

Teaching South Asian Anglophone Diasporic Literature

Edited by

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Binod Paudyal

Resisting Racialization: Mohsin Hamid's
The Reluctant Fundamentalist
in Ethnic Studies Courses

I teach Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and other South Asian diasporic literary works in my Asian American studies courses, specifically to examine issues concerning the global war on terror, racialization of Muslims, and migrant and refugee crises. While I have taught *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in different Asian American studies courses, such as Asian American Experiences and Asian American Cosmopolitanism at Northern Arizona University and Introduction to Asian American Studies and South Asian American Literature and Culture at University of Maryland, I can imagine teaching the text in a range of other ethnic studies courses focusing on issues of racialization and social justice. But for the purpose of this essay, I discuss my approach to teaching *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in the Introduction to Asian American Studies course. I do this for two reasons. First, my approach to teaching Hamid's novel offers a theoretical and pedagogical framework for understanding the identity politics and exclusionary ideologies of the contemporary United States. Second, it helps teach students how South Asian diasporic authors like Hamid deal with issues of social justice by imaginatively subverting the epistemology of the hierarchical binary that constructs Muslims as other.

Since the Introduction to Asian American Studies course is cross-listed with American studies and fulfills the University of Maryland's general education requirement, it draws students from all disciplines with diverse interests and disciplinary trainings. I teach *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* toward the end of the semester, placing it under the topic "Asian Americans in the Post-9/11 United States." The course is structured around historical and contemporary Asian American experiences, so students have already been introduced to key issues and watershed moments in Asian American history. I spend two weeks (four seventy-five-minute class sessions) on the novel: I use the first session to discuss historical and theoretical concepts around the discourse of "us" versus "them" and the next three class sessions to analyze key issues in the novel. For the first session, I assign the introductory chapter of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1–28) and Kent Ono's essay "Asian American Studies after 9/11." During the discussion, I ask students to reflect on any preconceived notions they may have of people of Islamic faith and ask them how they first learned about Muslims. Not surprisingly, most students shared that they had first learned about Muslims in school through discussions of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. My students' collective response reflects Amaney Jamal's finding that most Americans have come to know and learn about Islam and Arabs through the prisms of terrorism and barbarism, and a sizable percentage of Americans clearly believe that there is a fundamental clash of values between "us" and "them" (122). I remind students that following the events of 9/11 (and the more recent political shift in the United States since the 2016 US presidential election), South Asian Muslims and Sikhs (indeed, all Brown people from South Asia) have been mistakenly perceived as Arabs. They have become victims of hate crimes, racial profiling, physical assaults, and even murder because of their physical resemblance to people from the Middle East. This discussion helps students understand that post-9/11 American popular cultural production, which functions as an aspect of American Orientalism, tends to homogenize South Asian Americans—who might appear Muslim or Arab—into a single category, that of "terrorist," and treats them as what Sunaina Maira calls "the objects of intensified suspicion and surveillance" (333).

Although different Asian ethnic groups have been treated differently and have experienced different levels of prejudice in the United States as a result of the country's divergent colonial and imperial practices and foreign relations with respect to various Asian nations, framing the othering of South Asians in the post-9/11 era (and more recently, anti-Asian

hate crimes and expressions of prejudice largely against East Asian Americans) within a larger historical context shows how the racist scapegoating of all Asian Americans has been an ugly part of American history. It is worth noting that anti-Asian prejudice and violence has intensified during times of crisis (including US tensions with Asian nations). For example, the treatment of South Asian Sikhs and Muslims after 9/11 and now of Chinese Americans (and East and Southeast Asians in general) conjures up memories of the internment of Japanese Americans and of the Chinese Exclusion Act. If Orientalism is an ideology that constructs the other in opposition to the “superior” West (and the American self for that matter), as Said argues (7), the history of American racist scapegoating of different Asian American ethnic groups—a systemic propensity, when confronted with a problem, to deflect the problem by blaming it on the other—itself constitutes American Orientalism.

With this contextual backdrop established, I frame Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a response to the racist conflation of South Asian Americans (and Muslims in general) with terrorism and the intensified Islamophobia in the post-9/11 era. I demonstrate how the novel is a de-Orientalist text, to borrow Brett Levinson’s concept (22), that critiques and dismantles Orientalist discourse about South Asian Muslims and Middle Easterners as potential terrorists, principally through what I call a “reverse-Conradian” narrative technique that speaks back to the Western power. The dramatic monologue in the novel carves out a space in which Changez, the Pakistani other, not only delivers his message to the silent American interlocutor but also illuminates American Orientalist discourse as a reflection of America’s adherence to its presumed singularity, democracy, and uniqueness.

Throughout the novel, Hamid uses various globally recognized stereotypes in order to dismantle and redefine the political and cultural implications of these stereotypes. In doing so, Hamid positions his novel as a type of writing back, a form of creative resistance that disrupts the post-9/11 American discourse that tends to characterize Muslims and Arabs as inherently violent and hostile toward Americans. Such framing of the novel offers an alternative collective future by positioning the reader in a subject position. This approach helps students understand that Americans were not the only victims of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and that this catastrophic event has had far-reaching and devastating impacts on South Asians living in both the United States and South Asia. As such, my primary goal in teaching Hamid’s novel is not only to challenge the idea

about racialization of Muslims, about xenophobia, but also to show how we as teachers of ethnic studies can subsequently use the classroom as a space for social transformation and imagining more just ways of life.

I direct students to the key passages in which Hamid engages with popular stereotypes of Muslims in order to help students begin to question certain misperceptions concerning South Asian Muslims and those whom xenophobes characterize as Muslims based on phenotype. For example, the novel begins in Anarkali, a formidable neighborhood of Lahore, as Changez, the narrator, offers to assist an unnamed American character who is cautiously seeking something not revealed to the reader. Changez tells him, "Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America" (Hamid 1). This strategy playfully foregrounds the suspicion, distrust, and fear of the silent American interlocutor, exhibiting Hamid's use of the stereotype of a bearded man, who is thus potentially a suspicious terrorist. What is also striking about the novel's opening is that Changez introduces himself as a "lover of America," subtly poking fun at the general misconception and fear generated by the image of a bearded man in the imagination of Americans. Although the reader does not actually hear the American speak, Changez's frequent comments about the interlocutor's reactions and gestures show that the American is very cautious and almost pathologically paranoid, anticipating danger from anyone and any direction. From the time Changez and the American listener sit in a corner of the restaurant until the end of the novel, when Changez walks with him to his hotel, the narrative makes the reader alert to the possibility of imminent danger. The reader is then momentarily relieved after seeing that every time the American becomes filled with terror, Changez reassures him that there is no danger.

Hamid's use of a de-Orientalist strategy—that is, the projection of a globally established terror threat from Muslims followed by the revelation that this threat is just an illusion—not only suggests that the American interlocutor is preoccupied with fear and terror of violence from Muslims but also illustrates that such terror is manufactured, merely the product of negative stereotypes about Muslims by American media and cultural discourse. To examine Hamid's deliberate use of globally recognized stereotypes of the violence-prone Muslim, I invite students to consider the term *fundamentalism* in relation to two separate but interrelated instances in the novel: Changez's claim that he is a "lover of America," and his pleasure upon seeing the Twin Towers collapse (Hamid 72). When students read that Changez smiles while watching the collapse of the Twin Towers on television in Manila, they instantly suspect that he is a "fundamentalist,"

a terrorist sympathizer and thus anti-American, and disagree with his claim that he is a “lover of America.” But I remind them that Changez’s pleasure upon seeing the collapse of the Twin Towers and the massacre of thousands of innocents, as he confesses to the American listener, actually comes from the surreal and surprising news that “someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (73). I also remind students that the term *fundamentalism* not only is unique to certain terrorist groups with roots in Islam, as Hamid shows throughout the novel, but also refers to the guiding principle of many institutions and companies in the American corporate world and of the novel’s fictional company Underwood Samson.

In the last session, we discuss how Hamid’s novel helps us reconsider the epistemological, thematic, and geographic scope of Asian American studies by offering new ways of thinking about and understanding identities in the twenty-first century, a century marked by the global war on terror and complex global conditions, and by challenging the dominant US-based paradigms of what constitutes Asian American studies. I ask students to consider Changez as the embodiment of a new Asian American subject produced by the new sociopolitical circumstances of a post-9/11 world. The novel’s engagement with and articulations of the racial logic of 9/11 reflect the category of a new Asian American by reenvisioning the primary agendas of Asian American studies. I invite students to characterize Changez as a new Asian American subject because, unlike the traditional conception of an Asian American, he is foreign-born, of Islamic faith, and has a sense of belonging to the United States but does not embrace Americanism and its so-called melting-pot ideology, rejecting his previous participation in neoliberal US capitalism, which he calls the “project of domination” (Hamid 156)—and what we might call neocolonialism—and cultivating his distinct ethnic identity as a bearded Muslim man.

While students find Changez’s actions ostensibly anti-American, toward the end of the novel, they realize that Changez is not an enemy of the United States. I explain to students that the United States Changez claims he is in love with at the beginning of the novel, therefore, is not the one that excludes South Asian Muslims and looks back to its past; instead, it is the one that recognizes its origins in immigration and is responsive to the interconnected contemporary world, characterized by diversity and heterogeneity and mobility of people and their cultures and religions. To make this point evident, I ask students to consider the love triangle between Changez, Erica, and Erica’s dead lover, Chris, as a political allegory.¹

As reflected in the names of the characters, Erica represents America, Chris represents Christianity and America's past, and Changez, the non-white immigrant, represents the changing demographic landscape of the United States. Although Changez and Erica fall in love soon after the death of her first and longtime boyfriend, Chris, whom she describes as having "an Old World appeal" (Hamid 27), they are able to have sex only when Changez asks her to pretend that he is Chris.

Once we read Erica as contemporary America, Chris as old-world white America, and Changez as the changing demographic landscape of the United States, the contemporary reality, students can decipher the allegorical meaning the novel suggests—the failure of the melting-pot notion of multiculturalism, which tries to contain multiplicities only on its own terms. Erica (America) can allow Changez, a South Asian immigrant, to cross her borders only if he assimilates to old-world America (i.e., if he becomes Chris) and completely erases his ethnic identity. To further prove this point, I direct students to Erica's manuscript, which her mother gives to Changez after her disappearance. As he reads the manuscript, Changez notices that he is not a part of Erica's story; she found her past memories more valuable than Changez. Erica (and thus, allegorically, America) is unable to accept the present reality—as illustrated by her inability to make Changez a part of her story. But her attempt to escape from the present in order to live in a long-lost past results in a tragedy. Erica's suicide suggests that her longing for the white Anglo-European world is simply impossible to attain in twenty-first-century America, where diverse immigrants keep and maintain their ethnic and cultural identities. Here I tell students that perhaps acceptance of Changez could have rescued Erica from the conundrum of the past, enabling her to move forward and enjoy her new life and the changing world.

This discussion helps students understand that Hamid's novel allegorically suggests the need in the twenty-first century for the United States to move forward—instead of turning back "into myths of [its] own difference, assumptions about [its] own superiority" (Hamid 165). The novel points out these new possibilities mainly through its allusion to Joseph Conrad's Kurtz waiting for Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. Changez tells his story to the American interlocutor for the first time. His narrative shows that he clearly knew that the American was a CIA agent on a special mission. But why, I ask students to consider, does Changez trust and tell his story to the American? Does the American interlocutor believe his story, particularly his assertion that he is a "lover of America"? Hamid does not

answer these crucial questions explicitly in the novel, and students come up with different answers. But I remind them to consider the most important clue to the above questions: Changez's confession to the American interlocutor that he was "like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlow" (182). Here I briefly summarize the plot of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, assuming that the majority of students have not read the novella. I then discuss how considering Hamid's use of a literary allusion from *Heart of Darkness* can help us understand Changez's decision to tell his story to the American interlocutor because he already knew that he was on a list of suspects—for his "admittedly intemperate remarks," blaming America for inflicting "death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries" and frightening "so many people so far away" (182)—and the interlocutor was a CIA agent on a mission, sent to him, as Marlow had been sent to find Kurtz. The narrative situation, however, is reversed in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: it is the visiting Marlow who narrates the story in *Heart of Darkness*; in Hamid's novel, it is Changez who tells his story to the American visitor.

Marlow and the American are sent to Kurtz and Changez, respectively, but the parallels do not end there. Additionally, both Kurtz and Changez are rebels who resist the expectations imposed on them: Kurtz abandons his company's orders and builds his own empire among natives of Congo, and Changez refuses to serve corporate America. The reader doubts whether the American interlocutor, who embodies Marlow, will carry Changez's story to the United States and introduce Changez not as an "enemy" but as a "lover of America" because there is a suspicion that he might assassinate Changez. Nevertheless, what is important is that, unlike Marlow, who tells the story of Kurtz and Africans from an Orientalist perspective, Changez tells his story from a non-Western perspective, thereby illuminating for students several stereotypes and misunderstandings about Pakistanis and Muslims in the American imagination. Changez particularly urges the American "not [to] imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins" (Hamid 183).

Teaching South Asian diasporic literary texts such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, written in the wake of 9/11, offers us a new way to reconceptualize Asian American literary studies by exploring overlaps between South Asian and Asian American studies. Although Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* narrates Changez's personal story, his personal story becomes universal in that it reflects the predicament of South Asians living in the United States and beyond in the post-9/11 era. Changez

does not conform to the traditional notion of Asian American identity based on historical and cultural knowledge practices of East Asians. Instead, Changez can be understood as a new Asian American subject, a Muslim immigrant born in Pakistan, whose identity is still in the making. As Lisa Lowe compellingly argues, "Rather than considering 'Asian American identity' as a fixed, established given, perhaps we can consider instead 'Asian American cultural practices' that produce identity; the processes that produce such identity are never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material differences" (64). Understood in this light, Changez's identity represents an Asian American identity influenced by the shifting social and political circumstances of a post-9/11 world, circumstances that render that identity in a constant state of flux and evolution. These shifting social circumstances and relations in the post-9/11 United States, as Ono argues, are the minimum requirements needed to reconceptualize the field of Asian American studies (448). Ono reminds us that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are an opportunity to rethink the parameters of the field and to understand the complexity of all that Asian American studies represents (448). In this context, I suggest that teaching *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in ethnic studies courses can help us reconceptualize Asian American studies by examining the ways in which the global war on terror and Islamophobia within and beyond the United States have changed the face of Asian American studies and conceptions of Asian American identity. It can also help us renew the foundational social justice and civil rights agendas at the origins of Asian American studies in today's shifting social, racial, and political circumstances.

Note

1. A number of critics have already pointed out the allegorical meanings of the names, reading Erica as America, Chris as Christopher Columbus or Christ, Changez as representative of the demographic changes in the United States due to new non-white immigrants, and Underwood Samson as corporate America (e.g., Chakravorty; Hartnell; Morey). But I interpret these names allegorically to explore our understanding of a new Asian American identity (and the changing conceptions of American identity) in an era of transnational connections and in the context of the global war on terror.

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