

The framing of selfless role-playing in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Word count: 7789

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In Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), the concept of identity comes undone because the narrator-protagonist, confronted with his lack of belonging, resorts to role-playing as a means of feeling whole. Undertaken in order to heal the self, role-playing plays out in the sense of playacting *and* responsibility. Although critics have commented on the novel's deconstruction of belonging, the dual sense of role-playing has not been analysed in terms of how it affects the selflessness responsibility involves. This paper explores the text's implication of responsibility in playacting, with respect to how this entanglement opens onto a negative depiction of selflessness. The 9/11 novel's grim take on selflessness, which ties in with its focus on terror, is shown to undercut the ethical value that deracination bears in Jacques Derrida's readings of responsibility.

Keywords: pretending; responsibility; role-playing; selflessness; terror.

Mohsin Hamid's 9/11 novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), undertakes a consistent unworking of identity via its critical depiction of belonging and role-playing. The novel's Pakistani narrator-protagonist, Changez, looks back on how post-9/11 tensions between America and Pakistan disrupted his near-assimilation into the rarefied realm of corporate America. He pointedly entangles his aspiration to belong to corporate America with his unrequited longing for a rich American woman called Erica. As a result, the concept of belonging, which conveys how 'feeling a part of a greater whole' is integral to 'the constitution of one's sense of identity',¹ is deconstructed into a state of longing.² The shift from belonging to longing reflects on that which eludes the self about itself. That is, it points to a gap within the self. Changez attempts to heal this gap by posing as other, that is, through *role-playing*, which acquires connotations of responsibility because of its connection with healing. The dual sense of role-playing has dire implications for responsibility, particularly since posing as other is insinuated as a means by which the narrator, a suspected terrorist, could be contriving anonymity.

In line with the focus on anonymity, the narrator disguises the suspicion stalking his identity via a pointed use of allegory. His conflation of corporate America and Erica has the effect of interweaving terror, sexual intimacy and capitalistic greed.³ By means of this co-implicating strategy, Changez redirects suspicion onto his target 'audience',⁴ an American stranger he runs into at Anarkali bazaar in Lahore. It becomes evident early on in the novel that the narrator regards the stranger as a possible FBI undercover agent, sent on a 'mission' to combat terrorism in Pakistan (*RF* italics in original 1). The suspicion with which the narrator regards his addressee suggests that his 'tale' of non-belonging could be a hoax designed to deflect the threat of assassination.⁵ In effect, Hamid recasts a story of non-belonging, with its poetic and tragic connotations, as a potential tool of terror. This is a significant feat on the

author's part, for the relation between pretending and fiction (make believe) emerges as a *novel* means of reflecting critically on the responsibility of reading 9/11 fiction, a genre heavily inspired by discourse. The genre of 9/11 fiction, which Hamid points in a new direction by depicting a could-be rather than a would-be terrorist,⁶ undergoes a shift in terms of the border between 9/11 fiction and discourse. This border keeps shifting because of the novel's negotiation of anonymous militancy via pretending, a feature that reflects how terrorism is camouflaged to fit in with everyday life for the sake of disrupting it.

The dangerous fictions at work in a post-9/11 world are also embodied with a difference by a narrator who poses as other in order to mask his condition of self-lessness (his lack of self). This version of self-lessness, entangled with agenda-driven suicide, opens onto the possibility of harming, or taking away from, others. The overlap between playacting and terrorism foregrounds how selflessness can constitute an agenda. In this paper, I examine how the dual sense of role-playing charges selflessness with violent appropriation. This depiction undercuts the ethical value that deracination bears in Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death* (1995) and 'Abraham, the Other' (2008), both of which investigate Abraham's response to God— 'here I am'—in Genesis 22. In *The Gift of Death*, responding to the other necessitates an uprooting of the self, which renders responsibility into a possibility of unconditional giving.⁷ However, as demonstrated in 'Abraham, the Other', giving cannot be completely selfless because it is manifested by an 'I' who presumes to be the 'one' called upon to respond.⁸ Although 'I' is indispensable for manifestation, it unavoidably detracts from giving ('ATO' 337), which can only be selfless if it cannot be traced back to the giver (*GD*52). As demonstrated in this paper, this philosophical take on deracination is countered via the dual sense of role-playing, which shifts the appropriating tendencies of 'I' onto selflessness, depicting the latter as a condition of voracity.

~~Here~~-pretend I am': the agendas of non-belonging

On the face of it, there is very little in common between 'pretend I am' and 'here I am'. After all, the former is an upstart's response to the lack he spots within himself, whereas the latter represents a prophet's responsibility to God. However, as demonstrated in this section, a parallel emerges between the two responses because of Derrida's readings, in which 'here I am' is not treated as exemplary but is shown to exemplify the mortality that conditions the self's ability to respond to the other. *The Gift of Death* unpacks the mortal limitations of the self, while 'Abraham, the Other'—spoken of by Derrida as 'a postscript' to the former ('ATO' 312)—explores the presumptuousness that 'here I am' acquires in Franz Kafka's fictional parable 'Abraham' (1947/1961). With the help of Kafka's Abraham, a self-doubting patriarch who questions his election by God, Derrida exposes how the dangerous propensity of 'I' to elect itself as the chosen one problematizes the necessity of showing commitment to one's belonging. As illustrated further on, this philosophical argument is turned on its head by role-playing, which bestows violence on *non*-belonging, a position that Derrida regards as ethical because it mitigates the presumptuousness of 'I'. Derrida's commendation of fiction, for exposing the 'truth' about an exemplary instance of responsibility ('ATO' 337), also acquires considerable irony on account of role-playing. For the equation between 9/11 fiction and responsibility is shown to be far more complicated in Hamid's novel, which implicates pretending, a rigorously metafictional feature,⁹ in anonymous militancy.

Hamid tackles the problem of identifying terror by means of a narrator who suffers from a lack of self. This premise opens onto a fleshing out of Derrida's discourse on 'here I am, a response that *The Gift of Death* investigates in light of what is off-limits to the mortal self: access to its own death. This void can be inferred on the basis of how 'self' implies a relation to oneself,

which would not be possible if we were at one with ourselves. Our ability to relate or respond to ourselves and others is gifted by this void, which Derrida refers to as otherness. The notion of otherness underscores inaccessibility, which, deemed to be the exclusive privilege of God, is deconstructed as that which cannot be had, known or grasped by the mortal self (*GD* 108). As such, it is posited as the basis of selfless giving in *The Gift of Death*. But, as a mortal feature, otherness also problematises unconditional giving by rendering it contingent on interpretation, which invariably detracts from the inaccessibility of others. Put simply, the self cannot respond without interpreting what is ineluctably other.

The irreducible feature of interpretation, which implicates selfless giving in appropriation, is what binds ‘here I am’ to ‘pretend I am’. Abraham’s willingness to bear absolute loss—to sacrifice a son whom he not only regards as intrinsic to himself but who embodies his covenant with God—is, for the most part, held out as a possibility of selfless giving (*GD* 96), but a possible return to the self is not ruled out (*GD* 96). This is because the patriarch is said to (mis)read the void within himself as his relation to God, that is, he projects the divine command onto his own inaccessibility (*GD* 108). The death-giving command also violates the otherness of a son whom the father, in a reductive fashion, views exclusively as *his* flesh and blood. Changez, on his part, reduces the void of mortality to a complex, which he tries to mask by posing as other. Interestingly, the overlap between the two misreading opens onto a significant difference due to role-playing. For ‘pretend I am’ is geared towards having what is inaccessible to all mortals, whereas ‘here I am’ is about the willingness (not the ability) to forsake everything in favour of an inaccessible (O)ther. Indeed, the agenda of Changez’s role-playing—to close the gap within himself—has a negative impact on incalculable giving, which is only tenable because the self’s otherness precludes it from knowing whether its act of giving will

elicit a return. He tries to bypass this condition of no return by reading his own otherness solely in the context of that which can be had, namely material belongings.

Changez's preoccupation with materialism cuts into his own otherness and that of others. It affects how he responds to others. His obsession with money seeps into acts that, seemingly, target the welfare of others. For instance, his 'mission' of helping underprivileged 'students' in Lahore, which he undertakes as 'lecturer' of 'finance', revolves around healing the gap in others (RF 203). In this role, he 'mentor[s]' students undergoing 'drug rehabilitation' and domestic abuse, persuading them to 'demonstrate' against US interference in 'Pakistan's domestic and international affairs' (RF 203-4). But his political mobilisation of Pakistani youth emerges as a possible façade for terrorism because one of his students is 'arrested for planning to assassinate' an aid 'coordinator' from America (RF 206). Via his role as 'mentor' (RF 204), in which he plays at being selfless, Changez enacts his exploitative version of self-lessness. This version is propped up by an ever-shifting intersection between need and greed, which the narrator sets in motion by conferring the risk of terror on the needy and imputing the war on terror with greedy capitalistic designs on the 'Third World' (RF 77). However, the opposing terms of need and greed converge because '*fundamentals*' (RF italics in original 112), evocative of terror, is reconstructed as the '*hung[er]*' or ruthless greed (RF italics in original 13), of corporate 'finance' (RF 112). The void-like self's potential for violence is communicated vividly via the 'fundamentals' of need and greed, both of which conjure up a menacing gap.

The reading of need and greed reflects Changez's response to his own sense of non-belonging. More specifically, the overlap between the two terms bears on how he tries to redeem his elitist status in a third-world country by working at Underwood Samson, a leading corporate firm in New York. His social standing in Lahore—rich *once upon a time* but fallen on relatively

hard times—gives rise to a co-implication between need and greed, one that embroils *lack* in acquisitiveness. For the gap confronting him has nothing to do with need as such; it is merely a question of ‘*longing*’ for ‘what [his] family’ is rumoured to have ‘had and lost’ (*RF* italics in original 81).

In narrating this mission, Changez performs the problem of projection with a difference. Derrida attributes this problem, which bears on the violating implications of giving meaning to what remains other, to ‘I’. He argues that, since the mortal self can only grasp the other as *other*, not *as such*, the ‘I’ invariably projects itself onto the other’s call and, perhaps, even imagines the call itself (‘ATO’ 337). But the narrator circumvents ‘I’ by insinuating that his student’s suspected involvement in terrorism was a projection on the part of US authorities (*RF* 206). As borne out by his re-readings of need and greed, Changez innovates on the problem of projection by infusing a single term with more than one meaning. This uncovers the void at the heart of linguistic constructs, which, on the basis of their inaccessibility, are put to work in the interests of a dreaded sense of anonymity. In effect, the narrator converts the inescapable problem of projection into an agenda; for he exploits the intrinsic otherness of terms as means of shoring up his own anonymity. This offers a radically different picture of responding, which, according to Derrida, is a dilemma because the self cannot avoid projecting *itself* onto others.

The screening of identities through projection is an important facet of Changez’s role-playing, which, undertaken out of *choice* and with a view to having, aggravates the unavoidable violence of appropriation. Role-playing puts a disquieting spin on responsibility, in that it situates *having* squarely on the side of self-lessness, completely sidestepping ‘I’, the locus of appropriation in ‘Abraham, the Other’. Changez explicitly represents playacting as a means of remedying a fractured sense of belonging. At Princeton, he resolves to ‘pretend’ and ‘work hard’

for the sake of filling gaps in his native identity (*RF* 12). His ‘preten[ce]’ of being ‘a young prince, generous, and carefree’ is propped up by ‘three on-campus jobs’, which he juggles with his ‘classes’ (*RF* 12). As a corporate analyst at Underwood Samson, his mission of ‘restor[ing] things to what they were’ intersects with his wooing of Erica (*RF* 12), the daughter of ‘a man of consequence in the corporate world’ (*RF* 61). In acting as her official escort at the events of New York society, the protagonist spots the possibility of feeling whole: ‘I felt I was entering in New York the very same social class that my family was falling out of in Lahore’ (*RF* 97). However, the possibility of wholeness is uprooted by 9/11, which causes Erica to relive a personal loss: the death of Chris, a lover whom she views as intrinsic to herself (*RF* 104). In order to ‘anchor’ her (*RF* 99), Changez enacts sexual role-playing in a manner that showcases the rapacity of selflessness.¹⁰ What undermines his healing of Erica is not presumptuousness but selflessness; for, in looking back on his impersonation of Chris, he concedes that he ‘had nothing of substance to give her’ because he ‘lacked a stable *core*’ (*RF* italics in original 168). His admission of inadequacy is noticeably poignant. However, it does not account for the agenda that drives his healing of the ‘crack’ within Erica, whom he draws on as a means of constructing a financially stable self (*RF* 59).

Changez’s self-less mission in Lahore also appropriates and refashions an agenda that is imputed to the presumptuous ‘I’ in ‘Abraham, the Other’: ‘nationalism in its most violent forms’ (321). This agenda is shown to be attendant on taking responsibility for one’s belonging, a necessity that Derrida reflects on in the context of his own ‘failure’ to belong to Judaism (‘ATO’ 314). His problematic equation with Judaism dates back to his childhood in French Algeria, where the passing of anti-Semitic laws in 1941 forced him to attend a school meant only for Jews. Because he grew up viewing his Jewish belonging as an imposition, he was left with an

ingrained sense of non-belonging. In 'Abraham, the Other', Derrida responds to the gap within himself by thinking through the 'rupture' and 'separation' that conditions the very possibility of belonging (314). His inclusive reading of 'belonging' reflects unflatteringly on how Changez limits non-belonging to himself. However, the irony is that it is this limited reading that opens onto an unexpected manifestation of non-belonging, one that puts a new face on 'nationalism'. For the protagonist's political mission, to do with redressing Pakistan's subservient and reluctant role in the War on Terror, emerges as a possible front for terror. This façade underscores the potential of 'pretend I am', which works its way into a mission that is *fundamentally* about constructing a specific identity.

The responsibility of reading 9/11 fiction(s)

The unconventional part played by projection in the text has an implicating effect on the role of the reader, who, in a number of ways, also responds with 'pretend I am'. For Hamid intertwines the reader's anonymity with that of Changez's 'audience', the suspected undercover agent, who, like his antagonist, remains unidentifiable throughout. The 'you' that the narrator uses to address his 'audience' acts as an implied reader, whose anonymity targets the facelessness of the 'real' reader by providing a cover for it. Via his strategic use of the implied viewer, Hamid constructs a parallel between the responsibility of reading 9/11 fiction(s) and anonymous militancy. This parallel emerges all the more pointed because the stranger's responses, suspicions and questions are voiced by Changez. The narrator's *act* of speaking on behalf of his 'audience' pushes the 'real' reader to speculate whether the stranger's responses could be possible projections on the part of the narrator. This possibility gives rise to another suspicion, namely that 'you', the object of projection, could be a *subject*, a hostile other, that the narrator projects onto his fractured self.

Indeed, the narrator is responsible for this suspicion because he admits to being ‘plagued by paranoia’ in connection with the suspicion surrounding his role in Lahore (*RF* 208).

The reference to ‘paranoia, a condition that reflects on the other within the self, has a significant bearing on the anonymity of ‘you’, which emerges as irreducible because it is linked to the narrator’s otherness. The reader’s role comes into sharp focus because ‘paranoia’ reflects on the ‘audience’—a stand-in for the reader—as a possible concoction. The task of imagining the other typically falls on readers of fiction, but Hamid reconstructs this role by charging it with limitless anonymity and grounding it in endless role-playing. The reader’s implication in the latter is highlighted through ‘suspicion’ and ‘paranoia’, which bear on the *fear* of terror that conditions ‘real’ interaction after 9/11.¹¹ As insinuated by the narrator, the *role played* by ‘suspicion’ and ‘paranoia’, that of reflecting on the problem of reading others in a ‘post-9/11 world’,¹² is contingent on their potential fictiveness: “It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not *imagine* that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not *imagine* that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (*RF* my italics 208-9). In line with the meta dimension of pretending, Changez’s repeated use of ‘imagine’ evokes a distinctly affirmative feature of fiction: *imagining the other*. This positive possibility is brought to bear, in a conflicting fashion, on reductive readings that stem from a fear of otherness. These readings are exposed from within by ‘imagine’, for they are entangled with terror on account of their fictiveness. By working undercover, ‘imagine’ lays bare the worst implication of role-playing: the duplicity that touches responding. This implication is borne out by ‘imagine’, which enacts the pitfalls of reading in ways that could potentially placate the suspicious ‘audience’.

The implication that our fear of terror could be ‘imagin[ary]’ highlights another feature of role-playing, namely its uprooting of the border between 9/11 fiction and discourse. The

‘imagin[ary]’ fear of terror, by means of which Changez targets stereotypical readings, emerges as a possible appropriation of the ‘horrors’ that Kurtz,¹³ an ‘agent’ of European ‘terrorism’ in Africa,¹⁴ bears witness to just before dying. Changez prompts the reader to make this connection by likening his ‘paranoia’ to that of Kurtz (*RF* 208) and, in so doing, illustrates how fiction responds to gaps in discourse, the role it plays in giving a more inclusive (*whole*) picture of terror. The militancy conferred on intimacy points to Hamid’s provocative appropriation of Conrad’s ‘rhetoric of terrorism’, which the Polish-British author ‘use[d]’ ‘to call attention to *acts* of terrorism’.¹⁵ Albert Camus’s *The Fall* (1956), with its ‘terroristic’ ‘rhetoric’,¹⁶ plays a major role in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, in which the use of pretending as a means of radicalising selflessness represents a refashioning of Clamence’s ‘feigned selflessness’.¹⁷ The egotism that drives Clamence’s pretence of selflessness is re-rendered through the relation between role-playing and agenda-driven suicide. Camus’s *The Just Assassins* (1949) also looms large over Hamid’s 9/11 novel, the title of which represents a nod to the ‘reluctant’ ‘terrorists’ in the play.¹⁸ The totalising connotations of ‘fundamentalist’ heighten the irresolvable tension between ‘reluctan[ce]’ and ‘terrorism’.

The improbability conveyed by a ‘reluctant fundamentalist’ also gestures at the inauthenticity that unavoidably stalks confessional narratives. In fact, Changez makes a point of drawing attention to the fictiveness of his counter discourse on terror: “I am, after all, telling you a history, and in history, as I suspect you - an American - will agree, it is the thrust of one’s narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one’s details” (*RF* 135). By observing how facts are sacrificed in historical accounts to *make* a specific point, he also takes aim at US discourse on

terror. The fictions attributed to the latter are staged by the narrator's over-the-top deployment of allegory, which Sarah Ilott commends for 'encourag[ing] a more active way of reading'.¹⁹

Rightly so, since it is the 'thrust' of the love story that conveys the violence of fundamental readings. Yet there is more to this agenda-driven use of a fictional device, which plays another role, that of reflecting on the limits of 9/11 fiction. The possibility of limitations, hinted at via the liaison between 'imagine' and reductive readings, bears on the risk that otherness is exposed to in Hamid's 9/11 novel, that of becoming entangled with anonymity. The anonymity of terror triggers typical responses, such as fear and dread, which pose a serious challenge to the responsibility of re-reading 9/11 fiction(s).

The non-ending of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* poses this challenge to the 'real' reader, whose role is to test how the fear of terror limits the reading of otherness. Otherness emerges as irreducible at the (non-)end of the novel, in that it takes the form of a void suffused with the risk of mortality.²⁰ The potentially 'deadly void' represents what is left of Changez's inconclusive encounter with his suspected adversary, namely the risk of imminent death.²¹ The 'gaping hole' in the text is set up in order to elicit a 'visceral response' from the reader.²² Made to play the part of author, the reader is confronted with the challenge of writing a 'possible ending' to an 'encounter' that unfolds as a 9/11 fiction in more than one sense.²³ The fictions that make up the encounter represent projections onto the void of mortality, which Hamid deliberately represents in the literal sense, in order to pose the question: How open can the self be to otherness when it coincides with the possibility of 'real' death? This question relates to the fear of terror, which the novel brings home to the reader through a gap. This manoeuvre gestures at the role played by the void in the making of meaning. As such, it points to a continuation of the text, or the enactment of giving meaning to the other. This approach is in line with Derrida's

reading of ‘text’, which is not restricted to reading and writing in the ordinary sense but alludes to how the mortal self’s experience of reality is contingent on signification and mediation.²⁴ The use of ‘fundamentals’ bears out this strategy, in that it represents an interpretation that draws heavily on the war on terror’s unacknowledged imperialistic agenda.²⁵ The latter’s secrecy, laid bare in 9/11 discourse, is reworked in the form of role-playing, which puts its own spin on the text-context indeterminacy by suggesting that each and every meaning could be a text that *cons.*

‘I felt I was play-acting’

Speaking of *context*, the narrator represents the war on terror as a ‘guise’ that ‘advance[s]’ ‘American [corporate] interests’ (*RF* 202). Corporate America’s ‘hunger’ is represented by Changez in Manila, where he is sent ‘to value a recorded-music business’ on behalf of Underwood Samson (*RF* 75). Significantly, he speaks of his stay in Manila in the context of his ‘act[ing] and speak[ing], as much as [his] dignity would permit, more like an *American*’ (*RF* italics in original 74). The narrator recalls that he ‘was often ashamed’ because he acted ‘American’ by ‘tell[ing] executives [his] father’s age, “I need it *now*”’ and ‘cut[ting] to the front of lines with an extraterritorial smile’ (italics in original 74). Despite his sense of shame, he does not take responsibility for this performance, which is conveniently attributed to the ‘respect’ his Filipino counterparts reserved for his ‘American colleagues’ in the workplace (*RF* 74). What the protagonist cannot project onto others is his reductive enactment of ‘American’, the inaccessibility of which is encroached upon by his one-dimensional performance. It is noticeable that ‘American’ is not subjected to the deconstructive treatment that is evident in the case of ‘fundamentals’, which, via its open-endedness, underscores the responsibility of being more inclusive when reading the other. The problem is that the narrator’s scrupulous take on

representation cannot be differentiated from his tendency to screen, which he does by manipulating the intrinsic otherness of entities.

In the case of Changez's 'American' act in Manila, anonymity takes the form of a 'glar[e]' of 'undisguised hostility' (RF76). Dressed in an expensive 'suit' and seated in a 'limousine' (RF 76), the Pakistani is immersed in playing a member of the American elite when he is 'glar[ed]' at by a stranger, a Filipino jeepney driver. The use of *glare*, in the sense of 'a long, angry look',²⁶ screens another meaning: the *blinding effect of light*, which links up with anonymity. The stranger's hostile stare is directed at one who embodies the 'fundamentals' of corporate America. In attributing the 'glare' to a stranger, the narrator could be screening his suspected involvement in terror, which, in all probability, is also disguised via the role of corporate fundamentalist. After all, he does refer to his performance of 'American' elitism as 'play-acting':

I remained preoccupied with [the glare] far longer than I should have, pursuing several possibilities that all assumed—as their unconscious starting point—that he and I shared a sort of Third World sensibility. Then one of my colleagues asked me a question, and when I turned to answer him, something strange took place. I looked at him—at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work— and thought, you are so *foreign*. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside. (Italics in original 77)

'Play-acting', evocative of insincerity, contrasts sharply with the driver's disconcertingly direct glare: 'His dislike was so obvious, so *intimate*, that it got under my skin' (RF italics in original 76). The personal character of the glare forces Changez to scrutinise his identity, which he relates to solely in the context of loss of material belongings. He looks to his suit and expensive car, privileges he acquires, as well as disowns, by means of 'play-acting'. He implies that what

the driver makes of him, based on these props, is far removed from his 'reality', that he is no different from 'the people on the street outside'. This claim harks back to the intersection between need and greed.

The glare brings need into sharp focus by awakening a 'Third World sensibility' in Changez. This 'sensibility', presumably grounded in the economic gap faced by the Philippines and Pakistan in relation to America, also emerges as a possible sham because, earlier on, the narrator makes a point of highlighting the gap in 'wealth' between Lahore and Manila: 'It was one thing to accept that New York was more wealthy than Lahore, but quite another to swallow the fact that Manila was as well' (73-4). What also potentially renders 'Third World sensibility' into an elaborate pose is that the protagonist fails to feel this affinity in the case of his 'poor' compatriots, that is, Pakistani cabdrivers physically assaulted in New York in the wake of 9/11; for he downplays their plight 'because such things invariably happened, in America as in all countries, to the hapless poor, not to Princeton graduates earning eighty thousand dollars a year' (107-8). 'Third World sensibility' could be a smokescreen, given the suspicion of terrorism that stalks Changez's grooming of *needy* students. It is by means of 'Third World sensibility' that the narrator frames his loss-ridden self in the context of poverty and hunger. This framing is relevant; for the protagonist's 'hungry' self straddles the haves and have-nots, both of which are implicated in 'fundamentals'.

'And then I *smiled*'

The indeterminacy of 'fundamentals' intensifies the inaccessibility of Changez's response to 9/11, which he witnesses via a television newscast during his stay in Manila. The attacks elicit a gleeful response from him: 'I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York's

World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased' (*RF* italics in original 82-3). This appalling response, which gives an ugly manifestation of what can be had through loss, is narrated in line with the dual sense of role-playing. For the narrator dwells exclusively on the role that fiction plays in eliciting an authentic response to death: 'My thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack—death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes' (83). The stress on framing and mediation implies that he was acted on by the media, betrayed into giving an inappropriate response to death.

In implying that he was acted on, Changez is, arguably, putting on an act. For, in appreciating the '*symbolism*' of the attacks (*RF* italics in original 83), he flagrantly appropriates Jean Baudrillard's espousal of 9/11's 'symbolic dimension'.²⁷ The meaning that the narrator gives to the terrorist attacks—'[S]omeone had so visibly brought America to her knees' (*RF*83)—encapsulates Baudrillard's key argument, namely that America's image as the 'single global superpower' was rendered illusory via the orchestrated collapse of the Twin Towers.²⁸ In responding to the attacks strictly at the level of signification, Changez replays Baudrillard's 'logic' of terrorism, which the philosopher differentiates from acts of terrorism.²⁹ This 'logic' is brought to bear on how the world witnessed a violent return of 'singularity' to the realm of signification on 11 September 2001.³⁰ The French philosopher hails the 'logic' of 9/11, which used mass media, the chief purveyor of global capitalism,³¹ to expose how signs had lost their singularity—become interchangeable like commodities—via the endless proliferation of images. 9/11 is said to be 'a symbolic event of the first order' because it involved the staging of death, which resists commodification.³² The irony is that Baudrillard's 'logic' of terrorism

emerges as a possible screen for Changez's suspected involvement in terrorism. The Pakistani narrator's discourse on terror, instigated by an encounter that could be linked to terror, effectively ruptures the boundary between the 'logic' of terrorism (what pertains only to signification) and 'terrorist acts'.³³

The loaded circumstances under which narration takes place are overlooked by Tina Managhan (2017), who argues that the smile reinforces Baudrillard's claim about 9/11: '[W]e all dreamt it'.³⁴ For Managhan, who views Changez as 'one of us',³⁵ the smile bears out the fantasy of 'overturning power, not in the name of a moral or religious confrontation, nor some "clash of civilizations", but as a result of the pure and simple unacceptability of that global power'.³⁶ The novel's subversion of identity is completely sidelined by Managhan, who views the protagonist as a 'New Yorker',³⁷ as one who belongs to a Western and liberal *we*, opposed to the totalizing forces of globalisation. But there is a major problem with this collective 'we', namely the absence of 'I', of individual responsibility, which comes into sharp focus through the text's scrutiny of anonymity. In Changez's 'symbol[ic]' reading, the pointed use of 'someone' for the agent of destruction has a radicalising effect on that which is faceless and nameless about 'we'. This 'we', an audience that passively appreciates violence perpetrated by unknown others, emerges with a fatal difference in the novel; for Changez targets the loaded anonymity of his 'audience' via 'you', which, although nameless, underscores individual responsibility. Significantly, the narrator represents himself and his 'audience' as 'bats', which alludes to those who, complicit on an insidious level in organised violence, are 'swift enough to escape detection and canny enough to hunt among a crowd' (71-2). 'Bats', 'never involved in a collision', 'no matter how close they come to these buildings' (*RF* 72), is an attack on America's masked superhero, Batman, whose status regarding the law is indeterminate. This attack shows the

'audience' how to read a faceless subject, known for his heroic deeds, in light of the negative implications of understated subjectivity. The agency that harbours within anonymity is also demonstrated through the *anonymous* reader, who is made to script the outcome of the life-threatening encounter between the two antagonists. Performing this role brings home to the reader the death-giving implications of what is said to be merely 'symbol[ic]'.

Although the smile is acquitted on the basis of 'symbolism', it does considerable harm to Changez's sense of self. It uproots his conception of himself as decent and compassionate:

I am no sociopath; I am not indifferent to the suffering of others. When I hear of an acquaintance who has been diagnosed with a serious illness, I feel—almost without fail—a sympathetic pain [...] When I am approached for a donation to charity, I tend to be forthcoming. (RF83)

This recounting of random instances looks like a desperate attempt to reinstate his moral self, which, blown apart by the smile, is replaced with a violating sense of otherness: 'When I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity' (RF83). 'I' is employed in the context of accountability but only to be overtaken by the blind spot.

'I' also crops up insistently in the smile's uprooting effect on Changez's near-assimilation into America: 'I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?' (RF 84). The positing of 'I' in relation to 'American' belonging, which has formerly been established as 'play-acting', is tantamount to cancelling it out. The 'I', which insistently draws attention to its progress, could pass for an advertising pitch for the American dream, one that misfires because the 'product' is flawed. What particularly

undermines the 'I' is the use of 'product', connoting an object that is made and owned by someone; it is that which typically comes with the seal or stamp of its manufacturer. 'Product' not only captures the materialistic makeup of Changez's identity but also its lack of authenticity, or grounding in 'play-acting'. The plastic connotations of 'product', suggesting that belonging is a construct that is appealing on the outside but not inhabitable from within, bears a great deal of philosophical significance; for there would be no need for a self if one could be on the inside of oneself.

The plasticity of 'product' evokes responsibility towards the self from conflicting angles. While shaping the self, as in inculcating it with a sense of belonging, is gestured at in an affirmative sense through 'university', the text, simultaneously, plays up the harm that a constructed self, a 'product', potentially poses to its creator: 'So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?'. The loaded question, left dangling, evokes Al-Qaeda, which evolved from the Mujahideen who were trained by America to combat Soviet forces in Afghanistan.³⁸ The narrator fails to fully account for the 'desire to see America harmed'. Ironically, this failure is rendered suspect by the narrator himself, for he immediately follows up the question: 'So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?' with 'I did not know, *then*' (*RF* italics in original 84). The inclusion of 'then' implies that he now knows. But what is it that he 'knows' but does not name? Could it be the elaborate pose he refers to as 'Third World sensibility'? For this 'sensibility', arguably one of hostility towards the economic superpower, America, could be the driving force behind 'someone had so visibly brought America to her knees'.

'Pretend I am Chris'

The metaphor 'America on her knees' acquires sexual connotations because Changez's sexual

intimacy with Erica is littered with images of terror. There are two occasions on which he tries to *have* her, both of which seriously problematise the possibility of healing. However, playacting only features in the second instance, in which Changez participates in sexual role-playing for the sake of curing Erica's obsession with Chris: 'I was desperate to extricate her from the maze of her psychosis' (119). This mission bears considerable irony because, in order to purge a dreaded other, the protagonist resurrects his rival by pretending to be him. The resurrection of Chris is a seriously subversive gesture on the narrator's part; for Erica's dead beloved is played on as Christ-like, yet his relation is not to the Messiah as such. His '*Old World* appeal' (RF30), evocative of Christopher Columbus,³⁹ links him to colonial manifestations of Christianity. In short, Erica's longing for Chris is symbolic of America's nostalgia for its belonging to the '*Old World*'.⁴⁰ This historical subtext—the role of religious imperialism in the making of America—heightens the appropriating implications of pretending to be Chris(t), lining it with militancy, or *terror*. Not surprisingly, the (hi)story of Erica and Chris includes a specific mention of 'religion': 'I did not know whether I believed in the truth of their love; it was, after all, a religion that would not accept me as a convert' (RF 129). The exclusionary violence of 'religion' is ascribed to the lovers, thereby fostering the parallel between terror and intimacy.

Changez attempts to be on the inside of Erica and Chris's sacred, inaccessible relation by 'pretend[ing]' to be Chris(t) (RF119). This role-play is instigated by a gap, namely Erica's stultified sexuality, which rears its head a second time. On this occasion, the would-be lover suggests to her: 'Pretend I am [Chris]' (119). The narrator professes an inability to account for his suggestion: 'I do not know why I said it; I felt overcome and it seemed, suddenly, a possible way forward' (119). Although it is he who comes up with the idea of pretending to be Chris, he gives the impression that, in suggesting it, he was *acted* upon. His sense of not-knowing is

unconvincing. For, in the aftermath of their earlier abortive attempt at lovemaking, Erica confides to Changez that ‘she had only once achieved orgasm, and that, too, by fantasizing of [Chris]’ (103). The idea of pretending to be Chris is instigated by this intimate detail.

The release that Erica derives from sexual role-playing foregrounds the healing dimension of ‘pretending’: ‘I was Chris and she was with Chris, and we made love with a physical intimacy that Erica and I had never enjoyed. Her body denied mine no longer; I watched her shut eyes, and her shut eyes watched *him*’ (italics in original 120). However, the restoration of her sexuality not only hinges on consent obtained through questionable means (pretending) but involves an appropriation of Chris(t)’s healing prowess. The moment of consummation is riddled with a flagrantly allegorical sense of infiltration,⁴¹ which signals the way in which pretending cuts into the responsibility of healing. The healer emerges as a transgressor because he gains entry into (Am)Erica as an undercover agent (in the guise of Chris) and through an opening he refers to as ‘wound’:

The entrance between her legs was wet and dilated, but was at the same time oddly rigid; it reminded me—unwillingly—of a wound [...] More than once I smelled what I thought to be blood, but when I reached down to ascertain with my fingers whether it was her time of month, I found them unstained. She shuddered towards the end—grievously, almost mortally; her shuddering called forth my own. (120-1)

In longing to *have* what Erica had with Chris, Changez oversteps his limits, for he capitalises on her loss in order to infiltrate an equation he represents as spiritual. He also implicates Erica in making the most of an unpleasant situation by assigning her the role of ‘pretend[ing]’: ‘Pretend I am him’.

The unethical implications of ‘pretend[ing]’ to be Chris(t) are not lost on Changez, who recalls feeling ‘ashamed’ in the aftermath of having Erica: ‘I felt at once both *satiated* and

ashamed' (italics in original 121). The aligning of 'shame' with 'satiation' situates *having* as that which involves losing face. Significantly, the 'harm' his pretence *may* have done to Erica—'I was worried that I had acted selfishly and I sensed, even then, that I had done [her] some terrible harm'—is linked directly to his loss of self: 'Perhaps, by taking on the persona of another, I had diminished myself in my own eyes' (RF121). He sidelines his usurpation of Chris's identity in the interests of harping on the subjugation he undergoes at the hands of his 'dead rival', whose 'continuing dominance' makes him feel 'humiliated' (121). This is an unmistakable projection on Changez's part, given that Chris is dead.

The tension between having and loss intensifies on account of the simulated resurrection of dead Chris(t), who is implied as present in spirit during Changez's lovemaking with Erica: 'I cannot, of course, claim that I was *possessed*, but at the same time I did not seem to be myself' (RF italics in original 120). It is not clear what the narrator means by 'possessed', whether it denotes his being overtaken by sexual desire and ecstasy, or if it specifically refers to his role-play. What it does give a sense of is that his pursuit of having Erica results in his being *had*. Implications of madness underpin 'possessed', which, simultaneously, links up with belonging through 'possession'. The charging of belonging—the main tool used to interrogate identity—with connotations of madness situates 'I' in a state of dispossession. Yet this state of (dis)possession enables the protagonist, not only to have Erica but encroach on the otherness of the dead.

The hunger that assails the protagonist in the wake of 'satiation' is a significant manifestation of loss. It represents a turning point in the depiction of loss and its agendas, which come to naught but not without doing 'harm' to others. The void that results from having too much is vividly conveyed via the image of Changez gorging himself on 'a tasteless meal': 'I kept at it until my belly was full, and when I returned to the bed it was as though I had a tight drum

strapped to my front' (122). Capitalising on Erica's loss leaves him feeling empty. It is a strategic move on the text's part that this return to loss unfolds in a context of romance and intimacy, which is traditionally associated with a glorified sense of selflessness. Although this alarming face of romantic intimacy could be a front for terror, it plays a crucial role in pushing the reader to take a more critical stance on the venerated notion of losing oneself in love.

This paper has argued that the selfless aspect of responsibility is cast in an unethical light by a narrator who re-renders selflessness from the perspective of his lack of self (self-lessness) and sense of non-belonging. The accent shifts from giving to taking because Changez tries to heal his self-lessness by means of pretending, which evokes appropriation and is hinted at as a means of screening his suspected involvement in terrorism. He exploits the facelessness of terror by weaving 'fundamentals' into his sexual role-playing and enactment of American elitism. My analysis shows how Changez's responses, driven by playacting, emerge inaccessible, particularly since he projects anonymity onto entities and consistently places 'I' under erasure. In narrating his responses, he constructs a version of selflessness that upends the ethical role deracination plays in Derrida's discourse on responsibility. In the philosopher's readings of 'here I am', selflessness is undermined by the appropriating tendencies of 'I', which lays claim to that which it gives to others. The tendency to appropriate cannot be ruled out, at least not completely, for it stems from the necessity of interpreting the needs of others. But, by posing as other, the narrator not only circumvents the necessity of 'I' but, more importantly, imbues selflessness with agendas, particularly ones that could be implicated in self-annihilation that gives death to others.

I have also examined the reader's implication in role-playing, which is tied to the latter's metafictional implications. The meta dimension of role-playing frames the construction of missions that involve anonymity. These missions are made to reflect on 'fictions' (reductive

readings) on the inside of discourse on 9/11. That is, they play a role in dismantling the border between discourse and 9/11 fiction. This deconstructive act signals how the self's blind spot in the face of death places a limit on the responsibility of reading 9/11 fiction(s). This limit pertains to the fear of terror, which is not only instigated by but also gives rise to 'fictions' of discourse. The fear of terror is tested via the novel's inconclusive ending, which challenges the reader to write the outcome of the encounter. That is, it falls on the reader to respond to the fear that is responsible for the impending violence between the two antagonists. But the dilemma is that this void relates to death, which the reader also relates to on the basis of fear. The latter emerges as the highlight of the text's staging of role-playing, in that it dawns on the reader that, using fiction as a screen, he/she can anonymously give death to the narrator, his political assassin, or both. The fear of terror also links the limits of 9/11 fiction to death, which cannot be accessed through reading. In effect, the focus shifts from reductive readings to what is fundamentally limited about the act of reading.

Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1 Mairéad Hanrahan, Preface to 'Belonging and Transgression', *Tropos*, 4.1 (2017), pp. 1–2, p.1. DOI: 10.14324/111.2057-2212.074 . Hanrahan states that 'a relation to the other [is] irreducibly at the heart of belonging because the concept linguistically 'deriv[es] from the Old English be- (intensive prefix) + longen, "to go along with/alongside"' (1).

2 Ayesha Ahmed, 'The Transgressions of Belonging in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*', *Tropos*, 4.1(2017), pp. 1–6, p.1. doi.org/10.14324/111.2057-2212.069

³ Anna Hartnell, 'Moving Through America: Race, Place and Resistance in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46.3-4 (2010), pp. 336–348, p.337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2010.482407>

⁴ Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Penguin, 2007), p.80. Hereafter, references to the novel appear in the text abbreviated as *RF*.

⁵ Peter Morey, "'The Rules of the Game have Changed': Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Post-9/11 Fiction', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47.2 (2011), pp. 135–46, p. 140-1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2011.557184>

⁶ Hamid's focus on a could-be terrorist represents a provocative response to John Updike's would-be terrorist in *The Terrorist* (2006).

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 52. Hereafter, references to *The Gift of Death* appear in the text abbreviated as *GD*.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Abraham, the Other', *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 311–38, p. 337. Hereafter, references to 'Abraham the Other' appear in the text abbreviated as 'ATO'.

⁹ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (New Accents. Routledge: New York and London, 1984), p.34.

¹⁰ *Rapacity* is played on in relation to rape, in line with the threading of terror through capitalism and intimacy. Changez's first attempt at sexual intimacy is read as a possibility of rape by Sarah Ilott, 'Generic Frameworks and Active Readership in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 50, no.5, 2014, pp. 571–83, p.579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2013.852129>. For the relation between rape and the rapacity of the elite, consult Ayesha Ahmed's "'The Invasiveness of Healing in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (2021), pp. 1-10, p.5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.2002801>

¹¹ Ahmed, 'Invasiveness', p.2.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Frances B. Singh, 'Terror, Terrorism, and Horror in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 5.2 (2007), pp.199-218, p. 203. [10.1353/pan.2007.0010](https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.2007.0010)

¹⁴ Ibid.,p. 205.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁶ Margaret-Ann Hutton, 'The Janus and the Janissary: Reading into Camus's *La Chute* and Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*', *Comparative Literature*, 68.1 (2016), pp.59-74, p. 67. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3462651>

¹⁷ Grace Whistler, "'Saints without God': Camus's Poetics of Secular Faith", *Nordisk Judaistik: Scandinavian Jewish Studies*, 29.1 (2018), pp.49-61, p. 59. <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.68791>

¹⁸ Eve Morisi, 'Staging the Limit: Albert Camus's *Just Assassins* and the Il/legitimacy of Terrorism', *Critical Concepts of Terrorism*, ed. Peter Herman (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 263-282, p.266. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316987292.016>

¹⁹ Ilott, 'Generic Frameworks', p.571.

²⁰ Ahmed, 'Invasiveness', p.3.

²¹ Ibid., p.2.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Geoffrey Bennington, *Not Half No End: Militantly Melancholic Essays in Memory of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp.87-8.

²⁵ Hartnell, 'Moving', p.337.

²⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. 'Glare (n)', accessed 27 January 2022 www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/glare

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and other Essays*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2012).

²⁸ Gary Genosko, 'The Spirit of Symbolic Exchange: Jean Baudrillard's 9/11', *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, 3.1 (2006), para.3.
baudrillardstudies.ubishops.ca/the-spirit-of-symbolic-exchange-jean-baudrillards-9-11/ .

²⁹ Bradley Butterfield, 'The Baudrillardian Symbolic, 9/11, and the War of Good and Evil', *Postmodern Culture*, 13.1 (2002), para.5.
 10.1353/pmc.2002.0026

³⁰ Baudrillard, *Spirit*, p. 7.

³¹ In Baudrillard's critique of globalization, constant exposure to screen-based media is said to alienate the self from reality, an effect that facilitates agendas of capitalism by conditioning the self to want commodities it does not need.

³² Butterfield, 'Baudrillardian', para.12.

³³ *Ibid.*, para.4.

³⁴ Tina Managhan, 'We All Dreamed it: The Politics of Knowing and Un-Knowing the "War on Terror"', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10.1 (2017), pp. 22–43, p.35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2016.1253817>

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Baudrillard, *Spirit*, p.56.

³⁷ Managhan, 'Dreamed it', p. 35.

38 Robert Appelbaum, 'Fantasias of Terrorism', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 18.2 (2014), pp. 99–113, p.100.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2013.851848>

39 Ilott, 'Generic', p. 579.

40 Hartnell, 'Moving', p. 343.

41 Ibid., p.344.