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## (Un)Palatable encounters: Melancholic appetites in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on scholarship on racial melancholia and food studies, this article traces the melancholic appetites manifested in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and examines how alimentary desires stand in for the consumptive desires of the US nation state in relation to the model minority as well as the recuperative mourning undertaken by the protagonist Changez upon his return to Pakistan. A double encounter with Lahori cuisine and melancholic testimony in the novel pushes the American interlocutor towards acknowledging a political responsibility for the consequences of US actions during the War on Terror. Hamid's work highlights how melancholic subjects challenge nationalist narratives of racial progress by unearthing those racialized experiences which have been submerged, silenced, or underemphasized. This article thus highlights the possibility raised by the novel for grieving and healing the psychological wounds of racism so that Changez, the minoritized subject, does not remain locked into generational cycles of dejection.

### KEYWORDS

Melancholia; mourning; food; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; Mohsin Hamid; US imperialism

### Introduction: Culinary disruption and melancholic testimony

“The time has now come for us to dirty our hands” (Hamid 2007, 123), says Changez, the Pakistani protagonist of Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to his American interlocutor as they share a meal in Lahore. As the evening unfolds, Changez delivers a monologue that can be framed variously as a confession, a testimony, or an interrogation about his move from an initial assimilative desire for whiteness to his (r) ejection of/from the bounds of American belonging after 9/11. In confronting his earlier desire for assimilating whiteness, Changez acknowledges putting on a performance of the model minority type as a newly arrived South Asian immigrant in America. Promising national belonging upon assimilation to the bourgeois racial order of the nation, the model minority paradigm emplaces Asian Americans in a constricting positionality (Lowe 1996). In the novel, Changez observes and challenges the melancholic appetites of the US empire – that is, its capacity to incorporate racial minorities into its imperial projects – and undergoes a political awakening.

This article traces three shifts in the melancholic appetites manifested in the novel which reveal Changez's gradual awareness of his participation in US imperialist projects. Firstly, there is a melancholic interpellation of Changez as sustenance in the globalized labour market and in the domestic registers of psychosexual desire. Secondly, the novel shows how ethnic foodways root the model minority culturally and offer a path to maintaining connections with ethnic communities. Thirdly, feasting, and the testimony which unfolds around eating, enable Changez to enact a shift from his melancholic desire for whiteness to a recuperative mourning underpinned by economic and cultural nationalism in the Third World. By asking the American man to "dirty [his] hands" during the course of the meal, Changez metaphorizes as contamination the act of eating by hand in the authentic Lahori way and implicates the American in the post-9/11 racial projects of the empire (Hamid 2007, 123).

This article argues that culinary disruption and testimony (as given by Changez in Hamid's novel) enable the melancholic subject to transmute the loss of denied assimilation into political resistance. Here, testimony refers to Changez's candid conversation with the American which spans the length of the novel and unfolds during the evening meal the two share in Lahore. For the melancholic subject, this testimony externalizes the grief which has been withheld in the body and as such it is a transformative act enabling healing and, in Changez's case, expression of political responsibility. Defined by Sigmund (1957) 1968 as a form of failed mourning, melancholia develops when libidinal investment in a lost object/ideal is not detached, and the subject settles into a prolonged state of dejection, refusing to confront that something that has been lost. This work on melancholia has been extended by Asian American scholars to frame the sociopolitical conditions which germinate racial melancholia. David Eng and Shinhee Han (2003) argue that the racial subject is drawn into a melancholic state due to the loss of belonging, a failure to assimilate under the normative terms (white, bourgeois, heteronormative) set by the nation, as these terms remain always at an "unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal" (345).

Changez becomes a melancholic subject when he comes to a traumatic reckoning of his alienation in the US amid post-9/11 prejudice against Muslims. Although he performs the model minority role and pursues assimilation as a pathway to cultural belonging and legal protection initially, Changez soon recognizes how his interpellation in the US labour force consolidates neocolonial power in postcolonial countries. No longer invested in the privileges of whiteness and its associated socio-economic status, the melancholic subject returns to his home in Pakistan, and rekindles his kinship with those citizens of the Global South who are disproportionately affected by US imperialism. On the part of the US nation state, the racial Other is both an object of desire and a threat, incorporated by the dominant order but never fully assimilated (Cheng 2001, xi). This dyad of desire and repulsion characterizes Changez's relationship with (Am)Erica (the US nation state emblemized by Erica, Changez's wealthy Princeton classmate and lover), particularly after 9/11, as will be shown later.

Metaphors of eating, food, and consumption (which are central to the analysis here) are invoked in the conceptual framework of melancholia. Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, and Nicholas T. Rand write that the melancholic subject fantasizes "swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost" (1994, 126), thus suggesting that a melancholic appetite is oriented around ingestion and possession of the lost object.

In her work on food criticism in Asian American literature, Sau-ling Wong (1993) further observes that “ingestion is a physical act that mediates between self and not-self, native essence and foreign matter, the inside and the outside” (26). The mouth invokes bodily vulnerability as it enables access to physiological and psychic interiority. In Lahore, Changez certainly makes himself vulnerable by divulging personal details of his life in the US. At the same time, however, he makes his US interlocutor uncomfortable through his vulnerability and candid conversation. Alimentary motifs in Asian American literature speak to the complex psychic negotiations performed by racialized minorities in response to the white supremacist nation (Ku, Manalasan, and Mannur 2014, 6; Xu 2011, 8). The role of food politics (and metaphorical evocations of consumption and eating) in subject formation and defining the co-constituted relationship between self and Other thus bridges psychoanalytic criticism and Asian American studies.

In summary, this article highlights how Hamid’s novel speaks to the possibility of grieving and healing from the psychological wounds of racism so that the racialized subject does not remain locked in generational cycles of dejection. Eng and Han believe that “the hope for psychic health is stitched into the fabric of melancholia” (2003, 354), suggesting that the melancholic subject desires to overcome those harmful racial hierarchies which are the cause of racial melancholia. Food and testimony shared with an interlocutor hold the means of enacting this transformation. The concept of melancholia thus offers the potential to re-examine postcolonial belonging within the context of globalized labour markets and the impact of neo-liberal policies in the Global South.

### Model minorities and melancholic incorporation

Narrated in the form of a monologue, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* follows Changez as he unburdens his tale of political awakening to an unnamed American. His story traces his assimilative desire for whiteness, first as a Princeton student and later as an analyst at a prestigious valuations firm called Underwood Samson (standing in for nation state and its neo-liberal politics). The Underwood Samson recruiter who interviews him notes that Changez is “hungry” to advance his socio-economic status and, in turn, Changez believes that “Underwood Samson had the potential to transform my life [ ... ] making my concerns about money and status things of the distant past” (Hamid 2007, 11). Driven by cultural nostalgia to restore his family’s material and social prestige in Lahore, Changez’s attempts to assimilate are symbolized by his failed relationship with Erica, a white woman who temporarily allows him to benefit from the privileges of whiteness. In the hostile post-9/11 racial landscape, Changez increasingly rejects his desires for whiteness, until he eventually returns to Lahore with an aim to educate young Pakistanis. The American, who is his interlocutor, is never allowed to speak directly to the reader, and his questions, interjections, and responses are reported only through Changez’s mediated perspective and responses.

As a newly arrived immigrant in the US, Changez commodifies his ethnic differences to make himself palatable for consumption by the social elite (associated with his peers at Princeton and later his employer, Underwood Samson). This uneasy incorporation of the racial Other into the imperial-racial order of the US is expressed in the novel in figurative language of food and sexual desire when

Changez talks about the recruitment of Princeton graduates. Every fall, Changez explains, “Princeton raised her skirt for the corporate recruiters ... [and] showed them some skin” (Hamid 2007, 4). Changez, with his foreignness, stands out from “among all that skin” as a “perfect breast [ ... ] tan, succulent, seemingly defiant of gravity” (5). In this fetishistic desire for the Other, Changez is rendered acceptable when he is inscribed in a feminized and sexualized discourse as the object of national racial fantasies. The metaphor of the breast also evokes maternal nurturing and sustenance, enabling the nation state to feed upon the racial Other to sustain its own transnational, bioimperial projects and its domestic hegemonic order. This conditionality (which becomes clearer after 9/11) reflects “inclusive exclusion” (Agamben 1998, 16), the process through which the sovereign state produces subordinated subjects who are brought under the biopolitical control of juridico-political institutions but denied the possibility of sovereignty or its full protections. By feeding upon the racial, postcolonial Other, rather than feeding it, the empire thwarts the threat of ascendant third world nations by recruiting their most talented into its own service.

Through his interpellation as racial labour at Underwood Samson, in other words, accepting and internalizing the company’s dominant ideologies, Changez turns into a subjugated model minority subject, in competition with his Black colleague (the only other person of colour at Underwood Samson) and made complicit in the predatory projects of US transnational capitalism – in the Philippines and in Chile. Hamid’s critical portrayal of the model minority type invokes Gary Okihiro’s (2014) important reminder that this racialized type “fortifies white dominance, or the status quo” (141). At Princeton, Changez accepts that he was allowed to enter the US with the expectation that as an international student he would join the many who “contribute our talents to [US] society” and he was “happy to do so” (Hamid 2007, 4). Hamid indicates that Changez understands the feminized, submissive, and commodified nature of the model minority mould as an appeasement of white fears of the Asian immigrant. Changez takes full advantage of those aspects of his mannerisms that Underwood Samson finds desirable: “natural politeness and a sense of formality”, as well as the “ability to function both respectfully and with self-respect in a hierarchal environment” (44). At the same time, he suppresses those aspects of his foreignness as a Pakistani that might cause discomfort to his colleagues, averting any doubts about whether his “loyalties could be divided” (55).

Changez recognizes the ethnic assimilation of the Asian immigrant as a precondition and a pathway to the so-called colour-blind meritocracy of Underwood Samson (Hartnell 2010, 345). As Lisa Lowe (1991) warns, however, the model minority myth homogenizes Asians and maintains the hegemonic binary distinction between “dominant” and “minority” (28). The racialized stereotype inscribes a restrictive and harmful positionality for Asian immigrants, one which is bound up in anti-Blackness (Lee 2010) and holds out a false promise of national acceptance at the cost of normative assimilation. Moreover, this racial hierarchy elides the history of US imperialism and current forces of neo-liberal globalization that drive migrant flows and what Lowe calls “immigrant acts” (1996, 8). Although Changez performs well in the rankings at Underwood Samson, his performance as exemplifying the model minority type denigrates him and restricts how he expresses his subjecthood. He can share with his colleagues neither how his family in Pakistan

might be affected by the US War on Terror nor his visit to Pakistan for fear of being seen as a nonconformist.

By accepting his interpellation as a model minority subject in line with these ideologies, Changez willingly agrees to a racial performance, although he underestimates its psychic toll. Writing in psychoanalytic terms, Eng and Han (2003) note that the model minority type is a melancholic social formation that enjoins Asian Americans to internalize the dominant norms of the nation state in order to avoid the label of the perpetual foreigner. This formation insists on the erasure of that part of the subject's racial subjectivity that does not conform with the dominant order, thus resulting in self-denigration. In the novel, ashamed of his family's declining circumstances in Lahore amid the wealthy Princeton circles he finds himself in, Changez hides his roots and his family's loss of material status. He takes up three on-campus jobs but in "infrequently visited locations" so that his classmates do not learn of his family's "shame" (Hamid 2007, 11). Later, through a process of psychic substitution, New York becomes a stand-in for Lahore, and the race and class privileges of whiteness help him recuperate the loss of his family's status (Hamid 2007, 32, 33).

This psychic substitution is never complete, however, as the melancholic Changez holds on to the fantasy of a Lahore that preserves its rich cultural heritage and will (in his futurist vision) compete with New York as a global city. This belief and his ties to his hidden cultural roots are expressed again in the metaphor of food. If his ethnic difference represents the commodified part of his racial performance made palatable, food represents a deeper connection to community and home. Changez visits ethnic food stalls in New York and later reminisces about his US experiences that "did not, could not, make me forget such things as how much I enjoy the tea in this, the city of my birth, steeped long enough to acquire a rich, dark color, and made creamy with fresh, full-fat milk" (Hamid 2007, 15). Lahore is evoked and remembered in the sensory and cultural registers of tea. Food communicates indelible memories of home and unlike the metaphor of the "perfect breast", which feeds the US empire, drinking the tea offers nourishment, warmth, and a connection to home. Ethnic foodways act as sensory registers of memory and belonging and are associated with joy rather than shame like other ethnic markers that Changez identifies with.

Despite these culinary pathways to home, Changez believes that he can possess whiteness strategically, to recover the lost object of his melancholia (i.e., the lost grandeur of Lahore and his family), while he is possessed in turn by America to consolidate its global position of power. This mutual hunger and co-constitution of melancholia is best exemplified by the failed relationship between Changez and Erica, who is locked into an unending mourning for her dead white boyfriend. In the transposition of Erica as (Am) Erica, Hamid constructs a thinly veiled allegorical figure who reflects Changez's broader and troubled relationship with the nation state. Appropriately, the two meet on a Princeton food club trip to Athens, the putative cradle of western civilization. When Erica later takes him to an exclusive art gallery in New York City, he is thrilled at being "ushered into an insider's world – the chic heart of this city – to which [he] would otherwise have had no access" (56). His tentative access to these white upper-class spaces is preconditioned on Erica validating and "[vouching] for [his] worthiness" (Hamid 2007, 85).

On Erica's part, Changez becomes a substitute for her dead lover, Chris. Erica's melancholic state is expressed in the metaphor of an oyster, with the oyster representing the book manuscript she has completed but cannot send out to her publisher. She tells Changez:

It's like I'm an oyster. I've had his sharp speck inside me for a long time, and I've been trying to make it more comfortable, so slowly I've turned it into a pearl. But now it's finally being taken out, and [ . . . ] I'm realizing there's a gap being left behind [ . . . ] in my belly where it used to sit. And so I kind of want to hold on to it for a little longer. (Hamid 2007, 51)

Erica, as the consummate melancholic subject, describes here the emptiness of the lost beloved, corporealized in the empty belly. Introjection occurs when a subject recognizes and confronts the absence or loss of an object and undergoes the painful process of mourning. If introjection requires the mourner to be in a speaking community with others (Abraham, Torok, and Rand 1994), Erica's refusal to send the book out indicates the possession of an object (the book) which substitutes for the loss of the lover despite its potential for transformation – from an irritant (the speck) to a potentially productive and ego-expanding activity (the pearl). Instead, she draws Changez into her melancholic endeavour, filling the emptiness of her belly temporarily with his presence, “sipping” on his descriptions of Pakistan and “finding them to her taste” (27). This is a consumptive process that bell hooks (1992) terms “eating the Other” as it allows the dominant subject to “[assert] power and privilege” (378). His ethnic difference makes Changez an appropriate yet inadequate substitute for Erica's dead lover, Chris. Erica cannot accept him as the deceased Chris, yet, for that very reason, his presence is a reminder of the loss she has suffered. As Changez disrupts the melancholic fantasy of possession (of the lost object), Erica is drawn to incorporate him into her melancholic fantasies and simultaneously reject him because she cannot assimilate his difference.

Erica's body becomes the psychosexual terrain on which the nation state's incomplete incorporation of racial Others is mapped. The high point of this mutual process of self-denigration comes in two attempts at sex during which Changez finally pretends to be Chris so they can find pleasure in each other's bodies. Erica's ambivalent desire for Changez as a substitution for Chris reflects a larger national melancholic condition which embodies contradictory impulses to consume and expel the racial Other from itself (Chang 2012). Anne Anlin Cheng (2001) explains that “white American identity and its authority is secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate” (xi). While Changez's labour is temporarily valuable to (Am)Erica, the commodified body of the racialized Muslim occupies a vulnerable position. It can be discarded at will as the racialized construction of and slippage between “migrant” and “terrorist” becomes more defined (Rana 2011, 5). After 9/11, Erica's inability to build a future with Changez emblemizes a nation gripped by a powerful cultural nostalgia yearning for the return of a white lover/hero figure instead of the presence of the racial Other who brings evidence of a changing world order.

On Changez's part, this experience of sex is framed as an enjoyment that comes through humiliation. Erica's body, which had been previously represented as attractive to him, is now described as gaunt and her flesh is cool and “near-inanimate” (Hamid 2007, 105). In thus locating the inhuman condition in her body, rather than his own, Changez undermines the dominant norms which situate Erica's whiteness as desirable and



naturalized. The idealized vision of Am(Erica) he seeks cannot hold up to the expectations he has cultivated, and the ensuing act of sex, a final attempt to reconcile with whiteness after 9/11, becomes coded as a traumatic event. After 9/11, Changez rejects the affordances of whiteness following his treatment in New York, as much as he is rejected by whiteness in the reactivated racial formation of the Muslim subject as a terrorist. He is dismayed to discover that New York has been marked as an American space by the US flags planted all over the city. In a racist incident, an angry US man attempts to intimidate Changez in public by invading his personal space, uttering “a series of unintelligible noises” meant to mimic and mock Arabic, and concludes by branding him with the label of a “Fucking Arab” (Hamid 2007, 116). Although Changez does not claim a religious identity in the novel, he is interpellated as Muslim after 9/11. And though his work had received high praise at Underwood Samson, the company owes him no loyalty. Once Changez begins questioning the impact of its projects in the developing Third World and asserting his ethnic identity at work (no longer rendered palatable), he is swiftly and easily replaced.

In thus centring a racialized Muslim subject who resists US imperialism, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* stages an important intervention in the genre of 9/11 literature, which has been critiqued for glossing over issues of racial injustice and a “damaging denial of global repercussions” of the American War on Terror (Anker 2011, 469). Peter Morey (2011) observes that when Muslims are represented in 9/11 fiction, they often serve “to underscore the injustices of Islamic rule and justify neoconservative interventionism” (136). Hamid’s work departs from that mould by highlighting not only the explicit racial violence that Changez faces after 9/11, but also the dehumanizing and racialized nature of US workplace meritocracy and the myriad connections between neo-liberal globalization and US finance. Margaret Scanlan (2010) further writes that Hamid’s novel was one of the 9/11 novels that “revise[d] the West’s vision of itself as a haven for the oppressed” (267).

### Melancholic testimony and culinary disruption

Changez finally comes to the realization that “finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power” (Hamid 2007, 156) in order to maintain its own global hegemony, and that such power is exercised at the expense of the Global South. “It was right for me”, he then explains, “to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination” (156). As Changez processes his disillusionment and reflects on the circumstances leading up to his decision to leave the US, he admits to acting like “an incoherent and emotional madman, flying into rages and sinking into depressions”, and eventually labels himself a melancholic subject (167, 175). Melancholia, according to F. László Földényi, is “a fall from grace, a loss of reason, removal from the order of the cosmos” ([1952] 2016, 69). Yet having transgressed the order, the melancholic rejects any solution that imposes the “shackles of limits” (69), that resituates him within a finite world and order. Pakistan was and becomes again his cultural and political home, the space from which his prophetic vision for a stronger postcolonial nation can be fulfilled.

Changez’s meeting with the unnamed American transmutes melancholia to mourning through feasting and oral testimony. Delphine Munos’s (2012) germane article on racial melancholia in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* argues that the novel “leaves the lost ideal



of whiteness unchallenged” (397). However, the culinary disruption waged by Changez indicates a shift from melancholia to mourning, particularly given the interlinked nature of eating and speaking in the novel. Mourning occurs, after all, when there is a “passage from food to language in the mouth” (Abraham, Torok, and Rand 1994, 128). The American man consumes not only Lahori cuisine, but also Changez’s testimony of disillusionment and alienation in post-9/11 America. He acts out a symbolic transaction with Changez on behalf of the US empire which has been deprived of its psychic sustenance (the racialized body, labour, and subjectivity of the Muslim subject). His presence in Lahore seeks to reinscribe Changez into the racial order of the empire and to frame him in knowable terms – as a terrorist or an ally, with America or against America. However, Changez manages to elude these classifications astutely in the course of his testimony.

The shared meal, Changez warns the American, will dirty both their hands if it is eaten in the authentic Lahori manner and Changez ensures this will be the case by denying his interrogator the privilege and familiarity of a fork and knife (Hamid 2007, 123). The psychic transaction that takes place in the context of food here is reminiscent of what Arjun Appadurai (1981) terms as “gastro-politics”, a kind of “competitive encounter” with food events “in which what is risked are profound conceptions of self and other” (509). By participating in the feast with his bare hands, the American can no longer remain at a safe emotional distance from his prey (i.e., Changez) with his potential for contamination. Rather, it is the Lahori food and Changez’s testimony that constitute a form of contamination, an encroachment of alterity that disturbs the American because it holds a prophetic vision of a future with alternate structures of global power. This contamination begins with the consumption of the same tea that Changez once suggested was emblematic of Lahore and which marks the beginning of their shared meal. As the two are drinking tea and eating jalebis (fried sweets dipped in syrup) as the first part of their meal together in the district of Old Anarkali, Changez likens the jittery American to “an animal that has ventured too far from its lair and is now, in unfamiliar surroundings, uncertain whether it is predator or prey” (31).

Changez also casually mentions to the American that he was once called a “shark” (Hamid 2007, 70) for his ruthless and ambitious nature, thus setting up the possibility that he has predatory motives in confronting the American. Once inscribed in the feminized psychosexual metaphor of the “perfect breast” that nurtured American capitalism, Changez now suggests that he has the capacity to reduce the American to his prey. This implied cannibalistic consumption of the American as prey is markedly different from Changez’s earlier desire to possess Erica when he upholds whiteness and aspires to it. However, now surrounded by the richness of Lahore (and its lavish feasts), he has discovered more sustainable nourishment for himself in contrast to the empty and self-denigrative consumption of whiteness.

Later, Changez insists that the two eat dinner together, refusing to allow the American to decline his offer. The dinner, he claims, is an “authentic introduction to Lahori cuisine”, one in which locals take pride in for its “purity” because “not one of these worthy restaurateurs would consider placing a western dish on his menu” (Hamid 2007, 101). The meal will be a “purely carnivorous feast” as Changez and the American will be “surrounded [ ... ] by the kebab of mutton, the tikka of chicken, the stewed foot of goat, the spiced brain of sheep” (101). Coded as an excess, this extravagant meal, full of foods

unfamiliar to the American, promises a bold encounter with Lahori culture. Although Hamid's descriptions of Lahori food do invoke discourses of cultural purity and authenticity, they can be interpreted against the backdrop of melancholic shame and self-denigration which once saw Changez hiding his preference for ethnic food from his white colleagues. Moreover, these ethnic foodways are not commodified for the western gaze in the manner of what Frank Chin (1981) calls "food pornography" (86). Food pornography, according to Sau-ling Wong (1993), "appears to be a promotion" rather than a devaluation of ethnic identity but this food has been "domesticated, 'detoxed', depoliticized" (56) and, as such, promises white patrons an encounter with a palatable and staged exoticism.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid offers a different form of consumption as the Lahori cuisine has not been westernized or domesticated to suit American tastes, and its primary clientele in the market are locals. Lahori cuisine opens the possibility of defamiliarizing the American of his preconceived notions about the position of power that the US empire holds globally (Morey 2011). Through this testimony delivered over a feast, Hamid's work intends to "haunt and indict the war on terror" (Scanlan 2010, 277). In the novel, Changez indicates that if the American is to truly interact with cultural difference, he must accept the discomfort it brings him and interrogate those received social ideologies which code this cuisine (and culture) as radically different from and a threat to the US palate. In consuming the food, the American is thus invited by Changez to look past the contemporary Pakistani state, "burdened by debt, dependent on foreign aid and handouts" as well as dominant perceptions of Pakistanis as "crazed and destitute radicals" (Hamid 2007, 102). Changez's words invoke Földényi's belief that the melancholic gaze perceives and challenges the status quo which the melancholic has transgressed. Jacqui Kong (2011) writes that such a turning of tables in relation to ethnic foodways pushes the transformation of the western self through an acknowledgement of the "situated cultural and historical 'difference'" (47) of the Other and a realization of vulnerability. Changez later advises the American to do just this when he says that "there are adjustments one must make if one comes here from America; a different way of *observing* is required" (Hamid 2007, 124; original emphasis).

Intermingling Lahori food with Changez's melancholic testimony, Hamid uses the two to hold the US empire accountable for its harmful capitalist, military, and racial projects. As Changez discusses the lavishness of their meal, he mentions that the feast is one of "predatory delicacies" as Lahoris are not "squeamish when it comes to facing the consequences of our desire" (Hamid 2007, 101). This comment is a provocation and an invitation to the American to reflect on the consequences of US desires and excesses of power. The testimony Changez shares in the course of the meal, about how he came to reject his interpellation in US power structures and develop an ethical melancholic consciousness, is a kind of "confession that implicates its audience" (70). As such, the confession becomes a weapon wielded by Changez to unsettle the American and prompt him into self-reflection. It is with this goal of a contamination that compels self-critique that Changez unburdens his most closely held secrets to the American.

The American is given an early opportunity for self-reflection while the two are ordering their meal in the Old Anarkali restaurant. When Changez notices that his opponent is unsettled by their burly waiter, he attempts to better situate the waiter's presence in the restaurant. Changez explains that his bulky frame and weathered face

can be traced to the northwest mountainous part of Pakistan “where life is far from easy” (Hamid 2007, 108). While Changez begins his explanation to reassure the American, he fails in this purpose (perhaps deliberately so). Changez emphasizes to him that “his tribe [ ... ] has suffered during offensives conducted by your countrymen” (108). By making the American aware of the waiter’s life story, Changez forces a reckoning with the consequences of the War on Terror which are often elided in hypernationalist accounts of US actions in Afghanistan. The vulnerability of eating “exotic” foods is thus compounded by the ingestion of uncomfortable postcolonial realities. As the two enjoy a peaceful meal unmarred by any violence on the part of the waiter, Changez tacitly shames the American for viewing the soft-spoken waiter as a threat and giving into the reductive racial ideologies from which that perception is drawn.

Changez’s own testimony and recalcitrant subjectivity inevitably prove to be unpalatable to the American man. A striking example comes with Changez’s frank acknowledgement to the American that his first instinctive reaction to the Twin Towers collapsing was to smile and feel “remarkably pleased” (Hamid 2007, 72). He softens the impact of his statement by explaining that he is not “indifferent to the suffering of others” and admits to this socially forbidden pleasure “with a profound sense of perplexity” (72–73) about why he would feel so. While Changez does not articulate any alignment with the methods or ideologies of the 9/11 terrorists, he acknowledges his reaction candidly to the American. Gauging his opponent’s reaction to this story, he notes that he has angered and offended the American whose “large hand has, perhaps without [his] noticing, clenched into a fist” (72). Instead of placating him, he cross-questions the American and asks whether he felt “no joy at the video clips [ ... ] of American munitions laying waste the structures of your enemies” (73). The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were televised spectacles of the so-called “shock and awe” campaign intended to cover up the vulnerability experienced by America. Henry Giroux (2006) has labelled this “spectacularized violence [ ... ] to incorporate the populace into the racial fantasies of empire and the illusion of American triumphalism packaged as a victory of civilization over barbarism” (18). In making his point, Changez draws attention to the perverse pleasures of the US empire in bringing suffering to others, suggesting that his own perversions are no worse than those of the empire.

What was necessary after the attacks, according to Hamid, was to productively confront the losses of 9/11 – a reflection on “the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you” (2007, 168). Hamid leads readers into troubled territory with this statement, as it evokes what Fritz Breithaupt (2003) calls “the taboo of September 11” (79), or any semblance of appearing to empathize with the 9/11 terrorists. Although Changez does not identify with the means or the goals of the terrorists, he urges the American towards a more nuanced geopolitical perspective of terrorism. In the post-9/11 construction of Muslims as potential agents of terror, anti-Muslim rhetoric also foreclosed possibilities for the US nation state to empathize with the pain of civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere drawn into the War on Terror. It is worthwhile here to recollect Abraham, Torok, and Rand’s assertion that introjection, a healthy form of mourning, occurs in a “communion of empty mouths” (1994, 128) when mourners can collectively cope with loss. In suggesting his relational understanding of shared pain, Changez attempts to bridge the ideological gap between the two mourning subjects, a gap

that has yielded the troubling and destructive rhetoric of a civilizational war between the west and Islam (Huntington 1996, 27).

At the end of their meal, Changez explains this interlinked subjectivity (or perhaps contamination) to the American when he says that “it is not possible to restore our boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship [because] something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us” (Hamid 2007, 175). Changez is aware that globalized circuits of power, communication, capitalism, and knowledge inextricably connect the US and Pakistan, but he desires to find a productive and empathetic relationality between the two subjects. The various confrontations between the US and Pakistan, the western subject and the terrorist Other, Erica and Changez, and the American and Changez have already unfolded in intimate, strange, and sometimes violent terms. These confrontations have indelibly marked the interacting subjects, and it is now up to them to interrogate the implications of these encounters and redefine their terms of engagement. “Try as we might”, Changez muses, “we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be” (175).

### **Conclusion: Melancholia and political responsibility**

To sum up, speaking from the site of his melancholic wound enables Changez to gain a new transnational perspective on entangled (but not oppositional) futures that require critical self-assessment on the part of both interlocutors. Having developed a melancholic gaze that showed him the truth of the hegemonic order constituted of US transnational capitalism and its imperial ambitions, Changez now challenges the locus of global power in multicultural US cities. He envisions a postcolonial nation that resists the lures of US aid, capitalist projects, and imperial power. Outcast from the US (but not living in exile), the transgressive nature of Changez’s melancholic subjectivity thus invites postcolonial border crossings, transnational envisioning, and mapping of both the past and the future. While mourning declares the past to be “resolved, finished, and dead”, it is in the melancholic subject that the “past remains steadfastly alive in the present”, allowing for a “continuous engagement with loss and its remains” (Eng and Kazanjian 2003a, 2003b, 3–4). Moreover, by advocating a relative disengagement from the putatively marked metropole, Changez’s nationalist assertions deny the US empire the racialized labour and body of the Other for its own consumptive ends. In staging a sumptuous display of feasting in Lahore, Changez appears to entertain the hegemonic desire to reinscribe the western self and postcolonial Other, but the meal as well as Changez’s testimony deny that impulse entirely. The American, acting on behalf of the empire, might have consumed the meal but is unable to pin Changez down in the knowable terms of the good or bad Muslim (Mamdani 2004).

Food politics in the novel offer the racialized immigrant a pathway that leads back home, to cultural belonging, even as transactions over culturally situated foodways serve to destabilize and thwart the racialized inscriptions of the US empire. The political charge outlined by Hamid’s novel continues to be necessary. In the intervening years since 9/11 (and the novel’s publication in 2007), US forces have withdrawn from Afghanistan following the 20-year war started after 9/11. Although the laws and policies of the 9/11 era remain codified in the US in a state of exception (Agamben 2005), public memory

around 9/11 and the wars, detentions, and other Islamophobic responses will continue to diffuse as the initial urgency of the attacks dissipates, particularly for the post-9/11 generation. On the part of the nation state, national amnesia enables the avoidance of political responsibility. By keeping the past alive and by retaining memories of the wounds of racial violence, the melancholic subject forces the forgetful empire to confront its racial violence, much as Changez pushes the American to interrogate the harmful effects of US imperialism during the War on Terror.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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