



We Can No Longer Trust: Suspicion and Vulnerability in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* attracts great attention of both common readers and critics because it reflects upon the 9/11 attacks from the perspective of Pakistani people. This essay focuses on suspicion that runs through the story and attempts to examine the suspicious mentality behind the 9/11 attacks and the so-called war on terror. Humans' suspicion results from their shared vulnerability and might do more serious harm to one another. The novel explores the vulnerability of all people that live in the shadow of violence and proposes an equal conversation as a possible solution to remove suspicion and strengthen mutual understanding. By comparing the conversation at the core of the story and another one that happens between Changez and Juan-Bautista, the essay finds that the conversation is a doomed failure if people and their countries just care about their own interests and ignore the shared destiny of all humanity.

Key words: Mohsin Hamid; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; Suspicion; Vulnerability

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INTRODCUTION

Writers around the globe have recorded and reflected the 9/11 events from different perspectives over the past

decades, and the Pakistan-born writer Mohsin Hamid is one of them. However, he differs from the majority because his second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* published in 2007 is not told from the perspective of Americans but told by a young Pakistani to an unnamed American in old Lahore. Hamid's novel has attracted a large amount of international attention since its publication. It was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2007 and was adapted into a film directed by Mira Nair in 2012.

In this international bestseller, the character-narrator Changez tells his life story to an unidentified American in a café in his homeland Lahore. Changez was born into an upper-middle-class family in Pakistan and received higher education at Princeton. He was one of the brightest students there and thus got a promising job at the valuation firm Underwood Samson after graduation in 2001. He stood out at his work in New York and fell in love with an attractive American girl called Erica. However, the 9/11 attacks changed everything. Rage swept over America, Changez faced hostility towards his country and himself, and his relationship with Erica was troubled by her memories about her dead ex-boyfriend Chris. After coming back from Pakistan, Changez grew a beard to show his protest and highlight his identity, which intensified his conflicts with the local Americans and led his colleagues to isolate him in the workplace. After his last task in Chile, Changez quit his job, left New York and returned to his homeland to become a university lecturer.

The novel has been insightfully discussed by critics. Elena Ortells Monton believes that this novel reminds the readers of the forgotten victims of 9/11 and defends "those Muslims and Arab American citizens who suffered--and are still suffering--the effects of the irrational abhorrence of the other" (2017, p.29). Margaret Scanlan argues that Hamid gives a postcolonial insight into revolutionary violence and indicts the stereotypical connection between

Muslims and terrorists (2010, p.266). Joseph Darda regards the novel as a “critical global fiction”, which refers to “literary works that contest the forces inhibiting global understanding and advance international coalitions through this struggle itself”, and claims that Hamid’s challenge to the war on terror does not aim to breed anti-American hostility but to show international solidarity (2014, p.108). All these critics express concern about the victims of the war on terror and reach an agreement that Hamid goes further than those writers who merely focus on American victims of terrorism. Nevertheless, they neglect that there is one thing in common behind terrorism and the war on terror: suspicion. It is suspicion that causes the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror and hurts both Americans and Muslims. The whole story is marked by suspicion, from the meeting between those two strangers to the open ending. Therefore, this essay analyzes the suspicion that runs through the novel and its consequent harm to individuals and the whole international society. It argues that when nobody can trust and be trusted, everyone is vulnerable and society is bound to be unstable. The novel offers a possible solution to suspicion, which is an equal conversation, and it reflects that without considering the shared interests of all humans, the conversation is doomed to failure, and suspicion will continue.

1. SUSPICION: NOBODY AND NOTHING TO BE TRUSTED

Hamid’s story begins with suspicion. It is normal for one to be suspicious when hearing or reading such words, “EXCUSE ME, SIR, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America” (Hamid, 2007, p.1). The unnamed sir and Hamid’s readers are understandable if they are suspicious of the identity and the purpose of the speaker, who is the protagonist and also the narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez. The suspicion that runs through the story permeated the American society after the 9/11 attacks occurred. David J. LaPorte, author of *Paranoid: Exploring Suspicion from the Dubious to the Delusional* believes that the 9/11 attacks are one important factor that “has likely contributed to our levels of distrust” (2015, SO WHAT? section, para.7)¹, and along with its aftermath, it “aroused many a paranoid’s suspicions” (2015, ANTHRAX AND THE MAIL section, para.1)².

¹ David J. LaPorte’s *Paranoid: Exploring Suspicion from the Dubious to the Delusional* is an e-book published by Prometheus Books in 2015, and is available on the following website: <https://b-ok.org/book/2603415/bb4da1>.

² On the impacts of the 9/11 attacks on the American psyche, see LaPorte’s chapter 12, especially the section “LIFE IN AMERICA POST-9/11”.

In the novel, since the 9/11 attacks, Americans’ suspicion has been so excessive that it has mutated into paranoia, “the unfounded belief that someone is out to hurt us” (D. Freeman & J. Freeman, 2008, p.8).³ They were furious, worried and extremely suspicious of every possible threat, including Changez. The authority was on high alert: before he boarded the flight from Manila to New York and after he arrived, he was treated in an unexpectedly cautious way at the airports: almost naked frisking and frequent inquiries and checks at immigration. The ordinary people were unfriendly and aggressive: in a parking lot, an American stranger rushed to Changez and insulted him with such a curse as “Fucking Arab” (Hamid, 2007, p.117). Changez was not alone, but to some extent, he was more fortunate than those discriminated Muslims stopped outside the business world in America and his compatriots and other Muslims who experienced violent attacks or even disappeared:

Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people’s houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning, perhaps into shadowy detention centres for questioning or worse. (Hamid, 2007, p.94)

However, for paranoid Americans, Changez grew from a potential threat to an intolerable danger when he grew a beard. Beard served as a form of protest and a symbol of identity for him, which he knew that Americans would not miss or ignore, as he said, “I realized how deep was the suspicion I had engendered in my colleagues over these past few—bearded and resentful—weeks” (Hamid, 2007, p.160). His beard alarmed his colleagues, caused him to be isolated in the office and incurred verbal abuses of strangers on the subway. Americans’ overreaction to Changez’s beard reflects that their fear of threat has become paranoia. The 9/11 attacks undermined their sense of security so that they had to depend on their stereotypes of terrorists to discover threats and take all possible precautions. The war on terror launched by the United States is one striking and extreme example. As LaPorte states, “[p]aranoid people tend to have an edgy defensiveness about them” (2015, GETTING ALONG WITH OTHERS section, para.7), the country trapped in paranoia took more than defensive measures by forcefully mounting offensive attacks to escape any potential danger.

While Americans and their country were extremely suspicious or paranoid of Muslims and Muslim countries, the latter shared the same feelings and were afraid of attacks from 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. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions

³ See D. Freeman and J. Freeman, especially the second chapter, for an insightful analysis of the meaning of paranoia.

of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. (Hamid, 2007, p.168)

Pakistani people had a horrible suspicion that their homeland would undergo revenge attacks from raging America. Changez's mother was frightened and tried to stop him from returning to Pakistan. The levels of Changez's suspicion rose when he watched "ghostly night-vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan for what was described as a daring raid on a Taliban command post" (Hamid, 2007, pp.99-100) and witnessed America "giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia" with flags flying everywhere and uniforms signifying military power (Hamid, 2007, pp.114-115). He could not trust America as he did in the first two months. In that period, he believed that "Pakistan had pledged its support to the United States, the Taliban's threats of retaliation were meaningless, my family would be just fine" (Hamid, 2007, p.94). With the sense of insecurity getting stronger and tensions between him and Americans getting obvious, Changez's faith in the American dream was shattered. Before the 9/11 attacks, he had wished to build a brand-new life in New York, and shortly after the event, he still wanted to believe the possibility. However, his efforts not to disbelieve were in vain when he frequently encountered the hostility from Americans. He realized that he would never become an American no matter how well he acted and spoke like them and that he was just "a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire" like those "whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain" (Hamid, 2007, p.152). By resorting to violence to deal with the paranoia caused by violent attacks, America destroys the sense of security of people from other countries and makes them trapped in the same nightmare of attacks and suffer from the same paranoia of every potential threat, which demonstrates the unreliability and falsehood of the so-called American dream and the selfishness and terrorist nature of the war on terror.

The mutual distrust and suspicion in the international society existed before the 9/11 attacks and in a sense, gave rise to the event. Other countries and their people had good reasons to bear grudges against "the manner in which America conducted itself in the world" (Hamid, 2007, p.156). America's "constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable" (Hamid, 2007, p.156) and incurred suspicion and resentment of other countries. Changez pointed out that "Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role" (Hamid, 2007, p.156). People outside America have always been paranoid about America's interference in their own countries. Before the 9/11 attacks, Changez traveled to Manila for business, in which he intentionally acted and spoke like an American and saw "an undisguised hostility"

towards him in the expression of a driver of a jeepney (Hamid, 2007, p.66). The 9/11 attacks are far from a non-specific raid but can be traced back to the sense of threat and sense of insecurity brought by America to other countries that used to be subjected to its superiority and manipulation.

The global crisis of confidence that was intensified by the events of 9/11, and its aftermath has not ceased yet and still haunts the involved countries. This ongoing suspicion can be detected in Changez's meeting with the American stranger, which is "marked by distrust" (Darda, 2014, p.111). The American listener is "silent" in the novel but readers can sense his suspicion of Changez and his story from Changez's verbal responses: he was suspicious, vigilant and ill at ease during the conversation. The American guest looked worried and suspicious, attempted to reach under his jacket, recoiled at a passing beggar, showed evident disgust, and clenched his large hand into a fist, while Changez made conscious attempts to earn his trust. From time to time, Changez assured his listener by saying "you can trust me. I am not in the habit of inventing untruths!" (Hamid, 2007, p.152) and "I am confident of the truth of my words" (Hamid, 2007, p.181). Although the novel begins with suspicion, it seems to end with trust: the last sentence of the novel is "Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards." (Hamid, 2007, p.183) Changez claims that he trusts the American man and his kindness, but can we believe? Hamid leaves his readers suspicious of the truth with this smart open ending.

2. VULNERABILITY: FRAGILE INDIVIDUALS AND UNSTABLE SOCIETY

Suspicion, or paranoia, exposes the vulnerability of all individuals. Dangers make individuals increasingly threatened and vulnerable, eliciting suspicion of all possible threats. On the one hand, vulnerability causes suspicion to help prevent dangers; on the other hand, individuals are "vulnerable to all kinds of irrational, unjustified fears—to paranoia, in other words" (Freeman & Freeman, 2008, p.47). That is to say, suspicion, especially excessive suspicion, namely paranoia, can trigger the vulnerability. In his *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid represents the vulnerable individuals in the shadow of violence and the vulnerable countries in the tense international atmosphere.

In the novel, the 9/11 attacks expose that every individual is vulnerable and danger lurks below the surface of a peaceful and promising life. Americans were so worried, fearful and suspicious that they overreacted to all people from other cultural backgrounds by arresting Muslims, damaging mosques and guarding against those possible terrorists with a beard. The country was reduced

to paranoia by the vulnerability, filled with nostalgia and signals of retaliation like “generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as duty and honor” (Hamid, 2007, p.115). America’s vulnerability is explicitly represented by Erica, Changez’s American lover and more importantly, the personification of American nationalism. Erica suffered from severe melancholia because she failed to recover from the loss of her boyfriend Chris. The 9/11 attacks deepened her mood of melancholy and caused her insomnia, making her deeply anxious “[l]ike so many others in the city after the attacks” (Hamid, 2007, p.82). Anxiety and nervousness eventually led her to a recovery clinic. Nevertheless, without a clinic for her country, America committed violence to deal with its anxiety. According to Judith Butler, “Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way” (2004, p.28). Due to its vulnerability to people from other backgrounds, America committed violence, put them at risk, caused their countries severe damage, threatened to “expunge the other” (Butler, 2004, p.29).

As for “the other” like Pakistan and Afghanistan, their people were vulnerable to America’s irrational fears and afraid of its attacks. As a Pakistani working at the U.S., Changez was not only annoyed by the way he was treated in America but also felt worried about the safety of his family in Pakistan and powerless for the weakness and vulnerability of his homeland:

But I worried. I felt powerless; I was angry at our weakness, at our vulnerability to intimidation of this sort from our—admittedly much larger—neighbor to the east. Yes, we had nuclear weapons, and yes, our soldiers would not back down, but we were being threatened nonetheless, and there was nothing I could do about it but lie in my bed, unable to sleep. (Hamid, 2007, p.128)

Unlike America “that has not fought a war on its own soil in living memory, the rare sneak attack or terrorist outrage excepted” (Hamid, 2007, p.127), Pakistan was confronting “a million or so hostile troops who could, at any moment, attempt a full-scale invasion” (Hamid, 2007, p.127) and was too weak and vulnerable to prevent America from establishing military bases in its land. Pakistani people lived a seemingly normal life even though they were so close to the frontier that they heard “the sounds of military helicopters flying low overhead” (Hamid, 2007, p.127). Except for preparations of shotguns and canned food, they could do too little since they were so fragile and vulnerable before the flames of war.

Changez’s vulnerability is complicated by his identity crisis. Whether before or after the 9/11 attacks, he was vulnerable because he never truly knew who he was, as he claimed that one part of him “desire[d] to see America harmed” while the other part of him “was the product of an American university”, “was earning a lucrative American

salary” and “was infatuated with an American woman” (Hamid, 2007, p.73). Before the 9/11 attacks, he disguised himself as an American to gain a sense of accomplishment and the sense of security because he found that the fact that he was born and grew up in Lahore was shameful and made him inferior to others. He hid his Pakistaniness by his suit, his expense account, his Americanized actions, and his American companions. Such thoughts were obvious in his relationship with Erica: he disguised himself as her ex-boyfriend Chris because he realized the fragility of his own identity. However, the vulnerability of his American identity was uncovered by the 9/11 attacks. His instinctive response to the attacks was a smile, which reveals that he failed to identify with America from the bottom of his heart. Ayşem Seval explains: “Changez harboured resentment for American economic dominance as well as the aggressively neoliberal economic values he adopted, both of which ultimately caused his initial reaction to the terrorist attacks: to smile at the collapse of the twin towers” (2017, p.108). His Americanness took the place of his Pakistaniness because America had a dominant position in the international business world and he had to obey the game rules to earn a living in the country. Changez was also ambivalent about his country, especially after the 9/11 attacks. For one thing, he was angry at the weakness of his homeland; for another thing, he was worried about Pakistan and angry over America’s threat and he grew a beard to convey his dissatisfaction and rebellion. The Pakistani migrant has been long torn by the complex interactions with America and Pakistan as these two countries have also been torn by mutual suspicion and constant vigilance.

Butler proposes that “[t]his vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited” (2004, p.29). In the shadow of violence brought by both terrorist attacks and the war on terror, the international society has witnessed the intensified conflicts and lived with suspicion of any potential attack from terrorists or revengers like America. The international society could not be more vulnerable to paranoia:

Instead I perused news websites which informed me that Pakistan and India were conducting tit-for-tat tests of their ballistic missiles and that a stream of foreign dignitaries was visiting the capitals of both countries, urging Delhi to desist from its warlike rhetoric and Islamabad to make concessions that would enable a retreat from the brink of catastrophe. I wondered, sir, about your country’s role in all this: surely, with American bases already established in Pakistan for the conduct of the Afghanistan campaign, ...America was maintaining a strict neutrality between the two potential combatants, a position that favored, of course, the larger and—at that moment in history—the more belligerent of them. (Hamid, 2007, p.143)

With President Bush announcing the necessity of resolute measures to replace grief (as cited in Butler,

2004, p.29), America committed violence to show the international society that the country and its people were invulnerable, which, however, proved that they were vulnerable. Amanda Russell Beattie and Kate Schick maintain that “it is precisely when we think ourselves invulnerable that we are vulnerable” (as cited in Ganteau, 2015, p.4). They could not overcome their paranoia by denying their vulnerability and thus throwing the international society into emotional, political and military turmoil.

Humans are vulnerable and countries that humans found and construct are vulnerable, to violence, to suspicion, to paranoia. Admission of vulnerability and mindfulness of the vulnerable will enable one to “reflect on the status of the victim in contemporary societies and bear witness to an essential paradigm shift”, which is “the move from an era of suspicion to one of attention to and solicitude for victims of trauma, both in military and civilian contexts” (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009, as cited in Ganteau, 2015, p.3). Americans who underwent the terrorist attacks are vulnerable, migrants like Changez who experienced racism and the suspicion that he was a terrorist are vulnerable, and civilians who lived with suspicion of possible wars in Pakistan and those who lived in wars in Afghanistan are vulnerable—these people are not threats or dangers. The threat is the mutual suspicion that results from the mutual misunderstanding of different cultures. In the novel, Hamid makes an attempt to remove suspicion: a conversation.

3. CONVERSATION: POSSIBLE SOLUTION OR DOOMED FAILURE?

As is mentioned above, the novel is narrated by Changez at all and his American addressee is wholly muted. With a great many coverages and literary works written by and for Americans, such a monologue style enables Pakistani people to have a say and allows their story of the other side to be heard. Given the fact that Americans talk a lot about their stories, the meeting between the talkative Pakistani and the silent American plays the role of an equal conversation. Hamid offers a chance to the marginalized to let them play the dominant role in the conversation and to make different cultures meet and communicate. However, the open ending designed by Hamid signifies that even the author himself is not sure whether such an equal conversation will make some difference and remove suspicion from paranoid Americans: where does the glint of metal come from, the holder of business cards as Changez wishes or a gun that kills him? It can be inferred from the signals of distrust filling the conversation that the chances are that Changez fails to gain the American’s trust and murder is on the way.

The conversation makes no difference and fails to change the American’s mind because he does not realize that he and Changez share an identity: humans, vulnerable humans and thus share a fate. Instead, he takes merely the interests of him and his own country into account and suspects whether others will damage their interests. His fixed position and rooted egoism make him unable to accept others’ cultures or understand others’ predicaments. Therefore, the American listener was only concerned with what was related to the self-interest of America and American people during the conversation. For example, he asked questions about Changez’s impression of Princeton and the appearance of the American who scolded Changez, clenched his hand into a fist when he heard that Changez had smiled at the 9/11 attacks, and queried Changez’s claim that his student had been mistakenly implicated in the murder case of an American coordinator. However, his only reaction to the worry and anxiety of Pakistani people who were afraid of impending battles was that he said that he was “not unfamiliar with the anxieties that precede armed conflict” (Hamid, 2007, p.129) he was still talking about himself but showed no concern for people who suffered from violent threats caused by his country.

By comparison, the conversation between Changez and Juan-Bautista shows that thinking from the perspective of shared interests can remove suspicion and make a difference. Juan-Bautista was the chief of a local publishing company in Chile while Changez was there to determine the value of the firm and helped its owner decide whether to sell it. Despite their conflict of interest, Juan-Bautista communicated with Changez and helped him cross “the threshold of great change” by telling him the story of the janissaries (Hamid, 2007, p.150). Juan-Bautista jumped out of his own position of interest and realized their common predicament: America, the empire thought nothing of overturning their lives for its own gain. Changez was “a modern-day janissary” (Hamid, 2007, p.152) who served the empire that made light of the lives of his family and the security of his country, and he could be deserted by the empire at any time if he threatened its interests. Changez’s compassion was not only for Juan-Bautista but also for himself. It can be learned from the conversation that only when two parties of a conversation think beyond their own interests and stand in one another’s position can they truly hear and be heard.

Without taking the interest of the whole humanity into consideration, no negotiations work. Change sees the consequences clearly:

...the negotiations began to make progress, and the likelihood of a catastrophe that could have claimed tens of millions of lives receded. Of course, humanity’s respite was brief: six months later the invasion of Iraq would be under way. (Hamid, 2007, p.178)

Hamid tells his readers through Changez: "Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own" (2007, p.168). Humans are all vulnerable and lives are the fundamental interest of all human beings. Only when we think beyond the interest of one individual or one country can we make effective conversations and truly understand each other.

CONCLUSION

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* presents suspicion behind the 9/11 attacks and America's fight against terrorism and reveals the vulnerability of all humans in the shadow of violence. The 9/11 attacks shatter people's trust, and their suspicion continues even today. How to deal with the crisis of confidence in a post-9/11 era is a crucial global problem because it is concerning the international relations and the stability of the international society. Hamid offers an equal conversation as a possible solution, but it is noticeable that conversation is a doomed failure and no one wins if all are suspicious that others will hurt their own interests. Only when individuals and countries realize that humans have the common vulnerability and shared interests can conversations truly and fully remove suspicion and reinforce mutual understanding.

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