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# The Muslim Mystique: The Use of Rushdie's Imaginary Homeland to Combat Prejudice Against Muslim Peoples Explored in Three Semi-Autobiographical Works of Popular Fiction by Muslim Authors of an American Immigrant Background

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The Muslim Mystique:  
The Use of Rushdie's Imaginary Homeland to Combat Prejudice Against Muslim  
Peoples Explored in Three Semi-Autobiographical Works of Popular Fiction by Muslim  
Authors of an American Immigrant Background

by

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The Muslim Mystique:

The Use of Rushdie's Imaginary Homeland to Combat Prejudice Against Muslim Peoples Explored in Three Semi-Autobiographical Works of Popular Fiction by Muslim Authors of an American Immigrant Background

Lauren Nadolski

Southeastern University, 2015

There is a largely unexplored trend in recent popular fiction that regards the semi-autobiographical work of authors of an immigrant or refugee background. These works seldom fall into the trap exposed by Said's *Orientalism*, but instead present the author's native country and culture through a lens similar what Salman Rushdie described as "imaginary homelands." This thesis examines three primary texts that fit that description: *The Kite Runner* by Kahled Hosseini, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Moshin Hamid, and *Habibi* by Naomi Shihab Nye for their inclusion of the Islamic faith and their portrayal of America. The texts are analyzed and recommended based on their ability to combat racial and religious prejudice and ignorance in light of topical news and media portrayals of Muslim peoples.

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## INTRODUCTION

“It may be that writers in my position, exiles or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutilated into pillars of salt....We will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fiction, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.”

Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticisms 1981-1991”

What does the typical American know of Muslim culture? After the terrorist attack on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the United States ceased to feel safe. Violent extremists had infiltrated the nation’s airspace, killing over 2,000 people, and bringing a once-secure nation to its knees. After that day, lawmakers and security forces quickened to change policy that would fortify an “us versus them” barrier (separating Muslims and the Orient from the “rest of America”), and ignorance of both practice and mentality that would last well into the following decade, and beyond.

While President Bush rallied support for the “War on Terror,” 31-year-old Mark Stroman walked into a Texaco station in Dallas, Texas. With a red bandana covering the lower part of his face, no doubt something he saw in a movie about outlaws, he took a loaded gun and shot the man behind the counter (Sager). The shooter, a meth addict and white supremacist with a criminal history, had already shot two people in a rampage he

claimed was what “all Americans wanted to do” at the time. The others were two immigrants, one from Pakistan and one from India. Both were killed. The man in the Texaco station, Rais Bhuiyan, an immigrant from Bangladesh, survived the attack, but was left with shattered pellets from the bullet lodged in his face and head, and thousands of dollars of medical bills.

The outcome of this story will be revisited, but what stands out is this: none of these people who were attacked shared an ethnic background with the group of people who carried out the terrorist attack on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Only a portion (including Bhuiyan) were even Muslim. The shooter in this case had a history of drugs and racism, but this was not an isolated attack in the days following 9/11 and even up until today. Clearly there have been large gaps in recognition of Oriental ethnicities and Muslims in the U.S., and a pattern of generalization in regards to viewing all Muslim peoples as terrorists (Nussbaum).

America has had an uneasy history with Middle-Eastern and Asian peoples, especially Muslims (Alsultany). In 2011, when France completely banned face-covering Muslim headscarves, or hijabs, in public places, Americans debated whether or not the U.S. should adopt a similar policy (Winter). There are countless stories from the days surrounding 9/11 as well. When a mosque was to be built just a few blocks away from where The Towers fell, Americans clamored in outrage, and those Muslims living in New York City, many of them far removed from the kind of extremism that lead to modern terrorist attacks, had to question their identities as often occurs when Muslims face the (Ali, Duderija, Kaplan). For those who have lived in New York their whole lives, they were now being treated with contempt and hatred in the street, though the attack had

shaken these Muslim peoples just as much as those of the majority who considered themselves “true Americans” (Telhami).

These incidences did not begin with 9/11, however. Though this does not immediately concern America’s home front at the moment, the current actions of the radical Islamic State around the world, especially the frightfully common instances of people from various countries and ethnic descents leaving to fight in their support, leave news updates filled with terrifying and alarming reports of their “spectacles of destruction” of both cultural and human life (Harmanşah). Pair this with the Syrian refugee crisis and the global movement of millions of displaced peoples (many of them Muslim) relocating to “the West,” and assimilating into neighborhoods, schools, and careers, and it becomes crucial that Americans cease to remain in ignorance of Muslim backgrounds and cultural make-ups (Callaway).

The problem here is that the average American has no personal frame of reference for the Muslim person except that of television, films, media, and literature (Hussain). Troublesome news reporting in the past has shed an alarmingly negative light on Muslim peoples, and the villainous Arab/Oriental peoples, not all of whom would even be Muslims, portrayed in popular movies do not add to an accurate portrayal of these people (Nurullah).

Where, then, is one to turn to find a genuine, healthy understanding of Muslims in art and media? Popular media and literature should not be easily trusted. Thankfully, studies have shown that readers exposed to multicultural fiction are supplied with a deeper, more complex understanding of the cross-cultural peoples in the story (Baer and Glasgow). Not all cross-cultural literature is accessible to the general reader, however,

and can serve as harmful Muslim images instead of enlightening depictions. One turns to popular fiction, for instance, and doesn't have to look any farther from a book's cover to spot troublesome visages of overtly sexualized or inaccurately represented Muslim women (Ahmad). Yet, sadly, those are the glamorous novels and the portrayals that immediately appeal to hungry readers.

There must be a balance between popular fiction and rich, accurate portrayals of Muslim peoples that heightens Americans' understanding and enlightens them as to the cultural nuances of what so many have associated with violence, "otherness," and hatred. Even the use of the word "accurate" is problematic: news reports are accurate; statistics are accurate. Are people "accurate?" Are stories "accurate?"

Narrative is so often useful as a means of connecting people across time, space, culture, and socio-economic gaps. In the past, most popular entertainment involving Muslim peoples has aided in furthering this gap instead of bridging it (Ahmed). This largely has to do with the fact that many of these portrayals have been created by non-Muslims and people completely outside the varied worldviews of Muslim people. It is difficult to imagine, therefore, a proper Muslim depiction outside of an author of Muslim background. Such authors exist, and are currently writing popular American fiction, but there remains an undiscovered trend in the work of popular Muslim (secular or practicing) authors, and that is the aspect of semi-autobiographicalism (Chan, Fitzpatrick).

In recent years, there have been a number of fiction texts written by authors of Muslim background that correspond highly to his or her personal narrative. These authors tend to come from an immigrant or refugee background and are writing about their

homeland from the United States. These works convey stories that are impossible to separate from their personal, cultural, and religious aspects, and (subliminally or not) inform the reader one way or another of the lives of Muslim peoples (Auguste).

There is another aspect of texts by refugee, immigrant, or expatriate authors, however, that sheds necessary light on the cultural works read for greater understanding of the locus of the novel. In his essays “Imaginary Homelands,” Salman Rushdie considers the fact that his writing about India, the place of his birth and childhood before his immigration to Britain, is inevitably steeped in years of nostalgia and childlike associations, and thus are translated into fiction: not as crystalline images of Bombay to be read as a factual tourist’s or historian’s guide but as a broken mirror image of that time and place. The “storification” of an author’s homeland is often inevitable when writing from their adopted homes. According to Rushdie, it is a “useful tool with which to work in the present.”

Numerous Muslim (secular or practicing) authors who have spent time or grown up in America have unavoidably adopted the visage of an “imaginary homeland” with which to craft their novels. Given today’s political and religious climate regarding Muslims, and the chronic “otherfication” of Muslim peoples as outlined in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, a question arises: how does the often-enchanting portrayal of a (perhaps Americanized) “imaginary homeland” affect an American reading of works of fiction by American immigrant authors?

Three important texts in particular that lend for interesting analysis on this subject are *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (Afghanistan), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Moshin Hamid (Pakistan), and *Habibi*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (Israel). These texts will be

analyzed as integral American popular texts that are important to the understanding of Muslim people groups. They will be studied for their popularity, their inclusion of the Muslim religion and subject matter, and the relationship between America (an American culture) and the author's use of the imaginary homeland in respect to the nations and cultures of their heritage.

## CHAPTER 1: THE KITE RUNNER

### Islam in *The Kite Runner*

*The Kite Runner*, with its unparalleled achievement in popularity, is the most important text in this study. In January of 2009, Timothy Aubry, professor of English at Baruch College, New York, studied Amazon.com reviews for *The Kite Runner* from 4 June 2003 to 1 January 2006 (Aubry). The book, which has spent over two years on the New York Times Bestseller list (Random House), is the first novel published in English by an author from Afghanistan (Milvy), and not an obvious choice to reach top-seller status. Aubry examined the appeal of the novel to American Amazon customers, noting that “overall, the book has encouraged increased tolerance and sympathy for Muslims” and “*The Kite Runner* seems only to activate the desire to overcome or elude partisan, ethnic, religious, and national divisions.” The reviews he surveyed speak to the experience of reading *The Kite Runner* in the midst of War on Terrorism America. It is an anomaly that this novel, set in a remote land that was currently being antagonized with gusto by the American media at the time of publication, and containing a lexicon of Farsi vocabulary laced throughout the pages, would grace the everyday American’s bookshelf with a cover that boasts glowing reviews by Diane Sawyer and *People* magazine, and eventually earn a place in the family’s DVD collection with the 2007 film adaptation.

Aubry’s study of Amazon reviews points to the novel’s “strategic universalism” as the means by which the story became a cultural touchstone among readers of American popular fiction. One does not have to enter the novel with any frame of reference for the Afghan people or nation in order to feel the grip and sting of the text’s themes of betrayal, regret, loyalty, and redemption. Many questions have been asked as

to what makes this novel so accessible to the American reader, and its themes serve as one answer.

Another explanation stems from the author's background. According to the author's promotional website (khaledhosseini.com), Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965, and became an expatriate with the rise of the Soviet coup in Afghanistan. His family spent 4 years in Paris from 1976 to 1980, originally intending to move back to Kabul when the militaristic dust settled, but ended up seeking political asylum in the United States. The family settled in San Jose, California, where Hosseini went to high school and was educated as a physician. When he had the chance to return to Afghanistan at the age of 38, he experienced Afghanistan under Taliban rule and confessed that he "felt like a tourist in [his] own country" (Milvy).

There are many parallels to be drawn between Hosseini and *The Kite Runner's* protagonist, Amir. Both men's mothers were teachers of Farsi and history in Afghanistan, both were raised with Hazara servants in the homes of their childhood, both emigrated to the Bay Area in California as refugees after the Soviet Coup, and both returned to Afghanistan at the same age.

*The Kite Runner* is rich in author-protagonist parallels and testimonials of its perspective-shaking effect of American readers, but does Hosseini ever falter? Are there any elements in the novel's portrayal of Afghanistan and Islam that are problematic or questionable? Some scholars, such as Chan and Lam, have deemed Hosseini's fiction problematic for its portrayal of Muslims and have gone as far as to suggest that he gives in to the pitfalls outlined by Said. For a complete analysis and recommendation, it must first be studied for the nature of its inclusion of Islam and the relationship between the

East and the West: Hosseini's original home of Kabul, Afghanistan, and his adopted home of California, U.S.A.

The storyline of *The Kite Runner* can be divided into three distinct parts. The first is Amir's childhood in Kabul in the 1970's, where Hassan and Amir's friendship is strongest. Amir thirsts for the approval of his father, and Kabul remains in a state that is largely unaltered by military advances. The shift takes place after Hassan and Ali leave Baba's home, the Soviets invade, and Amir and Baba leave Afghanistan for Pakistan and eventually begin anew in America. The third and final part of the novel begins when Amir, a married adult without children, is summoned to Pakistan by Rahim Khan, told the truth about Baba and Hassan, and makes his journey to Taliban-occupied Kabul.

Islam has a part to play in each of the three movements of the novel. In the first part, it is clear that Amir is being raised in a Muslim society:

When I was in fifth grade, we had a mullah who taught us about Islam. His name was Mullah Fatiullah Khan...He lectured us about the virtues of *zakat* and the duty of *hadj*; he taught us the intricacies of performing the five daily *namaz* prayers, and made us memorize verses from the Koran – and though he never translated the words for us, he did stress, sometimes with the help of a stripped willow branch, that we had to pronounce the Arabic words correctly so God would hear us better. (Hosseini 15-16)

This passage introduces the reader to the overall function of the Islamic faith in Part One of the novel: that of an out-of-touch, linguistically foreign religion. The surrounding pages reveal Baba's views towards Islam, and all religion, which is formative and definitive for Amir at this stage of life. For Baba, God is not a certainty, and sin all has its origin in the command not to steal: murder robbed a spouse of a partner, and a child of a parent, and so on. However, it isn't what Baba states he believes in this passage that stands out so much as what he doesn't believe. When Amir questions him about sin, Baba

turns on the fundamentalists who teach Islam in Afghanistan: “You’ll never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots...I mean all of them. Piss on the beards of those self-righteous monkeys.... God help us all if Afghanistan ever falls into their hands” (Hosseini 16-17).

This short, darkly foreshadowing statement has an immediate effect in distancing the protagonist family from the Islamic “bad guys” of the Taliban regime, something contemporary American readers would recognize and appreciate instantly. That this conversation occurs so early in the book is also significant. If Baba had made a statement of support of or favor towards Islamic fundamentalists, American audiences would not have been as welcoming to the book, tossing it aside as extremist propaganda. The rejection of strict Islamic principles by the man who, at this point, is the novel’s most noble character, is a comforting invitation to read on, as if this is Hosseini’s first declaration of “it’s okay; you can trust me.”

What is problematic here is that there is not a distinction between strict adherence to Islam and religious education and outright extremism. It is suggested, in the knowing foreboding of Baba’s fear of the nation falling to “those self-righteous monkeys,” that the Taliban would be comprised of ordinary teachers and instructors of Islam from the streets of Kabul, which is not representative of the true origin of the Taliban (Akhtar, Williams).

Baba’s opinion, though spoken most forthrightly and sternly, is not the only voice in Part One of the novel, however. Hassan and Ali are both devout, practicing Muslims (although, as Hazaras, they were Shi’a, while Pashtun Amir and Baba were Sunni, a fact noted by Amir as not “easy to overcome”) (Hosseini 25, Baiza). Several times in the novel, Amir refers to Hassan as “the face of Afghanistan” for him, and throughout this

portion of the novel Hassan is as large of an influence on Amir as Baba is, though Amir would never admit it. Though Hassan and Ali are the most economically, socially, and educationally bereft characters in the novel, they are also the most idealized and the most longed for. One argues that not only is Hassan meant to be the symbol for Afghanistan in the protagonist's life, but representative of Islam as well.

During the second part of the novel, Islam takes a backseat to the ubiquitous descriptions and explanations of Afghan society, but it maintains a subtly present role in the American lives of the Afghan refugee community. Once again, the figure of Baba is at odds with Islamic tradition, but this time for the last time. His funeral is held "at the mosque in Hayward" (Hosseini 173), and the mullah and an attendee argue over which verse of the Koran to read at the gravesite (as one last allusion to Baba's hatred of self-righteous religion), but the Islamic funeral is overall fitting and portrayed as worthy of Baba, being well-attended and respectful of Afghan and Islamic tradition. This section seems to suggest that Islam in Afghanistan is not the beginning or end of Afghan community, as the closest connection to religious worship in the immigrant social experience is most heavily expressed through the weekly flea market, which is held on Sundays, a Christian day of worship. Apart from Muslim funerals and Afghan traditions, Hosseini does not hint at any sort of healthy practicing Islamic community in America.

When Amir gets the call summoning him to Pakistan, and the third part of the novel begins, his adventures in his homeland become crucial for the portrayal of Islam in the text, as American audiences search with hungry eyes for depictions of the Taliban to compare to the media coverage of them that they have already devoured. Amir's first conversation about the Taliban while in Pakistan is with Rahim Khan, who is a figure

who holds great influence in Amir's life and is central to his character development and is also a self-professed Muslim, who faithfully prays *namaz* and frequently invokes the name of Allah (Hosseini 227). Adult Amir holds him and Ali's family in admiration and reverence, and they all happen to be devout Muslims. From this initial conversation about the influence of the Taliban, it is clear which side the novel is to take; backing the belief that Islamic Extremism is separate from the true Islam, and not representative of Islamic people as a whole. When he first arrives in Pakistan, his driver declares "Muslims have to help Muslims" in reference to the Taliban reign in Afghanistan (Hosseini 194). Also, the stadium scene is a fierce indictment of Taliban brutality as it describes the event of an adulterous man and women being stoned to death as entertainment during a soccer match.

The Talib official on the scene reminds the crowd why such an act is necessary:

When the prayer was done, the cleric cleared his throat. "Brothers and sisters!" he called, speaking in Farsi, his voice booming through the stadium. "We are here today to carry out *Shari'a*. We are here today to carry out justice. We are here today because the will of Allah and the word of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, are alive and well here in Afghanistan, our beloved homeland. We listen to what God says and we obey because we are nothing but humble, powerless creatures before God's greatness. And what does God say? I ask you! WHAT DOES GOD SAY? God says that every sinner must be punished in a manner befitting his sin. Those are not my words, nor the words of my brothers. Those are the words of GOD!" (Hosseini 270)

The horror of the scene speaks for itself of the twisted, inhumane public rituals of the Taliban, and Hosseini immediately distances the central characters and "true" Islamic religion from the horrific display as Farid shakes his head and whispers "And they call themselves Muslims" (Hosseini 271). As Amir watches, he recalls his father's words that he would "Piss on the beards of those self-righteous monkeys," and the reader is made to feel sorrow and horror, but also this suggests a slight comfort in the fact that the beloved

characters of the text were never without wisdom in their judgment and distance from extremism (Hosseini 270).

When Amir is granted a meeting with the Talib official from the stadium, who he is told has Sohrab in his possession, an allegory unfolds involving Islam and Afghanistan. In a cinematically dramatic turn of events, the Talib is discovered to be Assef, the half-Afghan, half-German menace who made Amir's childhood an anxious mess and who raped Hassan in the alleyway in the event that launches the remainder of the story. When Amir finds him, Assef has Sohrab in his grasp as a sex slave. During Amir's meeting with him, Assef is portrayed with even more psychopathic tendencies than he was when he was a neighborhood bully. He describes his draw to the Taliban:

“You don't know the meaning of the word 'liberating' until you've done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good, and decent. Knowing you're doing God's word. It's breathtaking.” He kissed the prayer beads, tilted his head. (Hosseini 277)

Throughout the novel Assef spouts rhetoric that is laced with ideas that are laced with ideas that are racist, anti-Semitic, pro-Hitler, anti-Hazara, and proposing what Amir calls “ethnic cleansing” (Hosseini 284). These remarks are painted as evidence of the character's severe mental instability and a departure from true Islam, though as a Talib official he is clearly using extremism as a vehicle to accomplish his sadistic desires.

Several plot pieces point to evidence of an allegorical meaning with Assef representing Islamic extremism (embodied by the Taliban) and Amir and Sohrab as the culture, people, and nation of Afghanistan. Assef is foreign born, yet passes as completely Afghan, citing the Islamic religion as a mandate for unthinkable violence and destruction. This description belongs to the Taliban as well. Assef rapes Hassan as the

Taliban have raped (both literally and figuratively) Afghanistan. The tipping point, however, resides with Sohrab, who represents the future of Afghanistan. It is clear that the younger generations of Afghanistan have endured the same assault as previous generations, but the story must unfold in order for the American reader to discover what is to come of young Afghanistan. This allegory and its implications will be revisited in the next section of this chapter.

As the plot unfolds, Islam takes on a more graceful face in the life of Amir. When he discovers Sohrab's attempted suicide in the hotel bathtub and is waiting to hear news of his survival in the hospital lobby, he becomes a desperate man, proclaiming, "I know what I have to do" (Hosseini 345) and pulling a white bed sheet from a hospital supply closet to use as a "makeshift *jai-namaz*" (Hosseini 345), or prayer rug, and bows to the west for the first time in fifteen years:

I have long forgotten the words. But it doesn't matter. I will utter those few words I still remember: *La illaha il Allah, Muhammad u rasul ullah*. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger. I see now that Baba was wrong, there is a God, there always has been. I see Him there, in the eyes of the people in this corridor of desperation. This is the real house of God, this is where those who have lost God will find Him, not the white *masjid* with its bright diamond lights and its towering minarets. There is a God, there has to be, and now I will pray....I bow to the west and kiss the ground and promise that I will do *zakat*, I will do *namaz*, I will fast during Ramadan and when has passed I will go on fasting, I will commit to memory every last word of His holy book, and I will set on a pilgrimage to that sweltering city in the desert and bow before the Ka'bah too. I will do all of this and I will think of Him everyday from this day on if He only grants me this one wish: My hands are stained with Hassan's blood; I pray God doesn't let them get stained with the blood of his boy too....I pray that my sins have not caught up with me the way I'd always feared they would. (Hosseini 345-346)

For Amir, desperation is a vehicle that propels him to faith. For the first time in his life, he is seeing God with clarity, beyond the smoke of his father's opinions and the Taliban's

cruelties. What he finally sees of Islam is that, with all its traditions and behavioral regulations, it ultimately worships a God who can wound and restore, strike down and heal in equal measure. Amir turns to this God as something untethered by anything but love – his love for Hassan and therefore Sohrab, and guilt – that he believes Hassan is dead because of him, and he cannot live with the possibility of having killed his son as well.

Sohrab heals (physically), and ultimately Amir makes good on his promise to honor Allah even as he returns to his life in California: “I prayed morning *namaz* while Soraya slept – I didn’t have to consult the prayer pamphlet I had obtained from the mosque anymore; the verses came naturally now, effortlessly” (Hosseini 364). The story ends with the protagonist’s surrender and adoption of Islamic ritual and faith, but it is his coming to faith that is not foreign or threatening to American readers. He becomes a believer through fear, desperation, and bargaining, which is an oft-sung tune in the world of fiction and cinema that portray Christian faith began in medical desperation. This fact is crucial to probing the acceptance and understanding of the Islamic faith that has been gleaned from this book by Americans. Hosseini encased the testimony of his protagonist in a familiar narrative that makes frequent appearance in Christian faith circles.

Overall, though there are a few troublesome renderings of Islam and Islamic life in *The Kite Runner*, the subject overall is treated with a bias that is favorable to American readers. Though some may cite it as manipulative, it is nonetheless authentic and effective in bringing Americans who are ignorant and perhaps even scared of the religion into greater understanding.

#### The Role of America in *The Kite Runner*

Hosseini's "imaginary homeland" is contrasted with America in all three sections of the text. In Part One, the romanticization of Kabul begins almost immediately with descriptions on page 3 of Hassan and Amir climbing the poplar tree in the yard of Baba's house and continues to describe winter nights of card-playing and kite running juxtaposed by summer days of climbing trees and walls, reading underneath the pomegranate tree, and drinking lemonade from the street vendors. Growing up as Baba's son meant living in one of the nicest houses in all of Kabul, and the place seemed a safe sanctuary of childhood exploration and delight. The interruptions of the Soviet invasion and Hassan's rape are brazen contrasts that serve as the greatest threats to Amir's enchanting way of life in Afghanistan and are the eventual reasons why he and Baba leave. These circumstances are beyond their direct control, and thus, for the rest of the novel, the time and place of Kabul in the 1970s is forever associated with deep longing and nostalgia.

As a boy, Amir and Hassan are largely unaware of American culture and politics (Baba once points out Henry Kissinger to his son at a Kabul party, and Amir has no idea who he is) (Hosseini 21). However, their childhoods are both fashioned by their joint obsession with American Western films, yet they initially fail to understand that the movies are indeed American:

We saw our first Western together, *Rio Bravo* with John Wayne, at the Cinema Park, across the street from my favorite bookstore. I remember begging Baba to take us to Iran so we could meet John Wayne. Baba burst out in gales of his deep-throated laughter – a sound not unlike a truck engine revving up – and, when he could talk again, explained to us the concept of voice dubbing. Hassan and I were stunned. Dazed. John Wayne didn't really speak Farsi and he wasn't Iranian! He was American, just like the friendly, longhaired man and women we always saw hanging around in Kabul, dressed in their tattered, brightly colored shirts (Hosseini 28).

Here, America is almost as romanticized as Kabul, being that Amir now knows it is the land of his favorite films and is home to the “friendly” tourists. America, or what little Amir thinks he knows about it, is mentioned as a desirable place in Part One of the book, though its significance is overshadowed by the charming, though certainly complicated and imperfect, world of Kabul in the 1970’s.

Part Two of the novel begins with the inscription “*Fremont, California. 1980s,*” followed by the opening line: “Baba loved the *idea* of America. It was living in America that gave him ulcers” (Hosseini 125). This initial chapter is full of Baba’s interactions with Americans and American politics. He calls the nation “the brash savior” and one of the only “real men in the world,” along with Britain and Israel (Hosseini 125).

Afghanistan is not listed under that title. He determined the worth of American presidents based on their stance against the Soviet Union, calling Jimmy Carter a “big-toothed cretin” but buying a framed picture of Ronald Reagan and hanging it in the hallway when he called the Soviets “the Evil Empire” (Hosseini 126). Baba did not assimilate well into an American lifestyle as Amir did, refusing to enroll in ESL classes out of his pride and maintaining a job as the manager of a gas station (who was privy to occasional culture-shock related meltdowns), while in Kabul he had been one of the most economically powerful men (Hosseini 126-128).

Amir’s reception of the new country was opposite: “For me, America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his” (Hosseini 129). It is made apparent that Baba’s only recompense in coming to America (where he eventually dies of cancer) is to provide for a successful future for Amir. Amir, alternatively, thought of Kabul as “a city of harelipped ghosts,” calling America “a river, roaring along, unmindful

of the past (Hosseini 136). He took his departure from Afghanistan as an escape from the guilt of his actions toward Hassan, and “if for nothing else, [he] embraced America,” receiving a college education and adopting the ultra-American principle of “following one’s dreams” by studying creative writing (Hosseini 136).

In this section, though Baba is at times at odds with America and Amir is adjusting to it, the Afghan refugee community plays a large role in the societal makeup of their lives. Baba is able to see and socialize with many figures from his successful past in Kabul, and Afghan tradition and cultural idiosyncrasies (Baba reminds Amir that his future father-in-law has “*Nang. Namoos*. Honor and pride. The tenants of Pashtun men.”) remain strong throughout the community (Hosseini 145). Amir is still able to have an Afghan wedding, and some of the refugees, like General Taheri, only consider America to be a temporary marker on the timelines of their lives and expect to be summoned back to Afghanistan after the conflict quiets. For most of the community, especially the younger Afghans, however, it is apparent that they are in America to stay and should make arrangements to sink into the “Melting Pot.”

The role of America becomes complicated in Part Three as the “imaginary homeland” of Amir’s 1970s Kabul is replaced by the war-beaten wasteland of Kabul under Taliban rule. In this section, the contrast between the West and the Orient is greatest.

The change is apparent before Amir even re-enters Afghanistan in his meeting with Rahim Khan. Overlooking the kinship that still existed between the men, there is an obvious dissonance between Kahn, who remained in Kabul after Baba and Amir fled, and Amir, who, it seems, has been “Americanized:”

“I see America has infused you with the optimism that has made her so great. That’s very good. We’re a melancholic people, we Afghans, aren’t we? Often, we wallow too much in *ghamkhori* and self-pity. We give in to loss, to suffering, accept it as a fact of life, even see it as necessary. *Zendagi migzara*, we say, life goes on” (Hosseini 201).

Rahim Kahn says this in reference to Amir’s suggestion that he take him home to America with him for cancer treatment. It is a solemn nod to Baba’s death, expedited by the fact that he embraced the more Afghan approach of accepting suffering rather than fighting it, as well as evidence that Amir has adopted the “never give up” and “money and science change everything” attitude that is held by many Americans. A shift is noted here, as Rahim Kahn becomes a figure who will eventually fade into the background of Amir’s memory as another representation of his Afghan childhood and sensibilities. This is confirmed when Rahim Kahn asks something of Amir and Amir immediately assumes he can fix the issue with money instead of be bothered by it personally, and Kahn becomes visibly upset, declaring “I am a dying man and will not be insulted!” (Hosseini 221). He becomes a symbol for Afghanistan who coaxes Amir into the heroic fight that is in him and that reflects his father, Baba. Thus begins a series of comparisons of contemporary Afghanistan with the modern America in which Amir now lives.

Shortly after this scene, Amir enters Afghanistan for the first time since his hurried departure as a young refugee. His driver and guide, Farid, gives him lemon to help his carsickness, saying “It’s not fancy like American medicine, I know, just an old remedy my mother taught me” (Hosseini 229). This foreshadows Farid’s outburst when Amir proclaims, not unlike Hosseini himself, “I feel like a tourist in my own country” (Hosseini 231). “You still think of this as your country?” Farid snickers (Hosseini 231),

and proceeds to guess correctly that, though Amir is Pashtun and was raised in Kabul, he was so in a large estate with a powerful father and Hazara servants, and then:

He pointed to an old man dressed in ragged clothes trudging down a dirt path, a large burlap pack filled with scrub grass tied to his back. “That’s the real Afghanistan, Agha sahib. That’s the Afghanistan I know. You? You’ve always been a tourist here, you just don’t know it.” (Hosseini 232)

Rahim Kahn had told Amir not to be surprised if the Afghans who had not fled the country had no welcome to offer him, but Farid’s words in some ways rang true for Amir, who, in the spirit of generosity, gives Farid’s children his expensive watch that night, without realizing that he mistook their lustful stares that were directed at his food, not his wrist (Hosseini 241).

As Amir finally enters Kabul, many of the scenes he sees (“rubble and beggars”) he compares with old, enchanted Kabul instead of with America, but when he and Farid can’t sleep one night, he entertains him with stories about what it’s like to live in America, replete with tales of “plentiful” fruit and clean water and within every home a TV that could “receive over five hundred channels” (Hosseini 266). The awe of these stories, however, is followed up with silence, which Farid breaks by telling a “Mullah Nasruddin” joke, which is beloved and famous in Afghan culture. Instances such as this occur throughout the third part of the novel, where America, large, looming, shiny, successful, stands next to Afghanistan, marginalized, war-torn, impoverished, and the warm presence of Afghan culture seems to have more charm and life-blood than plasticized America.

Where the role of America may be troublesome in *The Kite Runner* is where the nation enters into the perceived allegory involving Assef and Sohrab. If Assef represents the Taliban and Sohrab represents Afghanistan and its future, what does Amir represent?

Given the fact that he removed Sohrab from danger in Kabul and spirited him away to safety suggests that Amir, who embodies America, needed to intervene or else the rape and mistreatment of Sohrab would not stop. This reads like a political statement in support of American intervention in the conflict in Afghanistan, especially since Amir is only able to rescue Sohrab because he is now from America. Is Hosseini suggesting that the only hope Afghanistan has for the future involves either direct intervention by the savior America, or a Westernization of Afghans to be able to defeat the foes at home? Several critics have taken this view and found it extremely problematic (Chan, O'Rourke).

However, perhaps there is more to the story of Sohrab's "salvation" and Amir's redemption. Though Part Three of the novel hinges on cinematic coincidences and a somewhat overtly tidy dramatic plotline, there are many grey areas amongst the black and white aspects of the text. First of all, Amir didn't "save" Sohrab. In the fight with Assef, it was Sohrab who drew his slingshot and ensured their escape. Also, though Sohrab expresses excitement at getting to travel and see America, his first and second reactions to Amir's request that he come to live with them are "it scares me" (Hosseini 324), and in the end, he never accepts Amir's offer (Hosseini 356). Sohrab attempts suicide not because he cannot go to America immediately, but because Amir tells him he may be temporarily sent back to the orphanage (Hosseini 342-343). When Amir eventually does take the boy back to San Francisco it is not depicted as an act of salvation in Sohrab's life:

What he yearned for was his old life. What he got was me and America. Not that it was such a bad fate, everything considered, but I couldn't tell him that. Perspective was a luxury when your head was constantly buzzing with a swarm of demons. And so it was that, about a week later, we crossed a strip of warm, black tarmac, and I brought Hassan's son home

from Afghanistan to America, lifting him from the certainty of turmoil and dropping him in a turmoil of uncertainty. (Hosseini 356)

That is hardly the description of a triumphant, joyful homecoming. He remains depressed and withdrawn for over a year, and when he eventually does show an almost imperceptible sign of opening up, it is at something that reminds him of home and of his father: kite running (Hosseini 370-371).

Hosseini takes careful pains to ensure that the ultimate stacking-up of America versus Afghanistan should not have a clear winner. Yes, Western values triumph in this book, but Afghan culture and the spirit of Amir and Hassan's childhood is depicted as ultimate value. Amir isn't qualified to put his hand toward rescuing Sohrab because of his Americanization (Rahim Khan didn't accept his offer of money to solve the problem; Amir is obviously unable to fight Assef physically), instead, it is the little Hazara boy, the future of Afghanistan, who injures his slaver and truly saves Amir's life. These events suggest that Afghanistan has enough courage, value, and skill to be put towards its own liberation from oppression. In the end, Amir only becomes of worth in Sohrab's life when he reminds him of his father, Hassan, the embodiment of everything familiar, pure, and Afghan.

Ultimately, *The Kite Runner* as a whole has some troublesome facets, such as a small gap in depictions of moderate Islamic faith that isn't laced with reflections of Western religious conversion, and the fact that the cinematic redemption plot is, at times, distractingly improbable and dramatic so as to all but skim past some of the more harrowing issues such as the stoning of the adulterous couple. Overall, however, *The Kite Runner* breaks down Orientalist separatism and employs the use of "the imaginary

homeland” and universalization to appeal to readers of an array of cultures. This work invites interested readers into something more than a moving story that takes place in Afghanistan; it invites them into a moving story that takes place within a nation with a myriad of people groups, cultural cues, traditions, problems, fears, questions, and great beauty. It’s that aspect of the text that invites American readers to discover Islam and Afghanistan on a human level, a benefit which, when the text is read closely, outweighs any problematic elements.

## CHAPTER 2: THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST

Mohsin Hamid has spent about half of his life in Pakistan. Moving to America when he was three, he learned English and in turn forgot Urdu, only to move back to Lahore at the age of nine to re-learn the language and all but forget English before he moved back to the United States to earn degrees from Princeton University and Harvard Law School (mohsinhamid.com). After schooling, he entered the world of finance as a business consultant in New York City, until moving home to Lahore, and has since spent time in London, where he maintains a dual-citizenship, and California (N.P.R. Staff).

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is his second novel, which was published in 2007 and achieved international fame almost instantaneously. Like *The Kite Runner*, *Fundamentalist* was also made into a major motion picture, but with a significantly altered plot. The success of this short novel is somewhat enigmatic. Scholars have pointed out that it “offers a counter- statement to one of the most established ways of understanding the post-9/11 era,” but it does so in such a way that is not immediately appealing to the American reader (Darda).

Hamid encases his semi-autobiographical work within the form of a frame story, where the protagonist, Changez, who also attended Princeton and landed a competitive position at a New York consulting firm, is telling the story of his time in America to an unknown, mysterious American. The rather dramatic, ambiguous ending of the story, which takes place outside the “frame” of Changez’s storytelling, contributes to the cinematic elements of the novel, and has caused it to be described as a “thriller,” an idea to which Hamid responded with: “The reason for that is that we are already afraid” (mohsinhamid.com).

Hamid's novel is not divorced from his strong ideological views on conflict and American foreign relations, and scholars have seen *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as both political discourse and the cornerstone for a new kind of "critical global imaginary" in literature, which resists global hostility and suggests international coalition through understanding (Darda, Iqbal et al.). However, the novel has sparked controversy and has been criticized by its popular audience for being "anti-American" (Darda). This may be evidence that it is unsuitable for use as part of "a global imaginary," as Darda claims, or is its reception in the United States, through both its popularity and its small-scale rejection, evidence that this imaginary is well needed among the American people, whether or not the novel can be trusted to provide such an understanding?

#### Islam in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

The role of Islam in the novel is enigmatic. On one hand, the title itself is a double entendre, with one of its meanings clearly hinting at Islamic Fundamentalism. On the other hand, Islam is rarely expressively mentioned in the text.

This section must begin with an analysis of the narrator's assumptions about the reader. Some scholars consider this text to be political discourse in part because it seems to be written to a very specific audience (Iqbal et al.). The narrative frame ensures that Hamid can expertly choose his own listener – his intended readership embodied by the guest sitting across the table from old Changez. What is clear from the beginning of the novel is that the listener is American (Hamid 1). Early into the first chapter, Hamid begins to meta-educate, a technique Hosseini used in *The Kite Runner* to give necessary background on the Hazara people to inform the reader as they delve further into the text (Hosseini 9). In both cases, the authors choose to do this because they assume their

readers are unaware of this knowledge. Hosseini's model for meta-educating, however, is that the information that is conveyed is central to the plot of the story; the reader is severely under-resourced if trying to read the novel without a basic understanding of Hazara-Pashtun dynamics. Hamid's use, however, is less functional. He seems to burden himself, as an author, with taking on the role of a defender of Pakistani culture (Perner). In Chapter 1, when Changez is first meeting his mysterious companion, he reveals that he did not know that he was American based on his skin, adding "we have a wide range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier" (Hamid 1). This is a tidbit of information that first personifies the speaker, Changez, as an intelligent, perhaps pretentious man. Secondly, it reveals the audience Hamid is targeting: Americans (perhaps white Americans), who are largely ignorant and perhaps ethnocentric. Hamid embodies his audience in the man who listens to Changez's story. The tip about the lighter-skinned Pakistanis in the northwest is not a crucial piece of information necessary to moving the text forward. Rather, it is thinly veiled commentary on the fact that most Americans tend to imagine the Arab and East Asian world monolithically, filling in the gaps of their understanding with what they know from popular media and entertainment. It is if Hamid is intentionally alerting the reader to the fact that this author is not privy to American ignorance, and considers it his duty, as a Pakistani who was educated in America, to bridge the knowledge gap between ill-informed western readers and the Pakistani people.

One area that is included in this meta-education treatment, however, is that of Islam. Hamid does not present Islam itself as a teaching point, only the effect it has on the Pakistani culture. He does not explicitly discuss the religion or attempt to clear up any

misconceptions about Islamic theology. Instead, he offers it up as a piece that is integral to Pakistan, and a given for the protagonist and his family, but it is rarely explicitly mentioned, if ever.

Hamid seems to consider Islam as a guide and cultural tie for the Pakistani people, just as Judeo-Christian values govern America, and there are several points in the text where Changez alerts his guest to the effect of Islamic standards. For instance, he points out a group of girls to his guest, contrasting their t-shirts and jeans with a table of women in “traditional dress” (Hamid 17), and later goes on to let his guest in on street secrets of Lahore, saying that in the marketplace “if a woman is harassed by a man, she has the right to appeal to the brotherly instincts of the mob, and the mob is known to beat men who annoy their sisters” (Hamid 22-23). This is in reference to a man in their vicinity who is unable to keep his eyes off the young girls, which prompts Changez to explain that the man’s reaction to this minimal exposure is “the effect of scarcity; one’s rules of propriety make one thirst for the improper” (Hamid 26).

He makes another reference to Islamic law and tradition backfiring in Pakistan when it comes to alcohol: “In truth, many Pakistanis drink; alcohol’s illegality in our country has roughly the same effect as marijuana’s in yours” (Hamid 53).

Another topic Hamid continually falls back on related to Islam is that of beards. When Changez leaves the inside of the narrative frame to comment on the world around them in Lahore, he often refers to the gentlemen in sight as “bearded,” and seemingly mentions this particular physical trait as a means to associate them with Islam (Hamid 26). A beard plays the same role in Changez’s life as well. At the beginning of the story, one of his first words to his nameless companion is “Do not be frightened by my beard: I

am a lover of America” (Hamid 1). He leans into the notion that Americans view bearded, dark-haired men as threatening, which is a response carried over from his time in America, where he started growing a beard after the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, and many of his co-workers began to treat him with contempt, and his friends and boss asked him to shave it (Hamid 130-131). However, as his sympathies towards his homeland (and, by extension, Islam) grow, so does his facial hair, which he opts to keep, eventually choosing Lahore over New York.

Female modesty in the streets, bans on alcohol, and beards serve as the three touchstones of Islam that Hamid presents, and they all interact with the idea of fundamentalism and its function in the novel. The title itself suggests that the four years Changez spends in America serve as a sort of “Rumspringa” for his Islamic and Pakistani sensibilities, to which he finds himself returning and choosing over his values in New York. However, there is no conversion moment, or point of re-dedication on a religious spectrum that occurs in Changez’s life. His departure from America has more to do with his disillusionment with American greed and foreign policy than religion, yet he seems to associate this change of allegiance with a change of religion. One is not a “fundamentalist” Pakistani or a “fundamentalist” American, yet Changez’s shift seems more political and value-driven, and has nothing at all to do with religion, save for his beard, which he describes as “common where I come from,” suggesting that his adoption of facial hair has more to do with his cultural identity than a religious identity (Hamid 130).

The notion of fundamentals has a double entendre in the novel. At Changez’s firm in New York, his boss is constantly reminding the team members to “focus on the

fundamentals,” referring to economics and business practices (Hamid 98). These are the fundamentals that Changez adopts as his governing authority during the first half of the book, where his life is consumed with the goal of success in his market. These “fundamentals” are presented as a type of “American programming” where fresh Ivy League graduates are conditioned to compete cunningly in a market of pure greed and ruthlessness. The “fundamentalism” that Changez ultimately reverts to after his rejection of his American life seems largely absent of Islam, and hints at being more of a movement from “American Changez” to “Pakistani Changez,” who becomes a professor and political activist in Lahore. One fails to see how Hamid uses the term fundamentalist in a religious context.

Two instances where Islam is explicitly mentioned, however, both include references to nuclear terrorism. When Changez is getting to know a group of friends who he is travelling with, he introduces himself and says that he “hoped one day to be the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability; the others appeared shocked, and I was forced to explain that I had been joking” (Hamid 29). This remark suggests that Changez, and perhaps the author himself, feel comfortable jesting about the reputations of Islamic people groups, but he ended up perpetuating instead of subverting them in this awkward encounter.

The second occurrence is less playful and more ambiguous. On a plane ride from New York to Lahore, Changez was seated “next to a man who removed his shoes—much to my dismay—and who said, after praying in the aisle, that nuclear annihilation would not be avoided if it was God’s will, but God’s will in this matter was yet unknown

(Hamid 121-122). This is the only picture in the novel of an Islamic fundamentalist, and he is depicted as friendly, yet somewhat delusional.

Hamid refers to his Pakistani characters as Muslim, but they never interact with their faith on a personal or even communal level. Instead, any references to the Islamic religion are couched in commentary on the stereotypes that are associated with Muslims in America, and would indeed perpetuate them were it not for the voice of the protagonist, Changez, who claims at least nominal Islam, and though he is a radical activist, his beliefs are strictly non-violent (Hamid 181). In short, Hamid does not try to dispel Islamic stereotypes prevalent in America by creating a Muslim character whose faith resembles that of a Christian journey, such as in *The Kite Runner*, or by showing the beauty and mystery of the faith, such as in *Habibi*. The Islamic religion itself is not Hamid's main concern, but it may be suggested that the absence of depictions of Islam amongst the magnifying glass that is held up to certain American habits and sensibilities is meant to suggest that national idiosyncrasies and group polarization based on ethnic and social identity speak louder in casual interaction than religious differences.

#### The Role of America in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Turning to Hamid's treatment of America, it is evident that the role of America is the centerpiece of the novel, and is strongly tied to the author's purpose for writing it. Hamid punctuates and gives life to his views on America through one of the novel's main character: Changez's elusive girlfriend Erica, whom is used as an extended metaphor for the nation that resembles her first name.

When Changez first arrived in America, he was impressed and excited in the face of his impending academic pursuits and freedom, told through his first experience at Princeton:

What did I think of Princeton? Well, the answer to that question requires a story. When I first arrived, I looked around me at the Gothic buildings— younger, I later learned, than many of the mosques of this city, but made through acid treatment and ingenious stone-masonry to look older—and thought, *This is a dream come true*. Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible. *I have access to this beautiful campus*, I thought, *to professors who are titans in their fields and fellow students who are philosopher-kings in the making*. (Hamid 4)

In this stage, the Changez who is experiencing the story as it is told is brimming with promise and hope. The Changez who is telling the story many years later, however, is already establishing his position on America by commenting that the buildings of Princeton have a façade-like quality that is not as impressive as the ancient mosques of his hometown. As he experiences it, however, this is not something that he is aware of, which is a common thread throughout his early years in the United States, where he is not yet disillusioned.

In this stage, he longs to feed the beast of American capitalism and climb the infamous ladder of success with a hunger that a recruiter for a successful New York firm recognizes almost instantly, which propels him into his arena of choice (Hamid 12). Before he even enters into said arena, however, the Changez telling the story relates to his American guest how he did not consider his migration to America as complete:

Yes, it was exhilarating. That, in an admittedly long-winded fashion, is how I think, looking back, about Princeton. Princeton made everything possible for me. But it did not, could not, make me forget such things as how much I enjoy the tea in this, the city of my birth, steeped long enough

to acquire a rich, dark color, and make creamy with fresh, full-fat milk.  
(Hamid 15)

This is one of the first appearances of the sense of “imaginary homeland” in this novel. The role of the imaginary homeland is complicated in this text, given the transitory nature of the protagonist, and the fact that he ultimately chooses to end up in his beloved hometown, where the outer frame of the narrative takes place. Though there are points in the story in which Changez verbalizes his appreciation and nostalgia for certain experiences from America, such as shrimp cocktails, the focus of the imaginary homeland is overwhelmingly on Pakistan. Throughout the novel, no matter what stage Changez is in in relation to his feelings about America, he mentions his longing for the flavors and scents of home. As he tells the story, the Changez who has since moved back to Lahore pulls his American guest into his own savory appreciation for Pakistani cuisine and culture, repeatedly exposing him to new dishes and dining habits with the flair and pride of a native cultural guide. This serves the purpose of pulling the reader into Hamid’s own imaginary homeland, offering pleasant scents of jasmine and roasted meat, and inviting the reader to bathe in the dim streetlamp glow of the marketplace at night. Hamid is very intentional in this, and appears to lend credibility to the adoration of Pakistani culture by presenting it through the eyes of an American-educated character.

In the inner frame of the story, Changez moves to New York and his relationship with America is heightened and expanded with all the excitement and opportunity New York offers. His initial thoughts about New York are shared directly after considering Lahore, a city that he frequently compares to New York, and vice versa:

Like Manhattan? Yes, precisely! And that was one of the reasons why for me moving to New York felt—so unexpectedly—like coming home. But there were other reasons as well: the fact that Urdu was spoken by taxi-cab

drivers; the presence, only two blocks from my East Village apartment, of a samosa- and channa-serving establishment called the Pak-Punjab Deli; the coincidence of crossing Fifth Avenue during a parade and hearing, from loudspeakers mounted on the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Association float, a song to which I had danced at my cousin's wedding.

In a subway car, my skin would typically fall in the middle of the color spectrum. On street corners, tourists would ask me for directions. I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was *immediately* a New Yorker. (Hamid 32-33)

Changez reveals a fondness for New York City that supersedes how he has come to feel about America, and, in this passage, largely attributes it to the diversity and inclusion that comes with the anonymity of living in a multi-million-person city.

However, that all changes for Changez, along with his view of America, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. He isn't actually in New York City when the terrorist attack takes place, but instead watches it on television from his business trip to Manila, and his shocking reaction marks a significant turning point in the novel:

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....Please believe me when I tell you that I am no sociopath; I am not indifferent to the sufferings of others....So when I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity....I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had visibly brought America to her knees. (Hamid 72-73)

Changez goes on to compare his reaction with that of Americans watching video clips of their munitions laying low the enemy. He makes no apology for his reaction, only conveys that he felt shocked by his own initial thoughts, and knew that he could never share his thoughts with his co-workers.

However, no matter what his stance on the terrorist attack was, it didn't matter, and Changez went back to a New York that was much altered, especially in their

tolerance for those who looked, spoke, or worshipped like the enemy. Upon returning from Manila, Changez was briefly detained and strip-searched before being allowed through customs, he is sworn at and called an “Arab” near his work, and his co-workers start to let contempt permeate their interactions with him in the office (Hamid 74, 117, 120). He finds America’s reaction to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks to be strange and is bothered by the belligerent patriotism and retaliatory attitude held by a shaken national consciousness: “*you have slighted us; beware our wrath*” (Hamid 79). According to Changez, America was going through a regression and coping unhealthily in the days after the attack:

America ...was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time. There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring words such as *duty* and *honor*. I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look *back*. (Hamid 115)

When the World Trade Center went down, Changez’s regard for America went with it. Up until then, he had merely considered his presence there a gift to cultivate. Now, seeing America thus weakened, he began to poke holes in the America of his mind as well. Eventually, those holes would be too numerous to count, and too invasive to justify staying in America, especially when compounded by his treatment by his co-workers and American passerby who associated his ethnicity with terrorism (Singh).

The balance tips even further when Changez makes a trip home to Pakistan to visit his family over the American holidays. His reaction to the house alarms and disappoints him, as he automatically and unwillingly compares it to homes he’s stayed in in America and thought to himself “*This* was where I came from, this was my provenance, and it smacked of lowliness” (Hamid 124). After being in the house for

awhile, however, he becomes frustrated with how Americanized he had become, rejecting his childhood home as shabby and uncomfortable. Eventually, however, he acclimatizes to his family and his home, which, he decided, was “rich with history,” and he spends the rest of his time in Pakistan with his family, hearing family stories, and informing him of the impending war between powerful India and ill-equipped Pakistan, who supported America against Afghanistan, but whom America chose not to treat like an ally, even pushing the two nations towards war (Hamid 127, 143).

When Changez comes back from visiting his family, his regard for America is splintered irreconcilably, and it begins to truly consume his thoughts and affect his work at the business firm.

Hamid stages another pivotal moment for Changez’s relationship in America while he is overseas for business a second time, in Chile. A book publisher who has strategic interest in sabotage’s Changez’s work at their company takes him out to eat and asks him a significant question: “Have you ever heard of the janissaries?” (Hamid 151). Juan-Bautista goes on to explain that the janissaries were Christian boys who were captured by the Ottoman empire and trained to serve in the Muslim army, all the while not fully realizing that they were brought in to fight against their own homeland. Changez takes this as confirmation that that is what he had become unknowingly, “colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war” (Hamid 152).

From there, Changez’s fate was sealed. He became emotional when thinking about home and the possibility of violence on the border with India, brought on by harmful American foreign policy. Once he keeps his beard for several weeks, consciously

or subconsciously, his solidarity with Pakistan becomes visible, and once he has attempted to wrap up several personal affairs, he is free to leave.

Changez's relationship with America, and Hamid's commentary on the future of America, is embedded in the character's relationship with his distant lover, Erica. Just as he was excited by the possibility of success and the hopeful spirit in the air at Princeton, so was he attracted to and intrigued by Erica, whom he met on a trip to Greece, and when he started advancing at his consulting firm, the two started spending more time together, and she invited her into her world as a socialite's daughter, taking him into "the chic heart of the city" (Hamid 56).

Changez had no girl back in Pakistan, or anywhere, with whom to compare Erica such as he frequently drew comparisons between America and Pakistan, but his disillusionment with attractive, rich Erica came when he realized she was hindered by the haunt of a past love, Chris.

Here Hamid's comparison is most noticeable, explicitly drawing America into Erica's own "dangerous nostalgia" in the form of living in the past and her unwillingness to move on. Changez's desire to please her and be with her overtakes his pride and sense of self, and he urges her to pretend he is her deceased lover so that they can make love for the first and only time (Hamid 105). This comes on the heels of his self-compromise with America as a nation and New York as a city, whom he longed to please by becoming what they longed for, which was not a young Pakistani immigrant.

Erica's situation becomes more serious, however, and her anorexic condition soon overtakes her, as she moves to an institution and eventually goes missing with the probability of suicide. This all-consuming hunger and inability to move on and confront

the past is Hamid's representation of America: a young, attractive, wealthy socialite who is brimming with creative potential, but who cannot reconcile a painful past in order to reach a hopeful future. His commentary on America as an empire reflects this:

"It seemed to me then—and to be honest, sir, it seems to me now—that America was engaged only in posturing. As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you" (Hamid 167-168). This mirrors Erica's, who was grieving the loss of her boyfriend, inability to connect with Changez, who was grieving the loss of his native home. America, then, according to Hamid, is headed to self-destruction at the hands of the inability to connect with those who desire a real relationship with her.

Changez resents America as an empire and eventually returns to Lahore and acts as a professor who mentors extremely politically active students, and is even tied to an ill-executed act of anti-American terrorism, but his love for Erica remains steadfast even when he is in his home country:

Often, for example, I would rise at dawn without having slept an instant. During the preceding hours, Erica and I would have lived an entire day together. We would have woken in my bedroom and breakfasted with my parents; we would have dressed for work and caressed in the shower; we would have sat on our scooter and driven to campus, and I would have felt her helmet bumping against mine; we would have parted in the faculty parking area, and I would have been both amused and annoyed by the stares she received from the students passing by, because I would not have known how much those stares owed to her beauty and how much to her foreignness; we would have gone out for an inexpensive but delicious dinner in the open air, bathed by the moonlight beside the Royal Mosque; we would have spoken about work, about whether we were ready for children; I would have corrected her Urdu and she my course plan; and we would make love in our bed to the hum of the ceiling fan. (Hamid 172-173)

Changez regards and remembers Erica just as Erica was fixated in her remembrance of Chris, as if her death passed something onto Changez that drew him into her hopeless world. Even in Lahore, Changez is unable to move beyond an obsession with America, though he still regards the nation negatively, it has crept into his bones and taken hold of him, whether he completely realizes it or not, and there is indication as the novel nears its ending that Changez may not be completely reliable (King 685).

### CHAPTER 3: HABIBI

In Naomi Shihab Nye's letter "To Any Would-Be Terrorists," she expresses the deep pain and frustration of an Arab American in the wake of 9/11:

I am sorry I have to call you that, but I don't know how else to get your attention. I hate that word. Do you know how hard some of us have worked to get rid of that word, to deny its instant connection to the Middle East? And now look. Look what extra work we have. Not only did your colleagues kill thousands of innocent, international people in those buildings and scar their families forever, they wounded a huge community of people in the Middle East, in the United States and all over the world. If that's what they wanted to do, please know the mission was a terrible success, and you can stop now. (Nye, "To Any Would-Be Terrorists")

Nye's frustration with violence is evident, and she evokes the images of her family, her Arab father, her American mother, and her half-Arab brother who "has to fly every week," as well as her Palestinian grandmother, who "would consider the recent tragedies a terrible stain on her religion and her whole part of the world" (Nye, "To Any Would-Be Terrorists"). Her letter suggests that the Arab community, both in America and abroad, are much more than how they have been portrayed in the news and at the cinema ("The USA should apologize to the whole world for sending this trash out into the air and for paying people to make it"). Her consolation and her hope, however, come in the form of small, simple delights. She urges these "would-be terrorists" to "plant mint," befriend someone different from them, and to read American and Arab poetry. Her faith in the power of smallness through the recreation of elements from her "imaginary homeland" of Palestine (her father plants fig trees in America, she offers to make the "would-be terrorists" their favorite Arab dishes), and her commitment to poetry and art being the impetus for cross-cultural and cross-religious understanding saturates her poetry and colors the pages of her first novel (*Blasingame*).

*Habibi* is a much different story than *The Kite Runner* or *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. It is a young adult novel published in 1997 and did not make waves with its publication. Popular with teachers of multicultural literature and those who are familiar with Nye's poetry, *Habibi* has been praised as an effective work of cross-cultural fiction that largely puts itself out of the way of the common pitfalls of orientalism, oversimplification, overtly cinematic flair, and "othering." Nye's poetry has been described to be "infused with a direct, determined commitment to peace and cross-cultural understanding" (Castro), and the same can be said of this novel, which, as the inside cover boasts, "bespeaks a vision of a gentler world in which kisses are more common than gunshots" (quote from the Houston Chronicle listed in the edition of the novel).

Of all three works discussed, *Habibi* is the most autobiographical. The protagonist, Liyana, is a half-American, half-Palestinian 14-year-old living in St. Louis, Missouri, when her father, an Arab immigrant, decides to move their family to the West Bank to be closer to his ancestral village and extended family. Nye herself grew up in Missouri, in Ferguson, and her father was a refugee who fled Israel in 1948, the year it was created, and she too moved with her family to the West Bank at the age of 14 and became the only non-Armenian student in a historical Armenian school in Jerusalem's Old City, just like Liyana (Nye, "On Growing Up in Ferguson and Palestine"). Her grandmother hugely impacted her life, and she has fashioned poems, children's books, and novels after her *sitti's* wisdom and simplicity.

Nye, a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, is known for communicating the aesthetic of the simple and the sublime of smallness in her poetry (Najmi), and this applies to *Habibi* as well. Absent from the pages are the cinematic

twists and large-scale plots with intense emotional connotations, and what remains is an exploration, from a young person's point of view, of a centuries-long conflict, amongst navigation in an unfamiliar land (as she travels not to America, but from it) in the shadow of her first and second kisses, which are symbolically treated with nearly the same weight as the tumult around her.

### Islam in *Habibi*

The religious scope of *Habibi* is slightly broader than the other two texts. Taking place in Jerusalem, it portrays Islam and Judaism in equal measure. Liyana's family, however, is Arab Muslim, and the role of Islam is an important part of the text. Liyana's grandmother is a devout Muslim, as is the paternal side of her family, the Arab side. On the Abboud family's first visit to the village on the day they arrive in Jerusalem, Liyana witnesses an unfamiliar scene:

A muezzin gave the last call to prayer of the day over a loudspeaker from the nearby mosque and all the relatives rose up in unison and turned their backs on Liyana's family. They unrolled small blue prayer rugs from a shelf, then knelt, stood, and knelt again, touching foreheads to the ground, saying their prayers in low voices. They didn't mind that Liyana's family was sitting there staring at them. When they were done, they rolled up the rugs and returned to sit in the circle.  
"Poppy," Liyana whispered, touching his hand. "Did you ever pray the way they pray?"  
"Always—in my heart." (Nye, *Habibi* 56)

The most revered character in the book, Sitti, is also the most devout Muslim character, who will never leave her homeland except to make the pilgrimage to Mecca – an honor Liyana's dad refuses to fund based on the fact that he is convinced she is sustained by the dream of visiting Mecca and will die as soon as it is accomplished. Islam itself is not singled out critically at any point in the novel. The only place where the faith of Sitti comes into question is through her belief in superstition, complete with stories of

angels and a bizarre healing ritual, which Liyana's father claims is the reason he studied to become a doctor, "to balance them out" (Nye, *Habibi* 134).

The faith of the Abboud family itself is described as a jumbled, syncretistic mix where no one metanarrative comes out on top, calling themselves a "spiritual family" but not a "traditionally religious one" (Nye, *Habibi* 175). Liyana states she believes in "God and goodness and hope and positive thinking and praying," along with "the Golden Rule" and certain, cherry-picked ideas from "the eightfold path in Buddhism," and all of the family members believed in reincarnation (Nye, *Habibi* 176). Mrs. Abboud was raised in Missouri with devout Christian grandparents, but her own mother was put off by the idea that only one group of people could be "saved," and that is where Poppy (Dr. Abboud) and Liyana's mother agreed as well:

Liyana's parents did not believe everyone was an automatic sinner when they were born. Too dramatic! All people on earth would do good and bad things both. Poppy said every religion contained some shining ideas and plenty of foolishness, too.

"The worst foolish thing is when a religion wants you to say it's the only right one. Or the best one. That's when I pack my bags and start rolling." (Nye, *Habibi* 177)

This statement conveys the rejection of all religions claiming a metanarrative, which includes Islam. However, the treatment of Islam in this novel, though neither condoning nor condemning, is subjectively positive in relation to the blatant rejection of evangelical Christianity.

The Abboud family visits the famous sites in the life of Jesus in Jerusalem, including a Christmas eve service in Bethlehem and an Easter sunrise service at the contested spot of Jesus's tomb, but this appears to mainly be a result of Christian cultural practices that are engrained in the family as Americans. At several points in the text,

however, Nye depicts evangelical Christians in a searing manner. Nowhere else is that more true than in the scene where three southern Christian evangelists arrive at the Abboud's house for dinner. This scene is nothing if not a deliberate statement of criticism of the characters depicted. Poppy comes across the evangelists "wandering with dazed looks by the shoe shops where the streets get narrower" and invited them to eat with the family (Nye, *Habibi* 209). The Abbouds get to know them:

Reverend Walker said, "God told us to visit Mount Gilboa right now to see the blessed Gilboa iris that only blooms three weeks a year. So we packed our bags in Atlanta and bought tickets! Amen!  
Now they were waiting for further instructions from God because they hadn't received a complete itinerary. (Nye, *Habibi* 209)

When Poppy suggests the group stay and help out at a hospital that is in dire need of volunteers (strategically saying their presence would be "a Godsend"), the trio decides instead to travel to Jordan to see Petra instead (Nye, *Habibi* 209, 212). The family also assumes that the Abbouds are Jewish and ask Liyana "if she'd been bathed in the blood of Jesus," to which her mother responded, "Um—we don't think—quite in those terms" (Nye, *Habibi* 210).

Nye's indictment of evangelical Christians seems strategic, as a platform for her own beliefs and commentary on how American fundamentalist Christians can come across to other cultures and religions.

The depiction of the Abboud family as "spiritual" instead of religious and their rejection of "one, true story" makes them accessible to many American readers, who struggle with their own concepts of faith and religion. Her presentation of Islam, or lack thereof, gives off the idea that being a Muslim is not an overtly foreign or strange thing. She portrays it by attaching it to warm, beloved characters, and discusses the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict largely in terms of ethnicity instead of religion, steering clear of any commentary whatsoever on Islamic extremism.

### The Role of America in *Habibi*

*Habibi's* depiction of America is also an anomaly. At the beginning of the story, right before the Abbouds leave St. Louis for Jerusalem and for the first few months of their relocation, America seems like the “imaginary homeland” Nye is writing about. Liyana is weighing her identity as a “*nos-nos*” (Nye, *Habibi* 104) “half-American with the Arab eyes in the navy blue Armenian school uniform” (Nye, *Habibi* 84), and she mourns the loss of her American neighborhood and identity:

Maybe the hardest thing about moving overseas was being in a place where no one but your own family had any memory of you. It was like putting yourself back together with little pieces. As home in St. Louis even the man in the grocery store remembered the day a very young Liyana poked a ripe peach too hard and her finger went inside it. She shrieked and the neighborhood ladies buying vegetables laughed. Forever after when she came into his store, the grocer would say, “Be careful with my plums! Don’t get too close to my melons!”

It was a little thing, of course, but it helped her be *somebody*. (Nye, *Habibi* 84)

Liyana doesn’t have to wait too long, however, to become “somebody” in Jerusalem. It may be as simple as making friends, getting to know shop owners, and bonding with her grandmother, but soon Liyana’s dreams of Forest Park and worries that her old friends are moving on and forgetting about her are replaced by the sense of magic woven in the descriptions of her family’s Arab village, the almond trees in bloom, and falafel stands in the Old City, and she tries to remember what she is so homesick about:

Then her mind went blank. What was she really homesick for? Those ugly green signs marking the exits off the interstate? The sports sections of American newspapers that she never glanced at anyway? The chilled tapioca puddings in little tubs at the supermarket? What was she really missing anymore? (Nye, *Habibi* 245)

This passage marks the complete transition of Liyana as an immigrant and of the novel as an exploration of Nye's "imaginary homeland" of Palestine.

Even before that, however, the role of America in *Habibi* is not necessarily one of fond connotations. Liyana's hometown friends and teachers are depicted as ignorant and perhaps racist. When she discloses that she will be moving to Jerusalem, her history teacher asks her, in front of the class, to explain why "people have had so much trouble acting *civilized* over there?" (Nye, *Habibi* 27), and the influence of the anti-Arab media is mentioned by adults in the novel several times.

Also, the integrity of American foreign policy is called into question when Rafik, Liyana's younger brother, casually mentions American funding to the Israeli army at dinner with the American evangelists:

"Do you know what our grandmother has in her collection? She has an empty tear gas canister that the Israeli soldiers threw at her house one day. It says Made in Pennsylvania on the side of it. The soldiers get their weapons and their money from the United States." (Nye, *Habibi* 210)

This is the only comment of this nature in the novel, and, though it is isolated, it casts her portrayal of Americans as ignorant in a more complex light. Liyana's teacher makes an offhand remark about the lack of civility in the Middle East, while failing to engage with the fact that American foreign policy is anything but bloodless.

Nye distances the protagonist and her family from America in a multitude of ways, including language acquisition, in-home cuisine, and the direction of the longing of their hearts. The Abbouds do not lose their "Americanness" completely in the book, retaining certain cultural idiosyncrasies and progressive views, but transformation comes

to each character through Nye's "imaginary homeland" of Jerusalem and particularly the presence of Sitti.

The novel does what no other text here does, by resisting flag-waving portrayals of America and normalizing Islam as a familiar religion to be critiqued. Nye's employment of the Jerusalem of her beloved grandmother invite the reader into a similar connection to the text, with the ultimate ends being that what is said about Liyana on page 246 becomes true for the reader: "The Old City was inside her already" (*Habibi*).

## CONCLUSION

The make-up of the world is changing. In 2014, an average of 3,300 Syrian refugees arrived in neighboring countries every single day (Zetter and Ruaudel 6). Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Palestine have had similar exoduses in the past 20 years, and with every migration comes a blending and juxtaposition of dissimilar cultures and religions. Many times, these internationally displaced persons find themselves in the western world – in a chaotic mixing of Said’s famed “Orient” and the land of those of European descent who often study and misunderstand them, and these people, living in America or Europe, face challenges of prejudice and crises in identity in their new home on almost a daily basis (Ozyurt). Sometimes, this can lead to a symbiotic relationship that is life-giving and comfortable for both parties. Often, however, the influx of refugees from Islamic nations is a highly confusing and contested affair.

What is the fate of those who come to America dragging the woes of their often perilous and frightening past? What is the proper response of the American people? In a media-driven society, reflections of people groups via movies, books, and news outlets are paramount to how consumers see themselves and others (Jeffres et al.). There are countless economic and political concerns when it comes to immigrant and refugee peoples seeking solace in the United States, but the decisions made in the nation are not made in a vacuum; it would be ideal if people made decisions and voted based on facts and truth, but here the western god of Enlightenment and reason fails, for no one is without bias when it comes to making decisions about a diverse and foreign people group. Those decisions are often informed, for better or for worse, by the portrayal of these people in what is watched and read in America, which are seldom, if ever, unbiased

sources (Amin-Khan, Druckman and Parkman, Shabir et al.). Exposure to artistic and media portrayals of Islamic people groups is paramount in considering how immigrant and refugee populations are viewed in America, and the three books explored in this text are part of that.

Returning to the story of Rais Bhuiyan, the Bangladeshi man who was shot by Mark Stroman as a misguided counter-attack after 9/11 can serve as a touchstone in recognizing why this form of study is important. Bhuiyan no more represents all Muslim peoples any more than Stroman represents all Americans, or all Christians. Yet he was chosen to be the victim of a violent, racist attack that was not, and still isn't isolated. Bhuiyan was almost killed for his faith, but the attack only made his faith stronger, and soon after his recovery he made the *hajj* to Mecca, where he was inspired to forgive Stroman, who by this time was on death row, and plead to have his death sentence converted to life imprisonment (Sager). Bhuiyan's efforts failed, but by the end of Stroman's life, the two had become friends, their relationship catalyzed by Bhuiyan's conviction to forgive.

This is an extreme example of the relationship between people who need to overcome hatred, ignorance, rage, and wrongdoing to finally understand each other, but perhaps it is possible to bypass such destruction in order to reach a point where human beings are seen by one another as complex and valuable, instead of a homogenized and often harmful representation of their people group, religion, or area of the world.

If Naomi Shihab Nye can plead with Arab terrorists to eat their favorite foods and plant mint instead of embracing violence, Americans can embrace the sublime of the small in reading texts about a little Afghan boy who wants to please his father, a bright

young Pakistani man who does not see American policy as black and white, and a young girl who moves to the Old City shortly after her first kiss.

There are gaps and imperfections in every text, granted. One needs to be wary of the author's sensibilities and the purpose of the book or film that is being read or watched (Yoon et al.). Each text portrays Islam as its unique and varied nature, and each text portrays America in its complicated nature as well. This is aptly reflective of the fact that there are a multitude of religious and American experiences. There is no one way to experience Islam, and there is no one way to think about America. Accuracy is irreplaceable, but the human condition is not overtly conducive to complete accuracy in sharing about one's life, especially as it is imagined.

The imaginary homelands of these authors are reflective of the psyche of every person who has been uprooted from their home. Hosseini, Hamid, and Nye all have one thing in common that laces their work together like a quilt, and that is the longing for peace that flows through their stories like a powerful undercurrent. Their work can be scrutinized tirelessly, and recommended or advised against as far as informational reading, but the voices inside these works that clamor for peace cannot be ignored or stifled. That is the most important part, and the factor that separates these works of imaginary homelands from the news articles and war-zone footage that pervades America's national conscience when it comes to Islamic peoples.

## DISCUSSION OF WEAKNESSES AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The analysis of these three texts in this paper is by no means comprehensive. Due to the subjective nature inherent to the idea of an “Imaginary Homeland,” the content of these three books has not been critiqued for accuracy and factual basis. The authors are decidedly biased when writing their semi-autobiographical accounts, and this is seen as a tool that recommends these texts instead of limits them, given the fact that most Americans have an inherent bias against the people groups portrayed by these novels. However, there remains a gap in the research done here. There is a need for an objective tool by which to separate the subjectivity of these texts from the objective factuality of the cultures and homelands portrayed therein. Such a tool would be useful in recommending or shunning these books as important reading for more ignorant populations. It would take a detailed study of culture, language, religion, and political factors, and perhaps expert personnel in each discipline, to tease out the bias included in these respective texts.

Similarly, the chosen texts were selected from diverse ethnic populations and histories. It would be useful to narrow the focus of this research through selecting texts written by authors of the same ethnic identity, and about the same homeland. One could then compare each text to the others to analyze how the same homeland is converted into imaginary homelands that are unique to the author.

Finally, a survey of how these texts literally affect the bias of American readers would be extremely useful. Monitoring how a person thinks and feels about these Muslim people groups, including what they know about them, could be measured before and after reading these texts for a better gage of how readers are responding to these portrayals.

If such studies were to be done, it would sharpen the recommendations of these novels and their authors and further the cause of championing human, realistic portrayals of Muslim peoples in an American context over problematic popular texts and media.

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