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ENGL 117B

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“A Lover of America”: The Truth or a Ruse?

The novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, written by Mohsin Hamid, is written so the reader feels very involved in the story. The narrator, Changez, is a young Pakistani man telling the story of his love affair with America (the country and a girl, who both inevitably let him down) to an elusive and mysterious American. The readers never learn the name of this American, and all his characterization is provided from Changez’s narration of the interaction. In the story, there are many moments when Changez reassures his apprehensive companion – as he is nervous to be in Lahore, Pakistan only a few years following 9/11. Readers are led to believe the American is there for pleasure or business, but his true purpose remains a mystery that entices the reader for the entirety of the novel. As a child, Hamid loved choose-your-own adventure books, so as an adult he aims to keep the reader heavily involved in his writing (Hamid, 2011). However, as is the case with *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it is very important to him that the reader is left in the dark a little bit. This is so the reader can come to their own conclusion, so they can think about the situation and what they have heard, read, and seen, and draw from the experience to make the story come to an end. His storytelling is purposefully ambiguous, so the reader has a chance to come to their own conclusions in this way. Where “the text seeks to reverse the dominant rhetoric of the West and create a space that allows the Muslim ‘other’ to speak,”

(Aldalala'a, 1) the film fails. The film allows Changez to tell his story in full, but it is between cuts of a horrifying kidnapping, negotiations, and soon-to-be-violent riots. It emphasizes all the injustices that Changez experiences at the hands of Americans post-9/11, which only reinforces the narrative that a wronged person of color is seeking revenge on a country because of those many injustices. Because of this, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* film, directed by Mira Nair, expresses many Islamophobic ideas driven by adapting the film to be a thrilling, Hollywood-ready movie. In this essay, I will be comparing the ways in which two forms of media are able to manipulate viewers and readers into interpreting the same story in vastly different ways, resulting in the exposure of harmful stereotypes in the movie industry.

A key component of the novel is the style that it is written in. In an article he wrote describing his process and the many, many revisions of his novel, Hamid says, "I began to wonder if the power of the novel, if its distinctive feature among contemporary mass-storytelling forms, was rooted in the enormous degree of co-creation it requires on the part of its audience." Because this is such an important factor to the interpretation of the novel, viewers and readers alike would assume that it would be incorporated into the adaptation, but the film fails to provide any ambiguity. Instead of the nuances and subtleties that Hamid uses in his book, there is a clear path laid out in front of the viewer to understand the story a certain way. For example, the only *hint* of violence we get from the characters in the book is at the very end: a hint of metal that resides underneath the American's jacket, which is not explained further other than Changez assuring the American that he trusts it isn't a gun, but only a business card holder. The movie, however, wants to be a thriller and "completely drains [the story] of ambiguity" (Dargis, 2013). There are added elements of a kidnapping, the "conversation" Bobby and Changez are having in

the café is more of an interrogation, and there are flashes of scenes depicting violence against Changez (such as ransacking his office, threatening his family, and then the final scene when the Americans are shooting almost wildly when they are trying to get Bobby away from the “riot” happening because students think Changez, their beloved professor, is in trouble). By making the film more “exciting,” there are links created out of nothing, and it is drained of the compelling, thoughtful plot the novel has. These links make the viewers jump between opinions of Changez: Is he a terrorist? Is he really a “lover of America” or is it simply a ruse? This makes the viewers second guess everything they have seen so far and propels the narrative of ‘outsiders’ inspired by the horrifying acts of 9/11 and trying to destroy America from the inside.

The smile scene is a turning point for both the book and the movie, but contribute to this ‘outsiders’ narrative in different ways. In the novel, Changez explains the situation somewhat gracefully, “And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased” (Hamid, 81). Changez immediately attempts to explain himself to the American. It wasn’t because he was happy with the slaughter of thousands of innocent people, it was “...the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (Hamid, 81). America has always been seen as a powerhouse of productivity and success thanks to its heavy reliance on capitalism, and the idea that someone *dared* to attack it was almost admirable to this young man who had struggled and fought to be where he was in that system. While readers may see this as a moment of clarity and decision to choose America or Pakistan, viewers of the film may interpret the scene very differently. In the film, Changez gets an email from Erica (his American love), he is ecstatic about the potential of a promotion rewarding his hard work at Underwood Samson, but then he turns on the TV to see live footage of the planes crashing into

the World Trade Centers. He is initially shocked, but then viewers see a small smile appear on his face and they are transported back to the café in Lahore, where Changez is explaining himself to Bobby, the American agent. He says, “All I felt was awe...the audacity. The ruthlessness of its act was surpassed only by its genius. David had struck Goliath.” This statement is met with silence from Bobby, who immediately begins to draw the conclusion that Changez *is* working with the terrorists he is after. From here forward, Bobby doubts every good thing Changez says. Before this, we see Changez as a ‘good guy’, someone who truly loves America and the opportunities it comes with, in business and in love. In the novel, these feelings continue throughout the rest of the story because of the language that Hamid employs when Changez tells the rest of his story, despite his feeling like an outsider. In the movie, the entire tone shifts and becomes even more thrilling as the audience is confused on their opinion of Changez. After the smile scene, Changez becomes more rash and violent, lashing out at Erica for dealing with the tragedy differently than him, getting upset with Jim, his boss and mentor, at times because of his lack of understanding. This is the beginning of his downfall in America. He can’t go back to feeling like he belongs there because he is thriving, because he will forever be an outsider. In both the novel and the film, we understand that Changez had to make a choice at this moment: either be an American or be a Pakistani, but not both. In an interview, Hamid says “...people who feel they belong to two different things aren’t encouraged to accept themselves...and instead are encouraged to pick one, and are asked to pick one, expected to pick one.” From here, the movie and the book begin to part ways. The novel makes it seem as though Changez chose Pakistan because of his roots and his love for his country, but the film makes it out as if Changez chose Pakistan *and violence* because he was inspired by the terror instilled in Americans.

Finally, having a complete, finished story has very different effects on viewers and readers. When the reader gets to the end of the book, they really aren't sure if Changez gets shot, if the waiter attacks the American or not, or if there is another, undetermined ending. In the movie, we know that Changez's friend dies because the American operative got nervous and accused Changez of working with the terrorist group that kidnapped and killed a man. In the end of the film we still have some sense of ambiguity and confusion because it is still possible that Changez was a 'bad guy' and did work with the terrorists to take down this country that he loved so much because it did him so wrong, and that paints him in a bad light. This means that America simultaneously built and destroyed his career, treated him poorly in a time of fear, and it is possible that he responded with violence. That is up to the viewer to decide.

In a way, this film perpetuates and reminds people of that fear that they held by bringing up the terrible treatment of Muslims and Muslim-presenting people (Although one can't tell a practicing Muslim from a practicing Christian, American stereotypes still try). By highlighting the terrible treatment of Muslims immediately following 9/11, the movie propels the narrative that because it is possible that Changez lashed out at America because of this treatment, other people might too. Changez is not a likeable person; he is ruthless when he sets his mind to things, as many people trying to "make it in America" are, but that in conjunction with his close relationship with fundamentalism at Underwood Samson and the assumption that Muslims are Islamic Fundamentalists frightens people.

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