The Misfortunes of a Deviant: Global Aspects in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Speaking of globalization sometimes urges one to think about transgressing or crossing borders, adapting to new cultures and exploring new domains. However, globalization also has a reverse side to it: just as it may be, and often is, a positive, beneficial process, it can also marginalize, preclude, and alienate the very same people it so often includes. This short synopsis thus aims at de-emphasizing the affirmative aspects of globalization by examining the misfortunes of a deviant in an absurd pseudo-globalized world. Starting with a short Camusian analysis of Changez, the protagonist in the art soliloquy (or perhaps more accurately, dramatic monologue) *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Moshin Hamid (2007)[1], this paper will set the stage for a discussion about how the deviant, or the *stranger*[2], acts when he or she is in the process of being 'globalized'. What happens on the fringe of society when the stranger realizes and outlives the dissimilarity that divides and estranges? Opening up for a debate that scrutinizes the psychology and mindset that define the stranger, I will draw on essays by Madan Sarup[3] and Amar Acheraïou[4] as well as lead the way to a potentially broader discussion on parallels between the filmed novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Camus' *The Fall*[5].

Despite the narrative's overt ending, many of the readers of this short novel most likely get the sense that Changez is going to make it as he finally returns to his homeland, Pakistan. However, in spite of the fact that Hamid somehow fails to shape Changez as a round character who, at least to some level, may seem like a sympathetic person, there is still a certain ambiguity related to this character. Changez *is* thus sympathetic in many ways towards Erica; yet he is, for better or worse, disloyal to his employer, Jim, who nevertheless himself resembles the stereotype of a cynical, postmodern capitalist. An easy or straightforward way of analyzing Changez is perhaps to obviously state that he is a lovable, insecure left-wing closet socialist, who finally breaks out. Yet there is much more depth to this

[1] Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, (Penguin Books, London: 2007).
[2] 'Strangers' in terms of Madan Sarup, cf. footnote below.
[3] Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, hand-out.
[4] Amar Acheraïou, *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization*, (Palgrave Macmillan, New York_ 2011).
[5] Albert Camus, *The Fall*, (Vintage Books, New York:1956).

character, if we draw on the parallels to Camus' work *The Fall*. Hamid has, on more than one occasion, alleged that he was inspired by Camus in writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.[6]

In order to examine the similarities and/or allusions between the two works, we need briefly to look to Camus' work, which itself is inspired by Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*. In Camus' novel, we follow the penitent lawyer Jean-Baptiste Clamence (perhaps an allusion to John the Baptist, and in Hamid's novel personified partly in the character Juan-Bautista), who in Camus' frame story (set up as a dramatic monologue as well) unfolds his life story to a, as the story develops, demoralized listening companion. The story is set in a bar in Amsterdam, and we quickly discover that Jean-Baptiste's story is a one-dimensional and at times narcissistic tale about his own fall from grace. He is on a detour that starts with him being a talented lawyer when he sees a shadowy figure falling into the Seine from Pont Des Art in Paris. Blaming himself implicitly for not having intervened, he falls into alcoholism in order to forget and alleviate his remorse. By taking on the role of penitent lawyer (or judge-penitent), he adapts by accusing himself first, only to judge others in the same regard. The essential part in relation to Hamid's work is that Camus' Jean Baptiste manages not to find pleasure in the absurd as for example Sisyphus did, but to find a place in a world of greed, capitalism and evil all around him.

Now, how is this useful in relation to Hamid's novel in general? Well, to begin with, we can consider Hamid's approach as a Camusian scenario where certain things are turned upside down. First, we learn that Changez, the protagonist, does not, like many Camusian protagonists, find happiness in the absurd. In contrast, Changez experiences that his job, which turns out for him to be absurd, does not make him happy. In fact, it seems as if Changez, although his at times apologetic, rambling story sometimes boils over, despises almost everything about America. In spite of his final remark that he does not "imagine that … Americans are all undercover assassins" (209), we easily get the feeling that he projects the stereotypical death trap that Muslims have notoriously been subject to onto American(s); namely by applying a model of prejudice similar to that which right wing Americans often

[6] Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/21/book-club-reluctant-fundamentalist-hamid> and <http://bookcritics.org/blog/archive/critical_outakes_mohsin_hamid_on_camus_immigration_and_love> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/magazine/15wwlnQ4.t.html?_r=0>

conveniently use to condemn extremist Muslims. This kind of mechanism, which almost has the same implications and undertones of a *fatwa*, thus fails to create a constructive, unilateral nomenclature that can link the two different cultures: that of the bearded and that of the smooth face.

Where Camus' work *does* appear to be significant and applicable is when Changez encounters Juan-Bautista. Here *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reaches philosophical heights, and Changez is finally forced to realize that his life in America is, for better or worse, reduced to a state of epistemological nihilism. As Changez' ontological crisis progresses, specific things happen: Erica vanishes, the protagonist's hatred directed against America increases, and his bond with Pakistan is re-established. We learn that the Western (American) reality is, from Changez' point of view, a gilded, hollow construct that is complicit with Western imperialism. Changez himself is reduced to "a modern day janissary" (173) in a world where "finance [is] a primary means by which the American *empire* exercise[s] its power" (177, italics are mine). The undertones imply that there is a complicity between knowledge and power, just as Foucault realizes throughout his extensive work in that field in particular. This complicity is interesting since it challenges the way we as Westerners think and act. This is, in my opinion, one of the few places where Hamid reaches further than in his general debate that tends to deconstruct the binary oppositions between East and West. However, it remains debatable whether he succeeds completely in his mission. One can obviously beg to differ with those who say he does, simply because the novel is too slanted and angled. Still, the novel manages to question globalization and postcolonialism as it ends overtly.

One thing that is hardly debatable is the position as a *stranger* that Changez seems to obtain during the novel. This aspect is intriguing because the stranger, as Madan Sarup accentuates, is a ambiguous character as well as one who traverses the frontier, which is "always [an] ambivalent [place]" (Sarup, 7). Sarup's thorough definition of a stranger includes more information, some irrelevant to this synopsis. Yet what is remarkable is how the stranger is also stigmatized, just as Changez deliberately is by letting his beard grow. This stigmatization creates, according to Sarup quoting Zygmunt Bauman in his essay, among other things, an "artificial order … [which] by necessity [is] asymmetrical and thereby dichotomizing" (Sarup, 9). This order is bound to be destructive for the stranger, who is

marginalized and alienated. In Hamid's novel, this is evident when Changez lets his beard grow and allows his façade to crack. As he is forced to reveal his original ego, it is true to say that Changez almost 'invites' his peers to dislike him. In a post 9/11 era, it could to be rather ostensible that the same prejudices Changez imposes on others are thrown right back at him with an opposite sign. However, Changez takes the consequence and abandons his job and 'flees' the country.

This may all sound as if it is quite natural for American or Westerners to have aversions towards Changez. Yet the novel's rationale is not as simple as that. There are, of course, also romanticized wefts of Pakistan from where the narrator narrates the frame story. These are redundant to mention here, as they are innumerable, but what is quite essential is the fact that America also preserves some of her innocence through Erica. Erica, the one who appears to be a soft and gentle embodiment of America, thus manages to stand isolated as a guiltless character. She has possibly never really loved Changez, true, but merely used him as a stand-in for her former boyfriend. Still, she is portrayed as trustworthy, frail and tender (everything post 9/11 America was not during the Bush era), and she thus adds to America a swell and needed entirety; one may say that she fills in the gap of what America in real life was missing: compassion, understanding and faith in the good in strangers. Yet one can also plausibly argue that Erica throughout the novel, as the personification of the U.S. that she arguably can be read as, does not exactly progress in the same manner as America does: when America rearms and tension increases after 9/11, Erica goes into isolation and ends up at the asylum. This break with a holistic 'game plan' from Hamid's hand is perhaps a slightly egregious blunder as the missing Erica (who apparently has killed herself) also puts an end to the American innocence. If that is the intention, the novel certainly does not celebrate globalization – it merely detaches itself from the globalization debate as a mediocre attack on America as a hegemonic institution.

Having said that, one can question how constructive are the global voices that come from either the interstices or from more elitist writers. Amar Acheraïou, a critical writer on globalization, postcolonialism and hybridity, ascertains that globalization, which he defines as "characterized by intense transnational interconnectedness in the fields of economics and finance, politics, technology, communications, and culture" (Acheraïou, 163), is "an unsettling, elusive phenomenon that resists easy categorization" (*ibid*.). His lengthy argument is thus that

globalization, just as hybridity, has become a fixed discourse itself that is shaped and executed by the elite. Therefore, there is no room left for the subaltern, and these binary discourses are quintessentially themselves left as hegemonic rhetoric instead of counterhegemonic oratory. Adding this to Hamid's novel, we get a mash-up of failed globalization personified in Changez, who gets to represent the reluctance, not only of a fundamentalist, but of a one-dimensional character, who in my opinion does not contribute constructively to the global debate. He is simply a supplement, adding to but not adding up, in Derrida's terms. Changez hence stands as an ambiguous, flat character that can be interpreted in two (or more) ways: as a diasporic wanderer who adds to the globalization discourse or, perhaps more likely, as a reluctant fundamentalist who remains hostile to the selfsame melting pot that he once admired.

To sum up, the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be read in more than one way. However, it is highly debatable whether it is a constructive read and whether Changez at all contributes constructively to the rhetoric used in globalization discourse. One of the main issues with the novel is consequently its missing inference; it ends overtly, yes, but still it lacks weight. Obviously, it does not conclude anything at the end; however, even that the missing conclusion *is* a hint to the reader that globalization remains an equivocal and problematic discourse; this does not blaze the trail. As a result, the novel stands back, not alone, as a judgmental piece of literature that in the words of the selfsame Camus it apparently is inspired by outlives the phrase that "people hasten to judge in order not to be judged themselves."

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