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Title: Post-9/11 Fiction: The provocative narrator as a vehicle for reader response

Research Question: In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, how effective is the form of narration of Mohsin Hamid in influencing the interpretation of his thematic ideas?

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Introduction

On September 11th, 2001, two iconic American towers were reduced to mere rubble, inspiring a whole generation of post-9/11 literature. Of these, one was *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a uniquely transgressive novel penned by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid. Hamid's book details a conversation at a restaurant in Lahore between a Pakistani "Changez", who is only known by his first name, and an anonymous American man. Changez recounts his life to the American, detailing his undergraduate study abroad at Princeton, work at a valuation firm called Underwood Samson, and his return to Pakistan after facing relentless discrimination post-9/11.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, in essence, is composed of two elements: Changez the narrator, and the structure of his narration. Then, **in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, how effective is the form of narration of Mohsin Hamid in influencing the interpretation of his thematic ideas?** Hamid uses a dramatic monologue style, famously employed in works such as *Ulysses* and Robert Browning's poems. Dramatic monologues generally require a speaker, who is not the poet, to give a speech to an audience which reveals his or her own personal traits. Within *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it manifests as an extended address by the first-person narrator to a silent audience. Sarah Ilott describes *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in this manner:

Changez is the speaker; the unnamed American provides an audience; Changez reveals the change in character that he has

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undergone over the years; Changez's monologue suggests an interplay between himself and the American; dramatic action ranges from global terror to personal assault and private love and loss; and in the present Changez and his acquaintance drink and dine together. (Ilott)

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is noteworthy in its encapsulation of the dramatic monologue by displacing the usually implied audience—the reader—with the American man. Later, it will be shown that this property effects a higher level of reader involvement in constructing meaning. Furthermore, the politics of Changez's and the American's conversation prepares the novel excellently for a postcolonial reading. Postcolonialism is a school of literary criticism which presumes that the victors of past power struggles—the colonizers—have maintained control over the historical canon, with the colonized only having recently gained a voice through literature (Brizee, Tompkins and Chernouski). This novel exhibits several postcolonialist characteristics, including an examination of economics, education, and culture as factors that create a power differential between nations. Furthermore, Hamid's novel discusses thematic ideas such as identity and race, both of which are influenced by the form of narration. It is important to take a structured approach to this analysis, beginning from each diegetic level alongside a discussion of the reliability of Hamid's narrator, and finally concluding with the purpose of this form through a postcolonialist analysis.

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Changez repeatedly displays his importance as the narrator within a reader-centric model of thematic interpretation. His existence at each level of the narrative, called the diegetic level, is also key to plot development. Overall, it can be shown that Hamid's use of a conversational narrative style between Changez and the American instructs the reader to initially interpret thematic ideas with suspicion and cultural subjectivity, but then to consider more balanced perspectives within a greater postcolonialist framework of global politics.

Body Paragraphs

An analysis of diegetic levels within *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reveals an unusual subordination of plot from the diegetic level to the extradiegetic. Diegesis ("narration" or "narrative"), as elaborated upon by Plato and Aristotle, is the concept of a story that is told by the narrator (Halliwell). Diegetic levels thus refer to the levels at which these stories exist, owing to the fact that a story can recursively exist inside another story (Guillemette and Lévesque). Baseer and Alvi have previously outlined three levels of diegesis in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: the extradiegetic level (i.e. external to the story itself) of Changez's recount to the silent American, the diegetic level of Changez's study at Princeton University, and finally the metadiegetic levels of Jim and Erica's life stories (Baseer and Alvi). Although they note the specific levels of diegesis, they do not attempt to speculate upon the relationship between each level. Indeed, like most stories, the diegetic level of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* contains most of the plot. His recounts of his life from studying at Princeton to leaving the United States develop his character as a shrewd and now-disillusioned Pakistani. Key

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elements of plot, exposition and climax, are exemplified by his progression from an academic to a professional career and the events of 9/11 respectively. Most of the of the thematic development happens at this level with Changez's identity struggles between Pakistani and American, along with the post-9/11 racial profiling of Muslims in America. At first glance, this novel seems to follow a standard pattern of a narrator reflecting on his past.

However, extending Baseer and Alvi's brief analysis, this novel is unusual in the fact that the reader has limited knowledge of the extradiegetic level. While they know of the conversation and its location, at no point is the identity of either the American or Changez revealed to the reader. Also, Changez only identifies the American by his "*bearing*"—a loose term that perhaps alludes to the "boldness" most associated with American qualities of liberty, individualism, and free will (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 1). Indeed, this mysterious atmosphere causes the reader to become acutely aware of the present circumstances surrounding Changez's diegetic recount, alerting them to the tension between both parties. A separation now exists between the diegetic dialogue and the reader themselves. An analysis of the functions of each diegetic level will demonstrate that this quality significantly affects the interpretation of thematic ideas within *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

At the extradiegetic level, Changez's exclusive first-person narration causes the audience, who is assumed to be Western, to interpret thematic ideas with his context in mind. The development of his identity is focused on the struggles of an elite Princeton-

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educated Pakistani's assimilation into the United States. Changez finds that initially, he successfully becomes a proud American, "I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 51). However, as time progressed, he slowly falls out of love with corporate life at Underwood Samson, "I know only that I did not wish to blend in with the army of clean-shaven youngsters who were my coworkers" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 148). In the end, he faces an identity crisis, "I was not certain where I belonged— in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither—" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 168). His journey as a man searching for his own identity is symbolic of a coming-of-age tale, with a theme being that one can never truly shed their home identity. The context of narration from a highly-educated Pakistani represents the 'other' perspective in postcolonial theory, which considers him to be a hitherto silenced party in global dialogue. Here, he is given an exclusive voice to narrate his whole story to the extent of silencing the American 'colonizer' voice. In fact, the American is only ever heard from through paraphrased quotations such as, "Creepy, you say?" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 71). As such, the focus of interpretation is based off the narrator's context within this new world order as the 'colonized'—Pakistan, in this case—become developing nations with their own stories to tell. The ironically silenced American man is also symbolic of the audience, as Changez addresses him using the pronoun "you". In addition, the novel is written in the English language, which is the language of the colonizer. Thus, it is plausible that Hamid is characterizing his audience as the Western people, meaning that this novel represents a dialogue between the West and the "other" nations. Ilott argues that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* sets up an "active readership" framework, wherein the audience is now

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called to judge upon the contents of the novel, no longer being the passive receiver of ideas (Illott). Henceforth the audience is called upon to interpret thematic developments in context of Changez's background, Pakistan's position in the world order, and the audience's own cultural identity.

At the same time, Changez's problematic value system sets him up as an unreliable narrator, forcing his audience's judgments to be culturally biased. Wayne C. Booth states that a narrator is "reliable when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (Booth 158-159). However, Zerweck extends this definition, arguing that the narrator's unreliability is also determined by the readers' culturally determined frame of reference and not only by the author's norms (Zerweck). In this case, any anti-American value system, whether it be biased against American values or its people, could be perceived as problematic by an American audience, and most likely the rest of the Western world. By synthesizing these two definitions, it's possible to observe Changez's unreliability arising from a suspicion that he may be concealing such a bias or misrepresenting the facts, or both, to ideologically mislead the audience. The most prominent example of Changez's problematic values is his reaction to the events of 9/11, "I stared as one— and then the other— of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And I then I *smiled*" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 83). In his recounts, he further selects details that pose himself as an enemy of America, such as advocating for distancing from the U.S., "made it my mission on campus to advocate a disengagement from your country" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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203). His words, with italics emphasizing his offensive acts, serve to seriously discredit his default good moral character, robbing him of his reputation entirely in the eyes of a Western audience.

Baseer and Alvi hold a slightly different view, claiming that Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a reliable narrator due to his personal witness of the events of 9/11 and the consistency of his recount with the reader's own personal knowledge of the tragic event (Baseer and Alvi). It should be noted that this is not necessarily a rebuttal, as the viewpoint in this paper does not claim that Changez must be lying about the events that occurred. Instead, this paper's claim is that Changez's unreliability is in his subjectivity in interpreting events, often making statements that disparage America such as referring to "your country's constant interference in the affairs of others" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 176). Most likely the difference stems from the various definitions of "reliability" that exist, where Kenan's definition used by Baseer and Alvi may not necessarily account for culturally determined problematic value systems.

Ilott presents an entirely contradictory argument to Baseer and Alvi. She presents Changez as wholly deceitful and "whose repeated assertions as to the validity of his story only serve to plant the seeds of suspicion that this is not the case". Her evidence is that Changez says, "there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you" (Ilott) (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 173). Additionally, the above sentence is phrased to excluded the case that Changez has lied about everything thus far. While far-fetched, a critical evaluation

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can be made here that Iltis is of British i.e. Western origin, while Baseer and Alvi are both Pakistani, highly supporting the claim that narratological unreliability is a culturally determined phenomenon. This is also by virtue of the fact that there are several sympathetic interpretations of his “repeated assertions [of the story’s validity]”, including a possibly perceived need to prove his credibility to the Western reader. Reliability, it seems, has been left as a choice for the reader.

Combining these analyses, the audience is ultimately forced to actively engage in the process of developing a personal interpretation of the novel beyond Changez’s account. The effect of such a visible bias is that the audience begins to view anti-Western judgments as unfair and start to generate their own pro-Western opinions. In fact, it may elicit responses such as this one from a review by James Lasdun published in *The Guardian*, “By what higher personal virtue does Changez presume to judge?”. Lasdun dismisses Changez’s protest as simple opportunism, as his arguments supposedly have no superior moral basis (Lasdun). On the other hand, it could be said that Changez’s protests are justified as he and his people were wronged. This type of novel-response system is what Hamid had intended, where an intentionally provoking viewpoint drives discussion. The audience is called upon to use their moral compass and entrenched beliefs to judge the novel’s thematic developments, given the absence of a reliable narrator to do so for them.

Furthermore, the use of an extended dramatic monologue at the diegetic level further incentivizes the audience to form a personal opinion by acting as a window to

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Changez's inner thoughts. For example, within the thematic idea of racism, a clear development in the novel is that racism only serves to alienate and antagonize the discriminated. This is shown through Changez's monologues, "My entrance elicited looks of concern from many of my fellow passengers. I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty; I tried therefore to be as nonchalant as possible" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 85). Eventually, his feelings develop into resentment as he "reflected that [he] had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world" and that "your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable" (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 177). These sentiments reflect the effects of racial profiling that occurred after the events of 9/11, marginalizing Muslim social groups within the United States. While they might be considered pieces of dialogue, the sheer length of dialogue in this novel (often spanning pages) means they are better considered as dramatic monologues. The audience spends the majority of their time listening to Changez's thoughts, slowly understanding his progression of his identity as part of thematic development.

Given that we are able to see into Changez's thought process, the audience gains deeper insight into how he develops them, and under what context. Within Iltis's active readership framework, the audience is invited to construct their own meaning and give a personal opinion on the effects of racism as it is discussed. Hamid's own description of his dramatic monologue as published in *The Guardian* states:

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a half-conversation spoken to "you" that leaves it to the reader to supply its missing context. So readers end up creating their own versions of what happens in the book...in response to [their] individual inclinations and world views (Hamid, Mohsin Hamid on writing The Reluctant Fundamentalist).

In this case Sarah Ilott has taken Hamid's intentions and formalized it into a system. For example, readers might interpret the novel's treatment of racism as a message that America should not violate others' national sovereignty, considering Changez's reference to such acts as "meddling". Another plausible interpretation is that racism is an unfortunate byproduct of terrorism, if they are particularly unsympathetic to Changez's perceived hardships. Both are opinionated judgments of the thematic development presented. Under normal circumstances, the audience may be more sympathetic to Changez's inner discomfort. However, as Changez has established himself as an enemy of America, the American reader may also be justified in having a culturally biased, unabashedly patriotic judgment on the themes developed in this story. Readers of other cultures may have different opinions depending on their beliefs. Again, this reflects how "the reader" is a volatile concept that can vary depending on geographical location and upbringing. Furthermore, the interpersonal nature of a dramatic monologue's address posits Changez as an individual on the same level as the audience in debate instead of an unimpeachable narrator, and a provoking one too at that. In the end, the audience is lured into engagement, incentivized to form a culturally determined opinion upon the developed themes of the novel.

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While the diegetic narrative entices the audience to form an entrenched, culturally determined perspective, the extradiegetic narration serves to continually destabilize it, forcing the reader to also consider more neutral perspectives. One particular element of interest is the audience address, which continually engages the audience to keep them rational. Hamid chooses to enter and leave the diegetic narrative at strategic moments throughout, often returning to the external conversation. For example, just after Changez reveals his smiling reaction to 9/11, he notes, “I can see that I have offended you, *angered* you even, but I have not, I suspect, entirely *surprised* you” (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 86). In this specific moment, he speculates upon the reader’s expected negative reaction and highlights it through the established American surrogate’s reactions. The narrative makes it evident that Changez’s suspicious nature, which the audience will have become alert to, is wholly intentional as remarked by the lack of surprise. The analytical element of this discourse forces the audience to consider that their thoughts have been anticipated from the start. The audience must then reconsider what Hamid’s true intentions are, and if it is in provoking them. This kind of awareness will then allow them to consider more neutral and less emotionally biased perspectives.

Another example is after Changez recounts his “*satiated* and *ashamed*” night-time experience with Erica, he remarks, “I suspect you are looking at me with a degree of revulsion; certainly I would look at *you* in such a manner if *you* had just told me what I have told you” (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 122). This scene in particular represents another development of identity as Changez takes on the role of Chris to

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satisfy Erica, an act symbolic of his assimilation into the United States. Ilott has remarked that this scene also connotes the act of rape, which is an act of highly questionable moral value, especially to an American audience. She remarks the following characteristics, “Erica’s passivity, accompanied by the suggestive language of “overlook[ing] the growing wound” and the force required to enter her, signifies rape, which suggests that the narrator is in fact disguising reality” (Ilott). Furthermore, Hamid’s italicized emphasis on “if *you* had just told me” is Changez’s emphasis of the difference in standards between Pakistanis and Americans. The implication is that an American committing rape is much more shocking, owing to the reader’s overarching racist biases that automatically presume Pakistanis as being generally less civilized according to Western standards. Hamid chose here to return to addressing the audience’s obvious reaction, given the disgust with which rape is regarded with in the West. The audience understands that the narrator is not only aware of the possible immorality of his actions, but also aware of their reaction. They must now again reconsider their emotionally charged perspective and perhaps discover the intended connection to the global political context. The overall effect is that the reader is forced to think rationally and recognize their own emotional responses. Just as the diegetic narrative calls for the reader to judge, its frame calls for evaluating that judgment.

Arguably, the ultimate purpose of the multileveled narrative is in alerting the reader to reexamine the novel’s plot and themes, and to an extent the world around them, through an educative postcolonialist context. The narrative is allegorical almost to the point of being fantasy, a fact noted by Ilott. The name “Erica” is a subset of the

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name “America”; Changez symbolizes “Change”, whether that be his or also the reader’s. His troubled relationship with Erica ending in her mysterious departure mirrors his, or rather, Pakistan’s relationship with America. He meets “Juan Baptista” (John the Baptist), who guides him to find his true identity (Ilott). There is also the allusion to Pablo Neruda, famous in his own right for radical views. In the end Changez realizes his true role: “I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war” (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 173). Through these varied examples, it can be seen that the novel reflects a deeper literary context than that of just 9/11. Within a postcolonial reading, it is probable that Hamid wishes the reader, both American and not, to reexamine their relationship with America, just as Changez has. Changez is considered part of the ‘alterity’ i.e. part of the different other. Meanwhile, in the English language, Western-generated literature dominates the canon in a way that reinforces the power that these past colonizers have over other nations. Hamid does not attempt to evoke sympathy for this past hegemony, presumably as that would only bolster the notion of lingering Western superiority. Instead, his narrative, which invites the Western reader to use active judgment, is a didactic approach that introduces the unequal relationship between America and other nations. By the effects of narration noted above, the Western reader can consider two perspectives: an entrenched one of Western righteousness, formed by their identity as part of the superior group and their experience with history as it is written by Western historians. The other perspective defines the West, in this case America, as yet still the colonizer, but which now brings in

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“the best and the brightest of [international citizens]” to be educated the American way to use them against their own countries (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 4). By value of Changez’s unreliability, Hamid’s text persuades the audience of neither viewpoint, but leaves it to the reader’s own judgment.

Through this newly derived context, Hamid uses the narration to ask the reader to ponder key issues including the systematic disruption of the world order by the United States. This is most evident as Changez reveals the reason he left America, “As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority” (Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 190). This address represented the culmination of a long story in which Changez recognized the true face of America which was uncovered by the terrorist act on 9/11. Here the reader is presented with a dilemma: by believing him, they accept his image of America as the colonizer who oppresses other nations for its own benefit. However, by not believing him, they play into the same image that he has constructed. The narration’s purpose is to make this choice more lucid, for while the diegetic narrative constructs the context of delivery, the extradiegetic narrative cautions the reader to consider other perspectives in a highly political issue. While Changez’s anti-American perspective may be unconvincing, the main purpose has been accomplished: Hamid has succeeded in having the reader perform a meta-analysis on their own views and reconsider the origin of their beliefs.

Conclusion

Through a unique approach to storytelling, Hamid captures a highly politically charged issue and selects an appropriate narration style to guide the audience through a process of judgment and evaluation. While his ultimate purpose may be to communicate a conception of the current world order, he selects a perspective as to represent a different side to what an English novel considered part of the Western canon would call for. His story lacks the usual elements of sympathy, guilt, and remembrance with which 9/11 is usually recalled with, but evokes a suspenseful thrill through ambiguity, delving deep into the concepts of fundamentalism and American values. In response to the question, **“In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, how effective is the form of narration of Mohsin Hamid in influencing the interpretation of his thematic ideas?”**, it can then be seen that the narration forces the culturally biased reader to maintain active readership in interpreting the thematic ideas. Hamid’s narrator is not the least bit reliable; in fact, some readers, as we have established, will completely disregard the supposed fictional truths of Changez’s story. However, through careful choices in the extradiegetic level of narration, Hamid succeeds in communicating the key elements which influence the audience’s thematic interpretations of identity, racism, and the overall power relationship between foreign nations and the United States. In fact, his novel is more relevant than ever; the United States faces a growing threat from the tension between certain supremacist groups and those they consider the “other”. Changez’s voice, while radical, reminds us all of the value of open-mindedness and international unity in times of crisis. If nothing else,

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Hamid reminds us that a text's meaning is not only inherent to what is written, but also to the context of delivery and the audience.

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