

## Contingency of Empathy and Muhsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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**Abstract:** *At a time when global interdependence has become our destiny more than ever, empathy and the ability to empathize have been increasingly praised as skills necessary for better social and political interactions. However, as the studies on international politics of emotion to empathy have argued, empathy is culturally and historically contingent and its productive possibilities might be limited by differentials of power. The present paper engages the politics of empathy with a focus on Muhsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a transnational text to show problems on the way of empathetic engagement with the Muslim other in the aftermath of 9/11. It will argue that by creating an interrogative mood and especially by depicting two scenarios of successful and unsuccessful empathetic engagement which indicate empathy as a site of tense power dynamics contingent on positionalities of those involved, the novel offers a critique of the detached, goal oriented perspective which forms and informs American empire's economic and political plans. The novel also invites readers to engage in a productive process of self-interrogation by considering one's standing in conversations on empathy.*

**Keywords:** Contingency of empathy, politics of Empathy, self-interrogation, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

### 1. Introduction

At a time when global interdependence has become our destiny more than ever, empathy and the ability to empathize have been increasingly praised as skills necessary for better transnational and cross-cultural interactions. In this increasing global interdependency, issues such as forced displacement, natural disasters, extremism, and a renewal of the question of national identity in recent political scenes especially in Europe and the United States, have made urban coexistence more difficult than ever before. Muhsin Hamid's second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008) is a fitting example to show the problems on the way of empathetic engagement with the Muslim other. Hamid is the author of three other novels: *Moth Smoke* (2000), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and *Exist West* (2017). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is among the works of fiction that have appeared on the literary scene as a response to anxieties and xenophobic attitudes about the presence and integration of Muslim immigrants and refugees in the west, rooted in the long history of conflict and colonization and culminated since the catastrophe of 9/11 and the deteriorating relations between the West and the Muslim World, especially in the shadow of extremism and the rising far-right and white supremacist ideologies which deem the latter as the enemy of their cherished values. In this atmosphere, heightened suspicion of Muslims resulted in

increased state sponsored mechanisms of surveillance and control in The United States and Britain. As Yousef Awad (2018:83) observes, this suspicion is directed at any kind of “ideological, ethnic, geographical and even academic links to Islam, no matter how tenuous they are”. Other examples of this kind of fiction include Feryal Ali Guhar's *No Space for Further Burial* (2008) *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie (2009), H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2009) and Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015).

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* takes place in Lahore and narrates, in the form of dramatic monologue the story of Changez, a Pakistani graduate from Princeton who seems to be on the verge of materializing his American dream in his stellar career position as a financial appraiser in the prestigious Underwood Samson Company, but the September 11 terrorist attacks shatters this dream. The novel is also an account of Changez's failed romance with the white American woman, Erika which, at an allegorical level, is a failed love story between the United States and many of its immigrant worshippers. Disillusioned and awakened to his complicity with the American empire, Changez returns to Pakistan as a university lecturer in the field of finance and gains a reputation as a critic of American capitalism its economic policies abroad.

Scholarly commentaries on the novel have addressed issues such as dichotomy of identitarian categories, representation, counter narration, resistance, identity crisis and global politics in post-9/11 times. For example, Peter Morey in “‘The rules of the game have changed’: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Post-9/11 Fiction” argues that in a global context in which despite the valorization of cultural differences, culture has turned into an instrument of violence, the novel functions as a parody of cultural certainties. He states that the novel's narrative technique and stylistic features challenge the predictable writing conventions of post-9/11 times. Morey calls the novel “an example of a sort of deterritorialization of literature which forces readers to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories of East and West, “Them and Us”. . . – those categories continually insisted upon in “war on terror”discourse” (2011:138). Bart Moore Gilbert looks at both sides of the 9/11tragedy, to explore the gaps in pre 9/11 western secular and liberal model of ‘recognition’ conceptualized by Fukuyama and Taylor in their disregard for the internal and international challenges of Muslim religious identities. He argues that the seemingly contradictory ‘politics of recognition’ and mechanisms of control and ‘policing’ differences are both exclusionary and divisive, and Hamid's treatment of fundamentalism underscores the phenomenon more “as a function of globalization rather than simply a form of irredentist, reactionary anti-modernism” (2012:193). Lisa Lau in “‘Reverse Orientalism’ and Whimsy” is concerned with the connection between representation and reality in attempts at self-representation. She draws on the possibilities of the novel's utilizing the unreliable narrator and his “reverse Orientalism” which “represents East-West relationships entirely through an Eastern/ Oriental lens” (2014:56). Lau considers Hamid's re-Orientalism as “an appropriation of the literary space of representation from the West” though resulting in further polarization and dicotomization of old

binaries and a dismissal of reconciliatory approaches of his predecessors in the field of Indian writing in English (Ibid.,71-72). Mandala White (2017) focuses on the novel's formal features and Hamid's experimentation with the narratological possibilities of the novel, specifically "the limits and ramifications of unreliable first-person monologue" (2017:5). To White, allegory is a key device deployed to delineate the ways in which global capitalism and terrorism are related. She considers "the unreliable political perspectives in the main narrative as part of a meta-allegorical project in which the narrative itself becomes an allegory of the post-9/11 milieu" (Ibid.,10). Mohamed Salah Eddine Madiou moves to a very different domain and in the light of Said's ideas on authorial tradition, especially those espoused in *Beginnings*, explores Hamid's creative concerns in the process of production and various influences in inception and publication of the novel. Madiou places Hamid in the position of a critic of the western authorial tradition and argues that as a "historiographic metafiction", the text reflects on "reality and history, its own production as well as its way to publication" (2019:275). Thus, paradoxically, 9/11 as a traumatic event has been fundamentally formative to Hamid's writing, enabling him to "space out" his career as a novelist (Ibid., 294).

These valuable critical responses do not specifically deal with the ways in which the novel might contribute to studies on affective responses and politics of emotion. Thus, the present paper adopts a different trajectory to study the novel's contribution to the post-9/11 literature from the perspective of the politics of empathy.

Anthony N. Clohesy explains that etymologically, the word "empathy" is derived from "the Greek *empathia*: en (in)-pathos (feeling, suffering or passion)" and rooted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century German aesthetics influenced by Kant who first broadened the aesthetic experience of beauty beyond the object and to the viewer's judgment, and later, Theodor Lipps introduced the term to the discipline of psychology (2013:11). Empathy has been beneficial to both psychology and aesthetics, but the debate over empathy as an outcome of exercising our faculty of reason or as a principle in line with Hume's favouring the power of imagination in making sense of aesthetic experiences or moral judgments is not yet resolved. In the contemporary scholarly parlance, empathy brings together knowledge of the other and understanding of another's feelings. According to Rajini Srikanth (2012:41), "Empathy is a relationally imaginative approach to living that underscores interdependence—whether of individuals, communities, or nations—and has at its foundation the call to imagine our lives always in the context of similar and dissimilar others." Carolyn Pedwell in *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* refers to the dominant (neo) liberal notion of empathy as "the affective act of seeing from another person's perspective and imaginatively experiencing her or his thoughts, emotions and predicaments" (2014:6). Based on such a definition, in the context of cross-cultural relations, this understanding can trigger dialogue and can contribute to important political action. However, as we will see, these scholars also refer to limitations of the productive possibilities of transnational empathy if the asymmetries of power are neglected in such relations.

In this light, the paper raises the following questions: How does *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* problematize the dominant notion of empathy as an affective relation based on the possibility of knowing cultural others? If empathy is not enduring or stable, how does the novel portray it as contingent and bound to the positionalities of those involved? What are the implications of the narrative's approach to empathy for readers? To answer these questions, the paper draws on the studies on international politics of emotion and affect particularly Pedwell's argument (2014) that empathy must be located within histories and relations of power and understood as culturally and historically contingent, unpredictable and subject to change as well as Srikanth's (2012) thesis that empathy is located at the paradoxical intersections of proximity and distance, and thus it is important to cultivate the ability to self-interrogate in exercising empathy. The paper will show that Hamid's exploration of this contingency takes place by delineating the physical and abstract dimensions of the positionalities of those involved in the politics of empathy. Nested within the main narrative frame, are productive confrontations of cultures, geographies and power politics during moments of sharing meals, and thereby, two scenarios of successful and unsuccessful attempts at empathy are pictured. Finally, the last part of the paper asks about the implications of the narrative's involving and, perhaps, challenging the reader in its discussion on the importance of considering the positionalities of those involved in conversations on empathy, understanding and co-feeling. To this aim, the paper draws on scholarly discussions of narrative empathy to explore the novel's use of narrated monologue and second person point of view as tools to productively engage readers in a kind of "meaningful interaction" (Srikanth 2012:7) with the novel.

## **2. Empathy, its implications and challenges in uneven transnational exchanges**

The notion of empathy as an affective principle, oriented towards morality, emerged after World War II (Clohesy 2013:16). Despite its short history of 100 years of presence in English, empathy has now found currency beyond its source of emergence in different disciplines, from neurosciences to education, political sciences to translation studies, and even to engineering. Indeed "Empathy gap" has recently been diagnosed as a source of affliction of modern societies on different levels (Douglas Alexander 2017: No page.). Empathy has also played a key role in the discourse of international development and the emergence of "more 'participatory' frameworks" in the postcolonial and late liberalist current conditions with the aim of redressing remnants of colonial grievances (Pedwell 2014:78).

An example of the contemporary liberalist call for ethical global citizenship is Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), whose message is that the best way to live today's global interdependency is to educate intelligent world citizens. This lofty goal can be materialized through an elaborate educational system which, since early childhood, instigates in learners concepts of an ideal global citizenship. The liberal arts are indispensable

components of this multicultural educational model which involves “the contributions of history, geography, the interdisciplinary study of culture, the history of law and political systems, and the study of religion—all interacting with one another, and all operating in increasingly sophisticated ways as children mature” (Ibid.,85-86). Nussbaum is right in saying “Knowledge is no guarantee of good behavior, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behaviour” (Ibid.,81); nonetheless, she seems to take for granted the superiority of the liberal democratic cosmopolitan standpoint from which she speaks. What makes Nussbaum’s proposed pedagogical model problematic is its emphasis on “knowing” other cultures, histories, languages, and religions and her unquestioning trust in liberalist norms and values (the emphasis is mine). The outcome of this kind of education, according to Nussbaum, is a kind of sympathy that could only happen after learning about other histories, languages, religions, and economies than one’s own. This type of universalist Euro-American vision of emotional identification has been problematized by scholars who examine the asymmetry of power between the two sides of such transnational exchanges.

In a fashion similar to Sara Ahmed’s understanding of emotions as historically contingent, transformative, and subject to change in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014), Pedwell emphasizes on the contingent, relational and differential nature of empathy because it is associated with a combination of thoughts, feelings and responses only after they are recognized as such. She views empathy as an outcome of “ongoing interactions with other subjects, objects and forces within affective networks of power” (Ibid.,20). Thus, transnationally, empathy is produced and circulated “in and through transnational relations of power . . . out of complex intersections of empire, slavery, colonization, diaspora, migration, development, globalization, neoliberalism, global media and international security paradigms, among other processes and phenomena” (Ibid., 30).

Drawing on feminist and anti-racist discourses, Pedwell argues that the current conceptualization of empathy and its value for transnational interventions as “an affective mode of perspective-taking premised on care and concern for ‘the other’” is problematic because it is premised on the possibility of accessing “to the ‘felt truth’” in a way that its ultimate goal is to achieve “emotional equivalence and accuracy” (Ibid.,184) and therefore can reinforce the extant hierarchies of power. As a remedy, she asks for considering the possibility of “conflict and aggression” similar to other types of governing because complexities of transnational relations demand such ambivalences to be taken into consideration (Ibid.). She draws on translation studies and specifically on the “cultural turn” in translation to move away from an understanding of empathy as “equivalence” to one that perceives the production of empathy as a translational process and resulting from intersecting and interacting cultural, political and economic elements in its context of production (Ibid.,37).

### 3. The fraught concept of empathy in the Post-9/11 American context

One of the challenges to international invitations to empathy, especially after the climatic 9/11 terrorist attacks, has been an intensification of xenophobic attitudes towards Muslims in the west. According to Gale and Hopkins, events such as “9/11 in New York, 14/3 in Madrid, ‘7/7’ in London, and so on . . . have become iconic tropes that organize much of the debates about Muslim identities” (quoted in Esra Mirze Santesso 2013:9). Such disasters have, at least for an unforeseeable future, changed the lot of Muslims and Arabs who have known Europe and the United States of America as their adopted or original homeland for centuries; records indicate voluntary migration to the United States as early as the late eighteenth century (Lori Peek 2011:10). A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017 indicated that approximately 3.45 million Muslims lived in the United States; this number has been on the rise, and Muslims have been prevalent among immigrants to the country (Basheer Mohamed 2018: No page). According to another report by the Pew Research Center in 2019, despite the centrality of religious tolerance and freedom of belief in America, discrimination against religious minorities continues. The research shows that compared to other religious groups including Jews and Evangelical Christians, Muslims have been more subject to discrimination and viewed least favorably (David Masci 2019: No page.). Yet, it is clear that they are not the sole target of such unfavorable feelings. Obviously, Muslims are just one recent example to illustrate challenges on the contemporary injunction to empathy. The United States of America bears witness to a long history of demonizing its immigrants at the time of crisis, with examples that include violent attacks against German Americans during the First World War and internment camps set up for Japanese Americans during the Second World War.

Peek (2011:16) observes that negative sentiments against Arabs and Muslims have snowballed since the abduction of Israeli athletes by Palestinians in the Olympic games of 1972 and the hostage taking in the American Embassy in the post-revolution times in Iran in 1970s. More than four decades have passed since Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) has pointed out the misuse of the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” as interchangeable terms in the discourse of Orientalism contrary to the remarkable diversity of anything else, lack of familiarity and misinformation form Americans’ ever increasing negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. In 2016 and on the fifteenth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, James Sues, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, told *USA Today* about a renewed climate of distrust, bias and violence against American-Muslims. He explained that a series of terrorist attacks in the name of Islam in the United States and elsewhere as well as some politicians’ (including Trump) using a rhetoric that disseminates seeds of hatred have further promulgated these already existing misconceptions and Islamophobic sentiments (Hannan Adely 2016: No page). It should be noted that even though extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State posed a continuing threat, the far-right extremism is a rising trend in the United States and Europe as well. As Seth G. Jones, the Director of Transnational Threats Project has pointed out in 2018, “the

number of attacks from right-wing extremists since 2014 has been greater than attacks from Islamic extremists". The trend in far-right extremism has been on the rise in both Europe and the United States (No page).

In *Constructing the Enemy: Empathy/ antipathy in U.S. Literature and Law* (2012) Srikanth examines the complexities of empathy manifest in U.S. literature and law with the consideration of the realities of the asymmetrical relationship between North America and its others and against the nation's pluralistic buildup. Similar to Pedwell's critique of empathy as a means of acquiring knowledge of others, Srikanth points out the problem with the notion of empathy offered by Jürgen Habermas as a coming together of "learning processes" which disregards the asymmetry of power between the two sides of empathetic relationship in a way that there can hardly be a "full commitment or a genuine desire to come to a shared understanding" (2012:6), the ultimate goal of empathy. She draws on Žižek to show that in order to become fully committed to this goal, the first step for those in the position of power is to embrace humility and relinquish their rather arrogant certainty of the possibility of knowing the other (Ibid.,7). And if empathy is necessary for an ethical way of being in the world, it can only happen in an "interrogative mood" [a term she borrows from William Spanos] or "the ability to acknowledge alternate interpretations of a given situation and to entertain the possibility of frames of understanding that are different from one's own" (Ibid.,19). Thus, part of the challenge of empathetic relationships, particularly in the case of the United States of America and its others, Srikanth (Ibid.20) notes, is the paradoxical relationship between proximity and distance in "both a concrete special and an abstract/ intellectual/ emotional sense."

#### **4. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and ambivalences of power**

As a transnational text, the novel represents East/West troubled relationships in a confrontational manner and by means of a monopolizing Eastern/Oriental lens, and moving between Lahore, New York, the Philippines and Chile, explores Changez's ambivalent relationship with America against the backdrop of post 9/11 tragedy. Drawing on the presumed positive powers of empathy and as an invitation at perspective taking, the novel portrays a "dialogue with the other" (Boler 1999:159) to show the difficulty of treating empathy as a fix to complex transcultural issues, an issue not irrelevant to recent and ongoing refugee crisis that riddles the relations between Europe and the United States and Muslims, particularly those with Middle Eastern origins. All the events of the novel are presented in retrospect, in a dramatic monologue narrative style as Changez's recollecting past memories takes place in a conversation with a mysterious American interrogator in a restaurant in Pakistan and at the threshold of the War on Terror.

Changez occupies a differential position in the disequilibrium of empathetic relations, and his situation exemplifies the ways in which the lot of many immigrants in the United States is subject to change by forces larger than themselves. Before its collapse, his world gives him the illusion that he lives in a post-racist world. His Princeton degree and his high-income career provide him

with an assured sense of membership in transnational capitalism, a high standard of living that exceeds that of many white Christians. This assurance is symptomatic of a phenomenon by which, according to Goldberg (2002), “non-whites” are “whitened by the class color of money” (qtd. by Arat-Koç 2010:155). This increased contingency of whiteness on class, as Arat-Koç (Ibid.,158) explains, is an outcome of neo-liberal economic globalization as a result of which, “a very small minority of non-European people are being welcomed into a transnational bourgeoisie. This involves not just a relative browning of the transnational bourgeoisie, but also a ‘whitening’ of “a very small (former) Third World elite” in relation to the people of their countries”. The word “illusion” is used above to show that Changez’s status and sense of membership in this newly expanded notion of whiteness is shaky because new complexities of the category of whiteness in its multicultural appearance do not mean quick elimination of the importance of the category of race especially since the renewal of “race-thinking and racial supremacy” (Ibid.,162) in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 has proved otherwise for many Muslims.

The conception of racism has long ceased to be limited to the skin color because as George Fredrickson notes, racism is defined by “difference and power” translating ethnographical differences as features that are “innate, indelible, and unchangeable” (qtd. by Joan Wallach Scott 2010:45). Thus for Changez, it is his religion that charts his path to acceptance with insurmountable challenges, even though, ironically, he is by no means a practicing Muslim. Indeed, racism against Muslims has its roots in colonial and orientalist legacies that place them in a double bind between a dangerously backward religion and tradition from which they need to be freed and the civilized world of redemption into which they have to be assimilated (Wallach Scott 2010:46-47). The problem is that Islam’s absolute otherness makes this conversion impossible. In other words, as Wallach Scott (Ibid.,46) notes, “Islam . . . [marks its practitioners] as a race apart”. This type of racism, more than having biological features, is contingent on “culturalist” components that render Islamic ideology incompatible with “Europeanness” and thus confuses “Arabness” with “Islamism”, as Etienne Balibar (1998:23-24) points out. Even though Changez is a non-Arab and a non-practicing Muslim, the discrimination he is subjected to is an outcome of his confusing placement at the intersections of ethnicity and religion.

Later on, Changez reexamines his sense of shock at “the power of his blinders” in those days. He confesses that he was in a sort of foolish denial to see “the obvious connection between the crumbling world around [him] and the impending destruction of [his] personal American dream” (Hamid 2008:93). Changez’s clinging to this sense of metaphoric whiteness despite its fast-paced disintegration and his sense of superiority results in his alienation from the Pakistani nation as well as from all non-white, non-western people. And thus, he ignores the news and stories of backlash against Muslims and successfully stays focused on “the fundamentals” as mandated by Underwood Samson’s guiding principle (98). The catch phrase defining empathy as “standing in the shoes of another” implies transformative power of closeness and “intimacy”; however, as

Srikanth (2012:4); Pedwell (2014:72) and a host of feminist and antiracist scholars maintain, a paradoxical dynamics of distance and proximity complicates the extent to which empathy can trigger meaningful change.

The distance between the two sides of the empathetic relation can be of an “ontological and epistemological” or a “cultural and geographic” nature (Pedwell 2014:74). Therefore, at the beginning, Changez’s serious subscription to the capitalist work ethics of Underwood Samson is responsible for his emotional distance from those he refers to as “soon to-be-redundant workers” because he wants to believe that his commitment to his job requires detachment from such emotional involvements (99). It is only when the American bombers hit *too close* (emphasis is mine) to home that his equanimity is shaken to some extent. The ambivalence of cultural diversity is revealed when he grows a beard while visiting his family in Pakistan and refuses to shave it in his return to the United States is temporary detainment in the airport and his colleagues’ discomfort with this style of self-expression reveal to him that the underbelly of exotic attraction is the threat of untamable difference. This suspicion is symptomatic of a form of anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim race thinking which is indicative of hidden anxieties underneath these identitarian categories which Art-Koc (2010:162) considers as “geographical meanings and security anxieties”.

Changez’s distance from his people during his first visit to Lahore shows itself in the form of his disdainful attitude towards them because he looks with the foreign eyes at the familiar scenes and places. His lens is tinted with the dust of pride and entitlement. A moment of epiphany occurs one day when he is looking at his reflection in his bathroom mirror and is turned off by what he sees, for he suddenly realizes his similarity with the annoyingly “unsympathetic American” he encountered in the “elite” circles of American academia and work place (124). Looking at the reflection of his face in the mirror with the eyes of a stranger, provides an opportunity to see himself as other. This awakening moment of seeing a defamiliarized image of the protagonist’s self, reveals the tension between his cultural identity and the power of his new American affiliative ties. The revelation triggers a deeper internal transformation that takes place later and during a failed job assignment in Chile and causes him to quit his job and return to Pakistan. Juan-Batista, the president of a failing publishing company becomes a “catalyst” (150) for his transformation and an ongoing “inflective journey” (146).

##### **5. The contingent nature of empathy**

Hamid’s use of the frame narrative technique is well suited to the novel’s exploring the ways in which the physical and metaphoric aspects of proximity and distance influence characters’ empathetic engagement with their “others”. The entire narrative is a face to face encounter in a restaurant. People sharing meals and drinking together is significant in many cultures; it is a time of bonding and binding when physical proximity can lead to intimacy. The power of food, Ewan Aitken points out, “lies in the relationships that are created around it and the fact that you meet people you wouldn’t meet otherwise” (qtd by Alexander 2017: No page). Meal sharing scenes create a space in which physical proximity could

potentially lessen tensions bred of people's ideological distance and thus provide an opportunity for interrogating one's beliefs and standpoints. Nested within the main narrative frame, there is another, much shorter encounter scene in another restaurant in Chile which portrays a key transformative moment in the novel; indeed, the main narrative frame appears as an attempt to perhaps re-enact this first life changing experience once more.

Batista invites Changez to dinner; Changez's epiphany occurs in the midst of the dinner and while he enjoys Chilean hospitality. Perhaps Batista's resemblance to Changez's grandfather, a mutual love and admiration for poetry and the experience of breaking bread together provide a moment of intimacy and closeness beyond the power asymmetries between the two, or "a temporary intertwinement of rhythms, a tuning of frequencies, and a sense of shared survival in the midst of staggering losses" to which Pedwell (2014:143) refers as an "organic process of becoming in synch". This productive empathetic engagement is the function of the reconcilability of the positionalities of the people involved.

However, Changez's internal transformation is much deeper than the momentary emotional response that such a brief encounter can trigger. It cannot be an instance of situational empathy as "a form of easy egotism" bred of a mere similarity in experience (Suzanne Keen 2007:80). Even though the importance of prolonged contact for effective empathetic engagement with the "other" has been emphasized (Srikanth 2012:20), I argue that Changez's paradoxical position in regard to power makes even this brief encounter a productive confrontation. Batista tells the story of janissaries who "were Christian boys captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army . . . they were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to" (151). As a result, Changez is able to see himself as a modern day janissary, complicit with the economic policies of American empire. Reflecting on what his complicity implied for those like Juan-Batista, he finds that nothing less than quitting his job can ethically resolve this dilemma. Here, as a financial appraiser, Changez is distanced from Batista. He occupies a position of power in a way that the life or death of the Chilean small publishing house depends on him. However, Batista's story also alludes to Changez's subordinated position as a third worlder since both Chile's and Pakistan's histories are marked by the United States' interventionist policies; thus, he is able to see the state of affairs from the perspective of fragile and less profitable businesses. Changez's Saidian "metaphoric" and eventually "actual" exile (Ashcroft and Alhiuwalia 2009:44) from the hard-won world of capital and prestige enables him to re-connect with the political realities of the both worlds of privilege and marginalization in which he inhabits. He returns to Pakistan a changed man. This difficult ethical decision is a token of "empathetic solidarity" when it involves one's voluntary loss of privileges and allows for "different ways of affecting and being affected to emerge" (Pedwell 2014:143).

The novel's oxymoronic title might be misleading at first, especially since Changez ironically shares his name with Genghis Khan, the famous warrior founder of Mongol Empire. Contrary to one's expectations, the title better suits the

economic fundamentalism rather than the familiar religious fundamentalism. This kind of fundamentalism is a central precept in a contra-empathic economic system represented by Underwood Samson that requires its members “to focus primarily on parts” (157) instead of adopting a holistic approach. The narrative’s placing of Changez, the financial appraiser, as an analogue to a member of an elite Ottoman infantry in the Crusades suggests that America’s financial power is no less violent than its military might. To focus on fundamentals means prioritizing self-serving agendas that promote capitalist interests of the U.S. orchestrated global economy at any cost, resulting in what Sardar (2003:72-73) calls “the continuation of structural arrangements” that hold the developing nations in disadvantage and make the poor poorer. Batista’s drawing on common experiences of the past triggers a mutual sense of affinity and closeness that facilitates a form of empathy grounded on enduring internal change in Changez.

Contrary to the productive dialogue in Chile, Hamid presents the reader with another encounter, this time a failed attempt at empathy. This encounter which highlights the contingent nature of empathy, forms the main frame of the narrative as it unfolds in a restaurant in Lahore where Changez tries to affectively engage his skeptic American stranger guest/ interrogator in a conversation by recounting the story of his past, his life in America and his reasons for back migration to Pakistan while giving the latter a taste of Pakistani hospitality. In this unsuccessful attempt at empathetic engagement, a different hierarchy of power exists between participants; the distance between the two seems too big to bridge. It is clear that the American guest is part of the American military apparatus. Changez brings to his guest’s notice that despite America’s readiness to assert its military prowess as a superpower whenever its interests and security demands, it “has not fought a war on its own soil in living memory” (127). According to Sardar (2003):

the idea of America, its self-image and sense of identity, uniquely, has always been less concerned with history than with a vision of the future that requires a particular way of operating in the present. In particular, . . . America’s idealized view of the human future permits a perverse, dangerous and often brutally destructive disconnection between ends and means (10).

The American guest is a mouthpiece for this detached, goal-oriented perspective which is also starkly similar to the one propagated in a business empire such as Underwood Samson. Therefore, the irreconcilability of the two is a function of the positionalities of the host and the guest. What except for the egotistic pursuit of the United States’ superior ideology and national interests, allows for the odd situation in which a Pakistani is being interrogated by an American in a restaurant in his own country? This rather odd situation in part alludes to the post 9/11 radical approach of the Bush administration not to only attack but proactively prevent further terrorist activities against the United States and its interests. Despite the physical proximity of Changez and his guest, the distance in their positionalities cannot be breached; therefore, the American is unable to move beyond the times and the power dynamics that define their

relationship in the first place. This strange combination of being involved and yet remaining detached from the grievances of others marks the interlocutor's inability to welcome any political challenges to his views and thus, the impossibility of an "affective synchronization" similar to that which happened between Changez and Batista.

### **6. The troubling invitation to empathize: Implications for the reader**

So far, this paper has tried to show how the narrative content in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* problematizes a liberalist conception of empathy as the organizing principle for global coexistence. But what is the use of readers' awareness of such problems? Views on the relationship between reading fiction and narrative empathy and the extent to which fictional narratives might arouse empathy in readers abound. There are arguments supporting the link between narrative empathy and moral efficacy (Nussbaum 1990; Hoffman 2000). There are also arguments against investing too much in narrative empathy as conducive to social altruism (Keen 2007, 2011). Suzanne Keen in an important historical study regarding the views on the pro-social role of novel reading since the Victorian Age in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) challenges the proclaimed altruistic outcomes attributed to narrative empathy. She observes:

Though the evidence for these effects is still scanty, the faith in the relationship between reading narrative and moral or social benefits is so strong and pervasive that it remains a bedrock assumption of many scholars, philosophers, critics, and cultural commentators. Real readers are more hesitant about the results that reading has worked in them, however (99).

Keen might be cautious about the breath and effectiveness of the positive social outcomes of narrative empathy, but she does find exploring the breadth of the efficacy of these effects worthy of attention. I argue that as a work of fiction dealing with anxieties related to challenges of transcultural encounters, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* poses a difficult yet rewarding challenge at empathy before its reader.

Similar to Keen and Pedwell, Srikanth (2012:4) refers to the complex relationship between individuals and social institutions to show the problem with viewing the individual as a privileged "site of transformative action". However, she also notes that private feelings can be of value if the individual is aware of his/her situated-ness in a web of complex contexts and relations in a way that a close relationship between empathy and "the interrogative mood" is understood. This awareness involves recognition of other possible and different ways of looking and understanding a situation (Ibid.,19). Holding up to these possibilities, the remaining part of this paper deals with the ways in which the narrative situation in the novel might invite readers to productively engage in a productive process of self-interrogation and recognition of one's social standing.

The entirety of the novel consists of a conversation between two people. This dialogue is conveyed to the reader in the form of narrated monologue. The choice of the first person narration obviously provides an opportunity to establish an intimate connection between the reader and the main character who self presents his inner life and experiences. This mode of representation is generally considered to invite empathetic responses (Keen 2007:70-97). What makes the narrative situation a bit odd is that although the whole narrative mimics the form of a dialogue, the second person point of view is also used. However, since the focalizer is the protagonist, the voice of the antagonist is also filtered through the former, and one does not have direct access to his words. There are different views on whether or not the use of the second person point of view is conducive of empathetic responses (Ibid.,98), but the argument here is that the novel's use of this particular narrative situation creates an opportunity for a form of self-interrogation which is no less important than an empathetic response.

Here the argument draws on Gregory Currie's "imaginative resistance" (2010:111) to discuss the way in which Hamid's narrative can productively engage the reader. Currie in *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* views narratives as artefacts with intentions to communicate stories. He argues that authors present a narrative framework which comprises "a preferred set of cognitive, evaluative, and emotional responses to the story" (Ibid.,86). These frameworks guide the reader's responses to different elements of a story in ways that are either congruent with or resisting against the author's focus. Currie discusses the affective challenges texts and authorial intentions put before readers in eliciting responses they might not be prepared for. In fact, he maintains that good narratives are those that make us have such unfamiliar experiences (Ibid: 86-87). He defines imaginative resistance as "difficulty in bringing to bear a range of affective and evaluative responses which are encouraged by expressive aspects of the work's point of view" and which we find "difficult or unrewarding" or even sometimes "wrong" because we feel we are pushed "to adjust our imaginings to fit what seems to be asked of us" (Ibid.,111).

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* creates this unfamiliarity/ resistance through its narration mode. The first person narration might invite intimacy, especially since Changez is polite and charming. However, the constant use of the second person point of view might also negatively influence the experience of reading and diminish the chances of reader's empathy depending on how it is inclusive or dissociative of the reader (Keen 2007:98). Because the guest/ interrogator does not have a name, or a voice of his own, even though Changez's addressee is a character within the story, the reader might also be drawn into action. On reading this univocal story, readers might experience feelings of discomfort and annoyance as some of the readers' reviews on Amazon's page also indicate [obviously there is a need for empirical research to ascertain the existence of connection between readers' responses and the narrative situation]. The dis-ease which readers might feel on being drawn into action by being pushed to be placed in the shoes of the "you" of the narrative could be a manifestation of Currie's concept of imaginative resistance.

According to Currie (2010:113), we resist imaginatively engaging with such scenarios because they challenge our world views and our emotional responses to certain situations. He explains that this resistance to responding could either occur in matters in which the content is “impossible” or “incoherent”, or it could happen as a response to framing. In presenting a framework, the author suggests a way of responding to content, and one important feature of Hamid’s narrative is the way it uses framing to engage the reader in challenges of responding empathetically. Fictional cases demand readers to suppose or assume a position and thus affectively side with each party which brings about “emotional consequences” for the reader (Ibid.,14).

Changez introduces himself as polite, kind and friendly and a “lover of America” (1) in an atmosphere of rooted historical suspicion and mistrust. He is a hospitable host who plays the role of a helpful guide and cultural translator, but at the same time, he does not allow the American any room for self-assertion. He offers, “I could translate for you but perhaps it would be better if I select a number of delicacies for you to share” (109). Changez assures his guest of being trustworthy. He says, “I am not in the habit of inventing untruths! And moreover, even if I were, there is no reason why this incident would be less likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you” (152). Neither the American, nor the reader can take the narrator’s claim for its face value. His playfulness, the use of double meaning and theatricality turn him into a charming yet unreliable narrator (Lisa Lau and Om Parakash Dwivedi 2014:68-70). As an unreliable narrator, Changez’s offer to translate is interesting since conceptualization of empathy as a kind of translation which is more a kind of “cultural 'negotiation' rather than strict linguistic 'faithfulness'” (Pedwell 2014:129), detaches empathy from its accuracy component and associated it with “conflict, contradiction, and even antagonism” (ibid.). In his remarks, the restaurant resembles a place for a hunting game between a predator and its prey. Many times there is a tint of anger in Changez’s playfulness. His use of the language of hunting in his gastronomic remarks turns the restaurant into a precarious scene of cultural encounter in an attempt to fight back the stereotypical orientalist representations of Pakistan and to differentiate the stories that the East tells itself from those told of it by the West and the media. For instance, Changez compares the growling of his empty stomach to that of “a young lion held captive in a gunnysack” (100) and describes Lahori cuisine as “a purely carnivorous feast” and the food served in these restaurants as “predatory delicacies” an emblem of the country’s glorified pre-colonial times when Pakistan was not “burdened by debt, dependent on foreign aid and handouts” (101). Food and identity politics are tied together in a way that, according to the protagonist, none of the important restaurants in Lahore serves a western dish. In this tense atmosphere of doubt and suspicion, the novel’s invitation to transformation of perspective could be consequential to readers.

The way the text engages with the discourse of re-Orientalism might be unsettling to some western readers. Lau and Dwivedi (2014:4) define re-Orientalism theory as the ways in which the East has increasingly seized the power of representation in a way that “Oriental authors of today comment on,

challenge, change but occasionally also reinforce the West's central role". Although such self-representations are quite sophisticated, creative and complex, they still appear and are received in a "Western centric" knowledge production context (Ibid.). They observe that as a good example of such narratives, Hamid's re-orientalism moves beyond self-representation and seizes the total control of the narrative, its path and its readers and calls the novel as an "emissary" between cultures that Orientalizes South Asia; however, as an unreliable and manipulative narrator, Changez does not intend to make Pakistan understandable to the western reader (Ibid.,64-65). This provocative and unapologetic re-Orientalism leaves little space for dialogue; it "is not just a representation of the East by the East, but an appropriation of the literary space of representation from the West – yet another stage in the growth and discourse of re-Orientalism practices" (Ibid.,70). If the goal of the discourse of Orientalism is to render the East transparent and knowable for the westerner; the novel frustrates such expectations, partly because readers are pressed to re-adjust their expectations.

The tense situation becomes more suspenseful towards the end, and the novel comes to a close in an atmosphere of impending violence. The unclear ending is an invitation to take sides with the protagonist or his unnamed guest/interrogator. Readers here might feel that their ability to choose right from wrong is being tested, since they not only face narrative gaps that the open-ended novel declines to illuminate, but also are pushed to decide which side to trust, a labor they did not ask to do. Therefore, it can be said that if empathy involves an imaginative way of experiencing another person's emotions or situation, the novel's second person point of view appears to many as an unwanted invitation to evaluate. In a social and political anti-Muslim atmosphere, many readers might, understandably, find the invitation to suspend their disbelief and empathize with the protagonist quite taxing. However, there might be some positive value coming out of this labor.

In *Post-Orientalism*, Hamid Dabashi is concerned with the question of moral agency. According to Dabashi, a major hurdle on the path towards achieving a system of knowledge production that will not be complicit in the power circuit in our time of war and terror is the continued assumption about the presence of what he calls a "fictive interlocutor" at the center of conversation and the problem that initiates from the need to always convince this fictive interlocutor (2009:271). Hamid's narrative gives embodiment to this continued, though not always visible presence. If the reader then resents being placed in the shoes of the "you" of the story whose ability to empathize with the marginalized Changez questions, this could indicate that Hamid has been successful in creating a situation for reflection. Isn't this the situations with which many subjugated peoples have to deal with as a function of their positionalities? This push to take sides is a situation many might find unfair because of the moral/ethical implications of their choice. If, ideally, empathy would be about walking in the shoes of another, this confinement "to the position of listener" is a call for empathy for those countries that have been long the target of the U.S.'s imperialist agendas (Santesso 2013:72). Moreover, it reminds us of the need for initiating a

more meaningful communicative process in international exchanges which might help get closer to how it feels to automatically, and without being asked, be relegated to the supporting grounds of fundamentalism and terrorism. This unasked-for invitation to take sides brings to mind the dichotomous manner in which George W. Bush had called for undivided loyalties when his administration launched the War on Terror.

Therefore, contrary to the narrative's depicting a face to face encounter in a restaurant, the chances of developing emotional intimacy to close the divide between Changez and the un-named American are slight. They are products of a history of unequal geopolitical relations between their worlds. In the case of Muslims, bypassing this history is very difficult because of the continuation of the civilizational trend in the First World hegemonic regimes of knowledge which demands Muslims' identification of their religious beliefs or a lack thereof prior to their entry into the modern systems of knowledge production as Minoo Moalem observes (2005:52). On a more hopeful note, Bart Moore Gilbert (2012:196) offers that Changez's 'in-between' location and his emotional ties with American and western culture complicates this traditional and binarist understanding of the irreconcilability of the west and the world of Islam. He reminds us that the insecurities of the two are similar and "the pain which apparently divides [them] is also, paradoxically 'shared'"; and therefore, the novel implies the need for a mutual recognition of this common pain for a meaningful change in their relationship.

## **7. Conclusion**

As the above discussion shows, emotions (even the positive ones) are not necessarily exempt from the workings of the interconnected systems of dominance in a way that the productive possibilities of empathy might be jeopardized by the liberal notion of equivalence and its disregard for differentials of power. Therefore, it wrongly places the burden of empathy on the individuals' shoulders. The paper argued that if the ideal of empathy is to understand another person's feeling, by placing the protagonist in contradictory positions of social and political privilege and disadvantage, and proximity and distance from his cultural others, the novel compels us to inquire about what can be done when emotional engagement is difficult and the chances of empathizing with the "other" are limited by the geopolitical forces that historically form the dynamics of transcultural encounters. By depicting two scenarios of successful and unsuccessful attempts at empathy, the novel shows that irreconcilability of Changez and the unnamed interlocutor is the function of their positionalities and bred of larger geo-political relations and histories. More than three decades have passed since Peggy McIntosh in her seminal essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" has cautioned us that, the first step to lessen domination is to recognize the ways in which an insidious matrix of power and privilege affects our daily lives. The novel shows that Changez's change of perspective is an outcome of his recognition of his privileged status and his complicity in the workings of power. As for the reader, the narrative's mimicking a dialogue in the

form of narrated monologue and its use of the second-person point of view provides an opportunity for self-interrogation which is no less important than empathy. Thus, it constructively engages readers by pushing them to step beyond their social location towards a recognition of how power and privilege affect our emotive responses as well.

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