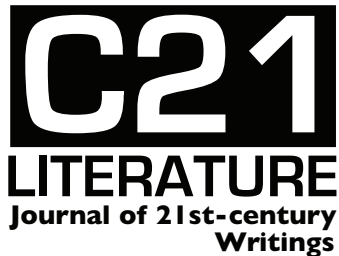




Open Library of Humanities



---

## Article

**How to Cite:** Donnelly, K., 2019. "Tarrying With Grief' in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 11, pp. 1–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.679>

**Published:** 11 June 2019

---

## Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

## Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## Open Access:

*C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

## Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles.**

ARTICLE

## 'Tarrying With Grief' in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Kelsie Donnelly

Queen's University Belfast, UK

[kdonnelly28@qub.ac.uk](mailto:kdonnelly28@qub.ac.uk)

---

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* responds tentatively to the question Judith Butler posed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks: 'is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief?' (Butler 2004: xii). Drawing on recent theorisations of precarity by Butler and Isabell Lorey, this paper argues that in this novel Hamid proposes an ethico-political theory of grief that refuses to conform to existing modes of post-9/11 mourning. This model does not stoke nationalist fervour, or reiterate exceptional circumstances of trauma, but instead advocates a continuous engagement with loss and its resources for political action. The novel suggests that tarrying with grief and its exposure of the permeability of psychic borders can produce new subjectivities and political movements. At the moment of writing in 2019, when borders between nations, populations and peoples are subject to increasing scrutiny, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* exploration of grief is both prescient and relevant to contemporary times.

---

**Keywords:** Mohsin Hamid; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; 9/11; Grief

---

On 20 September 2001 George W. Bush asserted that the grieving period that followed the events of 9/11 was over. By declaring that 'our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution', Bush implied that it was time to leverage this grief into a new form of justice (Bush 2001). As grief turned to anger, and anger to resolution, America became a nation arming and mobilising itself for what became known as the 'War on Terror'. Bush's premature declaration of an end to grief was, according to Judith Butler, 'invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly' (Butler 2004: 29–30). The attacks of 9/11 exposed anxieties about the stability of the American nation-state and a governing ideology of American exceptionalism.

William Spanos defines American exceptionalism as an 'ontological interpretation of the American national identity whose origin lay in the American Puritans' belief that their exodus from the Old World and their "errand into the wilderness" of the New' was 'divinely or transcendently ordained' (Spanos 2008: 188). This foundational myth resurfaced in the wake of the events of 9/11. While statements made by the Bush administration reminded the American nation of its enduring vulnerability, they also reminded the world of America's power over its enemies. US retaliatory aggression was directed primarily towards the perceived embodiment of terrorism, the Islamic Other: South Asians, Middle Easterners, Muslims, Arabs, or those who might vaguely resemble a Muslim or an Arab. As time has shown, however, the human cost of US devotion to dominance, as well as its readiness to exploit vulnerability elsewhere, has been immense and its dangers profound.

Against this context, Mohsin Hamid's 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores the ethico-political implications of grief, vulnerability and precariousness. This article reads the novel in response to the question posed by Butler in *Precarious Life*: 'is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief?' (Butler 2004: xii). It argues that this novel provides a tentative answer to her question through nuanced representations of a range of responses to loss, particularly those of its two protagonists, Changez and Erica. Following the death of Chris, her childhood sweetheart, Erica is trapped by a nostalgic longing for an old world of innocence and purity, a mythical time she believes she shared with him. In her pursuit to restore a lost (imagined) purity, (Am)Erica builds a wall around herself, sealing off her already pierced emotional and corporeal borders. This action can be read as analogous with the Bush administration's attempt to protect its sovereign position post-9/11, a position that 'denies its own constitutive injurability' (Butler 2009: 178).

The article will go on to consider the ways in which Changez, Erica's faithful admirer, tarrys with grief. Although Changez is nostalgic for Erica and his family's former privilege, he does not deny precariousness and mortality. Instead, he imagines the possibility of generating empathy and compassion. His experiential process of loss reveals the extent to which the self is neither pure nor sovereign, but plural and interdependent. This epiphany extends his gaze outwards, prompting him to

undertake a duty of care for those with whom he is invariably bound. Critical of the US government's unwillingness to tarry with grief, to use vulnerability as a means to recognise and respect the vulnerability of other nations, Changez theorises an ethico-political model of grief. His model advocates a continuous, open-ended engagement with loss, reflecting on the permeability of the self and the pain it shares with others. His empathetic identification with (Am)Erica's grief facilitates both his (re)birth and formation of a community that cares for precarious lives, regardless of political affiliations. Developing Butler's assertion that 'the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerges' from loss, this article argues that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* suggests that grief has the potential to create alliances that bridge regional, gender, cultural and political distances in the post-9/11 period (Butler 2004: 40).

At the point of its publication in 2007, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* spoke directly to post-9/11 America using voices that had then been excluded from mainstream discourse. In a recent interview, Hamid states that in 2018 any similar novel would be likely to take the same approach since 'we are still in much the same terrifying mess that we were over a decade ago' (quoted in Cuthbert 2018). There remains, he contends, 'a real cleaving of the world into an "us versus them" discourse and a sense of fear, which has not gone away' (quoted in Cuthbert 2018). The racial crystallisation of the Arab-Muslim Other has continued to shape possibilities and strategies for belonging, cultural citizenship, and identity. This was highlighted again in 2017 when US President Donald Trump temporarily suspended immigration into the US from seven Muslim-majority nations. The terrorist attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019, emphasised the fact that anti-Muslim sentiment is not unique to America. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* critique of the post-9/11 politics of nostalgia, the quest for purity, and the restoration of borders is also applicable to recent shifts in the geopolitical landscape in the UK. The Brexit campaign was fought on the basis of taking back control from the European Union, promising a return to the imagined greatness of pre-EU Britain. Across the Atlantic, Donald Trump also emerged victorious in the 2016 US election following his pledge to 'Make America Great Again', while in the Middle East, the Islamic State call for a return to the imagined glories of the early years of Islam. These nostalgic projects

of restoration can be regarded as quests for purity: from the Islamic State's ethnic cleansing, to the rise of white nationalism, which demonises and brutalises Muslims, Hispanics, and black people. As such, Hamid asserts that any quest to restore a lost purity ultimately inhibits the ability to 'imagine a brighter future' (Hamid 2017b). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* therefore offers an antidote to the trappings of such nostalgia through its (re)vision of loss and representation of an alternate future.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has influenced Hamid's subsequent work, especially his 2017 novel, *Exit West*. Although the latter focuses more explicitly on modern migration and alternate futures, the two novels share significant parallels. Where *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* searches for ways to transcend emotional, physical, geographical and ideological borders, *Exit West* imagines a world in which geographic borders are dissolved by magical doors. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* focuses on the inevitability of change and dislocation along the journey of life, a theme developed further in *Exit West*, which claims that 'we are all migrants through time' (Hamid 2017a: 209). 2019 offers a timely moment to re-read *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and its prescient exploration of precarity and grief.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is set in a café in Lahore, where Changez recounts memories of his time in America to an unnamed American. The narrative that Changez shares explains his complex relationship with America. Describing his childhood and heritage, he states: 'I grew up with a poor boy's sense of *longing*, in my case for what we had and lost' (Hamid 2007: 81; emphasis in original). In this situation, Changez claims, 'one has two choices: pretend all is well or work hard to restore things to what they were. I chose both' (Hamid 2007: 12). His nostalgic quest to restore fallen wealth and privilege is marked by a number of early successes: he receives a scholarship to study at Princeton University; and he successfully competes for a job at Underwood Samson, a prestigious business valuation company (Hamid 2007: 15). During his time in New York he meets and falls in love with Erica. While Erica becomes increasingly gripped by melancholia, Changez becomes increasingly disillusioned with America. This culminates in his departure from Underwood Samson. Following Erica's mysterious disappearance, he returns to Pakistan. After he has explained his narrative of love and loss, he asks the American: 'Why are you

reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards' (Hamid 2007: 209). On this note, the novel draws to a close.

The ending and formal structure of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* have been subject to much critical debate. Renee Lee Gardner argues that the structure 'subverts the empowered West-versus-subaltern East binary by lending voice to the othered (Pakistani) character while silencing the traditionally empowered (American) ones' (Gardner 2016: 109). The American interlocutor, however, is not forcibly silenced by Changez. Although Changez uses predation tropes in his narrative (such as his comparison of the American to an animal 'uncertain whether it is predator or prey'), they do not necessarily position both men as adversaries (Hamid 2007: 31). Writing about the pervasive fear of death in contemporary living, Hamid states: 'we are not adversaries, we are in it together, the great mass murderer, Death, has us all in his sights' (Hamid 2015). It would be advisable, he suggests, to 'recognise one another with compassion, not as predatory cannibals, but as meals for the same shark' (Hamid 2015). Changez and the American are 'bound', therefore, by Changez's intimate story of loss, which reminds both men that they are mutually susceptible to Death, the greatest predator of all.

Adnan Mahmutovic argues that the 'intimacy' Changez and the American share 'is meant to say that political and business exchanges need to be grounded in a certain sharing of civic rights and just economic interest' (Mahmutovic 2016: 12). In her examination of Changez's relationship with the American, Ayşem Seval proposes that 'as the silent addressee of Changez's dramatic monologue, the American is constantly under Changez's gaze' (Seval 2017: 108). Seval adds that the novel is 'about [Changez's] interpretation—through constant deductions—of the silent American' and 'Americanness' (Seval 2017: 108). Changez's relationship with the anonymous American is not simply a 'political' or 'business' exchange, but an emotional investment that offers Changez release. He shares and examines his (repressed) past, fantasies and fears with his interlocutor, who listens attentively and unwittingly performs the role of a therapist. Working through his loss and rejection, Changez articulates thoughts and feelings that he cannot express to Erica. The anonymous

American becomes a channel, a medium through which Changez can communicate his unresolved feelings of grief and love for her.

Critics have yet to acknowledge the structural similarity between the novel and a Sufi poem: a form of 'Islamic mysticism' that 'expresses itself in the form of love poems, which are second-person addresses, very often, and quite often nameless second-person addresses' (quoted in Johnson 2013). Changez, a self-proclaimed 'lover of America', does not express love for his nameless American interlocutor, but for (Am)Erica (Hamid 2007: 1). Contrary to what Ann Marlowe argues, the novel is not 'anti-American agitprop', but the narrative of a frustrated 'lover' who expresses disappointment about his beloved's insular gaze, self-defensive borders and disregard for precarious lives elsewhere (Marlowe 2007). His critique is not issued as a terrorist threat, but as the counsel of a 'lover', wishing to save the nation he loves from itself.

This reading concurs with Joseph Darda's assertion that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* challenges the logic of the War on Terror in the 'interest not of anti-American hostility but of international solidarity' (Darda 2014: 108). Drawing on Butler's theory of precarious life, Darda argues that the novel exemplifies the characteristics of 'critical global fiction', which he defines as fiction that 'sees the struggle against militarism and brutality itself as a site for a global coming-together' (Darda 2014: 109). The novel not only 'sees' the struggle against precarity as a site for 'coming-together', but also envisages the repercussions of doing so through its depiction of Changez's political assembly of the precarious. Darda, following Butler, argues that 'tarrying in our own grief might broaden our understanding of the conditions that sustain or endanger life beyond the boundaries of American recognisability' (Darda 2014: 115). Whilst Hamid undoubtedly stresses the transformative potential of grief, Darda fails to offer close readings of both the novel's representation of loss and its theorisation of the ways grief can 'broaden our understanding' of precarious life. Developing Darda's argument, this article examines Hamid's portrayal of grief and its illumination of the inherent relationality and non-sovereignty of the self. It also interacts with Mahmutovic, who asserts that the 'care' that arises from the 'porousness of national identity in Hamid's novel constitutes the basis of global civic

engagement' (Mahmutovic 2016: 13). However, while Mahmutovic notes Changez's 'care' for Erica, he overlooks his formation of a care community.

Writing in 2011, Richard Gray asserts that American literary responses to 9/11, including Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), are parochial and suffer from a tendency to 'assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures' (Gray 2011: 30). He proposes that post-9/11 fiction should instead respond to the syncretic character of American culture, avoiding binaries (such as them and us, West and East, Christian and Muslim) in favour of a deterritorialised and 'mixed, plural' America (Gray 2011: 90). Gray praises *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* for its location of crisis in an 'interstitial place', a 'site where a discourse founded on either/or distinctions is interrogated and even subverted' (Gray 2011: 65). The novel offers an antidote to the failures criticised by Gray, as well as ideologies of nostalgia and purity. Changez is a site of hybridity, embodying both the Middle Eastern Other and (Am)Erica. Blurring constructed borders between 'us' and 'them', 'East' and 'West', and 'here' and 'there', the novel exemplifies what Michael Rothberg calls a 'centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality' (Rothberg 2009: 158). Rothberg, like Gray, stresses the need to 'imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others' (Rothberg 2009: 158). Changez articulates a double narrative as both an ardent 'lover of America' and a fierce critic. He registers the asymmetrical power of the US, whose 'constant interference in the affairs of other countries' shapes world events and reduces populations, such as Pakistan, to a state of precarity and death (Hamid 2007: 177). Changez feels a sense of home in both Pakistan and (Am)Erica, and envisions ways in which citizens can co-exist together, beyond the confines of nationalist ideologies and geographical borders.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009) and *Notes Towards a Performative Assembly* (2015), Butler uses a philosophically ambitious approach to analyse the interweaving racial, economic and gendered powers that render some lives more precarious than others. In *Precarious Life*, Butler critiques the Bush administration for its failure to utilise



national vulnerability productively in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, 'to use a temporary dislocation from First World privilege to acknowledge a mutual corporeal vulnerability as a basis for a new interdependent global political community' (Butler 2004: xiii). In *Frames of War* Butler nuances this view by differentiating between 'precariousness', a socio-ontological condition shared by all forms of life, and 'precarity', a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2009: 25–26). In *Notes Towards a Performative Assembly*, Butler examines forms of resistance to precarity. She asserts that 'those who find themselves in positions of radical exposure to violence, without basic political protections by forms of law, are not for that reason outside the political or deprived of all forms of agency' (Butler 2015: 79). This has been demonstrated, for example, by the Black Lives Matter movement, which opposes police brutality against black men and women in the United States. Butler argues that such a public assembly can enable the vulnerable to claim rights and recognition (Butler 2015: 80). The collective presence of these bodies is itself, she argues, a form of resistance to the powers that obliterate or diminish their existence.

In *States of Insecurity* (2015), Lorey develops Butler's theory of precariousness and precarity. She theorises a 'third dimension of the precarious': 'governmental precarization', which defines the modes of government since the formation of the industrial capitalist condition (Lorey 2015: 13). Governmental precarization refers not only to 'destabilization through employment, but also destabilization of the conduct of life and thus of bodies and subjectivation' (Lorey 2015: 13). Lorey, following Butler, is interested in using the ubiquity of precarity as an instrument of political change. As precarity 'always exists in relation to others', it is 'constantly linked to social and political possibilities of action' (Lorey 2015: 100). One of the possibilities is the establishment of a 'community of care': a community that foregrounds 'our vulnerability' and 'our situated, partial and unfinished constitution within the weave of relationships in which we live' (Lorey 2017). Hamid shares Butler's and Lorey's interest in the possibility of forming new political assemblies and subjectivities from the precariousness that permeates contemporary living. Although precariousness and mortality

are ontological conditions of human existence, precarity is differentially allocated. Hamid's novel is hopeful that a recognition of human precariousness can engender a collective struggle against precarity and the exploitation of precarious life.

### **Erica: an American Dream to an American Nightmare**

Initially, the character of Erica radiates regality as a female Queen of the animals. Exuding strength and an 'uncommon *magnetism*', Erica embodies the (trans)national myth of the American Dream, defined by James Truslow Adams as 'that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone' (Hamid 2007: 22; emphasis in original; Adams 1931: 404). Erica, the proud and privileged 'lioness', invites Changez to taste the temptations of the American Dream, which he eagerly accepts (Hamid 2007: 22). He states that 'this was how my life was *meant* to be, that it had in some way been inevitable that I should end up rubbing shoulders with the truly wealthy in such exalted settings' (Hamid 2007: 97; emphasis in original). He understands his new role as fulfilment of his own version of Manifest Destiny: his destiny to live the life of wealth and abundance his family once had.

Beneath the surface, however, Erica is torn apart by trauma:

The destruction of the World Trade Centre had, as she had said, churned up old thoughts that had settled in the manner of sediment to the bottom of a pond; now the waters of her mind were murky with what previously had been ignored. (Hamid 2007: 94)

Although she feels 'haunted' after 9/11, trauma is already the precondition of the fragile entity of (Am)Erica (Hamid 2007: 92). In the wake of 9/11, her consciousness becomes flooded by 'old thoughts' that had been buried deep within her subconscious mind, including the death of Chris. His death, Changez believes, 'made her aware of impermanence and mortality' for the first time (Hamid 2007: 129). In the weeks, months and years after Chris' death, she exhibits classic signs of melancholia. Erica's melancholic state reveals the powerful extent to which strong emotional and physical attachments to others result in the loss of subjective boundaries. As Changez notes, Erica and Chris's relationship involved 'such a degree of commingling

of identities that when Chris died, Erica felt she had lost herself' (Hamid 2007: 104). Erica herself states, 'I kind of miss home, too. Except my home was a guy with long, skinny fingers' (Hamid 2007: 28). Chris provided Erica with the comforts of a home: a sense of security and belonging. Following his death, she becomes fractured, emphasising the dislocation at the heart of America.

Building on Freud's theory of melancholia, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok postulate that the melancholic subject 'fantasise[s] swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost', adding that, 'failing to feed itself on words to be exchanged with others, the mouth absorbs in fantasy all or part of a person' (Abraham and Torok 1994: 126; 128). As Erica has 'stopped talking to people' and 'stopped eating', she has failed to 'feed' her mouth since Chris' death (Hamid 2007: 59). She does, however, divulge details about her disordered psychological state to Changez:

My mind starts to go in circles, thinking and thinking, and then I can't sleep.  
And once a couple of days go by, if you haven't slept, you start to get sick.  
You can't eat. You start to cry. It just feeds on itself. (Hamid 2007: 117)

These symptoms are indicative of the desire to 'swallow' and preserve the lost other in a psychic 'crypt' within the self (Abraham and Torok 1994: 130). By incorporating Chris, or rather his lifeless shadow, into the structure of her psyche, Erica subconsciously 'feeds' on the latter and herself. (Am)Erica is no longer an American Dream but an American Nightmare: less a secure fortress, than a haunted and unstable shell of her former self.

Several critics have read Chris as an allegory of a post-9/11 resurgence of US neo-colonial power. Anna Hartnell asserts that Chris embodies a Christopher Columbus-styled America as his name recalls 'not only Europe's Christian roots but also Christopher Columbus' encounter with the Americas' (Hartnell 2010: 343). Margaret Scanlan asserts that Erica's fixation with Chris symbolises America's post-9/11 determination to 'look back' to myths of American dominance (Scanlan 2010: 66). Hartnell and Scanlan are right to point out the pervasive presence of colonial and Christian rhetoric in 9/11 discourse. In *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, Bush

stated that the War on Terror was an opportunity for the United States to 'extend the benefits of freedom across the globe' (Bush 2002: 2). Whilst the resurgence of US colonial power is notable, Scanlan's argument that Erica is nostalgic for a former era of colonial dominance is less persuasive. Erica presents Chris as a figure of childish innocence rather than a laudable figure of power and dominance. Their relationship was one of collaboration and shared (his)stories:

[they] had grown up together—in facing apartments, children the same age with no siblings—and were best friends well before their first kiss [...] they used to spend hours at home reading [European comic books] and making their own: Chris drawing, Erica writing. (Hamid 2007: 31–32)

There is a sense of symmetry between Erica and Chris: from the 'facing apartments' they live in to their shared lack of siblings to their co-creation of comics. In contrast to the gendered power relations of colonialism, Erica is not forcibly bound to Chris. If Chris is to be read as an allegory of Christian-colonial power, then it is partly because Changez projects his own repressed anxieties onto him. When Erica tells Changez that she 'feel[s] haunted, y'know?', she does not realise the extent to which Changez knows how it feels to be 'haunted' by (colonial) ghosts from the past (Hamid 2007: 92). Changez's scathing description of the 'illiterate barbarians' who invade[d] and colonise[d] America' paradoxically betrays his insecurities about his own inferiority to his 'rival', Chris (Hamid 2007: 38; 93). Chris is Changez's Other: he is a white wealthy Christian American and (requited) lover of Erica, whilst Changez is a post-colonial (secular) Muslim from a formerly privileged family. Erica finds a home within Chris, but in Changez's eyes, Chris is the decay that sets her self-annihilation in motion.

Changez witnesses Erica transform from a 'vivid confident woman' into a 'pale, nervous creature who could almost have been a stranger' (Hamid 2007: 102). She becomes uncanny in the Freudian sense, 'the form of something *plinesstrange* and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context' (Royle 2003: 1). To experience something or someone as *unheimlich* or uncanny is to recognise something that had

previously been suppressed. Changez recognises in the fragile and frail Erica the suppressed reality of precarity that ravages his homeland and family. While Erica is haunted by the spectre of colonialism, Pakistan is 'layered like a sedimentary plain with the accreted history of invaders from the Aryans to the Mongols to the British' (Hamid 2007: 8). Following the 9/11 attacks and the onset of the War on Terror, the threat of another invasion looms large. Changez notes that his family 'resid[e] within commuting distance of a million or so hostile troops who could, at any moment, attempt a full-scale invasion' (Hamid 2007: 144–145). Erica, meanwhile, is 'going through a bad patch', reflecting that 'it hasn't been like this since the first time, after Chris died' (Hamid 2007: 117). Both Changez's native homeland and Erica, with whom he feels 'at home', experience a simultaneous resurgence of repressed ghosts (Hamid 2007: 81). In Changez's eyes, Erica's subjection to Chris is an uncanny reminder of his familial homeland's subjection to colonial powers:

[Erica] looked like someone who was about to complete the month of fasting and had been too consumed by prayer and reading of the holy book to give sufficient thought to the nightly meal. (Hamid 2007: 150)

Although Erica is intimately bound to Chris, she is not perceived as Christian. Whilst her failure to eat is symptomatic of melancholic incorporation, Changez interprets it instead as a preparatory ritual for the 'holy month' of Ramadan. Subconsciously merging his Islamic heritage with Erica's psychic cannibalism, Changez presents the 'diminished' Erica as the personification of the diminishing state of his homeland (Hamid 2007: 116). Changez's boss describes Pakistan as a nation that is 'wasting away', just as Erica gradually withers and wastes until she becomes 'emaciated' (Hamid 2007: 110; 140). She is not only 'otherworldly' in the sense that she is evocative of repressed ghosts, but also because she is an uncanny reminder of Changez's 'otherworld': his precarious home and family in Pakistan (Hamid 2007: 89). Although her disappearance into a 'dangerous nostalgia' coincides with post-9/11 America's longing to retrieve a mythical past, it also triggers the return of Changez's repressed traumatic memories of his family's nostalgia (Hamid 2007:

130). As he states: '*Nostalgia* was their crack cocaine [...] and my childhood was littered with the consequences of their addiction: unserviceable debts, squabbles over inheritances, the odd alcoholic or suicide (Hamid 2007: 81). Although Erica is by no means in a financially precarious position, she is addicted to Chris and to the purity of the imagined past they shared together. This is an ideal she shares with Pakistan, 'the land of the pure' where purity 'is to be valued and impurity to be avoided, resisted, expelled' (Hamid 2018). Erica is not just an allegory of America, but an uncanny cipher for two ostensibly diametrically opposed nations: America and Pakistan.

Mahmutovic argues that 'Changez's desire to help Erica is a desire to help America heal after 9/11' (Mahmutovic 2016: 9). His desire to help, however, extends beyond (Am)Erica to those who, like his family, are haunted by colonial phantoms. He attempts to help Erica, tentatively, through the growth of intimacy. He explains to his American interlocutor that 'the best way of doing this was to come close to touching her [...] and then to wait for her to become aware of my physical presence' (Hamid 2007: 99). Changez emphasises his corporeal presence in an attempt to detach Erica from a disembodied ghost, making her present to the living. Changez's antidote to nostalgic longing is dependent on mutual recognition and dialogue between both parties. This is where Changez's relationship with Erica falters. In her pursuit to restore a lost (imagined) purity, Erica is reluctant to open up to Changez, choosing instead to build a border around herself. He tells his American interlocutor that 'she did not answer when I rang and she did not respond to my messages' (Hamid 2007: 116). Whilst Changez encourages Erica to share her (life)story with him, she cannot engage with the world beyond the comic-book world she wrote with Chris. This raises associations with the insularity of existing American literary responses to 9/11 as, stuck in the past, (Am)Erica cannot imagine a desirable present or future with Changez. Her wish to reclaim a lost purity is ultimately a death wish as she becomes 'sickly white' and '*lacking* in life' (Hamid 2007: 127; 140; emphasis in original). Her wish is finally fulfilled as she sinks under the surface of the death-filled 'waters of her mind', plunging herself into the murky depths of the Hudson River.

## Grief and Change(z)

Erica's detachment from Changez is analogous with America's increasing disengagement with the Muslim Other after the 9/11 attacks. Changez recalls rumours about 'Pakistani cabdrivers being beaten within an inch of their lives' while his kinsmen in Pakistan face the threat of invasion (Hamid 2007: 94). Feeling rejected by both Erica and America, Changez articulates a searing critique of US foreign policy, outlining the differential distribution of grief in the post-9/11 period: 'We waited as our September ticked by—little noticed by the media in your country, which was focused at that time on the first anniversary of the attacks on New York and Washington' (Hamid 2007: 178). While America focused its attention exclusively on commemorating the victims of the 9/11 attacks, the suffering of non-Western lives was 'little noticed by the media in [America]'. He states contemptuously:

As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. (Hamid 2007: 190)

Critical of humanity's brief respite from US-led violence, Changez argues that America, having been attacked, should have been more open to contemplating the suffering of others. He instead argues that a wounded America should empathise with those who suffer from the 'repercussions' of its violent outbursts and myths of exceptionalism. Significantly, this is prompted by sustained engagement with grief and its revelatory insight into the relationality and precariousness of the embodied self.

Changez experiences the power of loss most acutely in the wake of Erica's disappearance. Reflecting on his experiential process of grief, Changez confesses that he, like Erica, 'could not bring [him] self to converse or to eat' (Hamid 2007: 129). He later states that 'waves of mourning washed over me' (Hamid 2007: 172). Changez's metaphorical submersion under water recalls his almost telepathic reading of 'the waters

of [Erica's] mind [that] were murky' with trauma (Hamid 2007: 94). His capacity to imagine the recesses of Erica's unconscious mind indicates the permeability of psychic borders. Changez's body is metaphorically plunged under 'waves of mourning', while Erica's body appears to have plunged literally into the depths of the Hudson River. The physicality of the experiential connections between Erica and Changez implies that the body is the locus of 'shared pain'. His consciousness is thus inextricably tied to both his own sense of embodiment (the ontological state of being and having a body), and Erica's. Lacking a 'stable core', his subjectivity becomes fluid and fluctuates in accordance with the internal rhythms of his body (Hamid 2007: 168). Changez explains that his embodied response to Erica's death 'pull[s] and tug[s] at [his] moods', controlled 'by an internal cycle that was almost tidal [...] I responded to the gravity of an invisible moon at my core' (Hamid 2007: 172). He experiences grief as a forceful movement, controlled not by the autonomous will of sovereign power, but by an 'internal cycle' over which he has no control. The forceful flushes and pulses of grief that move Changez invoke the myth that the phases of the moon cycle correspond to those of the female menstrual cycle, a cycle of death and (re)birth. John Robbins explains that 'not only do the phases of women's menstrual cycles frequently correspond to the phases of the moon and the tides, they also correspond to different states of mind, different emotional states, and different ways of being' (Robbins 1998: 109). Changez's menstrual cycle analogy suggests that the embodied experience of grief provides fertile ground for personal (and political) growth.

Changez's empathetic identification with Erica facilitates a 'process of osmosis', an indirect approach to penetrating 'the membrane with which [Erica] guarded her psyche' during her lifetime (Hamid 2007: 160). The fulfilment of psychic 'penetration' and subsequent 'osmosis' is akin to a figurative impregnation. Whilst self and (m) other are intricately tied together in the womb, Changez is 'emotionally entangled' with Erica (Hamid 2007: 195). Although she is dead and her body is never found, she is entombed within Changez. Whilst the 'commingling' of Chris and Erica is destructive, the commingling of Changez and Erica is (re)productive (Hamid 2007: 104). In his essay 'Living in the Age of Permawar', Hamid stresses the fact that 'the physical commingling of two human parents is required to produce a child' (Hamid 2018).



The commingling of identities is an antidote to the lifelessness of purity as it has the potential to conceive and develop new forms of being. Mahmutovic argues that the 'commingling of identities', is a 'willingness to change together' (Mahmutovic 2016: 12). It is not a conscious decision, however, but a consequence of the self's uncontrollable emotional entanglements with others. Changez can neither help himself from falling in love with Erica nor losing part of himself after her death. Developing Lauren Berlant's assertion that 'love always means non-sovereignty', Changez's persistent emotional attachment to Erica indicates that there is also no sovereign in grief (Berlant 2012: 9).

Despite his return to Pakistan, Changez is emotionally dislocated in the wake of Erica's death:

I remained emotionally entwined with Erica, and I brought something of her with me to Lahore—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to relocate in the city of my birth. (Hamid 2007: 195)

For Changez, and indeed Erica, feeling at home transcends the geographical confines of the nation in which one is born: home is found with/in others. Developing Butler's assertion that 'I am not fully known to myself, because part of what "I" am is the enigmatic traces of others', Changez argues that harbouring otherness within the self is indicative of its non-sovereignty, its inability to account for desires, motivations, and embodied emotion (Butler 2004: 46). In her discussion of non-sovereignty, Berlant asserts that traditional conceptions of the individual as sovereign self 'afford a militaristic and melodramatic view of individual agency by casting the human as most fully itself when assuming the spectacular posture of performative action' (Berlant 2011: 96). Sovereignty can therefore be understood as the performance of autonomous thought and action. Berlant asserts that 'chang[ing] something from within' and 'training in one's own incoherence' are characteristics of 'non-sovereignty' (Berlant 2012: 15–16). Changez's procreative commingling with Erica gives birth to a non-sovereign mode of being, based on both the self and the other's incoherence. Changez states:

It is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try, as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us. (Hamid 2007: 197)

The non-sovereign self is not a clearly circumscribed embodied or psychological entity, but one that exceeds the confines of autonomous subjectivity. For Butler, '[t]he term "relationality" structures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe, a rupture that is constitutive of identity itself' (Butler 2004: 19). The situated relationality of the self implies that connectivity and separation are two inseparable aspects of selfhood, which are foregrounded in interpersonal relationships (and their loss). The self can never exist as a separate or 'pure' entity as it is forever intermeshed in material, socio-political, and emotional relationships with others. Significantly, Changez's name is a plural; multiple; and an imperative in French. As his name suggests, he is changeable and, unlike Erica, he is willing to accept that impermanence and injury are unavoidable. He realises that 'we cannot insulate ourselves in 'armour of denial' (Hamid 2007: 95). This realisation concurs with Butler's belief that being 'injured' causes one to consider the irrefutable array of others on whom one's well-being may depend: '[t]his fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away. No security measure will foreclose this dependency; no violent act of sovereignty will rid the world of this fact' (Butler 2007: xii). Although he grieves the death of Erica and his 'personal American Dream', he realises that change is not only inevitable, but necessary to imagine alternate existences and shared futures (Hamid 2007: 106).

Drawing on the modalities of non-sovereignty, mutual dependency and vulnerability, Changez begins to enact the ethico-political change he wishes to see. His calls for compassion and allusions to reproduction culminate in his creation of a community of care. While working as a University lecturer, he provides a form of parental nourishment for his students. He informs his American interlocutor that he is a 'mentor' to his 'comrades', whom he identifies as 'like-minded' individuals or '*well-wishers*' (Hamid 2007: 205; emphasis in original). Although the term 'comrade'

usually denotes Marxist sympathisers, Changez's definition is much more expansive and inclusive. He offers a listening ear and practical advice 'not only on their papers and their rallies, but also on matters of the heart and a vast range of other topics—from drug rehabilitation and family planning to prisoners' rights and shelters for battered spouses' (Hamid 2007: 204).

Changez's provision of counsel and care is not confined to the walls of his office. It extends into the public sphere, operating as a form of political activism. He organises 'demonstrations for greater independence in domestic and international affairs, demonstrations that the foreign press would later, when our gatherings grew to newsworthy size, come to label anti-American' (Hamid 2007: 203). Having confronted the oppressive phantoms of colonialism and the reality of his precarious homeland, he protests against the systematic oppression and exploitation of populations. If the protests are perceived as anti-American it is because 'no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America', as Changez informs television networks (Hamid 2007: 207). They stand in opposition to asymmetrical power relations and the logic of precarisation and oppression. The protests are, like the novel itself, 'anti-precarity', as Darda notes (Darda 2014: 115). The novel reflects that the protestors are critical of America, a nation that has inflicted violence and precarity on Pakistan in the fight against terrorism. Recalling a protest against the American Ambassador's visit, Changez states: 'we were charged at by large numbers of uniformed and plain-clothed police. Scuffles broke out, I intervened in one, and as a result I spent the night in prison, nursing a bloody lip and bruised knuckles' (Hamid 2007: 204). Changez and his comrades' collective presence in the public sphere constitutes an embodied resistance to the smooth functioning of disciplinary systems that threaten their existence. Their demonstrations are not theatrical performances of sovereignty, but demonstrations of vulnerability and precarity. They exercise a form of non-sovereign agency that is both potent and vulnerable, powerful and destitute of its sovereign status as they depend on the presence of others to appear and be recognised as political beings in the public sphere. Although Changez has been arrested and exposed to police force, he and his 'comrades' are persistent. As he informs his American interlocutor: 'my office

hours were soon overrun by meetings with politically minded youths', for advice on rights, shelter, and welfare in the struggle against precarisation (Hamid 2007: 204). Demonstrations that oppose precarity are, according to Butler, 'documenting the failures of justice, and they are part of our political freedom and even our political hope' (quoted in Berbec 2017). The persistence of Changez's 'politically minded youths' offers hope for a changed future in which the vulnerable can live and flourish.

Changez's mentorship facilitates the formation of surprising alliances among what Butler calls 'groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion and antagonism' (Butler 2015: 27). During the American ambassador's visit, 'thousands' from 'all possible affiliations—communists, capitalists, feminists, religious literalists' protest (Hamid 2007: 204). Their collective struggle is not only anti-precarity, but also pro-pluralism. It engenders solidarity, producing alliances that transcend the borders of nationalist, economic, gender, and religious ideologies. Resisting the purity of (Am)Erica and Pakistan, Changez proudly states: 'I had, in my own manner, issued a firefly's glow bright enough to transcend the boundaries of continents and civilizations' (Hamid 2007: 207). In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid demonstrates that 'civilizations or 'notions of Muslim-ness, Western-ness, European-ness, American-ness, that attempt to describe where, and with whom, we belong' are 'illusions: arbitrarily drawn constructs with porous, brittle, and overlapping borders' (Hamid 2014: 6). Incorporating and identifying with (Am)Erica, Changez transgresses the boundaries between Muslim-ness, American-ness, Western-ness and Eastern-ness. His plurality and fluidity exemplifies Butler's assertion that "'I" am already an assembly' (Butler 2015: 68). In turn, Changez and his comrades' assembly embodies a plural and relational community of care that departs from what Butler calls the 'insufficiency of identitarian ontologies' (Butler 2015: 68). In this case, grief and precarity unite a broad spectrum of people, establishing alliances that move beyond the exclusivity of identity politics.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* responds with critical optimism to the question posed at the outset of this article, 'is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief?' (Butler 2004:xii). Hamid uses the novel to suggest that

tarrying with grief has the potential to inspire new ethico-political movements and modes of being. However, its potential can only come to fruition if the bereaved are willing to accept the relationality, hybridity, precariousness and interdependency of the self. Grieving the death of intimates exposes Erica and Changez to the permeability of corporeal and subjective borders, but each responds in different ways. Erica's response is characterised by a melancholic hunger for a lost mythical era of purity and innocence, a hunger that can only be satisfied through death. For Changez, grief is an instrument for progressive change as it reveals the extent to which human beings are constituted by and through their attachments to others. Entangled in material, socio-political and emotional relationships with others, and their loss, the self is neither static nor bounded, but fluctuant, fragile and porous. Erica is unwilling to accept this reality, locking herself away in a figurative ivory tower, but Changez realises that insulating oneself in 'armour of denial' is destructive (Hamid 2007: 95). In opposition to (Am)Erica's resistance to interdependency and vulnerability, the novel insists on vulnerability and interdependency as embodied conditions of human existence. Realising that humans 'are not autonomous beings' as they depend on the care of others for survival, Changez develops an evolving resistance to precarity and exploitation (Hamid 2007: 197). Instead of clinging to an imagined past, he enacts the change he wishes to see, offering care and counsel to individuals whose precarious lives are deemed disposable and ungrievable. His anti-precarity assemblies, which gather together individuals with opposing political and social views, indicate that a collective cognizance of human precariousness can lead to the formation of alliances across identitarian boundaries. In turn, the novel espouses an ethico-politics of grief that is inclusive and pluralist, one that is not derived from reciprocity, familiarity or mutual interest. To provide care and counsel only to those who share the same national identity, ethnicity, or political affiliation is to embrace a politics based on parochialism and exclusion. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a prescient novel for present times, one that offers a compelling and ultimately optimistic case for the ethico-political gains of tarrying with grief.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

## References

- Abraham, N., and Torok, M., 1994. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Adams, J.T., 1931. *The Epic of America*. New York: Little Brown.
- Berbec, S., 2017. "We Are Worldless Without One Another": an Interview with Judith Butler." *The Other Journal*.
- Berlant, L., 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394716>
- Berlant, L., 2012. "On the Risk of a New Relationality." *Reviews in Cultural Theory* 2: 7–27.
- Bush, G.W., 2001. Speech delivered on 20 September. "Transcript of President Bush's Address." <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006416-200105000-00023>
- Bush, G.W., 2002. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*. Washington, DC: the United States Government Printing Office.
- Butler, J., 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London, New York: Verso.
- Butler, J., 2009. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London, New York: Verso.
- Butler, J., 2015. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. London: Harvard University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674495548>
- Cuthbert, O., 2018. "Author Mohsin Hamid: 'We're all migrants. We just need to recognise it.'" <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/author-mohsin-hamid-we-re-all-migrants-we-just-need-to-recognise-it-1.787594>.
- Darda, J., 2014. "Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*." *Mosaic* 47: 107–122. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2014.0034>

- Gardner, R.L., 2016. "Suicide as an Invocation of Shame in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*." In: *American Shame: Stigma and the Body Politic*, Ed. Myra Mendible. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Gray, R., 2011. *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444395860>
- Hamid, M., 2007. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc.
- Hamid, M., 2014. *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York and London*. London: Penguin.
- Hamid, M., 2015. "Living in the age of permawar." *The Guardian*.
- Hamid, M., 2017a. *Exit West*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Hamid, M., 2017b. "Mohsin Hamid on the dangers of nostalgia: we need to imagine a brighter future." *The Guardian*.
- Hamid, M., 2018. "In the land of the pure, no one is pure enough." *The Guardian*.
- Hartnell, A., 2010. "Moving Through America: Race, Place and Resistance in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46: 336–348. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2010.482407>
- Johnson, R., 2013. "Mohsin Hamid comes home to roost in Pakistan." *Los Angeles Times*.
- Lorey, I., 2015. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. London: Verso.
- Lorey, I., 2017. "Care Crisis and Care Strike." <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3170-care-crisis-and-care-strike-isabell-lorey>.
- Mahmutovic, A., 2016. "Global Citizenship in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*." *Transnational Literature* 8: 1–15.
- Marlowe, A., 2007. "Buying Anti-American." *National Review*.
- Robbins, J., 1998. *Reclaiming Our Health: Exploding the Medical Myth and Embracing the Source of True Healing*. California: H J Kramer.
- Rothberg, M., 2009. "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray." *American Literary History* 21: 152–158. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajn040>

Royle, N., 2003. *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Scanlan, M., 2010. "Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel After September 11." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46: 266–278. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2010.482372>

Seval, A., 2017. "(Un)tolerated Neighbour: Encounters with the Tolerated Other in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Submission*." *Ariel* 48: 101–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2017.0016>

Spanos, W., 2008. *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam*. Albany: State University of New York.

**How to cite this article:** Donnelly, K., 2019. "'Tarrying With Grief' in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 11, pp. 1–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.679>

**Published:** 11 June 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access icon, which is a stylized 'A' inside a circle.