

*Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne  
dell'Università degli Studi di Torino*

# Metamorfosi culturali nell'età presente e contemporanea



*a cura di Pierangela Adinolfi*

Università degli Studi di Torino



Nuova Trauben



*Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne  
dell'Università degli Studi di Torino*

Strumenti letterari

10

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*Volume pubblicato con il contributo  
del Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere  
e Culture Moderne dell'Università degli Studi di Torino*

In copertina:

“Persone in cammino nel deserto del Sahara” [Merzouga, Marocco, 2009]  
(foto Pier Paolo Piciucco)

© 2020 Nuova Trauben editrice  
via della Rocca, 33 – 10123 Torino  
[www.nuovatrauben.it](http://www.nuovatrauben.it)

ISBN 9788899312763

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WHEN FUNDAMENTALISTS  
RETURN TO THE ORIENT: AN ANALYSIS OF  
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S THE ENGLISH PATIENT  
AND MOHSIN HAMID'S THE RELUCTANT  
FUNDAMENTALIST

*Pier Paolo Picincco*

Although widely praised as an engaging piece of postmodern fiction, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* also drew a considerable amount of unfavourable, if not utterly hostile, critical judgement. Mostly, the unsatisfied reviewers were from the US (or, in one case, from Canada)<sup>1</sup> and their disagreement was due to a disappointing finale, when the Indian sapper Kip, on hearing that the Americans had been using nuclear weapons against Japan, had instantly – and surprisingly – abandoned his group of friends and his sweetheart Hana on the grounds of an achieved consciousness of the East-West divide. The perceptible incongruity of Kip's hastened decision to sever ties with his comrades however lies in his confused and confusing notion of identity that seemingly brings him to mistake a dying man – supposedly English, but recently identified as Hungarian – for the person responsible for the nuclear attack on Japan: the plot then discloses not only the evolution but also the split in the Indian boy who

<sup>1</sup> See for instance TOM CLARK, *On Foreign Ground*, in "The World and I Online" (1993), 8.2, CRAIG SELIGMAN, *Sentimental Wounds*, Rev. of *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, in "The New Republic," March 15 (1993), HILARY MANTEL, "Wraith's Progress: Review of *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, in "The New York Review of Books," 40.1-2 (1993), and THOMAS HURKA, *Philosophy, Morality, and The English Patient*, in "Queen's Quarterly," vol. 104, no. 1, (1997).

turns from “a dedicated Anglophile”<sup>2</sup> into a rebel with “the desire to become ‘unEnglished’”<sup>3</sup>. The consequences of the twin atomic bombing dramatically precipitate the story towards a quick conclusion, framing the book within a clear political assessment. Many Northern Americans have been for way too long convinced of the good cause of the uranium gun-type bombing in August 1945 until Barack Obama became the first American President to publicly recognize that “(t)he world war [...] reached its *brutal end* in Hiroshima and Nagasaki”<sup>4</sup> some 71 years later. If *The English Patient* was a successful novel, awarded with the Booker Prize in 1992, it was, if possible, even more so as a film, when the British film director Anthony Minghella brought it on to the screen in 1997: as a matter of fact, it won in 9 out of 12 nominated Academy Awards categories. Apparently, among the reasons that made the film eligible for its successful outcome by such a prestigious institution, the decisions to shrink Kip’s role and disconnect his character from the fatal bombing in Japan are paramount<sup>5</sup>.

This paper purports to study those shadowy stages of the story, adopting the modes of the comparative analysis with Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* – a literary work that I claim rises from a similar support – in order to examine the real motivations, as well as the idiosyncrasies, that brought the two plots towards those unexpected conclusions (or volte-faces?). Changez, the protagonist and narrator in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*,

<sup>2</sup> LORENA RUSSELL, *Hope and Despair in The English Patient*, in “Postscript,” vol. 22, no. 1 (2004), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> MARILYN ADLER PAPAYANIS, *Writing in the Margins - The Ethics of Expatriation from Lawrence to Ondaatje*. Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press (2004), p. 223.

<sup>4</sup> “Text of President Obama’s Speech in Hiroshima, Japan,” in “The New York Times,” 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/world/asia/text-of-president-obamas-speech-in-hiroshima-japan.html> [italics mine, retrieved 8/8/2020]

<sup>5</sup> In his article *Dropping the Bomb?: On Critical and Cinematic Reactions to Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient*, in ID. “Re-constructing the Fragments of Michael Ondaatje’s Works,” (edited by Jean-Michel Lacroix), Paris, Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1999, p. 240, Josef Pesch has declared: “dropping the nuclear bomb scene from the film is both a political and a cultural statement: where the book faces the issue, the film looks the other way, and shows how effective self-censorship is in the industry. With the references to the bomb left in, the film would have been more honest and coherent, but it would also have attracted criticism of the type Seligman and Mantel addressed at the novel. What is more: it is unlikely that a film touching such a politically controversial issue would have been awarded 9 Oscars. It might not even have found a producer or distribution in the U.S.A.”

in fact “finds himself metamorphosed”<sup>6</sup>, following a trajectory “from a successful immigrant into a terrorist suspect”<sup>7</sup>. Not only does he transfigure himself in a way that may remind one of Kip in *The English Patient* but, similarly to what happens to the Indian sapper in Ondaatje’s novel, the spark that ignites this troublesome evolution appears to be a dramatic historical event which, in deference to a typical postmodern fashion, takes place at the other end of the world. If Changez comes to know about 9/11 when he is in Manila, so Kip becomes aware of the nuclear bombings of Japan while listening to the news on the radio when he is in the hills of Tuscany. As a matter of fact, the two stories thrive on analogies. Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Kip in *The English Patient* can in fact also be paired due to their accurate description of a painful progression towards maturity, so characteristic of the Bildungsroman form: they are both young men of about the same age, born in the Indian sub-continent but who migrated to the West, striving to give some stable orientation to their lives. They are acutely sensitive to the world’s evolutions up to the extent that they feel the compulsion to re-write their own existence and to re-position themselves as the latest events seem to alter the course of ordinary people’s lives, careless of the costs involved in the operation: their resolution to cut with their American (North American in Kip’s case) fiancées should be regarded as an excruciating side-effect following their decision. The newly-acquired awareness of their wrong positionality – only in part due to a mistake committed previously, and instead largely owing to sudden, remarkable switches in man’s history – drives them to look for a new zenith. S.P. Huntington is acutely perceptive as he writes that “people can and do redefine their identities and, as a result, the composition and boundaries of civilizations change”<sup>8</sup>.

In Kip and Changez, this process clearly generates pain, a feeling that gradually penetrates throughout the text and that in its own turn creates misperception, chaos, ambivalence, elusiveness and blurriness of some sort. As a matter of fact, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The English Patient* owe part of their fascination to their mistiness and overlapping of meanings: if the former for instance plays ambiguously with the roles enacted

<sup>6</sup> AROOSA KANWAL, *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction - Beyond 9/11*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan (2015), p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> MARGARET SCANLAN, *Migrating from Terror: the Postcolonial Novel after September 11*, in “Journal of Postcolonial Writing,” (2010) 46:3-4, p. 275.

<sup>8</sup> SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations?* in “Foreign Affairs,” Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), p. 24.

by the eloquent Pakistani lecturer and the mysterious American visitor, the latter does so with the names and identities of the main characters. However, hazy situations proliferate in both novels and cannot be limited to those just mentioned. As for the entire narration of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Crosthwaite registers his suspicious attitude when he claims that “Hamid’s narrator is nothing if not unreliable”<sup>9</sup>. In *The English Patient*, on the other hand, forms of mystification are even disturbing the communication among the inhabitants of Villa San Girolamo, as it occurs to Caravaggio when, with a focus on the English patient, he wonders: “*Who is he speaking as now?* Caravaggio thinks”<sup>10</sup>.

Following the two dramatic historical events, the re-adjustments of the two Asian young men are dramatic as well, involving as they do a tuning of identity; since this happens as the aftermath of real incidents, also the ideological overtones of their turns are patent. The domino effect that this whole process triggers entails implications on a wide scale, directly investing the realms of morality and psyche of the two characters. Two observations seem relevant at this stage. First, the U-turn strategy that they firmly intend to chart brings about a significant change in their territorial identity as their adaptation to a post-nuclear, or post-9/11, environment requires a transformation from a nomad to a sedentary perspective. Alarmed and threatened by the upsurging imperialistic plans devised by the United States, as a defence strategy they become enflamed by nationalism and react – Kip in a much more impulsive way, Changez with a slightly more machinated tactic – against prevailing assimilationist policies. Their amazing revolution therefore implies a change from a diaspora frame of mind to a regression to the nation-state stage. In both cases, however, they tailor their sense of belonging not exactly, or simply, and not always around the idea of their nation of birth, but around another imaginary construct: the Orient. In the two texts this gradually comes to the surface when one considers that the two young men directly refer to Asia, rather than to their native countries, in their counter-discourses as they feel the overwhelming intimidation of America shaking their world. In more specific terms, Kip all of a sudden blasts his most important connections in Villa San Girolamo, disorienting his fellow-comrades (as well as some of his reviewers), as he constructs his resistance with these words: “American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing *the*

<sup>9</sup> PAUL CROSTHWAITE, *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II*, Basingstoke, Palgrave (2009). p. 179.

<sup>10</sup> MICHAEL ONDAATJE. *The English Patient*. London, Bloomsbury (1992), p. 259.

*brown races of the world*, you're an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English"<sup>11</sup>. Hence, even if the new demarcation of an identity may seem a little confusing, what inevitably stands out is that the re-alignment of his personal identity is more ethnic- than national-oriented, and very likely prefigures an association with the Orient. On the other hand, despite being now firmly rooted in Lahore, and proud of his Pakistani identity, also Changez instinctively reacts to America's prevailing discourses by invoking a counter-discourse that calls upon a (tyrannized) Asian role:

I reflected that I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role<sup>12</sup>.

Not even in his case, to tell the truth, the terms used to reformulate this new identity are crystal-clear and linear throughout his mental journey back to Pakistan. If in the previous situation Changez was marking his sense of belonging within the Asian community, in a further case it becomes evident that what his fervent imagination is working on is a broad Islamic state with clear-cut borders and that in part – but not wholly – corresponds to the idea of the Orient. During the Indo-Pakistani crisis, in fact he finds himself musing on the fact that “Lahore was the last major city in a contiguous swath of Muslim lands stretching west as far as Morocco and had therefore that quality of understated bravado characteristic of frontier towns”<sup>13</sup>. Despite the blurred set of these overlying cultural constructions, one may argue along with Daily that “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* ultimately raises questions about Muslim identity more than being South Asian”<sup>14</sup>.

If however their identity has blurry borders, their vision becomes similarly distinct, vibrant and clear-cut when their objection to the West (whether it be America or England makes little difference) is probed. In a way, their aversion towards the West definitely helps them find their paths

<sup>11</sup> MICHAEL ONDAATJE, *Patient*, cit., p. 304. [italics mine]

<sup>12</sup> MOHSIN HAMID, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, London, Penguin (2007), p. 177.

<sup>13</sup> *Ivi*, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> KATIE DAILY, *Rejection and Disaffiliation in Twenty-First Century American Immigration Narratives*. Cham, Palgrave Pivot (2018), p. 29.

and identities. This is possibly the firmest reactionary tract in their somewhat wobbly ideological characterization and the major sparkle in their detonator: their anti-Western (militant?) attitude cannot be missed, so that while for example Jacobs has written about “Kip’s final rejection of an inimical ‘Englishness’ at the end of the novel”<sup>15</sup>, Morey has defined Changez after his return home as “an anti-American firebrand lecturer”<sup>16</sup>. If they both return home after an important chapter of their lives in the West, therefore, it is not only because of their nostalgic bias but also out of their intense resentment against America or England.

The second – and possibly even more important – observation involves the reversal of an ideological perspective, the re-location of their positionality, the U-turn of the migrants’ identities, or however we decide to call the radical change in direction operated by Kip and Changez calls into question matters of allegiances and bonds: with places, with clans, with families. Strongly related to two distinct hemispheres, flattered by the chances of careerism in Western elitist circles and – in Kip’s case – protected by different family sets, all too late they come to learn that a choice for one party inescapably involves the rejection of the other, shifting their pick on to a moral, as well as ideological level. Their preference is not therefore a matter of convenience, as a troublesome compromise with their mournful conscience, placed as they are in a hazy, disorienting framework. It is in this puzzling context that they are each confronted with a ghost in their cupboard: a vague, indistinct sense of betrayal in fact permeates the two novels since scattered allusions remind the readers of this uncomfortable situation. The whole story of *The English Patient* gravitates around issues of disloyalty of a sort, whether in a military, sentimental, or family context. All this is fairly evident in a telling journal entry by the English patient, that may be used a summary for the whole story: “*There are betrayals in war that are childlike compared with our human betrayals during peace*”<sup>17</sup>. Even if betrayals cannot be said to be equally central in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, they are nonetheless dormant loose ends that may possibly show their potential at any time. Moore-Gilbert perceptively associates the possible etymology of Changez’s name to an explanation of his

<sup>15</sup> J.U. JACOBS, *Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient (1992) and Postcolonial Impatience*, in “Journal of Literary Studies,” 13:1-2 (1997), p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> PETER MOREY, *Islamophobia and the Novel*, New York, Columbia University Press (2018), p. 214.

<sup>17</sup> MICHAEL ONDAATJE, *Patient*, cit., p. 103.

real nature: “His very name, with its echo of ‘changes’, suggests a chameleon-like protagonist whose affiliations – and loyalties – are impossible to fix with any certainty”<sup>18</sup>. Ironically enough, also Morey chooses the metaphor of the chameleon to describe Changez’s ambivalent positionality when he asserts that “this chameleon takes on the hue of his environment”<sup>19</sup>.

A wide-awake conscience and the anxiety caused by the sense of guilt concur in driving Changez toward the climactic decision to abandon New York for good: what follows is the protagonist’s restless vision at the time he finds himself in Pakistan after 9/11 but prior to his final resolution to return home definitively.

Yes, we had nuclear weapons, and yes, our soldiers would not back down, but we were being threatened nonetheless, and there was nothing I could do about it but lie in my bed, unable to sleep. Indeed, I would soon be gone, leaving my family and my home behind, and this made me a kind of coward in my own eyes, a traitor. What sort of man abandons his people in such circumstances? And what was I abandoning them for? A well-paying job and a woman whom I longed for but who refused even to see me? I grappled with these questions again and again<sup>20</sup>.

Apart from confirming that nationalism is generated as a defence mechanism when a subject feels under threat, this conspicuous passage shows that the migrant’s mind responds to stimuli that in many cases are far from being the result of a straightforward and rational chain of thought, but are rather the effect of primordial associations. In the same way as the Hungarian count László Almásy on his deathbed can hardly be connected with the devastations resulting from the atomic bombings of Japan, so Changez should not blame himself if India is taking advantage of a murky political and historical passage at the expense of Pakistan. And, needless to say, both Kip and Changez are smart enough to grasp this line of thought. This said, what these two parallel and critical situations bring to the fore is that the two Asians seem to be far less in control of how unconscious binds work on them than they expected.

<sup>18</sup> BART MOORE-GILBERT, *From ‘the Politics of Recognition’ to ‘the Policing of Recognition’: Writing Islam in Hanif Kureishi and Mohsin Hamid*, in ID. “Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing” (edited by Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey, and Amina Yaqin) New York, Routledge (2012), p. 193.

<sup>19</sup> PETER MOREY, *Islamophobia*, cit. p. 219.

<sup>20</sup> MOHSIN HAMID, *Fundamentalist*, cit., p. 145.

The issue of the sense of guilt in relation with how unconscious energies mould the existence of diaspora subjects ushers in the problematic question of the sense of belonging, a complex subject that Brennan has brilliantly and concisely explained with reference to the construct of ‘natio.’ “As for the ‘nation’, it is both historically determined and general. As a term, it refers both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the ‘natio’ – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging”<sup>21</sup>. The sense of belonging is the end product made with kinship, relatedness, acceptance, loyalty; when assembled together, these ingredients can easily condition a subject’s identity, something that has a major influence on Kip’ and Changez’s young lives. Since no matter how the condition of belonging is a combination of a number of factors, different cases may generate different sets of circumstances, a solution easily applicable to the cases in hand.

Kip’s and Changez’s diaspora stories narrate chronicles of displacement of two young Asians in a Western society. On arriving in New York or in the UK, they both soon embark on a project focussed on a new identity formation that over times becomes strictly related to their working environment. The recruitment stages in particular are invested with deep resonances that go well beyond those one may attach to the first phases of employment, since finding employment for these two migrants has also wider implications in terms of impacting their sense of belonging, as well as assessing their self-esteem. Changez’s somewhat mythical account of the fateful interview ensuring him a job with Underwood Samson clearly sets the roots for a multicultural (with a penchant for a US-orientation) identity:

On that day, I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee, and my firm’s impressive offices made me *proud*. I wished I could show my parents and my brother! I stood still, taking in the vista, but not for long; soon after our arrival we entering analysts were marched into a conference room for our orientation presentation. There a vice president by the name of Sherman – his head gleaming from a recent shave – laid out the ethos of our new outfit.

“We’re a meritocracy,” he said. “We believe in being the best. You were the best candidates at the best schools in the country. That’s what got you here”<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> TIMOTHY BRENNAN, *The National Longing for Form*, in ID. “Nation and Narration” (edited by Homi K. Bhabha), London, Routledge (1990), p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> MOHSIN HAMID, *Fundamentalist*, cit., pp. 38-39.



Being selected by Underwood Samson, with all the possible allusions to those two heavy initials, makes the Pakistani-who-does-not-think-of-himself-as-a-Pakistani-any-more proud of himself, so that a little later he boasts that “I felt empowered, and besides, all manner of new possibilities were opening up to me”<sup>23</sup>.

If Changez, with all his captivating affabulatory skills, sometimes talks like Aesop’s frog in ‘The Frog and the Ox,’ Kip displays a more restrained and reserved nature which nonetheless does not prevent him from feeling (moderately) excited when the selection of his recruiters falls on him.

He was one of three applicants selected by Lord Suffolk. This man who had not even spoken to him (and had not laughed with him, simply because he had not joked) walked across the room and put his arm around his shoulder. The severe secretary turned out to be Miss Morden, and she bustled in with a tray that held two large glasses of sherry, handed one to Lord Suffolk and, saying, ‘I know you don’t drink,’ took the other one for herself and raised her glass to him. ‘Congratulations, your exam was splendid.

Though I was sure you would be chosen, even before you took it.’

‘Miss Morden is a splendid judge of character. She has a nose for brilliance and character.’

‘Character, sir?’

‘Yes. It is not really necessary, of course, but we *are* going to be working together. We are very much a family here. Even before lunch Miss Morden had selected you’<sup>24</sup>.

Even with considerable gaps in the rhetoric employed in the two episodes, these two stories reinforce the feeling that, even more than simply passing selection and landing a job, the two young Asians have won respect and acceptance from the West. It is here, though, that Kip’s story diverges from Changez’s since, as the last lines in the previous excerpt indicate, the modes of the admission do not only abstractly suggest acceptance from a society but by a restricted group of individuals whose connections are typically found in a clan, if not in a family. Two birds with one stone, seems to be the moral of Kip’s story, who applies for a job and gains a family, along with the job, of course. Possibly, Kip himself may have remained unaware that passing an exam would have so many repercussions: however, as we will notice with the progression of the story, his taciturn and withdrawn nature hides an inner turmoil of some sort.

<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> MICHAEL ONDAATJE, *Patient*, cit., p. 201.

Indeed, there must be a void in his soul that the successful test fills because, as his recruiters make him an offer to include him in their family-like clan, he eagerly accepts it. And it is clear to all the readers that Lord Suffolk at that time does not become his employer only but also – and most importantly – his surrogate father. It is interesting in fact that in a novel with so many consistent elisions, also the figure of Kip's Indian father remains eclipsed throughout the plot. The story in fact narrates Kip's most vivid impressions during the time he is trained as a sapper in the UK and during the war, showing how he neglects his Indian parent and how in the meanwhile the image and the memory of Lord Suffolk becomes magnified in his eyes. "Lord Suffolk was the best of the English, he later told Hana"<sup>25</sup> is a little afterwards echoed by "Lord Suffolk was the first real gentleman he had met in England"<sup>26</sup>; that Suffolk stands out from the pack and occupies a place apart is confirmed when we are informed that the group of his superiors is idealised as "the trinity of Suffolk, Morden and Harts"<sup>27</sup>. This clearly bespeaks of Kip's (silenced) longing for a paternal figure of guidance. With all his typical restraint and discretion, Kip cannot however hide a certain classist pride in stressing the aristocratic extraction of his putative English father, expressing in his own peculiar way the smug delight that also Changez had voiced (or maybe boasted?) after successfully passing selection. In other words, being selected by the West is an ego-booster for Kip and Changez, whatever the forms of their manifestation.

Back to Kip and his parental void, this has obviously both psychological and metonymical resonances. Kip in fact is not only a young man in need of a father figure, but also a servant from a colonized country who feels the need for recognition on the part of the (English) master: hence, the restoration of his sense of belonging has overlapping significations. What should be stressed here however is that this process is reiterated throughout the plot. An unconscious mechanism seems to be at work in Kip's mind whereby whenever he remains fatherless – because he migrates, or because his father figure is killed – he instinctively looks for a replacement figure. I fully agree with Marais when he claims that after Suffolk's death, Kip elects the English patient as his substitute; the scholar's preference for the ideological interpretation of Kip's rebellion to the dying patient's paternal dominance is thought-provoking:

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> *Ivi*, p. 198.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 202.

The scene in which Kip almost kills the patient, and shortly thereafter tears the British insignia from his uniform and reclaims the name Kirpal (305), marks the end of his comprador status and his Anglophilia – the latter a product of his tutelage under a succession of English “fathers,” the last of whom is the patient he assumes to be English. In the context of this paternal relationship, Kip’s apostasy is ostensibly an expression of independence<sup>28</sup>.

As for the climactic scene when Kip finally finds himself inches away from shooting the English patient, Ondaatje has provided us with an extremely thrilling example of a split personality disorder, corresponding to the typical explanation of how colonization creates the appropriate context in which a colonizer meets a colonized in Bhabha’s theory. Bhabha in fact claims that “the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s *avenging anger*”<sup>29</sup>. It is evident therefore that I register my full accord with McVey when he claims that “(t)he accusation – *you’re an Englishman* – is as much a subconscious accusation of himself as it is of the patient”<sup>30</sup>.

Nonetheless, if on the one hand the need to fill an emotional hollowness may seem quite acceptable behaviour, on the other the replacement of a father, or the swap of a family does find fewer sound justifications, at least on a moral ground. It is right in this context that a sense of guilt originates. I would again emphasise the relevance of Kip’s taciturn nature, because it also explains how the young Indian sapper manages for a long time (at least) to silence some undesired emotions. The action of repression suddenly comes to the surface after the nuclear bombing of Japan, when it is not possible for him to ignore his brother’s previous warning:

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But we, oh, we were easily impressed – by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For *this* to happen<sup>31</sup>?

<sup>28</sup> MIKE MARAIS, *Violence, Postcolonial Fiction, and the Limits of Sympathy*, in “Studies in the Novel,” Vol. 43, No. 1 (spring 2011), p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> HOMI K. BHABHA, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge (1994), p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> CHRISTOPHER MCVHEY, *Reclaiming the Past: Michael Ondaatje and the Body of History*, in “Journal of Modern Literature,” vol. 37, n. 2, Winter 2014, p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> MICHAEL ONDAATJE, *Patient*, cit., pp. 302-303.

It is interesting, then, that the voice awaking Kip to consciousness is not his (Indian) father's but his brother's. By stretching another analogy with the world of fairy-tales, Kip's brother may be equated to the Talking Cricket, the judicious entity warning Pinocchio against choosing immoral and frivolous paths. His recommendations however always remain unheeded, because Pinocchio instead favours easier and seemingly gratifying solutions, that in time prove inappropriate. Thus, the somewhat prophetic trustworthiness of the message of Kip's brother shakes the Indian sapper to maturity and while he is motoring away to Southern Italy on his way towards India, Hana remembers – and possibly gives a new interpretation to – a cherished memory of her runaway sweetheart: “*When the war came my brother sided with whoever was against the English*”<sup>32</sup>. After hearing the fatal news broadcasted in the first half of August 1945, Kip has abruptly switched identification, swapping from the English patient to his Indian brother, whose anti-English rebellion he now fully incarnates.

Both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The English Patient* revolve around deterritorialized identities, creating split personalities and crucial ambivalences: if however Kip, due to his introverted temperament, makes the final confrontation with the English patient a surprising (destabilizing, maybe?) revelation, with the garrulous and outspoken Changez the coexistence of two inner conflicting entities is presented as routine. So much so that the first-time reader may easily mistake it for a sign of a fixed multicultural perspective. As the story progresses, though, the first doubts arise. One meaningful example can be found in the description of the contradictory feelings the embarrassed Underwood Samson analyst records in the aftermath of 9/11, when he considers his mischievous pleasure at witnessing the televised images of the collapse of the Twin Towers. He wonders: “I was not at war with America. Far from it: I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed? I did not know, then”<sup>33</sup>.

However, Changez's fairly schizophrenic attitude is foreshadowed throughout the plot and I would suggest looking at the way in which he discusses two important topics in order to understand how widespread this effect in regard to his new identity formation is. Western cinema and Pakistani food are actually alternatively used to show where his passions

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>33</sup> MOHSIN HAMID, *Fundamentalist*, cit., p. 84.

and cultural affiliations direct him. Changez often believes that his existence is part of a film as when he claims: “Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible”<sup>34</sup>. Yet, other episodes also give him that same feeling, as the collapse of the World Trade Center. During the exposition of his life to his anonymous American addressee, Changez colours his descriptions with frequent references to Western cinema, making allusions to *Top Gun*<sup>35</sup>, *Star Wars*<sup>36</sup>, James Bond<sup>37</sup> and *Grease*<sup>38</sup>, whereas he describes Erica’s femininity arguing that “she belonged more to the camp of Paltrow than to that of Spears”<sup>39</sup>. This semantic field indebted to Western culture is opposed to that of Pakistani food, “something we Lahoris take great pride in”<sup>40</sup>. Not surprisingly, the long coverage of Changez’s (American) life is narrated during a dinner in which food is elected to a testimony of the local age-old culture (the Americans do not possess) and style of living:

we are surrounded instead by the kebab of mutton, the tikka of chicken, the stewed foot of goat, the spiced brain of sheep! These, sir, are predatory delicacies, delicacies imbued with a hint of luxury, of wanton abandon. Not for us the vegetarian recipes one finds across the border to the east, nor the sanitized, sterilized, processed meats so common in your homeland! Here we are not squeamish when it comes to facing the consequences of our desire<sup>41</sup>.

Further references to Pakistani cuisine call into question a “piece of warm bread, like so – ah, fresh from the clay oven”<sup>42</sup>, a sweetish dessert<sup>43</sup> and “green tea, the perfect aid to digestion after a heavy meal”<sup>44</sup>.

This said, possibly the most significant sign of Changez’s ambivalent identity is to be found in the episode of his sexual intercourse with Erica, “a metaphorical nation figure”<sup>45</sup>, that testifies at the same time the swinging quality of the novel as well as of its own abundance of significances.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ivi*, p. 14 and p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ivi*, p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> *Ivi*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> *Ivi*, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ivi*, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi*, p. 139.

<sup>43</sup> *Ivi*, p. 157.

<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, p. 175.

<sup>45</sup> KATIE DAILY, *Rejection*, cit., p. 32.

Whereas Kip in the conclusive confrontation with the English patient swaps identification, deserting the dying man to associate himself with his anti-British brother, in order to reach his goal also Changez plays the part of Erica's previous American boyfriend Chris, with all the echoes that his name brings. It is because of the possible symbolical resonances apportioned to Erica and Chris, that the episode has originated completely opposite interpretations. If by all means, Moore-Gilbert has focussed his attention on the kindness of their relationship, maintaining that "(m)ost egregiously, he allows Erica, the allegorical figure of *America*, to construct him in the image of her former lover Chris, symbolically turning the new immigrant Other into a version of the Same"<sup>46</sup>, Hartnell has instead read the sexual relationship in terms of a subtle representation of the attacks on New York and Washington: "(t)he ways in which Changez's and Erica's love-making alludes to the violent penetration of American space as represented by the 9/11 attacks are obvious"<sup>47</sup>. Since I consider the metaphoric construction of the characters as crucial in this story – something that has driven Morey to write about "the novel's rather heavy-handed allegorical framework"<sup>48</sup> – I tend to privilege Hartnell's reading. Given the peculiar ideological framing of this narration, and the metaphorical reverberations of the two characters involved in the sexual-affair, I think that the sexual encounter clearly seems to be insisting on the allusive 'Fuck (Am)Erica' message that the whole plot resonates with. Therefore, far from substantiating the gentlemanly attitude with women that for the entire plot Changez considers one of his characterizing traits, in that specific occurrence he rather gives vent to a misogynistic whim.

Faithful to my habits of the time when I was a student, I have left for the conclusive section the most problematic issue, connected with the title of this paper and to Hamid's novel: fundamentalism. A debate on the nature and the boundaries of fundamentalism – the more so with reference to episodes of our contemporary age – is of course a minefield. There are two sets of traps that largely contribute to making this argument insidious. First, we should take into account an ideological issue. Positionality is a key argument in this context, so that we should not expect people from the UK, the US, Vietnam or Afghanistan to share the same understanding

<sup>46</sup> BART MOORE-GILBERT, *Writing Islam*, cit., p. 192.

<sup>47</sup> ANNA HARTNELL, *Moving through America: Race, Place and Resistance in Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, in "Journal of Postcolonial Writing," 46:3-4 (2010) p. 344.

<sup>48</sup> PETER MOREY, *Islamophobia*, cit. p. 217.

of the question; nor can we imagine that an ordinary Massachusetts resident's outlook matches one from Texas, or, for the same reason, a Muslim free-thinker from Lebanon necessarily agree with an orthodox Saudi Arabian. The second possible issue generating a theoretical deadlock in this sense can arise if we approach the problem with the tools of terminology. Hamid is shrewd enough to play with the polysemic quality of the term, but he also takes advantage of a certain nebulosity of their accepted definitions. In order to properly understand the meaning of the term in Hamid's title and novel, we can select the two distinct definitions that mostly describe his case, as reported in the OED:

- b. In other religions, esp. Islam: a person who believes in strict adherence to traditional orthodox religious beliefs or doctrines; a proponent or adherent of fundamentalism
2. *Finance*. A person who relies on *fundamental analysis* [...] to identify market trends and forecast developments in the value of an investment<sup>49</sup>.

The second definition is the appropriate outline of how the term can apply to the financial world, in particular to label an approach to business analysis broadly in use in neo-colonial imperialism. The repeatedly stressed maxim 'Focus on the fundamentals' in the novel is used to create a thought-association between the callous practises adopted on the global market by Underwood Samson and US foreign policy. Scanlan is correct in saying that

Changez uses "the fundamentals" only when referring to Underwood Samson. The fundamentals are "systematic pragmatism", "efficiency", and "maximum return" (37). "Focus on the fundamentals" is Underwood Samson's "guiding principle [...] single-minded attention to financial details, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value" (98). With repetition, the association of merciless capitalism with fundamentalism comes to define Underwood Samson; when Changez quits, he reflects that his "days of focusing on fundamentals were done" (154). When, in the course of his dinner with the American in Lahore, he has occasion to allude to strict Muslims, it is notable that he calls them not fundamentalists but "religious literalists" (179)<sup>50</sup>.

Scanlan is also accurate when she highlights that Hamid never contemplates the use of the term 'fundamentalist' as referring to sections of the Muslim population strictly attached to religious faith, that would definitively

<sup>49</sup> AA VV, *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, online version, July 2020 update: [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) [accessed August 2020]

<sup>50</sup> MARGARET SCANLAN, *Migrating*, cit., p. 275.

connect the two meanings and definitions of the term selected from the OED. It is at this junction then that the riddle becomes particularly treacherous. To start with, the attempt to offer a definition of this multifaceted topic may seem tricky indeed, if a book entirely dedicated to this issue takes some dozen pages to try and sketch a proper contour to the case, opening the discussion with: “(f)undamentalism, according to its critics, is just a dirty 14-letter word”<sup>51</sup>. Yet, the same definition offered by the OED in the first case can be considered disputable, because while fundamentalists of Islamic belief are of course connected to ‘traditional orthodox religious beliefs or doctrines,’ their militant action after the Cold War years should be positioned within a de-colonizing process against the neo-imperialist agenda of the Western economy. Fundamentalists’ ultimate goal is not so much the creation of religion-based states, as a struggle against the policies of ‘market fundamentalism’ by the use of religion-based states. Religion is not the end, but the means employed to achieve the target, and it is with this respect that the OED’s explanation is unsatisfactory. Osama Bin Laden – the mastermind behind the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – was after all not a religious leader, even though he made extensive use of religious pronouncements in his slogans, but a millionaire Arab who sponsored and created a militant group of Afghan jihadists at the time of the Russian occupation. Marranci is particularly clear-sighted in his scrutiny of the nature and the boundaries of the ‘fundamentalist issue’:

the phenomenon is deeply rooted in the dynamics of social identity. Of course, culture matters and religion too, but they are not the essential ingredients. The final answer, Herriot has recently argued (2007), could be found in the ‘us versus them’ attitude that underlies the conflict between religious values and secularism. Identity (role identity) theory, directly or indirectly, has shaped the discussion of ‘fundamentalism’<sup>52</sup>.

This argument again draws us back to Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, since also the narrator-protagonist of the novel perfectly fits into this frame. Thus, I totally agree with Eaton as he claims: “(t)he narrator’s motivations are notably less religious than political in nature, for according to

<sup>51</sup> MALISE RUTHVEN. *Fundamentalism: a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press (2004), p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> GABRIELE MARRANCI, *Understanding Muslim Identity. Rethinking Fundamentalism*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan (2009), pp. 4-5.



the reluctant fundamentalist: ‘finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power’ (Hamid 2007: 177)<sup>53</sup>.

In the light of this, I can attempt to disentangle the knots with regard to how I personally believe the term ‘fundamentalist’ is used and what purpose it serves in Hamid’s novel. Very aptly, in fact, Moore-Gilbert brings to the fore the slippery intent of the rhetoric adopted in the text: “‘fundamentalism’ is much more difficult to ‘recognize’ and therefore ‘police’”<sup>54</sup>. As a starting point, it may be interesting to stress that the two possible definitions of the term – as related to a Muslim-oriented anti-Western group and pertinent to modes of approaching markets by global capitalism – can be quite easily associated with the two distinct spheres presently involved in the global conflict: the former to the (Islamic) Orient, the latter to the West. What the narrator in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* does is to silence the former while emphasizing the latter, reversing the common expectations about the uses of the term. This is indeed a political statement. And a remarkable one, at that. Therefore, I agree with Ahmed, Morey and Yaqin when they contend that

Hamid’s text deliberately sidesteps the matter of the ‘representability’ of Islamic fundamentalism through an implication that, at least for now, the phenomenon may be ‘unwriteable’ because unrecognizable in western representational terms which still rely heavily on the stereotyping of Muslim subjects<sup>55</sup>.

This is perfectly in keeping with the absence of the term in the dictionaries of some of the ‘Oriental’ languages: “As with Arabic, there is no indigenous Hebrew word that corresponds to ‘fundamentalism’”<sup>56</sup>.

It remains undeniable however that the persistent ambivalence of the narration/narrator leaves the reader in doubt whether Changez may actually be an Islamic terrorist hunted by a CIA agent. According to Morey, the narrator “is, in effect, consciously pandering to the image of the “fundamentalist” that will be eagerly beamed around the world as the required mediated Muslim “type” – a sort of off-the-shelf Islamic Rage Boy, complete with beard, slogans, and flag burning”<sup>57</sup>. Whether killer or victim –

<sup>53</sup> MARK EATON, *Pathways to Terror: Teaching 9/11 Fiction*, in ID. “Teaching 21st Century Genres,” (edited by Katy Shaw), London, Palgrave (2016), p. 141.

<sup>54</sup> BART MOORE-GILBERT, *Writing Islam*, cit., p. 193.

<sup>55</sup> REHANA AHMED, PETER MOREY and AMINA YAQIN, *Introduction*, in ID. “Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing,” New York, Routledge (2012), p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> MALISE RUTHVEN. *Fundamentalism*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> PETER MOREY, *Islamophobia*, cit. p. 223.

or simply prey to an overwhelming form of anxiety causing Changez to believe that his life is in danger while it is not – is immaterial, of course, since the author himself has shunned offering a clear-cut conclusion. “During the conclusion it is not clear what is happening, who might be assassinating whom”<sup>58</sup> is the comment by King. Therefore, I would claim that the concept of ‘fundamentalist’ swings from pronounced oppositions to the neo-imperialistic economy to silenced allusions to anti-American militant positioning, in the same way as Changez considers himself as a New Yorker first and a Pakistani later.

Kip and Changez are thus easily associated by a parallel reverse diaspora discourse, originated as a coercive opposition to Western policies of domination that brings them home after feeling urgent pangs of conscience. Fraught with contradictions and ambivalent exploits, alliances, afterthoughts and sudden/shocking turns in their contentions, noisy silences revealing their spiciest tales, their two different stories, with minor gaps, follow the same scheme:

- a. affiliation to the West /switch of family
- b. emotional connection with the West
- c. tragic historical event
- d. feeling of betrayal to the original homeland
- e. return to the homeland

In the course of their experience they savour the taste of life, manliness and death, and learn what it is to carry the burden of one’s responsibility on their shoulders: their achieved sense of maturity makes them understand how duty creates unsuspecting obligations towards their clan, as well as towards themselves. With their striking discrepancies, neither of the two lacks the courage to re-write their identities and to re-position themselves as major historical events around them shift the horizon: nor, are they afraid to be misread in their new trajectories. Changez for his own part adumbrates the possibility that he may be a terrorist, while his own narration seems to locate him within an average context, albeit ideologically positioned against American economic expansionism. This said, his description of a young migrant of Islamic faith, living and integrated in the West while strongly objecting to Western politics, broadly conforms to the typical depiction of a

<sup>58</sup> BRUCE KING. (2007) “The Image of the United States in Three Pakistani Novels.” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8:3-4, p. 685.

potential terrorist. On the other hand, Kip's association to a terrorist may sound strident. Even so, meek and introverted as he is, in the final scene when he threatens the English patient with his rifle, he becomes the protagonist of a most thrilling episode, the only one in the two novels possibly evolving into a murderous scene. The episode becomes even more thought-provoking in this sense if the reader favours an allegorical rather than a realistic interpretation, namely a young Asian threatening the (fake) Englishness of a dying subject. Along with many others, in such a perspective this may be quite an unexpected and shocking conclusion, typical of these diaspora narrations.

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