolationist and exceptionalist American nationalism that allow the United States to pursue questionable and damaging policies abroad because they create a boundary between America and the world. Changez is initially drawn toward America for these very reasons that later repel him in the form of his relationships with Erica and Underwood Samson that initially promise to change his life. However, the myths of American superiority become too much to digest and Changez realizes the threat this superiority poses to humanity and that America has to be stopped.

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2 The myth of the Chosen People can be understood today as “in some mysterious way, God chose the American people for a special, redeeming role on the stage of world history” (Hughes, 6). The myth of Nature’s Nation claims that America’s “way” of life, including their versions of capitalism and democracy, are natural and there are no “viable alternatives” (Hughes, 2). The myth of the Christian Nation is that God has “chosen America for special privilege in the world” (Hughes, 2). The fourth myth, the myth of the Millennial Nation, is the belief that America will usher in a golden age and “liberate the world through the sheer force of their nature” (Hughes, 7). The fifth myth, the myth of the Innocent Nation, emerged post WW2 and allows “Americans to imagine that because they faced great evil, they themselves were altogether righteous in both intent and behavior and therefore innocent in the world” (Hughes, 8). Hughes finds redeeming qualities in all of these myths except the last as it is “grounded in self-delusion” (Hughes 8).
For Changez, Erica is a symbol for the American Dream that is alluring in its ideals of all people being created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights including “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” but is undermined and contradicted by the power of American nationalism that lies underneath which increasingly isolates her. His description of her when they first meet in Greece fits a description of the Statue of Liberty: he describes her as “regal” and with “her hair piled like a tiara on her head” and “in the foreground shimmered Erica, and observing her gave me enormous satisfaction … She attracted people to her; she had presence, an uncommon magnetism” (19; 24). Despite her being a romantic interest and a symbol for the spirit of the America that draws him in, he notices from the beginning that there is something distant and unattainable about her, which is initially part of the attraction: “But one felt that some part of her—and this, perhaps, was a not insubstantial component of her appeal—was out of reach, lost in thoughts unsaid” (24-25).

But post 9/11 this distant aspect worsens as she begins “disappearing into a powerful nostalgia, one from which only she could choose whether or not to return” while the same thing is happening in America: “it seemed to me that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time” (129; 130). He notes Erica and America’s nostalgia are both for something “imaginary” or “fictitious” and laments that whatever it is, it is a religion that will not accept him as a convert (129). Erica begins to move further and further away from him post 9/11 and he sees her in increasingly confined spaces, and declining health, culminating in a visit to her in a mental hospital. Symbolic of America turning away from the world into myths of their own difference, Erica retreats to a mental hospital because "it was difficult for Erica to be out in the world, living the way the nurse or I might, when in her mind she was experiencing things that were stronger and more meaningful than the things she could experience with the rest of us. So Erica felt better in a place like this, separated from the rest of us, where people could live in their minds without feeling bad about it" (151). This gives us a clear picture of the kind of isolation that the United States is indulging post 9/11 where it can find comfort in national myths that set it apart. This echoes the image on the wall of Erica's bedroom, drawn by her dead boyfriend Chris: "It depicted under stormy skies a tropical island with a runway and a steep volcano; nestled in the caldera of the volcano was a lake with another smaller island in it—an island on an island—wonderfully sheltered and calm" (60). Compare this image to the United States living peacefully and in isolation, "a country that has not fought a war on
its own soil in living memory" and contrast it to Changez's family in Pakistan "residing within commuting distance of a million or so hostile troops who could, at any moment, attempt a full–scale invasion" (144-145). The thrust of the narrative is this: the myths of difference, special blessings, and privileges that underlie American nationalism allow America to close its eyes to the world and pursue policies that deny the humanity of the Other that inhabits the nations they exploit economically and militarily.

Changez’s job at Underwood Samson is another symbol for the appeal of the American Dream to change one’s life but, like with Erica, the dream and promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are contradicted and undermined by the myths of American exceptionalism. Underwood Samson is a symbol for American capitalism that sees people as only commodities or collateral damage because of national myths that give legitimacy to American global economic expansion. Initially, Changez is drawn toward the dynamism that Underwood Samson represents and is excited to be part of it, but he is increasingly alienated as the commodification of people hits closer to home. He reports for training at his new job at Underwood Samson and states that he felt that day not like a Pakistani but “as an Underwood Samson trainee, and my firm’s impressive offices made me proud” and as he travels first class, sips champagne and flirts with a flight attendant, he sees himself as “a veritable James Bond” and relishes in a feeling of self-satisfaction” (38; 72-73). Later, Changez muses to the American that after being named number one in his training class at Underwood Samson, that he “felt bathed in a warm sense of accomplishment. Nothing troubled me; I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet. How soon that would change! My world would be transformed, just as this market around us has been” (51).

But just as Erica is a mirror for the United States and its increasing isolation post 9/11, this initial elation at working for Underwood Samson soon starts to give way as he realizes that the way the company values people as commodities makes him uneasy and mirrors how America as a country behaves on the world stage. He casually mentions that the amount of money he spends in an hour with his expense account with Underwood Samson is equal to how much his father earns in an entire day (42). As he works with Underwood Samson valuing companies, the human element is disregarded, and he is repeatedly reminded to “focus on the fundamentals;” for Underwood Samson, and for America, the fundamentals are unfortunately not life, liberty, equal rights for all and the pursuit of happiness, but financial value, and this extends to America’s actions on the world stage (112). When Changez makes the connection between
America’s dedication to “focusing on the fundamentals” and their military efforts in Afghanistan and then Iraq, his “equanimity” is upset and he is increasingly unable to “focus on the fundamentals” (112). War between Pakistan and India is imminent and this makes Changez deeply angry as he "wondered how it was that America was able to wreak such havoc in the world—orchestrating an entire war in Afghanistan, say, and legitimizing through its actions the invasion of weaker states by more powerful ones, which India was now proposing to do to Pakistan—with so few apparent consequences at home" (149). The reason that America is able to cause such damage in the world and have so few consequences at home is because of the powerful myths of America as a “Chosen Nation” with “special blessings and privileges” that are the foundation of American nationalism.

Changez’s reaction to the myths underpinning American capitalist nationalism is to clad himself in an armour of denial, but an encounter with the Other who is dehumanized by the processes of American economic expansion penetrates that armour and he undergoes a cosmopolitan transformation. This transformation is not a nationalist reaction or religious one as the title of the novel might imply; he does not become increasingly Pakistani, nor does he become a radicalized Islamist. When he has this transformative experience, which will be examined in the next section, it is outside of America and Pakistan, in Chile, and thoughts about the dangers of American nationalism do not focus on the danger to Pakistan only but humanity in general (190). He returns to Pakistan, unable to remain in the United States, committed, not to the destruction of America, but to convincing Americans to “reflect upon the shared pain that united” them with their attackers (190). They are unable to reflect on that shared pain because the myths of American nationalism operate on such a deep unconscious level that most Americans are not aware of them, but at the same time, “there is perhaps no more compelling task for Americans to accomplish in the twenty-first century than to learn to see the world through someone else’s eyes” (Hughes, 1). This makes it necessary to enter the American psyche through a process of osmosis, which is what Changez does with his narrative to the American, in an attempt to cause a cosmopolitan shift to a way of being in the world that accepts commitments can be varied and hybridized and allows for more dialogue and understanding across boundaries.

Cosmopolitanism in Theory and Practice
The idea of *cosmopolitanism*, or world citizenship and universal rights and duties, as the antithesis to nationalism, dates back to the famous story of Diogenes the Cynic in antiquity calling himself a “kosmo-polites,” or “citizen of the world,” rather than tethering himself to any local affiliation (Lemos Horta 2017, 2). Surviving through various permutations and nomenclature through the ages, the idea of being a citizen of the world can be traced through the Stoic philosophers of Rome, through a variety of empires, world religions and flourishing in the age of Shakespeare and then the age of Enlightenment (Calhoun 2017, 190). The traditional, Kantian, cosmopolitanism was an idealistic commitment to a global, human identity and community that could detach itself from the more tribal affiliations of smaller localities, but a modern conception of the term is, above all, a conversation. To Anthony Kwame Appiah, one of the major theorists of cosmopolitanism, “cosmopolitanism shouldn’t be seen as some exalted attainment: it begins with the simple idea that in human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association” (xvi; xix). While these days the concept may be defined and utilized widely, a working definition of cosmopolitanism can be identified and used for our purposes as an antithesis to nationalism: “any one of many possible modes of life, thought, and sensibility that are produced when commitments and loyalties are multiple and overlapping no one of them necessarily trumping the others” (Lemos Horta 2017, 3). As an ideology, cosmopolitanism offers a corrective to nationalism by presenting a way of being in the world that accepts allegiances can be numerous and mixed, and that allows for more communication and understanding across borders.

In order to understand how Changez’s story could act as a cosmopolitan antidote to the exclusivity of American nationalism, it is important to look at how cosmopolitanism as a concept can work in practice and then apply that to our understanding of the novel. How do we develop these “habits of coexistence” that recognize the obligations we have to each other simply by virtue of our shared humanity? Building on Appiah’s theory of cosmopolitanism as conversation, Thomas Bender argues that cosmopolitanism can be best understood as an experience, rather than an idea or theory (Bender 2006, 116). He explains how a cosmopolitan experience and shift in thinking occurs when one is confronted by one or more unsettling differences that stimulate an internal inquiry followed by introspection that leads to a “partial understanding of the other and an enriching partial reunderstanding of one’s
self” (Bender 2006, 121; italics mine). Bender argues that we need to seek out and create new situations that will bring about these cosmopolitan experiences because “the spatial reorganization of our lives and the vast expansion of digital relations together radically limit social experience” (123). Cosmopolitan shifts that allow us to better understand ourselves and our connection to others with whom we share this planet come from interactions that bring our differences together, cause a sense of unease, followed by self-inquiry, introspection, and a reunderstanding of self. To understand and see the Other as our fellow human being to whom we owe something, we must meet each other face to face, making the imaginary stranger real and present.

The life-changing encounter Changez has with Juan–Bautista in Valparaiso can serve as a model for understanding how this cosmopolitan process works in practice and can be a springboard for further analysis into what happens between Changez and the American at the teahouse in Lahore. The experience Changez has with Juan–Bautista mirrors the one he has set up with the American; it is a conversation, over a meal, that creates a shared intimacy between the two that cultivates the potential for introspection and a new understanding of the Other and an enriching reunderstanding of one's self. Note the parallels between Changez's description of the lunch with Juan–Bautista, and his meeting with the American:

As for myself, I was clearly on the threshold of great change; only the final catalyst was now required, and in my case that catalyst took the form of lunch. Juan–Bautista's invitation caught me off guard; he simply mentioned, as I was passing his office one day, that it would be a shame to have visited Valparaiso without having tasted sea bass cooked in salt, as he intended to go to his favorite restaurant that afternoon, I really ought—if I were free—to accompany him. I said—out of politeness and curiosity, and also because I was eager to seize any pretext to avoid returning to the poisonous atmosphere of our team room—that it would be an honor, and the next thing I knew, I found myself making my way through the streets of the city with a man who desired more than any other to see our client's acquisition fail to proceed. (170-171)

Compare this description to the circumstances under which Changez encounters the American in the market and asks him to join him for the "perfect cup of tea" at his favourite tea establishment, to Juan–Bautista asking Changez to join him for a local specialty at his favourite restaurant (Hamid, 2). Note the similarity as well, that Changez finds himself walking through the streets of the city with a man who can only be seen as his enemy. In a role reversal, Changez is playing the Juan–Bautista to the
American who may have been sent by the CIA to assassinate him, just as Changez was sent to shut down Juan–Bautista's work in Valparaiso, and just as the American finds himself having tea and dinner with a man who is potentially the target for the grim job he has been sent to do. How Changez engages the American is an amplified, and extended version of the confrontation between Juan–Bautista and Changez that leads to Changez's transformation and realization about the reality of his relationship with America and serves the same purpose. Juan–Bautista confronts Changez about his work by asking him directly "'Does it trouble you,' he inquired, 'to make your living by disrupting the lives of others'" (171). This question could very easily have been posed by Changez to the American as it is the general thrust of his narrative.

The encounter between Changez and Juan–Bautista shows how encountering the Other who exists outside of American capitalist nationalism enables a shared intimacy that can cross boundaries and generate a cosmopolitan shift to a sense of self that allows for more varied and intermingling allegiances. Juan–Bautista is able to reach through Changez’s armor of denial as he clings to his American Dream by allowing him to know the Other whose life he is going to disrupt and by making him see himself in a different light by telling him about the janissaries. This causes a shift in Changez’s thinking that makes it impossible for him to continue as he was and plunges him into deep introspection that makes him see himself as a “modern-day janissary” betraying a “country with kinship” to his and even his own country when really he was “predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan–Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its gain” (173). In this meeting between Changez and Juan–Bautista, we see the model for a meeting between adversaries resulting in boundaries being blurred by a relationship that invites one to know the Other and see oneself through the eyes of a perceived enemy, and why Changez might believe in the possibility of entering the psyche of the American “through a process of osmosis”:

Such journeys have convinced me that 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, and something of the outside is now within us. (191; 197)

This passage demonstrates clearly that Changez is convinced that one’s identity can be permeated and changed by a relationship. He believes that by spending time together and by creating a relationship of shared intimacy where the American will know
Changez and see himself through his eyes it will be impossible to go ahead with the planned assassination. It will be impossible because the boundaries of American nationalism will have been called into question and the American will have undergone a cosmopolitan shift that sees the potential for commitments beyond the national. “When the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him, you may agree or disagree; but, if it is what you both want, you can make sense of each other in the end” (Appiah, 99). This is the relationship he seeks to create in sitting with the American and telling his story.

Cosmopolitanism as Storytelling

The way Changez creates this relationship of potential great change is through storytelling. Changez’s storytelling has an agenda to challenge and open up the membrane of nationalism between America and the world to bring about a cosmopolitan shift in the same way Juan–Bautista did with him. In Mahmutovic’s view, “the fictionality infused into his dramatic monologue to the American seems to reinforce the notion of storytelling” as a “medium for creation of connectivity” (Mahmutovic 2018, 7). The storytelling works to connect where more direct attempts have failed; upon his return to Pakistan, Changez becomes a vocal advocate for disengagement with America and this only attracts America’s wrath, but with hope he wonders that “with sufficient insight I might yet be welcomed through a process of osmosis” (160). Storytelling is the medium through which Changez hopes to reach America in this process of osmosis. Changez delivers the entire novel to the American he meets in the market of Lahore as a dramatic monologue in the second person at the same time he delivers it to us and within the same timeframe. The reader only hears the other actors, even his direct audience, the American, through Changez’s voice and perspective. In this regard, we have no way of knowing if Changez’s story is indeed true and the heavy-handed use of symbolism gives the other actors a “superficiality” that makes us question their authenticity and that of the narrator (Morey 2011, 140). Morey argues Changez “may well be an unreliable narrator and whose story has its own political rationale and relentless momentum. When it comes to our usual expectations and hermeneutic reading pleasures, The Reluctant Fundamentalist can be understood as the novel-as-hoax” (Morey 2011, 139). But while Morey suggests that this “constant attention to fiction-making” shows Changez is attempting to “draw in” his adversary
before the “kill” and are “part of a tale spun in order to reel him in ahead of the bloody
denouement,” I would argue the “novel’s constant attention to fiction-making” through
the use of allegory and unreliable narration serve to draw awareness to the fact that the
narrative has a purpose (Morey, 140-141). That purpose is not to “draw in the kill” but
to infiltrate the American psyche by creating a cosmopolitan experience that facilitates
a recognition of the Other and a reunderstanding of one’s self.

Changez’s unreliable narration demonstrates the narrative itself is a self-
conscious attempt to reorient his American listener to a more cosmopolitan perspective
by getting through to him with a story that allows him to see and know the Other and
himself in a different light. Changez insists repeatedly that the details of his narrative
are not as important as the principle objective: “it is the thrust of one’s narrative that
counts, not the accuracy of one’s details. Still, I can assure you that everything I have
told you thus far happened, for all intents and purposes, more or less as I have
described” (135). At another point, he casts doubt on the genuineness of the crucial,
life-changing encounter with Juan–Bautista: “there is no reason why this incident
would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you” (172-173).
It seems the narrative is going out of its way to be sure the American and the reader
suspect the veracity of the story Changez tells and thereby start investigating its purpose
or thrust. Toward the end of the novel, we learn that Changez has known that a CIA
agent may have been dispatched to “intimidate me or worse” and that since then he has
“felt rather like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe” and that he has been “plagued by
paranoia” but now “I must meet my fate when it confronts me” (208). This calls to mind
when Changez describes at the very beginning of the novel a kind of mental state he
used to attain when playing soccer: “When I entered this state I felt unstoppable. Sufi
mystics and Zen masters would, I suspect, understand the feeling. Possibly, ancient
warriors, did something similar before they went into battle, ritualistically accepting
their impending death so they could function unencumbered by fear” (14). I suggest
that the entire narrative is a product of Changez being in this “state” of having accepted
his impending death; he is now “in the zone” and able to focus on the task at hand and
operate “unencumbered by fear.” While there is no way to know which aspects of his
story are true and which are not, it seems irrelevant because the task at hand is to enter
into a relationship with the American that cultivates the potential for introspection and
a new understanding of the Other that America dehumanizes in its global economic
expansion and an enriching partial reunderstanding of one's self in a cosmopolitan shift.
Another aspect of the novel that demonstrates the conscious functionality of Changez’s narrative as an attempt to reach through the membrane of American nationalism is the obvious use of allegory. There is seemingly universal agreement amongst critics that the novel is highly allegorical and what the individual elements broadly or narrowly symbolize. Neelam Srivastava has done a thorough examination and rightly pointed out that the allegory is not at all trying to disguise itself and is right out there for the reader to see and engage with. In fact, she argues that the allegorisation “is an explicit and conscious function of the text” and that “there is hardly any element in the novel that does not train ‘an allegorical gaze on America’” and that those elements “stubbornly refuse to conceal themselves” (Srivastava 176, 174, 172). In America, Changez falls in love with a young and beautiful woman named Erica who is very obviously a symbol, even by name, for the American Dream and the aspects of America to which Changez is drawn. Erica is still in love with her boyfriend, Chris, who died, and she suffers from a terrible and unescapable nostalgia for him that she eventually succumbs to completely. It has been suggested that Chris is himself a symbol for America’s past and the name itself refers to Christopher Columbus and American foundation myths (Adams). Changez goes to work for a valuation financial firm called Underwood Samson (US), a symbol for America’s global capitalism that is focused solely on the “fundamentals” of finance and is relentlessly uncaring for human elements. By training “an allegorical gaze on America” using the symbols of Erica and Underwood Samson, the narrative is better placed to enter the American’s psyche through a process of osmosis where more direct approaches have failed.

Reunderstanding of Self and the Other

Having argued that Changez’s story is a cosmopolitan attempt to infiltrate the American psyche and change the minds of those who believe in the myths of their own superiority, we can now look at how Changez’s story works to create a shared intimacy with the American through a partial reunderstanding of himself and the Other. The cosmopolitan alternative offered and demonstrated in the conversion that Changez undergoes with Juan–Bautista, is a way of being in the world that accepts loyalties can be numerous and mixed, and that allows for more communication and understanding across borders. Returning to Bender’s theory of cosmopolitanism in practice: “one’s engagement with difference, whether marked by pain or any other condition of
difference, provides an experience that prompts both a reaching out and a self-reflexive awareness…. That experience reorients us to the world around us, whether in a small or large way. And that is the foundation of cosmopolitanism” (121). Changez tells his story about Erica and Underwood Samson and the aspects of American nationalism they represent in order to make the American see himself through the eyes of the Other, and at the same time he forces the American to take the Other out of the abstract and into reality. Following Bender’s argument, this will lead to a partial reunderstanding of the Other and oneself in a cosmopolitan shift.

Changez uses his story of Erica and Underwood Samson in the same way that Juan-Bautista used the story of the janissaries in order to make the American see himself through the eyes of another. They are used as symbols to convey the promises of the American Dream and all it stands for and at the same time demonstrate how American nationalism built upon myths of difference and assumptions of superiority contradict those promises and allow America to act on the world stage as though people are either commodities or collateral damage. Erica, an allegory for the (Am)erica that is alluring, full of promise, beauty and adventure that morphs into a tragic, lonely and inward-looking figure hypnotized by myths of its past, and Underwood Samson (US), the economic power of the United States that promises to change Changez’s life but later symbolic of that side of the United States that is dangerously dedicated to self-promotion and its own interests to the detriment to the rest of the world. Both Erica and his job at Underwood Samson symbolize for Changez the lure of the American Dream on the surface, but underneath lurks American nationalist myths of “special blessings and privileges” that lead to a dangerous blindness that allows America to rationalize global capitalist imperialism where the rest of the world is seen as only commodities or collateral damage.

Finally, an important function of Changez’s meeting with the American in Lahore, mirroring his encounter with Juan-Bautista, is to lure him into a shared intimacy that will challenge the myths of difference that underpin American nationalism and make him see Changez (and arguably Pakistan/the world) as more than collateral damage. Appiah advocates “knowing the other” as an antidote to the ills of exclusive nationalism: “This is how things are with people who are in conversation with one another. They do not have to agree. They have only to accept each other. And they can do that without a theory or a principle, because being together has generated commitments that can transcend even serious disagreement” (Appiah, 273). To make
sense of each other, and make the stranger no longer imaginary, throughout the discourse, Changez repeatedly references “handling of prey,” encouraging the American to get up close and familiarize himself with someone who has been dismissed as an unknown Other (5; 141; 114). He tries to familiarize the American with Pakistan, and with him, his story, to generate commitments that make the American see things differently.

The method and the goal can be best understood by Changez’s description of how he viewed his house in Pakistan upon returning from America and the effort required to change the way he sees it. He says “the Americanness of my own gaze” made him see his house as “shabby” and full of shame, but when he realizes it is the American gaze that is the problem, he reacclimatizes and “it was only after so doing that I saw my house properly again, appreciating its enduring grandeur, its unmistakable personality and idiosyncratic charm. Mughal miniatures and ancient carpets graced its reception rooms; an excellent library abutted its veranda. It was far from impoverished; indeed, it was rich with history” (141-142). The charm, the Mughal miniatures, the ancient carpets and the library all hint at the rich history and culture of Pakistan that is denied by America when their policies abroad see it as nothing more than collateral damage that can be sacrificed in the name of America’s interests. He is encouraging the American to recalibrate his gaze in the same way. His agenda is revealed when he speaks to the American about their time together: “But we, sir, who have been sitting here for some time, we know better, do we not? Yes, we have acquired a certain familiarity with the recent history of our surroundings, and that—in my humble opinion—allows us to put the present into much better perspective” (51). Just as Changez was unable to continue “focusing on the fundamentals” after his encounter with Juan-Bautista, the American has now entered into a relationship with Changez that will potentially make it impossible for him to carry out the implied assassination.

The last line of the novel hints at this hopeful outcome. “But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards” (209). He has pulled the American into a relationship of “a certain shared intimacy” that has hopefully permeated the myths of difference that allow him to see Changez as collateral damage as he is excluded from the “religion” of American nationalism that refuses to accept him as a convert.
Conclusion

With *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid invites the reader into a world that promises one thing and delivers another. We do not get the expected tale of insight into how a young man initially enamoured with the United States gets drawn toward anti-American activity out of hatred for America. Quite the contrary, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* fights the implied prejudices and tells the story of a young man very much committed to his new life in the United States. As he struggles desperately to hold it all together, Changez’s American Dream crumbles under the realities of American nationalism and isolating myths of American difference that exclude and deny the humanity of the rest of the world. According to Appiah, it is our responsibility as human beings to do something if we are confronted with people who truly believe others do not matter (153). It is my position that this is the agenda of Changez’s narrative. It is a conscious, cosmopolitan effort to confront the blindness of American nationalism with a story that winds its way through myths that lie deep in the American psyche and offers a chance to come to a partial reunderstanding of self and the excluded Other. The function of Changez’s story is to lure the American into a certain intimacy that challenges him to confront the humanity of the Other that has been so casually dismissed by the absolutism of American nationalism. Ideally, the American comes away with a new, cosmopolitan way of being in the world that can accept commitments as varied and hybridized that allows for more dialogue and understanding across boundaries. Beyond the scope of this essay, but interesting to pursue, would be an analysis of how the novel as a whole shows textual consciousness of itself as a tool of creating a cosmopolitan shift in the reader. The use of the second person, an American reader-surrogate, and several references to literature in the narrative hint at a self-awareness and agenda to the frame narrative as well. As Peter Morey suggests, the novel itself could be linked to those optimistic thinkers in the study of world literature who believe “that literature can participate in the re-creation of the world: just as the world itself is open to change, and that different actors from different classes, cultures and hemispheres share in this process” (Morey, 142).

Is Changez’s narrative successful in doing something to stop America, or in forging a bond that permeates that so-called impenetrable veil of nationalism that separates America and causes it to behave on the world stage as if they were its ruling class? There are no answers as the story ends with a cliffhanger. It is not known if
Hughes 17

Changez and his friends from the tea shop accost the American or if the American reaches for a gun and shoots Changez or if they walk away friends. Changez references their “shared intimacy” that has made them more familiar with each other and that not all Pakistanis are “potential terrorists” just as not all Americans are “undercover assassins” (209). While many have read this ending as an ominous suggestion of violence, I find these final lines more hopeful; a suggestion that, in the end, there is a mutual understanding between them that transcends the bounds of local loyalties.
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