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NEO-ORIENTALISM IN REVERSE: THE VOICE OF THE "OTHER" IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*

ABSTRACT

This article offers a postcolonial and narratological analysis of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, arguing that the novel actively reverses Neo-Orientalist discourse through its narrative structure and use of focalization. Situating the text within post-9/11 cultural and political contexts, the study examines how dominant Western media and literary narratives have constructed Muslim identity through binaries of threat, irrationality, and otherness. Against this background, the article demonstrates how Hamid reclaims narrative authority by centering a Muslim protagonist who speaks in his own voice and controls the terms of representation. Drawing on postcolonial theory and narratology, particularly Gérard Genette's concept of focalization and its later revisions, the paper argues that the novel's monologic form and first-person narration transform the Muslim subject from an object of the Western gaze into an active focalizer. By rendering the Western listener silent and epistemologically subordinate, the novel destabilizes conventional subject–object hierarchies that underpin Neo-Orientalist representation. Ultimately, the article contends that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* functions not only as a thematic critique of post-9/11 Islamophobia but also as a formal intervention that reconfigures narrative power and challenges hegemonic modes of seeing, knowing, and speaking about the Muslim "Other".

Keywords: Neo-Orientalism, Postcolonial literature, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Muslim identity in America, Mohsin Hamid

TERSİNE NEO-ORYANTALİZM: MOHSIN HAMID'İN *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST* ROMANINDA "ÖTEKİ"NİN SESİ

ÖZET

Bu makale, Mohsin Hamid'in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* adlı romanını sömürgecilik sonrası kuram ve anlatıbilim çerçevesinde inceleyerek, eserin Neo-Oryantalist söylemi anlatı yapısı ve odaklanma tekniği aracılığıyla tersine çevirdiğini ileri sürmektedir. Çalışma, romanı 11 Eylül sonrası kültürel ve politik bağlam içine yerleştirerek, Batı merkezli medya ve edebi anlatıların Müslüman kimliğini tehdit, irrasyonellik ve ötekilik ikilikleri üzerinden nasıl inşa ettiğini ele almaktadır. Bu bağlamda makale, Hamid'in Müslüman bir anlatıcıyı merkeze alarak anlatı otoritesini yeniden tesis ettiğini ve temsilin koşullarını anlatıcının kontrolüne verdiğini göstermektedir. Sömürgecilik sonrası kuram ile anlatıbilimsel yaklaşımlardan, özellikle Gérard Genette'in odaklanma kavramından ve bu kavramın sonraki kuramsal açılımlarından yararlanan çalışma, romanın monolog biçimindeki yapısı ve birinci tekil şahıs anlatımı sayesinde Müslüman öznenin Batılı bakışın nesnesi olmaktan çıkarak etkin bir odaklayıcıya dönüştüğünü savunmaktadır. Batılı dinleyicinin sessiz ve epistemolojik olarak ikincil bir konuma yerleştirilmesi yoluyla roman, Neo-Oryantalist temsilin temelini oluşturan özne-nesne hiyerarşilerini istikrarsızlaştırmaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*'in yalnızca 11 Eylül sonrası İslamofobiye yönelik tematik bir eleştiri sunmadığını, aynı zamanda anlatı gücünü yeniden yapılandıran biçimsel bir müdahale olarak, Müslüman "öteki" hakkında kurulan hegemonik görme, bilme ve konuşma biçimlerini sorguladığını ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Neo-Oryantalizm, Sömürgecilik sonrası edebiyat, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Amerika'da Müslüman kimliği, Mohsin Hamid

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Introduction

The events of September 11 2001 marked a profound rupture in global consciousness, initiating not only geopolitical shifts but also longlasting cultural and psychological repercussions. The coordinated attacks on the Twin Towers were experienced as a global trauma and elicited fear, grief, and uncertainty across international borders. In response, the United States launched what became widely known as the "War on Terror": a military campaign that would redefine international relations, security protocols, and domestic policies for decades to come. As Fouskas and Gökay argue, this initiative, particularly the invasion of Iraq, was perceived by many as an "unprovoked war against Iraq by the neoconservative administration of the U.S. government" (qtd. in Shihada, 2018, pp. 452). While military operations were central, the campaign extended far beyond conventional warfare. The global reach of the United States ensured that its cultural apparatus, especially the media, played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. Indeed, the media emerged as one of the most potent tools of the 21st century, framing narratives, consolidating ideologies, and constructing collective identities. In the aftermath of 9/11 in particular, this power was frequently mobilized to reinforce a binary worldview ("us" versus "them"). Within this worldview, the West was aligned with democratic values and security, while the East, and particularly Muslim-majority nations, were cast as inherently threatening, irrational, or violent. Although such perceptions were by no means new, drawing heavily on long-standing Orientalist discourse, the post-9/11 era intensified and reconfigured these stereotypes. Islam and Muslims were increasingly portrayed through a reductive lens that conflated faith with extremism, culture with backwardness, and identity with suspicion.

This discursive pattern contributed to what scholars have since identified as Neo-Orientalism: a renewed, insidious mode of othering that adapts classical Orientalist tropes to contemporary political anxieties. Unlike its predecessor, Neo-Orientalism is more diffuse, operating across news coverage, popular media, political rhetoric, and even literary production. It does not merely exoticize the East; Neo-Orientalism casts it as a direct and perpetual threat to Western values and security. As a result, in this particularly tense climate, literature and film became key arenas for the negotiation, and too often, reinforcement of these binaries. Moreover, while many creative works sought to process the trauma of 9/11, a significant portion of them did so by depicting Muslim characters in monolithic, dehumanized, or vilified terms. These representations, whether intentional or not, often reproduced the logic of suspicion and contributed to the cultural alienation of Muslim communities globally. However, against this dominant current, a small number of literary works have emerged that offer counter-narratives: texts that resist or reconfigure the Neo-Orientalist frame. Among these, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* stands out for its nuanced and provocative approach. Rather than reproducing stereotypical portrayals of Muslims as passive victims or active threats, Hamid centres the voice of a Pakistani protagonist who narrates his own experience in a post-9/11 world. Through its formal and thematic strategies, the novel challenges the hegemonic Neo-Orientalist discourse by inverting the typical West-East gaze and inviting the reader to adopt the perspective of the Other. More importantly, it does so by situating the reader, and thus, the other, not as an object of fear, but as a complex, reflective subject. In this sense, Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reverses the Neo-Orientalist narrative by giving narrative power and authority to the Muslim 'Other,' through formal inversion. Hence, this paper aims to provide an in-depth explanation of the core features of Neo-Orientalism to examine Mohsin Hamid's novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist

from this perspective, while demonstrating how Hamid subverts Neo-Orientalist discourse through the setting and positioning of the listener and the narrator.

What is Neo-Orientalism?

To understand what Neo-Orientalism is and how it functions, we must first comprehend how classical Orientalism operated. According to Edward Said, the East, often referred to as the Orient, is frequently characterized by four key assumptions. Firstly, the East is depicted mainly as fundamentally different from the West, which is perceived as rational, developed, and superior, while the Orient is regarded as irrational, undeveloped, and inferior. Secondly, the generalizations drawn from classical Oriental texts are often prioritized over modern evidence, which results in the reinforcement of outdated stereotypes. Thirdly, the Orient is generally portrayed as eternal and uniform, incapable of self-definition, and necessitating a Western framework for its description, since the West is often presented as objective and scientific. Finally, the Orient is either feared as a threat, or seen as something to be controlled through research, pacification, or direct occupation (Said, 2003, pp. 300-301). Moreover, since Neo-Orientalism is an extension of classical Orientalism (Behdad and Williams, 2013, p. 298), rather than an entirely new form, it is easy to see how these principles persist.

While the September 11 attacks are frequently described as a "transformative moment" in shaping the trajectory of East–West relations (Altwaiji, 2014, pp. 313), in its aftermath, a discernible shift emerged in Western media discourse, wherein narratives increasingly framed anything originating from the Muslim-majority world as a potential threat to Western societies. This worldview, deeply rooted in a binary opposition between 'us' and 'them,' was visible across major Western news outlets. As Douai and Lauricella (2014) point out, such platforms often align with governmental priorities while also functioning as vehicles for nationalist rhetoric under the guise of protecting the public interest (p. 20). However, this dynamic is not confined to the United States alone: a broader range of Western media organizations contribute to what Douai and Lauricella (2014) identify as a "neo-Orientalist discursive narrative" that both shapes and constrains Western audiences' perceptions of Islam (pp. 19). This narrative not only fosters enduring associations between Islam and terrorism but also reinforces oppositional binaries between East and West. In doing so, it effectively revitalizes the first of Edward Said's key Orientalist dogmas: the essentialist divide between a rational, civilized West and an irrational, dangerous East.

What makes this continuity between Orientalism and its modern adaptation so troubling is not merely its persistence, but the subtlety with which it disguises itself. Neo-Orientalism does not openly declare its biases; instead, it conceals them in the language of objectivity, liberal concern, and security. Its sophistication lies in presenting prejudice as a reason and intervention as a moral duty. This rebranding of domination, where cultural essentialism is reframed as analytical neutrality, renders the discourse far more insidious than its classical predecessor. The apparent modernity of its rhetoric only deepens its ideological hold, making it increasingly challenging to distinguish representation from propaganda. In this sense, another distinctive feature of Neo-Orientalism is its lack of regard for the representation of recent events; that is to say that it utilizes "superficial empirical observations about Muslim societies and cultures to make great generalizations about them" (Behdad and Williams, 2013, pp. 285).

In the context of creating misinformed masses, presenting violence as a part of the culture rather than a result of political and economic events (Behdad and Williams, 2013, pp. 289) contributes to what Paul Richards refers to as 'New-Barbarism'. According to Richards, New Barbarism refers to presentations of political violence that omit political and economic contexts; instead, such violence is portrayed as the result of traits supposedly embedded in local cultures (qtd. in Tuastad, 2003, pp. 592). As a result, the binary oppositions between the two sides are easily deepened, as the central reasons underlying the issues are hidden in the periphery (Tuastad, 2003, pp. 597). In other words, when the political, economic and historical context of the issue is not provided in the media coverage, the violence of the situation seems unreasonable and barbaric to the viewers.

This returns to the central dogmas of Orientalism outlined by Said, who suggests that the second central dogma is that pre-established ideas about the Orient are more commonly accepted than the facts derived from the source (300-301). Through this approach and the use of symbolic power, a hegemonic version of reality is constructed (Tuastad, 2003, pp. 591). This process enables the production of a reality that diverges from material truth. This kind of production of reality simply "produces distorted images of dominated people" (Altwaiji, 2014, pp. 313-314), and all these one-sided, generalized images of Islam and Muslims suggest that the third central dogma of Orientalism is also still in effect. This can be seen as an example of what Vultee refers to as the "ideology of difference, which suggests that "reporting 'errors' re-affirms a deep-seated Orientalist bent in Western news discourse" (Douai and Lauricella, 2014, pp. 18-19).

Moreover, Douai and Lauricella further explain that the "terrorist frame" which is used to frame most news about Muslim countries as related to terrorism, has become a "tailored narrative", and its omnipresence in media is simply a "part of a larger historical legacy in which the Muslim world was represented as 'different' and 'other'" (2014, pp. 21). What makes this discursive evolution particularly alarming is its calculated normalization. Neo-Orientalism no longer operates from the margins of political rhetoric but from the very centre of cultural production, having been absorbed into journalism, academia, and entertainment as common sense. The danger lies not in its visibility but in its invisibility, as it persuades through repetition, rather than confrontation. Behind every seemingly factual statement or neutral headline rests a pre-shaped narrative that privileges Western rationality and delegitimizes non-Western experience. This quiet persuasion (clearly much subtler than colonial propaganda yet equally coercive) transforms public perception into an ideological instrument, preparing audiences to accept misrepresentation as truth.

This othering appears to be historically consistent, especially given that treating Islam as the "other" has been part of the world's history since the Middle Ages (Douai and Lauricella, 2014, p. 11). In addition to this long-standing tendency, it can also be argued that the events of September 11 drew heightened attention "to Muslim countries, issues related to religious extremism and radicalization and, more generally, the salience of Islam and Muslims in international news coverage," which helps explain the media's frequent reliance on the terrorist frame to interpret tensions in the Islamic world (Douai and Lauricella, 2014, pp. 8–17). Altwaiji supports this argument by asserting that Orientalism, with its entrenched "us versus them" binary, has re-emerged, as "terrorism becomes the most available term for labelling this group of people" (2014, pp. 314–315). He further contends that the American media has already accepted that, by employing this frame and openly stigmatizing Islam and Muslims, it contributes to the widespread dissemination of prejudice throughout society (Altwaiji, 2014, pp. 315). Similarly, Khan et al.

underline this point by clarifying that "the USA has fallen back into its own misconceptions about Islam and racism, gaining sympathy from the World concerning terrorist attacks and massive killings by Islamic extremists. In fact, exercising its political power to subjugate the inferior and portray Muslims as an uncultured, barbaric, and menial race" (2022, pp. 7).

This Neo-Orientalist binary, which casts the East as a threat and the West as a civilizing force, along with the inherent belief that "the East is a source of threat to the Western way of life," is not only oversimplified but also widely embraced in Western discourse (Altwaiji, 2014, pp. 316). Furthermore, it can be argued that this framing of the East as a threat, coupled with a binary intentionally crafted to reinforce the "us versus them" ideology, has served to alienate the Islamic community further and distinguish it from the so-called civilised world. Shihada affirms this point by stating that the "negative American media campaign of misrepresentation and stereotypes about Muslims and Islam has terribly affected the lives, safety, and future of millions of American Muslims living in the U.S." (2015, pp. 453). He also highlights the persistence of binary narratives by explaining how news outlets "continuously air programs that portray Muslims as terrorist threats and simultaneously show the American government's heroic deeds that save American lives and the nation," reinforcing the notion that democracy is inherently American, while terrorism and violence are attributes of Islam (Shihada, 2015, pp. 453). While the depiction of Muslims as terrorists serves as a key component of this binary opposition, it also reinforces the foundational dogmas of classical Orientalism within Neo-Orientalist discourse, as representing the Orient as a source of fear and danger perpetuates these reductive frameworks. In postcolonial terms, such binary constructions, which have been amplified through media manipulation, have historically functioned as justifications for both colonial domination and the systemic oppression of those deemed the inferior side of the divide.

Understanding Neo-Orientalism as a mode of representation that reinforces Western epistemic dominance also invites attention to how such hierarchies are constructed and potentially dismantled within narrative form itself. If Orientalism, and by extension, Neo-Orientalism, depend on who speaks, who observes, and whose perception is privileged, then the act of storytelling becomes a crucial site where these dynamics can be reversed or reimagined. Within post-9/11 fiction, this inversion often occurs not through explicit political statements but through subtle manipulations of voice, perspective, and focalization. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid translates the ideological struggle of representation into the architecture of narration, transforming the mechanisms that once sustained the Orientalist gaze into tools of self-definition and resistance. By tracing this shift from thematic discourse to narrative design, it becomes possible to see how Neo-Orientalism is contested not only in what is told but also in the manner in which it is told.

Early Encounters of a Postcolonial Subject

Pervez argues that the act of othering is simply the act of judging people who are different, as less than fully human, as he points out that othering "divides the world between us (the 'civilized') and 'them' (the 'other' or 'savages')" (2018, pp. 21). Throughout his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid not only makes this division clear in the minds of readers but also examines the problems faced by the Muslim population in the United States. Shihada underlines that, by indirectly posing questions of loyalty, identity, and citizenship to its readers, the novel explores "the psychological, cultural, social, moral, and ethical intricacies confronted by Muslims in post-9/11 America" (2018, pp. 455–56).

The novel opens with a Pakistani man sitting across from an American tourist in Lahore, telling him about his life and experiences in the United States, which he left years earlier. Throughout his narrative, the readers experience what he has lived through, not as a stereotypical immigrant in America, but as a highly educated and critical individual. We learn that he was educated at Princeton University and later handpicked to work at one of the most select finance companies in the country (Hamid, 2017, pp. 3-17). At the beginning of the book and in the early stages of Changez's career, the marginalization he experiences appears to be minimal; in fact, his presence among some of the most privileged groups in society seems to challenge stereotypical constructs and assumptions (Alghamdi, 2013, pp. 53). However, even though he is not being visibly otherised just yet, it is clear that in America, he remains a "postcolonial subject", suspended between conditional freedom and structural constraint (2018, pp. 18). There are many instances in the first part of the novel in which Changez feels he is on the edge of tolerance. For example, during a simple chat with his classmates, he jokes that he would like to become the dictator of an Islamic state; however, the shocked reaction he receives prompts him to explain the joke to his friends (Hamid, 2017, pp. 33). Seval suggests that in this instance, "his ethnic otherness reaches the limits of accepted distance, he feels the awkwardness of his situation as the tolerated Other" (2017, pp. 106).

Moreover, the difference in attitudes towards him is made clear in a business trip, where Changez feels the need to imitate the behaviour of his American colleagues in order to get the respect he deserves (Hamid, 2017, pp. 74) and thus, he becomes the mimic man. The term "mimic man," coined by Homi K. Bhabha, refers to the colonized subject who imitates the language, behaviour, and values of the colonizer and results in appearing almost the same but never quite identical: a form of ambivalent mimicry that both reinforces and undermines colonial authority. This mimicry, combined with his pre-existing hybridity, clearly suggests that he is, indeed, a postcolonial subject in America. However, both his attitude towards the world and the world's attitude towards him start to change drastically after September 11. Immediately after the attacks, while returning from a business trip, Changez is humiliated during the airport search and forced to strip to his underwear. Throughout the flight, he remains on edge due to the suspicious glances directed at him (Hamid, 2017, p. 84). Moreover, once in America, at passport control, he is questioned about his intent of being there, even though he has been living there for a long time. This question remains in the background of the narrator's journey for the rest of the novel, as he himself begins to question his reason for being in the United States. While it is understandable that people are somehow wary of each other in the immediate fallout of the attack, the suspicious gazes keep following Changez for the rest of the novel. Ultimately, Changez's early experiences reveal the fragile conditionality of his acceptance within American society, where mimicry and hybridity grant provisional belonging yet simultaneously reinforce his status as the tolerated Other.

Post-9/11 Experiences of Othering and Alienation

The aftermath of September 11 marks a decisive rupture in Changez's narrative, transforming his earlier ambivalence into overt marginalization and exposing the mechanisms through which Neo-Orientalist discourse converts fear into systemic exclusion. As anti-Muslim sentiment intensifies in the United States, Changez, still absorbed in his professional ambitions, initially chooses to disregard the growing reports of retaliation against Pakistani cab drivers, the dismissal of Muslim employees, and the FBI's raids on Muslim homes and businesses (Hamid, 2017, pp. 107). Instead of reflecting on these rumours, he adopts what he calls an "armour of

denial" and keeps focusing on the essentials, as he has been taught throughout his life in America (Hamid, 2017, pp. 108-112). Nonetheless, his armour does not hold for long; he is reminded of his own home and the prospective dangers it is about to face when he sees news reports about the bombings in Afghanistan (Hamid, 2017, pp. 113). He comments that the images of the bombings were part of a "partisan and sports-event-like coverage" (Hamid, 2017, pp. 113), which indicates that Neo-Orientalist discourse has already come to dominate the media at this point in the novel. The implication of hunting terrorists, presented in these kinds of news coverage, has begun to suggest to the masses that the enemy they are fighting against is less than fully human, which once again foregrounds the concept of binary oppositions and their functions as justifications of domination. Even after seeing these images of his neighbouring country, Changez tries to convince himself that world events have no effect whatsoever on him, which, as he soon finds out, is an unfounded assumption.

Subsequently, the narrative presents a more explicit moment of racialized hostility when a passerby shouts, 'Fucking Arab' at Changez (Hamid, 2017, pp. 134). This moment exposes the depth of post-9/11 prejudice and misrecognition. He confesses that even though he is clearly not an Arab, these words enraged him and caused him to give a much more aggressive response than he usually would. This, perhaps, is caused by the stress he is under, as he starts to hear more and more stories about Muslims in the business world who had to face "rescinded job offers and groundless dismissals" (Hamid, 2017, pp. 137). Pervez suggests that at this point of the novel, the othering is indeed an undeniable fact as "[a]fter 9/11 incident Changez had become a joke in the eyes of America. His colleagues had not been sincere with him. Every American considered him their enemy and agent of Al-Qaida" (2018, pp. 21). Moreover, this once again shows us that even though the terrorist frame and the othering are not targeting the Muslim population of the United States in particular, they have been caught in the crossfire between two binary oppositions established through fear and the ideology of difference. This argument is further reinforced by Hashemipour, who suggests that, shaped by the evolving nature of human consciousness, Changez, as an immigrant, comes to question the core of historical consciousness as defined within Western globalization (2025, pp. 42). In tracing Changez's gradual disillusionment, Hamid exposes how the post-9/11 climate transforms latent Orientalist assumptions into overt hostility, revealing that alienation is not a psychological rupture alone but a structural manifestation of Neo-Orientalist ideology.

Identity Politics, the Beard, and the Reversal of Neo-Orientalist Discourse

As Changez's identity becomes increasingly politicized, Hamid reconfigures the symbols of difference, such as a beard, into instruments of self-definition, using them to stage a broader reversal of Neo-Orientalist power relations. Unsurprisingly, the constant pressure of surveillance, stereotyping, and judgment produces an inevitable psychological response in Changez, which manifests symbolically in his decision to grow a beard. He claims that his beard is a "form of protest on [his] part, a symbol of [his] identity" (Hamid, 2017, pp. 148), which brings us to the concept of nativism. According to Pervez, nativism is "the protest of the native people against the colonizers' culture; and readoption of their native culture", which is exactly what we see Changez doing. As a bearded Muslim man in America, he immediately faces what this paper examines as a Neo-Orientalist attitude. He recounts that he has been subjected to not only verbal abuse from strangers, but also to whispers and stares at his workplace (Hamid, 2017, pp. 148). While previously he was able to avoid harsh judgment from other people simply because of his American

friends and his prestigious education (Hamid, 2017, pp. 97), now he is the representation of what has been regarded and represented as the biggest threat to Western civilization, with his dark skin, beard and religion. In the words of Khan et al., "he did not show any infidelity towards the USA but rather was subjected to bear the fundamentalism of the USA" (2022, pp. 6).

As the narrative shifts from Changez's personal recollections to the novel's more complex, dual-layered structure, the focus moves from the individual experience of identity and belonging to the broader mechanics of storytelling through which these experiences are framed and interpreted. Moreover, the novel can be considered to have two layers due to its frame narrative style. While the first and the most prominent one is the one in which the readers witness the events through Changez's point of view, the second one consists of the communication and brief relation between Changez and the silent listener. In this sense, another significant part of the novel to examine is the reversal of Neo-Orientalist roles in the second layer, between our narrator, Changez and the unnamed listener. One of the most significant aspects of the terrorist frame used by Neo-Orientalist discourse in news media is the privileged perspective of the Western sources. Douai and Lauricella points out that "[o]ver-reliance on these Western official sources indicates that news reports about this topic are likely to continue privileging the perspectives and narratives of the West about the Orient" (2014, pp. 18), which is to say that by over-relying on the western sources and lacking the eastern ones, the East as the other is effectively being silenced. However, what we observe in the novel is the complete opposite of this idea; instead of presenting the actions of the Muslims from the point of view of the Western world as Neo-Orientalist discourse is known to do, the novel gives us a complete reversal of perspectives by presenting the reader with the actions of the Western world from the perspective of a Muslim man.

Furthermore, by making the narrator an Eastern man with a Western education, Hamid not only gives voice to the East as the other, but also challenges the conventions of the post-9/11 novels (Alghamdi, 2013, pp. 61). Shihada explains that most post-9/11 fiction focuses on the themes of loss, trauma, fear, terror and Islam from an American perspective; he further argues that these narratives helped to reinforce the stereotypes against Islam and Muslims, as "[p]ost-9/11 literature portrays Muslims from the East as either radical suicide bombers who hate America and the West or confused disturbed personalities." (2018, pp. 454). However, this is not the case in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. As mentioned before, the novel's structure invites the reader to view the existing problems through Changez's eyes, which is why it can be considered a response to the dominant literary discourse (Alghamdi, 2013, pp. 51; Shihada, 2015, pp. 454). By integrating the events that left a personal scar, as well as political ones, Hamid demonstrates how world events that seem distant when reported on the news have a profound impact on others (Aldalala'a, 2012, pp. 5). Furthermore, by making the narration a one-sided conversation, Hamid turns the tables against the dominant Western discourse and gives voice to the Muslim other, while silencing the Western. Most importantly, through the reversal of the speaker and listener, the novel prompts readers to question who the victim is and who the assailant is (Seval, 2017, pp. 102-103). Contrary to Neo-Orientalist media and literature, which do not provide any opportunities for the other to speak, Hamid's novel creates a cultural and geographical displacement for the American listener, and thus, making him the one who is out of place in a foreign setting and being observed by someone who is somewhat familiar with his culture. Alghamdi adds to this idea of reversal of roles by suggesting that

> [T]he American is placed within the position that the subaltern finds himself in, but is viewed, once there, not by someone who is limited by his own enculturation but by a liminal and impeccably informed narrator. An observer who has a greater or wider scope observes a subject whose scope is lesser, outside of that subject's native domain. (Alghamdi, 2013, pp. 54)

Moreover, it can be understood that by giving a voice to the Muslim other and silencing the dominant discourse through the reversal of roles, setting and culture, Hamid is actively reversing Neo-Orientalism, and exposing its effects on an individual level, as well as giving a voice to the people who have been otherwise otherized. This point is further supported by Sherazi et al. in their brief section on narrative agency, where they argue that this "reverses the power dynamics of Orientalist discourse" (2025, p. 98). This reversal is a deliberate political and psychological intervention. By relocating the American character to a foreign context, one in which he lacks cultural authority and epistemic dominance, Hamid creates a rare moment in contemporary literature in which the Western subject is rendered silent, vulnerable, and epistemologically inferior. The listener's silence becomes symbolic of a broader historical failure to hear the voices of the colonized, displaced, and vilified. The narrator, in contrast, speaks with confidence, nuance, and critical awareness, not only of his own cultural identity but also of the listener's. This power shift destabilizes the typical subject–object dynamic of Neo-Orientalist narratives. It also challenges the assumption that narrative control and knowledge reside solely with the West. In this way, Hamid forces the reader to experience discomfort, uncertainty, and a sense of powerlessness, mirroring the emotional and psychological dislocation often felt by those routinely subjected to surveillance, suspicion, and stereotyping. The reader, too, becomes complicit in the Americans' silence, as their interpretation depends entirely on the Pakistani narrator's voice. In other words, through this narrative inversion, Hamid converts the mechanisms of Neo-Orientalist representation into instruments of self-assertion, turning the gaze back upon the West and transforming the act of narration into an assertion of epistemic and political agency.

Narratological Reversal and the Politics of Focalization

This reversal of power, however, is not achieved solely through characterization or setting; it is embedded within the very mechanics of narration. The structural design of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, from its first-person monologue to the manipulation of voice and to its selective disclosure of information, serves as the medium through which Hamid performs his political intervention. In this sense, the novel's capacity to silence the Western subject while amplifying the voice of the Muslim other can be better understood through a narratological lens. By examining how Hamid orchestrates perspective, control, and reader engagement, it becomes evident that the subversion of Neo-Orientalist discourse occurs not only at the thematic level but also within the narrative structure itself.

In this sense, it could be argued that Hamid's text also reconfigures the terms of Neo-Orientalist representation not through direct opposition but through a subtle negotiation of narrative and power. By constructing a dialogue in which the Western presence remains silent, Hamid subverts the authority of the Western gaze while maintaining an illusion of politeness and civility. Yet this inversion does not occur solely at the level of theme or character; it is deeply embedded within the architecture of narration itself. The very mechanics of storytelling, voice, perspective, and focalization, become the site where ideological control is both asserted and contested.

While much scholarship on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has focused on its post-9/11 Orientalist context, the novel's subversive force also emerges through its narrative structure. Beyond Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, Hamid's text invites a narratological reading in which form becomes an instrument of resistance to the Neo-orientalist discourse, as well as a direct reply to it. To deepen this analysis, this study draws upon Gérard Genette's concept of focalization and its later revisions by William F. Edmiston to propose a narratological-postcolonial synthesis. Genette defines focalization as "a restriction imposed on the information provided by a narrator about his characters" (Narrative Discourse, 1980, pp. 189), distinguishing between zero, internal, and external types according to "a diminishing degree of access to the psychology of the characters" (Edmiston, 1989, pp. 729). In Hamid's novel, the homodiegetic first-person narration complicates this taxonomy: Changez is simultaneously the narrator and the focalized subject, negotiating between what Edmiston calls the "dual consciousness" of the first-person narrator: "his own subjective point of view" and that of "his earlier incarnation" (Edmiston, 1989, pp. 730). This duality mirrors the postcolonial subject's divided identity, suspended between the Western gaze and self-articulation. Through this hybrid lens, the novel's monologic address functions not merely as confession but as an epistemic response to the dominant political discourse. In other words, in The Reluctant Fundamentalist, the 'restriction of information' that Genette theorises becomes a device of narrative control. Changez determines what the Western listener, and by extension, the reader, can know. The focalization thus reverses the Neo-Orientalist authority: instead of being the observed object of narrative vision, the Eastern subject assumes the role of focalizer, while the Western figure is rendered voiceless and externally perceived. Hamid therefore transforms the supposed limitations of first-person narration that Genette calls its "spatial and psychological restrictions" (1980, pp. 195) into a mode of narrative sovereignty.

The very first sentence of the opening scene of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* illustrates how Hamid's manipulation of focalization becomes a political strategy. From the first line of "Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance?", Changez establishes himself as both narrator and focalizer, as he governs both the diegetic frame and also the reader's epistemic horizon. In Genette's terms, the narration shifts between internal focalization, in which Changez recounts his emotions during his time in New York, and external focalization, in which he speculates about the American listener's reactions. This fluctuation results in what Edmiston identifies as the "dual consciousness of the first-person narrator," which is a structure of self-division that reflects the postcolonial tension between complicity and critique (Edmiston, 1989, pp. 730). When Changez retrospectively admits, "I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be pleased that the mighty United States had been humbled" (Hamid, 2017, pp. 52) he exemplifies Genette's notion of temporal advantage, in which the narrating "I" knows more than the experiencing "I" (Narrative Discourse, 1980, pp. 217). This dissonance aligns with what Edmiston calls "dissonant self-narration," where the narrator "distances himself from past ignorance and delusions while providing a great deal of subsequent knowledge" (Edmiston, 1989, pp. 732). Through this process, Hamid stages a reversal of epistemic power: the Pakistani narrator assumes interpretive mastery, while the American listener becomes an object of focalization, seen but unheard. Focalization thus ceases to function merely as a formal narratological category. Instead, it becomes a postcolonial act of re-vision that redirects the narrative gaze from the margins toward the imperial centre.

In this light, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be read not only as a thematically anti-Neo-Orientalist text but also as a narratological decolonization of the Western gaze. Hamid's

manipulation of focalization, as theorized by Genette and reinterpreted by Edmiston, turns the novel's structure into an implicit critique of the epistemological asymmetries that sustain Neo-Orientalist discourse. By embedding political inversion within the mechanisms of storytelling, Hamid suggests that narrative form itself can become a site of postcolonial response. Ultimately, this rhetorical and narrative strategy compels readers to rethink the asymmetrical structures of power that govern global discourse and to recognize that perspective is not neutral; it is shaped by historical privilege and systemic exclusion.

Conclusion

The narratological inversion Hamid achieves through focalization directly anticipates the broader reversal of Neo-Orientalist narration that follows. Whereas Neo-Orientalist discourse privileges a Western narrative consciousness that speaks about the East, Hamid's novel reclaims the right to narrate from within. Moreover, the novel also serves as a powerful critique of dominant literary traditions and a direct challenge to the public's perception of marginalized individuals. Hamid confronts the reader with a raw portrayal of the constant judgment, stereotyping, and shame that individuals face because of their cultural, religious, or physical traits, particularly within the context of Neo-Orientalist discourse. In this worldview, individuals and entire communities are deemed violent, dangerous, and inherently linked to terrorism due to their ethnic or religious background. Through his protagonist, Changez, Hamid illustrates the daily realities of marginalized people, offering a profound reflection on what it feels like to be on the receiving end of Neo-Orientalist discourse. A striking element of the novel is its narrative structure, which unfolds entirely from the perspective of a Pakistani man. This choice draws attention to the narrator's unreliability, as it is impossible for any individual to remain altogether objective about their own lived experiences. In this sense, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid subverts the conventions of post-9/11 fiction, which often presents similarly subjective narratives without ever questioning their inherent biases. By doing so, Hamid effectively turns the lens back on the dominant Western discourse, urging readers to reconsider the biases and partialities that have historically shaped their understanding of global events. Ultimately, the novel illuminates several pressing contemporary issues, including the manipulation of public perception by the media, the systematic othering of Muslims, and the silencing of voices that have long been excluded from mainstream dialogue. While Hamid does not offer easy solutions to these problems, his work represents an essential first step towards a more inclusive and just future, one where binary oppositions no longer dictate our understanding of identity, and where there is no longer any justification for the marginalization or mistreatment of others. Through this nuanced portrayal, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths and engage in the difficult but necessary work of dismantling harmful ideologies.

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