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**“Focus on the Fundamentals”: Personal and Political Identity  
in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

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Amid current discussions of cultural exchange and transfer, especially in a context of globalization, and the resulting production of an – arguably – borderless identity, Mohsin Hamid's recent novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)<sup>1</sup> seems to make the case for a core reality on which personal identity is based, founded on the notion of origin, of 'home'. This hard kernel of self corresponds to the widespread belief that each individual, behind the façade of culturally-performed identity, possesses a real 'me' which is unalterable and distinguishes each of us from everyone else, and while there may be an element of truth to that, as we will see it nevertheless requires contact with an Other to bring the 'me' to the fore, in other words an identity which, according to Sophie Duchesne and Vanessa Scherrer, takes into account the simultaneous permanence and change of the social actor<sup>2</sup>, not to mention the existence of identity within a 'relational field', wherein relations are never understood as fixed<sup>3</sup>. Corinna Byer, in a discussion of two contemporary Urdu novellas, highlights this common thread of what she calls the 'primary self' within the genre, and which applies to Hamid's English-language novel as well:

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, New York, Harcourt, 2007. All further references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Duchesne and Vanessa Scherrer, “L’identité politique comme force de conflictualisation et de hiérarchisation des appartenances sociales: justification théorique d’une définition empirique” in *Identités*, Actes du colloque « Identité(s) », Maison des Sciences de l’Homme et de la Société, Poitiers, du 23 au 25 janvier 2002, Université de Poitiers (France), Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, p. 325-336, p. 325.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Keith and Steve Pile, “Introduction Part 2: The Place of Politics” in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, M. Keith and S. Pile (eds.), London, Routledge, 1993, p. 22-40 and E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolutions of our Time*, London, Verso, 1990, p. 20-21.

The recognition and embracing of one's essential, or primary self often leads to a kind of personal salvation [. . .] such realization and acceptance are essential for a person to move forward in his life and discover his true capabilities. His problems may not be magically solved by embracing his primary self, but life will begin to seem less like a confusing struggle and more like a coherent and meaningful whole<sup>4</sup>.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* main character, a Pakistani named Changez, becomes neither an immigrant nor an exile after finishing top of his class at Princeton, but instead becomes "*immediately a New Yorker*" (33; original italics) in a high-paying, glamorous job, rubbing shoulders with society's elite; only one or two people connect with Changez deeply enough to understand his sense of home and family, of origin and core. Changez's sentiment of belonging to New York high society, however, is abruptly altered by the events of 11 September 2001 and the following US invasion of Afghanistan – defined by Neil J. Smelser as cultural trauma, leaving "indelible marks upon [...] group consciousness" — events which act as the catalyst to expose Changez's "fundamental" self, in both the personal and the political sense, and crucially, to highlight the changing perspective of his priorities. While most Americans are succumbing to the rhetoric of nostalgia and patriotism in the wake of September 11th, Changez realizes that a firm grasp of history is the key to understanding the present – and indeed the future – more clearly, and he does not like what he sees. His home and family are in danger, largely due to continuing American arrogance and hegemony around the globe, as he makes clear in several places throughout the novel, for example: "A common strand appeared to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie's concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism [...]" (178). Changez's own position as a new recruit with the prestigious New York firm Underwood Samson is, he understands, collaborating with the oppressor, and serves to underscore the relational aspect of identity – in relation to some Other – as Stuart Hall expresses the concept: "identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself"<sup>5</sup>. Initially disoriented and finally disillusioned, Changez returns to Lahore, from where the novel is narrated, Changez carrying on a monologue,

<sup>4</sup> C. Byer, "Reclaiming the Past: Rediscovery of the Primary Self in Two Novellas by Rajinder Singh Bedi and Qurratulain Hyder" in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, no. 16, 2001, p. 167-181, p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> S. Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity", in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, A. D. King (ed), London, Macmillan, 1991, p. 19-39, p. 21. See also Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds.), London, Sage Publications, 1996, p. 87-107, p. 89.

telling his story, while at dinner with an American agent, the two characters representing their respective countries – the personal / identity and the political / identification becoming indistinguishable as “social relations tak[e] a particular geographical form” – in an atmosphere of mounting tension and mutual suspicion which ends, as it must when two societies blame each other for their own recent cultural trauma, in violence<sup>6</sup>.

Politics is about closure, about 'us' versus 'them' about “questioning how identities are produced and taken up through practices of representation” (Lawrence Grossberg 90), and political identity in the largest sense is certainly not limited to a person's adherence to a particular institutionalized, ideological political party, but depends rather on what Duchesne and Scherrer call “clivages,” or splits / divides:

Il nous semble que la première spécificité de l'identité politique est qu'elle est une force de conflictualisation ou, plus précisément, de constitution de clivages. [...] la notion de clivage se distingue de celles de différence ou de frontière non seulement en ce qu'elle ajoute l'idée d'opposition ou de conflit entre les deux groupes qu'une différence ou une frontière se contentent de séparer ; mais aussi en ce que le clivage est en fait un mélange de différences d'origines diverses qui préside à la séparation subjective et transversale du corps social en deux catégories opposées d'individus. Cette mutation de la différence en clivage est, elle, proprement politique, dans la mesure où elle met l'acteur en position de confronter ces différences les unes aux autres, de les hiérarchiser et d'arbitrer entre elles, jusqu'à choisir un camp et l'assumer par rapport à ceux qui seraient potentiellement de l'autre côté du clivage<sup>7</sup>.

Such “clivages,” as we see, are more complex than a simple geographic or ethnic difference, and Changez's case is no exception, given the importance of certain trans-border identifications, like religious affiliation or socio-economic class, within the formula, and one of the reasons why “clivages” are always discussed in the plural, being multiple and always evolving, as well as politically-oriented. For his part, Changez's personal history is a proud one, his family wealthy and also

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<sup>6</sup> “Politics and Space/Time” in M. Keith and S. Pile (eds.), *Place and the Politics of Identity*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 141-61, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Duchesne et Scherrer, *op. cit.*, p. 331-32. “It seems to us that the primary specificity of political identity is that it is a means of placing elements in conflict with one another, or more precisely, a constitution of clivages/oppositions. [...] the notion of “clivage” is distinguished from that of differences or borders not only in that it includes the idea of opposition or conflict between two groups which a difference or a border merely separates; but also that the “clivage” is in fact a blend of differences emanating from diverse origins which oversee the subjective and transversal separation of the social body into two opposed categories of individuals. This transformation of difference into “clivage” is itself political, at least so far as it puts the actor in a position to place these differences in opposition to each other, to rank them and to judge between them, to the point of choosing one side and defending it against those who may find themselves on the other side of the “clivage”. (my translation).

rich intellectually, a family history which provides him with what Nikolas Rose calls a “genealogy” of his own identity, especially regarding the evolution of the psychological self within a certain historical context, an historical biography of sorts<sup>8</sup>:

[...] my great-grandfather, for example, was a barrister with the means to endow a school for the Muslims of the Punjab. Like him, my grandfather and father both attended university in England. Our family home sits on an acre of land in the middle of Gulberg, one of the most expensive districts of this city. We employ several servants... (9-10)

But each succeeding generation is less well-off than the preceding one, due to inflation and the division of family estates, such that Changez’s family history is one of faded glory, although he is still seen as a member of the upper-middle class since, as he says, “status [...] declines more slowly than wealth” (10). Such past glory on the personal level is mirrored by Pakistan’s history, recounted by Changez, and the resulting associations which upset him:

Often, during my stay in [America], such comparisons troubled me. In fact, they did more than trouble me: they made me resentful. Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed. (34)

These comparisons become even more troubling during Changez’s first Underwood Samson assignment, in the Philippines, when he realizes that Manila

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<sup>8</sup> Nikolas Rose, “Identity, Genealogy, History” in *Questions of Cultural Identity, op. cit.*, p. 128-50, p. 128-29. Given Changez’s situation, it is worth quoting Nikolas Rose at length regarding his concept of “genealogy.” While Rose’s elaboration is of course meant to be thought out on a grand scale, I would suggest that it is also helpful in more particular circumstances, in Changez’s case a micro-genealogy of sorts: “For it is only at this historical moment [the 19<sup>th</sup> century], and in a limited and localized geographical space, that a way of thinking emerges in which human being is understood in terms of persons each equipped with an inner domain, a ‘psychology,’ which is structured by the interaction of biographical experience with certain laws of processes characteristic of human psychology. A genealogy of subjectification takes this individualized, interiorized, totalized and psychologized understanding of what it is to be human as delineating the site of a historical problem, not providing the grounds for a historical narrative. Such a genealogy works towards an account of the ways in which this modern ‘regime of the self’ emerges, not as the outcome of any gradual process of enlightenment, in which humans, aided by the endeavours of science, come at last to recognize their true nature, but out of a number of contingent and altogether less refined and dignified practices and processes. To write such a genealogy is to seek to unpick the ways in which ‘the self’ that functions as a regulatory ideal in so many aspects of our contemporary forms of life – not merely in our passional relations with one another, but in our projects of life planning, our ways of managing industrial and other organizations, our systems of consumption, many of our genres of literature and aesthetic production – is a kind of ‘irreal’ plan of projection, put together somewhat contingently and haphazardly at the intersection of a range of distinct histories” (p. 129).

too is wealthier and better-developed than Lahore, although he will come to change his perspective, his fundamentals, his priorities about what count as progress and wealth (63-64).

Changez's own history, like that of his country, is long and rich, with multiple layers of diverse influences, as he specifies in response to a question about his origin: "I said I was from Lahore, the second largest city of Pakistan, ancient capital of the Punjab, home to nearly as many people as New York, layered like a sedimentary plain with the accreted history of invaders from the Aryans to the Mongols to the British" (7). The latest addition to this complex aggregation of identity is of course the influence of American culture, about which Changez is ambivalent: while he remains very much attached to his Pakistani home, he also feels at home in New York (50). First, as we've said, were the four years spent at Princeton. As one of the best and brightest that Pakistan had to offer, Changez is one of only two in the entering class (3), given a scholarship and "invited into the ranks of the meritocracy" (4), with the understanding that, "In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. And for the most part we were happy to do so. I certainly was, at least at first" (4), giving one of the many hints throughout the monologue that his enthusiasm for contributing to America – or more precisely, to the idea of America – will not endure. After graduation, he spends the summer holiday in Greece with other Princetonians, all of course from wealthy families, and who for the most part regard Changez as an "exotic acquaintance" (17), who also leave him frustrated by their inexhaustible supply of money as well as their condescending attitude toward those whom they consider servants:

I, with my finite and depleting reserve of cash and my traditional sense of deference to one's seniors, found myself wondering by what quirk of human history my companions – many of whom I would have regarded as upstarts in my own country, so devoid of refinement were they – were in a position to conduct themselves in the world as though they were its ruling class. (21)

During this vacation, Changez meets Erica, who will, later in the novel, escort him even further "into an insider's world – the chic heart of [New York] – to which I otherwise would have had no access" (56), although he remarks, while visiting the isle of Rhodes, on the castles – fortified against the Turkish threat – "much like the army and navy and air force of modern Greece, part of a wall against the East that still stands. How strange it was for me to think I grew up on the other side!" (23),

further revealing lingering doubts about the West representing the future of humanity<sup>9</sup>.

After the summer holiday, Changez begins working for Underwood Samson, and on his first day he is overwhelmed by the company's impressive, high-rise office in midtown Manhattan: "On that day, I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee, and my firm's impressive offices made me *proud*" (34; original italics), his Pakistani origins temporarily subsumed by the technological prowess he finds in America, and with which he identifies – *my* firm; it is perhaps no coincidence that Underwood Samson might also be abbreviated US, representing a violent capitalist space, to paraphrase Henri Lefebvre<sup>10</sup>. On his first evening out for a drink with the group of new recruits, Changez is initially struck by the diversity among its members, a diversity which he later realizes is only superficial among these graduates of Ivy League universities; Huma Ibrahim calls such diversity simply "another marketing device" for US universities, focussing on appearances (34). Changez reflects, "It struck me then – no, I must be honest, it strikes me *now* – that shorn of hair and dressed in battle fatigues, we would have been virtually indistinguishable" (38; original italics), a premonition of the soldier he would become in the near future, and yet another indication of the layered, sedimentary nature of identity as the personal and the political meet in the role of the warrior. While Western readers, whether anglophone or francophone, recognize the etymological root of the verb 'to change', less obvious to these same readers is the fact that Changez is a variant spelling of Genghis, as Salman Rushdie makes clear in his most recent novel: "Genghis, Changez, Jenghis, or Chinggis Qan", the greatest in a long line of marauding warriors (34). Wainwright, the only other non-white colleague, seems to be reading Changez's thoughts as he warns, in his humorous manner, "Beware the dark side, young Skywalker" (38), although the ambiguity surrounding which side represents the dark side is interesting, given Changez's allegiance to his Asian origins in this milieu of New York high finance, which necessarily alters his perspective

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<sup>9</sup> See John Gledhill, *Power and its Disguises: Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*, London, Pluto Press, 1994., p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*, 4<sup>e</sup> éd., Paris, Anthropos, 2000, p. 64.

In a similar vein to Changez's identification with Underwood Samson – "*my* firm" – Paul Connerton (in a discussion of ritual and the formation of liturgical communities), examines the role of what he calls "pronouns of solidarity": "In pronouncing the 'we' the participants meet not only in an externally definable space but in a kind of ideal space determined by their speech acts" (Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 59).

regarding what calls a form of "situated knowledge"<sup>11</sup>, in other words "making sense so that things are seen in *this* way rather than *that* way"<sup>12</sup>.

In the novel, Jim is Underwood Samson's managing director responsible for recruiting, and he seems to have a lot in common with and does indeed connect with Changez, at least on a certain level. Jim's family history is a rags-to-riches tale, of working his way through college, and he sincerely sees Changez's situation as one of opportunity (11), at different times referring to Changez as "hungry" (9), "watchful [...] from feeling out of place" (42-43), as having "a bit of the warrior in you" (44), the image of the warrior reinforced when Jim ceremoniously knights Changez at the summer party in the Hamptons: "Jim made one feel he could hear one's thoughts [...] and with that he tapped me on either shoulder with the blade of his hand – an odd, deliberate gesture – and led me back inside" (44). Jim makes an offer of employment to Changez, an offer which Changez accepts largely for the same reason that Jim has elucidated, regarding the temptation of climbing the socioeconomic ladder, as well as recovering past glory and status; the novel employs the metaphor of the candy store, Jim having grown up outside, and Changez having grown up "on its threshold as its door was being shut" (71):

I noticed [Jim's] hand still hanging in the air between us, and – fearful it might be withdrawn – I reached out and shook it. His grip was firm and seemed to communicate to me, in that moment, that Underwood Samson had the potential to transform my life as surely as it had transformed his, making my concerns about money and status things of the distant past. (14)

Indeed, Changez's life will be utterly transformed, but not in quite the way he – or Jim – thought, since wealth and status are only part of what motivates Changez on his voyage of self discovery, as Changez himself remarks: "And [Jim] was, in some ways but not in all – as I would later come to understand – correct" (11).

"National origins", Kathleen M. Kirby reminds us, "predetermine ideological formations; individual cultures, set apart by the bounds of continents and countries, rivers and mountains, form their realities in divergent ways. As subjects, we vary widely depending on the actual *place* we came from and the

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<sup>11</sup> Pertti Alasuutari, *Social Theory and Human Reality*, London, Sage Publications, 2004, p. 168.

<sup>12</sup> Gerard Duveen, "Introduction: The Power of Ideas" in *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, New York, New York University Press, 2001, p. 17.

subsequent *places we occupy*"<sup>13</sup> (11; original italics). This is where Jim's insight comes up short; he does not understand, to paraphrase John McLeod (himself borrowing from Paul Gilroy) the complexity of identity as involving both roots *and routes*<sup>14</sup>, in other words he and Changez do not share the same genealogy, the same reality, despite certain intersections in their spheres of identity formation<sup>15</sup>. While Jim has no reason whatsoever to reconnect with his roots, regarding his past as nothing more than motivation to improve his socioeconomic status, and above all to avoid returning to his modest beginnings, Changez is still very much in touch with his origins, his personal history becoming increasingly disturbing and intertwined with the political as the rich layers of his past continue to inform his present – and future – sense of self. Jim is sure of who he is, or wants to be, whereas Changez suffers a great deal from what Leon Festinger, some time ago now, called cognitive dissonance regarding how his actions seem to conflict with his underlying attitudes and beliefs; to paraphrase Stephen Heath more recently, Changez appears to be a subject who has been imperfectly sutured to the dominant "structures of meaning"<sup>16</sup>. Ultimately, Changez will reduce such dissonance, not by changing his underlying attitudes or rationalizing his beliefs (as most subjects would, in order to maintain the dissonant behavior), but by abandoning his prestigious job at Underwood Samson and returning home to Lahore, an act that Jim cannot comprehend, since he interprets such a deviation from the standard rags-to-riches myth as a – literal – divergence from reality (153)<sup>17</sup>, although it must be noted that Changez, much like Jim, is still operating within a framework of 'we' versus 'they' as a means of identification, the same kind of retreat into what were previously referred to as pronouns of solidarity, pronouns which help to define and delimit the political, in much the same sense as the "clivages" already mentioned:

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<sup>13</sup> Kathleen M. Kirby *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity*, New York, Guilford, 1996, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> J. McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000; P. Gilroy, "Roots and Routes: Black Identity as an Outernational Project" in *Racial and Ethnic Identity: Psychological Development and Creative Expression*, H. W. Harris, H. C. Blue and E. E. H. Griffith (eds.), London, Routledge, 1995, p. 15-30.

<sup>15</sup> McLeod, *op. cit.*, p. 215; Christiane Schlote, "Confrontational Sites: Cultural Conflicts, Social Inequality and Sexual Politics in the Work of Rukhsana Ahmad" in E. Parker (ed), *Contemporary British Women Writers*, Woodbridge, UK, Brewer, for The English Association, 2004, p. 85-103, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Evanston, Illinois, Row Peterson, 1957; Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981, p. 106. See also Stuart Hall, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London, Penguin, 1966, p. 83.



The distance between the first and the third person plural expresses the distance which separates a social place where we feel included from a given, indeterminate or, at any rate, impersonal place. This lack of identity, which is at the root of modern man's psychic distress, is a symptom of this necessity to see oneself in terms of 'we' and 'they'; to oppose 'we' to 'they'; and thus of one's inability to connect the one with the other<sup>18</sup>.

A political identity seems to repose on a strong sense of personal identity, a solid core, which is by definition intersubjective, about which Changez, as a Pakistani and an American resident, himself complains in his frustration regarding his inability to help Erica as she retreats more and more from any interpersonal relations (148).

Several events throughout the novel push Changez away from his American attachment and toward his Pakistani origins, the most significant being the attacks of September 11, 2001. He confesses his reaction to his dinner companion, the American agent, in Lahore – the two occupying what Andrea Huyssen calls a modern "adversarial space" of fear regarding the Other<sup>19</sup> – upon seeing the attacks on television from his Manila hotel room:

I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. 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. [...] But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack [...] no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees. (72-73; original italics).

The key words are, of course, *victims* (personal) and *symbolism* (cultural/political), the image of the American institution, and how that image is represented and projected to the rest of the world, not to mention to Americans themselves, what Berger and Luckmann call the "social relativity" of knowledge and reality<sup>20</sup>. The targets of the attacks, Neil J. Smelser argues, were "symbolically perfect [...] the single most salient symbol of American-dominated global capitalism and the single most visible symbol of American military domination [...] Immediately elevated to near-sacred status, those symbols themselves were an integral part of what make the events so traumatic". But Smelser goes on to remind us, without getting into a moral and ethical debate, that the infliction of one cultural trauma can be interpreted as repayment in kind:

<sup>18</sup> Serge Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, G. Duveen (ed. & introd.), New York, New York University Press, 2001, p. 34

<sup>19</sup> A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, p. vii. See also Lawrence Grossberg, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 15.

In the ideology that was evoked by the leaders and in the ranks of the Al Qaeda organization – and by those in the Muslim world who applauded the events – one telling theme emerged. These and other attacks were justified by referring to the cultural trauma that the Muslim and Arab worlds had *themselves* suffered through centuries of Western, and recently American, economic, military, and cultural penetration . . .<sup>21</sup> (original italics)

The complexity and seeming incoherence of his reaction is not lost on Changez, since he is the product of an Ivy League university and makes a very good living in the United States, not to mention in love with an American woman, Erica (73). As he has been hinting, however, Changez's sense of belonging in New York has always been based on his association with others, from acceptable, even prestigious, groups, all of whom will, for diverse reasons, ultimately fail him. "Erica vouched for my worthiness; my way of carrying myself – I flattered myself to believe – suggested the impeccability of my breeding; and, for those who inquired further, my Princeton degree and Underwood Samson business card were invariably sufficient to earn me a respectful nod of approval" (85). On his way back from Manila – after the attacks — Changez is first strip-searched in the airport, then feels uncomfortable under the suspicious gaze of his fellow passengers, and on arrival in New York is separated from his colleagues for interrogation, they in the line for American citizens, he in line with the foreigners:

The officer who inspected my passport was a solidly built woman with a pistol at her hip and a mastery of English inferior to mine; I attempted to disarm her with a smile. "What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?" she asked me. "I live here," I replied. "That is *not* what I asked you, sir," she said. "What is the *purpose* of your trip to the United States?" Our exchange continued in much this fashion for several minutes. [...] My team did not wait for me; by the time I entered the customs hall they had already collected their suitcases and left. As a consequence, I rode to Manhattan that evening very much alone. (75)

Changez's sense of belonging has been transformed overnight, an indication that what we take for civilized society, including conceptions of our own identity as members of a given community, is constructed on very fragile pillars. Martha Augoustinos and Iain Walker underscore the notion of the "reflexive self" during times of social upheaval, reminding us that "[...] the important lesson is that individuals' views of self are tied inexorably to social forces and social structures. Even when the individuals do not define self explicitly in terms of social positions (the social self), their views of *self* still depend on, and are qualified by, the *social*"<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Neil J. Smelser, "Epilogue: September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2004, p. 264-82, p. 277, p. 264-65.

<sup>22</sup> Martha Augoustinos and Iain Walker, *Social Cognition: An Integrated Introduction*, London, Sage

the social, as we've said is relational, dynamic and non-linear in its evolution, impossible to predict with certainty, and if the community no longer offers support to the individual, "an important part of the self has disappeared [...] 'We' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body"<sup>23</sup>. While Changez had initially felt very much at home both as a Pakistani *and* as an 'American', chatting with New York cab drivers in Urdu or frequently eating at the Pak-Punjab deli, while in Manila he begins to act 'more like an *American*', treating the Filipino executives like underlings, all the while knowing he is acting the part: "Did these things trouble me, you ask? Certainly, sir; I was often ashamed. But outwardly I gave no sign of this" (65; original italics). During that same business trip, Changez finds himself stuck in traffic while riding in a limousine with his colleagues, and notices a jeepney driver glaring at him with overt hostility, an experience which perturbs him:

[...] perhaps he resents me for the privileges implied by my suit and expensive car; perhaps he simply does not like Americans. I remained preoccupied with this matter 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 rather 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. (67; original italics)

While Jim has honestly believed that he shares a certain connection with Changez, he has not seen deeply enough into the layers of Changez's complex sense of self, including the aforementioned multiple clivages and assumed Third World sensibility, and also has not understood how Changez's intricate formula of personal and political identity can be such a source of torment; Jim certainly suffers no such doubts – his actions and beliefs are of course also political, though always coherent, always in accordance with whatever is good for Underwood Samson.

Erica, on the other hand, does understand the strength of attachment to home and origin, and encourages Changez to talk about his roots: "'You give off this strong sense of home,' she said" (19); "Then she said, 'You miss home'" (27); "You're touchy about where you come from. It shows on your face [...] and I think

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Publications, 1995, p. 98 (original italics).

<sup>23</sup> Kai Erikson, *Everything in its Path*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1976, p. 153-54. See also Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 1-30, p. 4.

it's good to be touchy sometimes. It means you care'" (56); "'I love it when you talk about where you come from,' she said. [...] 'you become so *alive*'" (81; original italics). Erica realizes that Changez is not simply nostalgic for a mythologized past, but homesick, as distinguished by Zygmunt Bauman in a discussion of the tourist:

Homesickness means a dream of *belonging*; to be, for once, of the place, not merely *in*. And yet if the present is the destination of all future tense, the future tense of 'homesickness' is an exception. The value of home for the homesick lies precisely in its tendency to stay in the future tense for ever.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, Changez is neither simply a tourist, nor, as has been said, a nostalgic forever dwelling on the past to the point of melancholy – such nostalgia is merely personal. It is precisely the future tense of his history, of his homesickness, which makes of the personal a powerful political tool which will inform his actions and beliefs, a process which is often accelerated or catalyzed by his contact with others along the way. Erica is the principal among these others who help him define his personal identity in terms of origins, in terms of home; in her case, she has definitively lost her 'home', which she explains was her boyfriend Chris, dead from lung cancer: "'So I kind of miss home, too,' she said. 'Except my home was a guy with long, skinny fingers'" (28). While Changez's sense of belonging is rooted in Pakistan, and for a time in New York too – and, as we've said, becomes the basis not only for his individual sense of self but by extrapolation becomes political as well, given the tense relations between the two countries in the hunt for terrorists – Erica is adrift from her moorings of identity, not an 'us' but simply a 'me', a loss of social self which ultimately kills her. Except for a very brief interlude, where Changez assumes Chris's identity (105), all signs indicate that Erica is perishing from her lack of a home, of an 'us', of a future tense<sup>25</sup>: "out of reach" (22); her eyes, described as "*broken* [. . .] like a tiny crack in a diamond that becomes visible only when viewed through a magnifying lens" (52); "reced[ing] a half-step inside herself" when surrounded by friends (57); "the crack inside her" (59); "utterly detached [. . .] struggling against a current that pulled her within herself, and her smile contained the fear that she might slip into her own depths" (86). The extremity of Erica's loss – of her lack of the relational aspect of identity – is best summarized by Changez: "Suffice it to say that theirs had been an unusual

<sup>24</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity" in *Questions Of Cultural Identity*, *op. cit.*, p. 18-36, p. 30. See also Jonathan Matthew Schwartz, *In Defense of Homesickness: Nine Essays on Identity and Locality*, Copenhagen, Akademisk Forlag, 1989, p. 15, 22.

<sup>25</sup> See p. 135 of the novel, where Erica places Changez into the past tense.

love, with such a degree of commingling of identities that when Chris died, Erica felt she had lost herself; even now, she said, she did not know if she could be found" (91). Erica's personal identity does not become political, in the absence of a home – memory, after all, is not synonymous with history<sup>26</sup> – but she does attempt to develop the personal into artistic expression in the form of a novella (51), though without success; her story remains personal – not political, not even interpersonal – and it finally kills her. After reading the manuscript, Changez understands better why he has been unable to help Erica through her pain:

I could not locate Erica in the rhythms or sounds of what she had written [. . .] When I put down the manuscript, it was not with the conviction that Erica was either alive or dead. But I had begun to understand that she had chosen not to be part of my story; her own had proven too compelling, and she was – at that moment and in her own way – following it to its conclusion, passing through places I could not reach. (166-67)

A personal story, which even a friend of Changez's sincerity cannot make interpersonal, leaving Changez to conclude "we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us" (174), a recognition of the social, and ultimately political, foundation of identity.

Of all the characters in the novel, Juan-Bautista has perhaps the greatest influence on Changez, as he draws closer and closer to home, and provides the impetus which fuses the personal, developed and defined by Erica, and the political; it is he who links identity not simply to the past, but to the future as well, and who incites Changez to interrogate the representational structure on which his identity is based. Juan-Bautista is an old man who runs a publishing company in Valparaiso, Chile, which Changez and a vice-president from Underwood Samson are sent to value, knowing that the literary section of the business will likely be shut down as a result. Changez's uncle was a poet in the Punjab, and books are very highly valued by himself and his family (142). This fact impresses Juan-Bautista, and the two connect on human terms, especially since Juan-Bautista has noticed that Changez is not like the others, that he is not happy doing this valuation mission (146). Changez feels himself "on the threshold of great change;

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<sup>26</sup> Citing Pierre Nora, Joël Candau suggests that not only are memory and history non-synonymous, they are in fact diametrically opposed: "Parce que mémoire et histoire sont en opposition totale, le 'criticisme destructeur' de la seconde va s'employer à refouler et détruire la première. La perspective adoptée par Nora pourrait se résumer dans la formule suivante: l'histoire est une anti-mémoire et, réciproquement, la mémoire est l'anti-histoire". *Anthropologie de la mémoire*. Paris, Armand Colin, Collection Cursus, 2005, p. 59.

only the final catalyst was now required, and in my case that catalyst took the form of lunch" (150). During this lunch, Juan-Bautista tells Changez the story of the janissaries, "'Christian boys,' he explained, 'captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army [...] They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilization, so they had nothing else to turn to'" (151). Juan-Bautista's objective is obvious, to lead Changez to see the irony of his own situation, the reason for his pervasive sentiment of not knowing exactly who he is or where he belongs:

"'How old were you when you went to America?' he asked. 'I went for college,' I said. 'I was eighteen.' 'Ah, much older,' he said. 'The janissaries were always taken in childhood. It would have been far more difficult to devote themselves to their adopted empire, you see, if they had memories they could not forget.' He smiled and speculated no further on the subject" (151).

Changez of course possesses a memory that the younger boys did not, and as he gains what Alexander calls "reflexivity, to move from the sense of something commonly experienced to the sense of strangeness" (2), Changez feels that he has betrayed his origins, feels that he shares in the oppressor's guilt, as he attempts to reorient his identity along its more "true" axes after having gone through what Hall has earlier described as "the eye of the needle of the other" on his way toward insight, self discovery and a unification of the personal and the political, in the postmodern sense, wherein "the personal is the political"<sup>27</sup>:

In any case, Juan-Bautista's words plunged me into a deep bout of introspection. There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. Of course I was struggling! Of course I felt torn! I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was pre-disposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain. (152).

Returned to New York in order to resign his position with Underwood Samson, Changez looks about him with "an ex-janissary's gaze" for which he thanks Juan-Bautista (157), a new way of focussing on the fundamentals which highlights not the details studied in isolation, which only helps to perpetuate the status quo<sup>28</sup>, but his relation to his socio-historical context / genealogy in much broader terms, a new perspective which brings all of the contradictions, bad faith and lies to the fore. Changez has, in effect, changed reality by subscribing to the formula which

<sup>27</sup> David Hawkes, *Ideology*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

suggests that to understand meaning – defined as “symbolic universes [. . .] social products with a history,” one must also understand “the history of their production”<sup>29</sup>; increased awareness often destabilizes cultural frames, those structures which propose a place, an identity to subjects as members of a group. At the very end of the novel, both Changez and the American agent see themselves as justified, as acting in self defense, after their respective cultural traumas, Western oppression and terrorist attacks, as Smelser suggests: “when two antagonists confront one another, each armed with the sure conviction that it has been traumatized by the other, we have an unfailing recipe for a polarization of the pious, rigidity of ideological positions, and violence perpetrated in the name of the holy”<sup>30</sup>. While the final scene in Lahore is left open, the most likely outcome is that Changez and his confederates kill the American agent, a result which seems fair and just given Changez’s status as the hero of the novel after rediscovering his primary self and becoming a political actor by focussing on the fundamentals. Although communities under threat often retreat into their respective enclaves, keeping apart, as we have seen the infusion of the personal with the political results in something more complex, those clivages which oblige one, not to avoid the Other, but to go all the way through the Other on the quest for the primary, the fundamental self.

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<sup>29</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *op. cit*, p. 115.

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