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## **The Language of Assumptions and Perceptions: A Stylistic Study of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

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### **Abstract:**

The novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, by Mohsin Hamid, has marked its presence in the global literary scene because of its severe critique of the neo-imperial superpowers and the rising religious fundamentalism. The novel presents two sides of the world –of a developing country like Pakistan and its people and the developed countries like the US, through the eyes of a Pakistani youth who goes to the US on a scholarship to Princeton and works in a multinational evaluation firm. His return to Pakistan after the 9/11 terrorist attack on the US makes him ponder over and reflect upon how the developed nations now make assumptions about Muslim people and how appearances and generalisations about them guide their perceptions. This research paper attempts to explore how Mohsin Hamid has given expression to the people about whom assumptions are made. This study will analyse the author's narrative techniques in giving these people voices through the protagonist and express their concern and sense of identity through confident stylistic choices. The research methodology employed to examine these techniques will include certain concepts and parameters from Narratology and Stylistics to create an interdisciplinary exploration of the world of fiction presented by Mohsin Hamid in the novel.

**Keywords:** dramatic monologue, homodiegetic narrator, modality, linguistic foregrounding.

### **Introduction**

Our perceptions about people, places, events and cultures are often tinged with assumptions, shaped by our past experiences, both personal and influenced by external sources such as social media, texts, and visuals. The oversimplified image of a person from any Islamic country as a terrorist, for instance, or that of a person from the US as an apprehensive

individual, has become a prevalent norm, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), is set against this backdrop, with the theme of assumptions, apprehensions and perceptions permeating the entire text. This research paper, therefore, takes on a crucial role in dissecting these societal perceptions and exploring how they are expressed in literature, thereby highlighting the importance of understanding and challenging these assumptions.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the story of a Pakistani youth, Changez, who goes to study at Princeton, works with one of the highest paying multi-national valuation firms, Underwood Samson, falls in love with an American girl, Erica, and decides to leave America after he gets disillusioned by the US response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. His disillusionment makes him leave the highly paid job in the US, and he chooses to become a lecturer and a political activist in his native country, Pakistan. He became vocal about American foreign policy and started disseminating the idea among the youth and the people of Pakistan. The story takes up from here; the location is a local market eatery shop where Changez and an American converse. What is very unusual in this conversation is that although the conversation involves two persons, the spoken utterances are only of the novel's protagonist, Changez. The whole novel is experimental as the narrative progresses through a dramatic monologue.

### **Dramatic Monologue and Rhetorical Choice**

A monologue is a long speech by a single character in a play. However, dramatic monologue is not related to play but is a lyric poem made famous by Robert Browning. It is defined by M. H. Abrams and G. G. Harpham as a speech by a single person in the poem 'in a specific situation at a critical moment' where the other characters are present. Still, their presence is made clear by the speech of the only character who speaks (94). As suggested by Abrams, the poet's choice of such a monologue is to create interest among the readers and make them aware of the speaker's thoughts and character. Dramatic monologue is self-revelatory, and this feature makes it different from dramatic lyric. Apart from this, in dramatic monologue, the single voice presented is not that of the poet but that of one of the speakers. Mohsin Hamid's choice of narrating a story through dramatic monologue is apt and significant for these reasons. When we consider *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the voices we hear are not of the author but that of the America-returned Pakistani protagonist, Changez. Changez, in the style of a genuine dramatic monologue, addresses and interacts with the American; however,

we come to know of the latter's presence only from the words of Changez. That a second person exists in the discourse is realised only in the utterances Changez makes where he uses address markers in the form of second person 'you' as in the sentence, "I noticed that you were looking for something" (Hamid 1). Hamid begins the story with Changez addressing the American directly, asking, "Excuse me, Sir, but may I be of assistance" (1). Besides, we do not hear the American speak or contribute to the conversation by replies or comments.

The novel uses many interrogative syntactic forms referring to a second person. When Changez talks about the company he worked for in the US, he says, "You have not heard of them? They are a valuation firm" (Hamid 5) or when he addresses his American counterpart and asks, "What? My voice is rising? You are right" (33). There are several instances of such syntactic forms of asking questions where Changez is not interested in getting a response to his questions; instead, he chooses to speak in this fashion to heighten the rhetorical effect of his utterances. The force of assertion is visible in the scene where he asks a question about gaudiness, "A little gaudy? Yes, you are right" (47). These questions are not meant to be interrogative speech acts; instead, they are evaluative, judgemental, and assumptions on the speaker's part, that is, Changez. The significance of these interrogatives is that they add to the illocutionary force and, hence, the dramatic effect of the monologue. This mode of narration ensures that the Pakistani in the novel gets an opportunity to raise his voice and concern against the cruel and spiteful treatment meted out to the people from Islamic countries post-9/11 attack on the US. Changez's concern for being stereotyped by the US and such developed countries who make assumptions about others comes out very creatively through the author's choice of a dramatic monologue. His monologues are so powerful in critiquing the neo-imperialism and capitalist power of powerful nations like the US that the latter, represented by the Americans, is bound to be silenced and listen to Changez. Changez's speech and thought presentation express the nature of assumptions made by such superpowers. He mocks the Americans for forming opinions about developing countries and their people based on appearances. In this novel, the protagonist points out that the powerful capitalists who, based on appearances, assume, perceive, and thereby stereotype people of developing countries and act hostile towards people from specific religious communities. The apprehension of the US is made clear by Changez when Hamid makes him say, "Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America" (1). However, appearances are deceptive- this seems to be what the protagonist wants to state to the American. Assumptions and presuppositions are made on both sides- the US and the Islamic countries. The other world sees things differently and has a different way of forming

opinions about people and countries based on the 'bearing' or demeanour or actions of the people and the countries.

How did I know you were American? No, not by the colour of your skin; we have a range of complexions in this country, and yours often occurs among the people of our northwest frontier. Nor was it your dress that gave you away; a European tourist could as easily have purchased in Des Moines your suit, ...it was your bearing that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation. (Hamid 2)

That all Muslims having beards are potential terrorists is the perception formed about Islamic countries post-9/11 attack, which is subverted by the author through Changez when the protagonist starts keeping a beard on his return to Pakistan, which is a kind of identity marker for him, but not of a terrorist, instead of a well-educated lecturer and an activist.

### **The narrator, Point of View and Modality**

The narrator in this novel is a first-person narrator, a characteristic of a dramatic monologue, whom Gerard Genette also calls the homodiegetic narrator (Herman and Vervaeck 92). The narrator, Changez, in our case, is a primary character in a homodiegetic narration, and the narrative unfolds as he perceives it, divulging his psychological or perceptual viewpoint. The exciting aspect of a dramatic monologue is that the first person 'I' in such narratives is not the poet. So, we can assume that since the novel's narrative is in the form of such a monologue, it is not the author's voice but almost a kind of ventriloquised voice of the persona of Changez. While reading a novel narrated through dramatic monologue, many inferences must be made regarding the nature of this second, so-called 'unspeaking' character addressed as 'you' throughout the text. Such speculation adds to the pleasures of reading.

Understanding Changez's point of view may require focussing our attention on the various linguistic indicators in the novel, especially studying the language's modality or attitudinal features. Paul Simpson has analysed different points of view based on the concept of modality, which expresses the narrator's attitude and sets the tone and mood of the narrative, thereby reflecting upon the author's style (126). He categorised modality as deontic (expressing duty or obligation), epistemic (knowledge, belief and certainty in the situation), bulimic (expressing a wish or desire), and perception (degree of commitment). What is interesting to observe in this novel is that the modality of perception, which is considered to be a sub-category

of epistemic modality, pervades the entire fiction, communicating a sense of certainty/uncertainty and various degrees of commitment to or assumptions about people and countries, based on human perception, usually visual perception.

### **Linguistic Foregrounding and Location of Power**

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid has made Changez, the Pakistani speaker, suspect the real motives of the American stranger, who in turn suspects the former of ulterior motives. There is an implied action in such early passages when Changez says, “Once more I am raising my voice, and making you rather uncomfortable...” (Hamid 102); and later, as the marketplace closes, when the atmosphere becomes more ominous and, on the last page, the auditor becomes frightened, apparently with a good reason. There is a particular fear and preconceptions to their conversation and an act of reverse ethnic profiling.

In stylistics, one of the basic features of a conversation is the element of turn-taking. In analysing any dramatic dialogue, there is a concern for establishing who holds conversational control or conversational power (Gregoriou 135). This can be established by considering each participant’s number of turns and average turn length. Considering this aspect, Mohsin Hamid’s choice of narrative technique of a dramatic monologue ascribes conversational power to Changez as he is the only person to speak. This act can be seen as subversive, where the latter represents all the voices of a religious community that was quietened earlier and viewed with suspicion, scepticism, and spite.

The linguistic vitality of the text strengthens the novel. The world of assumptions, stereotyping and hostility in the backdrop of global changes, rising capitalism and pervading religious fundamentalism is created through the choice of verba sentient (words denoting thoughts, feelings and perceptions). Words such as *noticed*, *looking for*, *guess*, *identify*, *poisoned*, *suspected*, etc. abound throughout the novel. Another technique that Mohsin Hamid employs in this novel is linguistic deviation, which has a significant psychological effect on the readers. If a part of the novel becomes deviant, it becomes noticeable and perceptually prominent (Short 10). The psychological effect is said to be foregrounded, and one of the ways that the author chooses to do so is to italicise a word and even sentences in the text multiple times. An instance of such graphological foregrounding through deviation is noticeable when Erica looked at Changez on the beach in Rhodes: “... I am being dishonest; it was *more* than a moment – she turned her head to the side and saw me staring at her” (Hamid 23). In italics, the

word 'more' seems to add time to the moment, which felt like an eternity to Changez. Words like nostalgia, look back, specific pronouns like 'it' 'you', predatory delicacies, becoming change, wanted, bearing, emotion, foreign, intimate, now, gravity, intoxication, etc. are italicised. Hamid has italicised the sentences to emphasise the pride, anger and threat of the US after the 9/11 attack. In Changez's rants, "They all seemed to proclaim: *We are America—not New York, which, in my opinion, means something quite differently—the mightiest civilisation the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath*" (79). The italicised phrases in these lines express the angst of a country that has been wronged and believes it can diminish and destroy any power/country/group that tries to harm it. After this event, Jim suggests that Changez "*Focus on the fundamentals*" and act accordingly (98). This worldly advice is italicised. When Changez meets Erica's family, they assume that being a Muslim, Changez does not drink, but when the reply is contrary to their belief, her parents think, "So, of course, *he drinks*" 53. Moreover, this, again in Hamid's style, has been italicised.

After returning to Pakistan, Changez starts 'observing' things around him and his household. Things had changed for him. Everything seemed to be archaic, shabby and obsolete. Gloominess took over him, and he found himself looking at everything from the point of view of an 'unsympathetic American' (Hamid 124). Then, Changez goes through moments of introspection; his inner turmoil and the political developments outside are all in conflict. There are moments of reflection that make him realise how his perception of his household, people, and country had changed through the years of living in the US. His years of study at Princeton and the critical evaluation practised at Underwood Samson were instrumental in making him the man he was and had changed him beyond recognition. Self-reflection and introspection brought him back, and he started reacclimatising with his environment. These changes are artistically presented through parallelism as a tool of linguistic foregrounding. Everything is in the mind. The same things, the people and the household appear differently to anyone the moment one comes to terms with the inner turmoil and starts seeing things from a different perspective. Changez, too, starts appreciating the grandeur and charm of the place he was born and brought up. His perception changes, and he becomes more generous in analysing and evaluating everything around him. He reflects, "There are adjustments one must make if one comes here from America; a different way of observing is required. I recall the Americanness of my gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing" (124). Drawing parallels in the protagonist's state of mind allows the author to present his protagonist as evaluating himself, critiquing himself, in a true spirit of dramatic monologue.

Comparisons between the two worlds abound throughout the novel. At the novel's beginning, Changez compares the American and Pakistani students in terms of their intellect and the competition they face for getting admission through scholarships at Princeton. In terms of critical acumen and knowledge of the discipline required by the firms or companies that come for placement, the performance of international students is relatively far above that of their American counterparts.

Conflicting worldviews of the US and Pakistan are presented throughout the novel through structural contrasts regarding intellect, food, lifestyle, behaviour and culture. Changez's comment, "Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonise America were illiterate barbarians" (20). He expresses his pride in his civilisation by comparing it with the US.

Mohsin Hamid considers the novel an invitation to enter the story, and the reader's interpretation is final. This seems to be why he provides an open end to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the action ends abruptly without resolving conflicts. The novel ends with the American putting his hand inside his pocket, and the characters look at each other suspiciously. Assumptions, at this point, work at two discourse levels — the first, the assumptions made by the two characters as to what will the other do and how the other will respond, and the second, the assumption by the readers of the novel as to how will the two characters respond to each other in the situation they are placed in.

## Conclusion

Mohsin Hamid, in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, presents the assumptions formed by the superpowers about people of certain developing countries and particular religious backgrounds based on a single instance of a terrorist attack. They make sweeping generalisations that people of such countries are all religious fundamentalists and possible terrorists. Hamid explores these assumptions and perceptions through the character Changez's point of view and becomes the representative of the hostility perceived by the people about whom such perceptions are common. These innermost feelings of being perceived in a particular fashion have been very well delineated through the narrative technique of dramatic monologue, rhetorical devices like interrogatives, and linguistic foregrounding through parallelism and linguistic deviation, to name a few.



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