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Fractured territories: Deterritorializing the contemporary Pakistani novel in English

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Abstract

This article makes use of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialization and lines of flight, together with Aamir R. Mufti's analysis of global literature in order to study the work of three Pakistani novelists, Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, and Kamila Shamsie. Fragmentation, disjunction, and disorientation are the main forces at work in contemporary Pakistani fiction in English, whose founding metaphor is the image of partition, and an insistence of borders and their transgression.

Keywords

Pakistani fiction, deterritorialization, ekphrasis, fragmentation, Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Aamir R. Mufti, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari

Contemporary Pakistani fiction in English now has an established position not only regionally, as part of the South Asian Anglophone novel, but also as a distinct and identifiable stream within global literature. However, Pakistani literature in English is not exactly a new literature, appearing like “a new star, with all the attendant flash and glory”. On the contrary, it is “a long-standing movement with history and depth” (Shah, 2012: 153), with “a long, continuous process from pre-Partition and pre-Raj times to the present day” (M. Shamsie, 2017: 594). The main aim of this paper is to join the “history and depth” and the dynamics of contemporary Pakistani fiction in English, and try to identify the complex ways it articulates the fractured territories and fissured identities of Pakistan's contemporary history in a global, transnational, Anglophone literary form.

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I will focus on three writers: Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, and Kamila Shamsie, first analysing their fiction through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's framing of "deterritorialization" from *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). I shall explain how the concept of deterritorialization informs the particular position of Pakistani Anglophone fiction and defines it as a literature of ruptures, disjunctions, and "lines of flight" (Deleuze, 1998: 2) in a global, transnational literary context. This double movement may be read in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of lines and territories.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari define these terms, which can be applied to study contemporary Pakistani literature: "In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 4). Indeed, the rigid lines of identity and stability are disrupted by "microcracks" (1987: 219), "indistinct fringes, encroachments, overlappings, migrations" (1987: 251). What Deleuze and Guattari call "lines of deterritorialization" (1987: 10) are the lines of flight which produce ruptures, leading, in their turn, to new stratifications and proliferations. The line of flight is thus "a flashing line of experimentation, emancipation, mutation, liberation" (Guignery, 2009: 308). In other words, the Deleuzian lines of flight delineate the potentiality for a form of escape from norms and limits, a tension towards the realization of other aesthetic spaces. I will suggest that Aslam's, Hamid's, and Shamsie's novels are based on a tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, between the opposite poles of fragmentation, faults, instability, and divisions on the one hand, and transgression, border-crossing, and a belief in the stabilizing power of representation on the other. Key to contemporary Pakistani fiction is the way history and territory are articulated through an insistence on the representation of the traumas of the past and the turmoil of contemporary geopolitics through the lens of the problematic of border-crossing and transgression. Fractured territories — actual geographical territories and metaphorical territories of the narrative voice with its hidden fissures and observable sutures — constitute the grammar of the contemporary Pakistani novel in English. The fractured territories in question can be epitomized by Shamsie's vision of Karachi — which can stand as a metonym for Pakistan — for she describes the city in *Kartography* as "a violent, fractured place" (2002: 331).

The second theoretical framework I use shows that the emergence of the Pakistani Anglophone novel raises yet another paradox. Indeed, the interest for the Pakistani novel in English coincides with the advent of global literature, which such critics as Aamir R. Mufti (2016) read as the contemporary avatar of Orientalist aesthetics and politics. The borderless, transnational literature described as "global" is, therefore, another myth and the end result of former British colonial supremacy. Pakistani fiction in English oscillates between two gravitational pulls: first, the identified pole of the fractured territories of Pakistan history and politics, and second, the "new" territories of global literature in English which in fact prove "the persistence of the Orientalist versus Anglicist debate of the early colonial state" (Mufti, 2016: 5). Moreover, for Mufti, contemporary Anglophone Pakistani novelists face a particular challenge grounded on the paradoxical nature of the novel as a form whose essence is both a question of innovation and assimilation. According to Mufti, these novelists are bound to produce in English, the dominant, global language, "an epos" of Pakistan (2016: 177). This also constitutes a definite break

from Indian literature as, he speculates, “the violence, extremism, and overall fissiparous social tendencies that are currently tearing the country apart” can “also be understood as the birth pangs of a new cultural independence from Pakistani society’s ‘Indian’ past” (2016: 177). The Deleuzian imaginary cartography can find here another form of expression in Mufti’s description of the Pakistani novel in English as a mode of considering global literature from a new angle: an engagement with “vernacular social and cultural imaginaries” — the Deleuzian lines of flight — and an engagement with the “cultural and social worlds that surround” these novels (Mufti, 2016: 178).

Writing from “extreme edges” (Cilano, 2009), worlds “colliding” (Waterman, 2016), liminality (Chambers, 2011), lines and border crossing (Guignery, 2009): spatial metaphors abound when South Asian and Pakistani writing is depicted, and the idea of the transgression of borders is associated with both Indian and Pakistani writing. Pakistani fiction occupies shifting ground: it stands as a historically and politically over-determined territory, fashioned by two partitions, and has been at the forefront of contemporary geopolitical turmoil since 9/11 and the state’s involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom. In other words, “Pakistan is just like India, except when it’s just like Afghanistan” (Granta, 2010);¹ the nation occupies a liminal space between the massive continent of contemporary Indian literature and the political chaos of the Muslim Middle East. Willy-nilly, Pakistan’s history has always been international and the fulcrum of global geopolitics since 1947. The initial disjuncture and rupture of history can be considered to have taken place when the signifier “partition” was internalized, deterritorialized, and made into a mode of apprehension as well as a lens of interpretation. Contemporary history haunts Pakistani fiction: the 1947 and 1971 partitions and 9/11 are not only present as defining events but also as critical moments of disjunction and rupture, underlining the centrifugal nature of Pakistan’s identity. The country holds a unique hub position in the world: its geographical position along the “spine of the silk roads” (Frankopan, 2015: 477) and at the entry point to Asia from the West, together with its position at the intersection of different imperial expansionisms, make Pakistan a true cultural crossroads between the Islamic world and South and Central Asia.

Although clearly dissimilar in their writing techniques and themes, Aslam’s, Hamid’s, and Shamsie’s writing shares common features. Beyond the commercial and editorial success of their novels, the common denominator for all three is their commitment to a shift in literary affinities which has both internalized the literary discourse about the empire “writing back” — as part of an academic literary curriculum rather than a personal experience of reclaiming — together with the historiographic metafictional practices and self-parodic modes of postmodern fiction. At the same time, they have re-embraced political and social commitment through a form of deterritorialized writing which favours fractures over permanence, fragmentation over continuity. Deterritorialization, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, dovetails with the act of writing as tracing “lines of flight” (1987: 32). This act of deterritorialization condenses the metaphor of literature as a space of enclosure and escape, confinement and transgression; the Deleuzian lines of flight articulate both limits and their subversion. Pakistani fiction in English participates in a global movement of both inscription and displacement of borders, suggesting in the writing of its authors a tension between defined lines and their erasure, between rigid frames of reference and

their permeability. These authors' fiction stands at the juncture of the paradoxical space expressed by a poetics of deterritorialization, displacement, and fragmentation. In other words, the Deleuzian concepts of lines of flight and deterritorialization suggest the critical avenue to be pursued here: the paramount importance of territories, borders, and maps and the porous nature of dividing lines, the focus placed on the centrifugal forces at work in Pakistani society together account for the strain at the heart of the fiction of these three novelists.

Borders and border-crossing are prominent tropes for South Asian novelists and Pakistani writers in particular. A point of departure for the symptomatic persistence of the image of frontiers and lines is certainly Pakistan's creation history. Manto's 1955 short story "Toba Tek Singh" constitutes one of the fictional and imaginative matrices for the spatial obsession. Even if it was written in Urdu, it nonetheless encapsulates the frictions manifest in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction: the fractured territories of Pakistani fiction are present in this parable about the literal lunacy and absurdity of partition. The vision of the inmates of the Lahore lunatic asylum found in Manto's short story is summed up by the final image of Toba Tek Singh who refuses to pass over the border and dies in a no man's land: "There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (Manto, 2001/1955: 51). Shamsie's work is also concerned with the tension between the strong presence of borders and divisions on the one hand and, on the other, a strong drive towards liberation from boundaries and definitions. In *Kartography* (2002), a novel devoted to the illusory cartography of socially and ethnically divided Karachi, Shamsie explores notions of territory, identity, and ethnicity, and how concrete and metaphorical boundaries are created. She interrogates the Pakistani paradigm of building borders and bolstering social divisions: "How many walls can one nation erect and sustain [...] Is it possible to circumnavigate one wall without crashing into another?" (2002: 51). Similarly, *Salt and Saffron* (2000) is constantly haunted by partition and is concerned with the intricacies of a family's past. For Shamsie, the family becomes the symptom of Pakistan's history: the subjective manifestation of a latent, unexpressed conflict. As yet another allegory of the subcontinent's history, in the vein of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, "the family divides at Partition into two sides who hate each other and continually quarrel over whose fault it was" (King, 2004: 284). This is made all the more poignant since the divisions and rancour are "constructed on a past that no one really knows" (King, 2004: 284). For Shamsie the past is both a boon and a burden, and Pakistan is both the place that shapes her imagination and a state whose faults she portrays. Families in Shamsie's fiction are the repositories of the repressed wounds of the past and the silent guardians of the archives of the undisclosed tragedies of personal and national history.

Burnt Shadows (2009) offers a new perspective on the same problematic of the deterritorialization of an author's voice by including a critique of American political hegemony in "the war on terror". Once again, spatial dislocation and temporal erasure generate the contradiction of the novel's plot and themes. The two historical collisions of the narrative, Hiroshima and 9/11, form the alpha and omega of Shamsie's description of trauma over three generations. The shifting horizons of the novel, from Japan to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and New York, represent the different geographical points which,

once joined together by the narrative, form this novel's lines of flight and contradict the logic of borders. For Shamsie:

[T]he idea of the nation-state as the defining framework of a novel has less and less relevance in this interconnected world. At the very least, I seem to have become incapable of imagining a novel that is restricted within the boundaries of a single nation. (qtd. in Alam et al., 2018: n.p.)

Against the homogenization of global culture and the hegemony of the American worldview, Shamsie's novels offer tales of estrangement and reconnection, discontinuity and recombination, betrayal, and atonement. The fragile "lines of flight" presented in Shamsie's novels are essentially historical and geographical: the burden of representation seems to be transferred from one generation to the next and from one location to the other, crossing boundaries and overlapping chronologies.

Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) explores once more the recurring theme of families and their secrets. The political context is the fate of British jihadists gone to fight with ISIS in Syria, but the literary antecedent is Sophocles' *Antigone*. Through the Greek tragedy framing, Shamsie reads the political cracks and fissures that define migrants' and their descendants' British identity in the aftermath of terror attacks in Europe and wars in the Levant. The characters' names echo those of Sophocles' dramatis personae and the plot revolves around an opposition between the laws of the land which strip a young British jihadist of his nationality, and the blood ties of the family. However, the original tragic quandary of *phusis* (natural laws) opposed to *nomos* (man-made laws) is closer to Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1946), written in 1942 during the Nazi Occupation of France. With Shamsie, as with Anouilh, the dilemma is more political and moral than religious: the central importance of the Greek sisters' and brothers' incestuous bloodline and the cathartic conclusion are replaced here by a sense of irreparable loss and unresolved tensions. For Claire Chambers (2018) the novel is about the failure of auditory reception and communication, and where sounds and noises, fragments of communication through WhatsApp messages, are symptomatic of a world which silences the oppressed. By using sound both as a "metaphorical conceit and as a material or embodied experience" (2018: 217), for Chambers, *Home Fire* is "one of the most plangent and multitonal novels" (2018: 218) yet to be published about terrorist-related violence, as the text itself "can supplement sociological, psychological, and criminological analyses of radicalization" by bringing into discussion "its sensual qualities of visual and aural texture" (Chambers, 2018: 218). Like Hiroko from *Burnt Shadows*, the characters from *Home Fire* function "most powerfully as [...] agent[s] for the demystification, differentiation and humanisation" (Clements, 2016: 145) of British Muslims. Kamila Shamsie's novels engage here, especially since the publication of *Burnt Shadows*, not only with the Deleuzian lines of flight but also with the challenges outlined by Mufti, of the "precarious balancing act between writing about the fundamental issues facing Pakistan and South Asian society [...] without playing to the metropolitan fascination with the spectre of Islam and stereotyped Muslim sensibilities" (Mufti, 2016: 178). Shamsie's global epics not only destabilize the notions of border and border crossing but also blur the limits of essentialized Muslim identities as they are framed by mainstream Western media. The frisson of

delving into the minds of “jihadists” is radically deflated by Shamsie’s literary and metaphorical strategies.

In Aslam’s and Hamid’s fiction, what Deleuze calls the “otherness of language” provides another, more internalized, form of instability and deterritorialization. In *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1998), Gilles Deleuze delineates his theory on the “otherness of language”. According to him, writers discover their voice within the space and experience of writing, which is a form of narrative deterritorialization. The writer therefore invents a language by twisting familiar tropes, defamiliarizing metaphors, and reinventing a voice which is “neither another language nor a rediscovered dialect [...] but [...] a minoritization of this major language, a delirium carrying it off, a witch’s line of flight out of the dominant system” (Deleuze, 1998: 5). Both novelists favour ruptures and displacements, fractures and fissures that point to the deterritorialized lines of flight at work in their writing. But the differences between the two novelists are apparent: whereas Aslam favours a lyrical style based on description and startling analogies, as well as references to Urdu literature, Hamid’s writing is more indirectly destabilizing since more often than not minute cracks and fissures appear in the narrative voice, gradually dislocating the reader’s expectations.

First, let us consider Aslam’s writing. Aslam, himself a painter, is also a keen amateur of icons and miniatures (Aslam, 2017b: n.p.). Paintings play an essential role in his writing, and more specifically his descriptions of painting, or “ekphrasis”, a rhetorical device which enables to the writer to introduce long descriptive passages of an inanimate object, like a work of art. With Aslam, the use of these long descriptions has a double function. First, it has import in the narrative as pauses and moments of contemplation, whether it is in the character’s musings or the narrator’s rumination. Second, it connects the network of images with the main dialectic at work between centrifugal and centripetal forces. Here is an example from *The Wasted Vigil*:

Marcus takes down Virgil from the shelf. On the cover is a painting of Aeneas fleeing the burning destruction of Troy. The great broken heart of the city in the background. Aeneas is accompanied by his young son — a path to the future — and is carrying his aged father over his shoulder — the reminder of the past. The old man clutches the statues of the household gods in his right hand and because the other hand is out of sight in the folds of his cloak, absent beyond the wrist, Marcus thinks for a moment of himself. If so, then David is Aeneas — he had offered to carry Marcus up the tall minaret in Jalalabad. (Aslam, 2008: 95)

The choice of the book whose cover is described here is interesting for two reasons, first as an intertextual reference to a founding myth of Roman identity and second as it illustrates a moment of transition between chaos and hope. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, written between 29 and 19 BCE, is a founding text in Latin literature as it legitimized not only a godly filiation in Rome’s inception (Aeneas is the son of Anchises, a mortal, and the goddess Aphrodite), but it also justified Roman identity as both distinct from Greek culture as well as its rightful heir. In other words, the ekphrasis describes not only a flight from a devastated city but also a moment of cultural emancipation. The scene also mirrors Marcus Caldwell’s predicament: as he identifies with Anchises, clutching “the household gods in his right hand”, he interprets the never-ending war in Afghanistan, where the novel takes place, through the lens of the Latin epic. In a novel focusing on the

destruction or survival of ancient works of art and their guardians, the passage depicted by the ekphrasis crystallizes a moment poised between extinction and revival, between a nostalgic fixation on past ruins and promises of rebirth.

Furthermore, the role of ekphrasis in Aslam's work is to mediate the mimetic role of language. Reality — the reality of the border zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the reality of the “War on Terror”, the reality of religious pogroms — is, therefore, all the better perceived when the work of art frames it. The ekphrasis provides a surface on which character or narrator can project their inner thoughts and contemplations. More often than not the motif of windows — both window frames and window panes — is associated with such moments. The description of the character looking at a painting is echoed by descriptions of outdoor visions or reflections on the surface of a mirror or a window pane. The window motif is therefore dual, both a frame distancing the point of view, but it also acts as a point of insistence, emphasizing the allegory at work. Aslam thus describes the narrator or the character in an in-between position: inside looking out, as if the painted surface or the reflected image act as a zone of contact between inside and outside, and between intimate subjectivity and the outside world. In other words, for Aslam the writer–painter, the ekphrasis performs a connection between, on the one hand, personal emotions and subjectivities, personal history and its catalogue of traumas and, on the other, the stage of history and geopolitics.

The ekphrasis mediates a reality both so violent and, to use Aslam's words, so “beautiful” (Aslam, 2017b: n.p.), that it would otherwise be unbearable. What the ekphrasis also underlines, and this is its second role in Aslam's writing, is the dialectics of centrifugal and centripetal forces. The particularly pervasive trope of fragmentation embodies this dynamic. As the ekphrasis crystallizes the reader's gaze, images of fragments and shattered surfaces abound. It comes as no surprise that paintings, illustrations, and books are often smashed and shattered in Aslam's novels, especially in *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013), and *The Golden Legend* (2017a). In *The Wasted Vigil*, a mural representing couples is shot to smithereens by the Taliban, irate at the heretic act of representing human figures. One of the tragedies of *The Golden Legend* is the destruction of the eponymous *Golden Legend*, whose pages are torn to shreds by philistine authorities. The book's destruction is symbolic for more than one reason. First, as a compendium of Islamic lore and testimony to its humanism and open-mindedness, its being torn to pieces underlines the violence of contemporary Pakistan. Then as a fetish, it condenses Aslam's relation to art and to the lines of fracture that destabilize dominant discourses. At one point, the female protagonist repairs the torn pages, now reduced to fragments and pieces of a puzzle, and the Japanese term *kintsugi* is used to describe the act of repairing an object and making it more beautiful in the process. In a remark echoing Keats's aphorism which concludes his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty — that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (Keats, 1909/1820: 113), the narratorial voice intimates that “some things were more beautiful and valuable for having been broken” (Aslam, 2017a: 79). The damage, an extended metaphor for the state of affairs in Pakistan and the mental state of the protagonists, replicates the cracks and fissures of the text. By giving a voice to the different subalterns and disposed of Western society — Pakistani immigrants as in *Maps for Lost Lovers* — or Pakistani society with its strict ethnic, social, and religious stratification, Aslam performs

fictional *kintsugi*. The sutures and fractures of society are metamorphosed into “luminous scars” (Aslam, 2017a: 82), inverting the centrifugal dynamics of Pakistan’s history into the centripetal forces of creation.

In an interview Nadeem Aslam uses the metaphor of a helix to describe his identity as an author: “Islam and Marxism are the two strands of my DNA, my double helix” (Aslam, 2017c: n.p.), thus emphasizing the presence of opposite yet complementary forces at work in his writing. Sadia Abbas links the extreme aestheticism of Aslam’s writing to what she terms “Cold War Baroque”: an echo of seventeenth-century Baroque with which it shares

certain formal tendencies and [...] signals a longer political *durée* marked by the ongoing problematic of the restructuring of religion — and the relationship of that reconfiguration with the problem of the nation-state and the status of the citizenship and minority — in modernity. (Abbas, 2014: 151)

Specifically, Abbas describes Aslam’s writing in Deleuzian terms since “Cold War histories, devotional aesthetics, literary forms are infolded, inverted, revealed to be caught in a cycle of seemingly inescapable yet endlessly torqued iteration” (2014: 185). The hyper-aestheticism, the “*préciosité*” (Abbas, 2014: 185; emphasis in original) of Aslam’s writing does indeed have a purpose which he exploits in political terms, meaning that the Baroque image of “torque” is indeed apt. The image of the DNA prolongs Sadia Abbas’s explanation seamlessly, together with her use of Baroque aesthetics, since Aslam’s notion of identity as a double helix evokes his writing as Deleuzian folds: open-ended and infinite, non-exclusive and unlimited, exterior and interior at the same time.

If the deterritorializing “lines of flight” of Aslam’s writing produce a crisis between the centrifugal forces of the present posited against the centripetal forces of art and visual representation, Hamid’s deterritorialization lies in his ambiguous story-telling and in the way his novels play with the mimetic conventions of realism. His narratives are spoken in a “minoritized language” within the language of fiction. The narrative voices of Hamid’s novels are the ultimate fractured territories mirroring the frictions of the contemporary world. However, unlike Shamsie whose writing is anchored in a specific cultural landscape, and Aslam’s mediated and sutured referentiality, Hamid’s writing moves towards the generic and the allegorical through his practice of erasure and unlabelling of references.

Hamid’s novels have to be read as allegories or even meta-allegories. The novels are the destabilizing metaphors of a shifting world where “fundamentalists” and tourists are indistinguishable, a “pretty girl” may or may not be part of a love subplot in a rags-to-riches story in “rising Asia”, and where migrants enter a Narnia-like land to escape death. Hamid’s writing, from among the three authors taken as representatives of new Pakistani fiction, is certainly the most deterritorialized and the most Deleuzian. Deeply ironic and based on “ludic deception[s]” (Chambers, 2013: n.p.), Hamid’s novels deal with Deleuze’s otherness of language and the fundamental ambivalence of the narrative voice. Hamid’s writing is, therefore, the deterritorialized line of flight which counteracts attempts at stabilization: his novels are places of disjunctions and divisions, ruptures and slippages. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising*

Asia (2013) Hamid opens up within the narrative voice a space of shifting certainties, misleading the reader in a constant movement of “interpellation” and “counter interpellation” (Althusser, 2014/1971: 190–97). By deterritorializing his narrative voice and playing with its lines of flight, not only does he give a voice to the overlooked and the subalterns of history, the way Shamsie and Aslam do, but he also unfastens ambiguities where certainties rule, disorienting the reader by playing with the conventions of fiction. Each of his four novels, by removing secure standpoints, tends toward the experimental in their use of the narrative voice producing a sense of disorientation.

The opening pages of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), in that respect, are programmatic of the deterritorialized line escaping from the recognizable structure of the novel. The novel is an interpellation which turns the table on the reader’s assumptions and prejudices about the Muslim other, making the silent American interlocutor both the silent witness of a confession and a possibly threatening presence. The text is a claustrophobic construct, inspired by Camus’ *The Fall* (1956),² and yet that novella’s openly binary construction is eventually dismissed and replaced by the shifting grounds of uncertainty. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is carefully built as a moment of enunciation based on the tension between the opposite poles of the enunciating “I” and the enunciated “I”, the enunciating “I” is an economics lecturer at the local university in Lahore, known for his political commitment against Operation Enduring Freedom, ensconced in a tea shop in Anarkali addressing his potential assassin, while the enunciated “I” is Changez, the “modern-day janissary” (Hamid, 2007: 173), the remembered “I”, whose political awareness is gradual yet violent. The novel’s opening sentences illustrate a dual movement of assertion and rebuttal of duality and difference:

Excuse me sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I’m a lover of America. I notice that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact, you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services. (Hamid, 2007: 1; emphasis in original)

The voice is deceptively straightforward, open and hospitable. The tropes of duality, division, and contradiction abound. Changez the narrator doubles as “Changez”, a personable young Pakistani, engaging in a one-sided dialogue with a silent American “tourist” who himself may — or may not — be that paradigm of duplicity, a secret agent on a “licence to kill” mission. The novel’s first lines introduce the reader to the fundamental strain at work within the text. Just as Changez presents himself both as a linguistic and cultural go-between bridging “America” and Old Lahore, and a menacing figure whose “beard” is the synecdoche for Islamist terrorism, the narrator’s voice equally oscillates between ingratiating and threatening. Changez’s voice seems to embody both the Orientalized voice of the Muslim other, at once fascinating and politely threatening, and the worldly cosmopolitan New Yorker, no longer a Pakistani, but a “brown” citizen of the world. For Delphine Munos, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* describes how the events surrounding 9/11 are “a symptom [...] reveal[ing] the racial melancholia surreptitiously informing today’s ‘new’ versions of the American Dream” (2012: 399). Indeed, the novel points at the hidden fractures of American society after 9/11 and creates spaces of

instability within the narrative. For Mandala White, the “ambiguity of the exchange in the frame narrative functions” is allegorical of the “uncertainties in the globalized world, and the narration itself as an allegory of the attempt to combat paranoia by maintaining control in the face of an increasingly uncertain global space” (2017: 14). Hamid is a novelist of allegories and the metafictional, pointing at the constructed nature of identity discourses.

Hamid’s lines of flight lie less in what is left unspoken or in his narrator’s unreliability, than in Changez’s openness, his highly articulate tone, and his almost excessive, parodic, eloquence. Muneeza Shamsie points out that his American lover’s name, Erica, echoes the syllables of America and that the company for which he works, Underwood Samson, shares the same initials as the United States (M. Shamsie, 2017: 404). The symbolic and implicit are part of the novel’s explicit, involving the reader “in a literary game of misrecognition (and recognition)” (Clements, 2016: 61). The pivotal episode of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers is the occasion for Hamid to describe a radical gesture of deterritorialization: the attacks are not seen as the irruption of the reality of violence disrupting the fiction-making of the American myth, but on the contrary as the irruption of fiction, “the *symbolism* of it all”, into the real:

I turned to the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one — and then the other — of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled* [...]. But at that moment, my thoughts were with the victims of the attack — death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built relationships over multiple episodes — no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had visibly brought America to her knees. (Hamid, 2007: 83; emphasis in original)

9/11 is perceived, at first, by an incredulous Changez through the mediation of fiction as if the historical event underwent a double process of derealization and dehistoricization before being rehistoricized and re-entering the real as a historicized, meaningful, and re-symbolized event. The re-symbolization of 9/11 as Changez perceives it also coincides with its sexualization as America becomes feminine since it is brought to “her” knees, in a gesture of sexual submission and aggression. Moreover, the passage echoes Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of 9/11: “this fantasmatic screen image entered our reality. It is not that reality entered an image; the image entered and shattered our reality” (2002: 16). What Hamid offers in this twice-mediated representation of 9/11 — mediated first as a memory recalled by the framing narrator telling the story and then mediated once more by television repeating the same sequences in loops — is a displacement of 9/11 as a fracture of history. It appears here less as a traumatic event than as another allegory of that event, pointing at the metafictional nature of the text and its claim towards the interpretation of the novel as a fable. The self-reflexive nature of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* points at Hamid’s own interrogation of the world as an allegory, a Borgesian tale founded on the deterritorialization of fiction. Reading and writing as tools of self-invention are central to Hamid’s narrative strategy: *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is another example of the author’s tongue-in-cheek approach to the literal interpretation of the capitalist discourse of self-improvement and social mobility. As Angelia Poon demonstrates, the novel is caught in a “dialectic between the individual subject and historical forces”

(2017: 149): reading and writing provide counter-forces that balance the univocal and centrifugal pull of neo-capitalism. Indeed, “reading literature creates room for creative human interpretation, and it thereby creates space beyond global capitalism’s reach and beyond the narrow, counter-creative logic that global capitalism arguably necessitates” (Naydan, 2016: 100). Alternate spaces are certainly at the centre of Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017), a novel of escape, disillusionment, and recreation of identity.

Exit West offers an even more allegorical representation of the present. The fractured territories of his fiction give way to a form of anti-mimetic writing where labels and references are left out as if the signified of language were erased and the signifiers left free-floating. In this narrative about border-crossings and shifting identities, the central problematic is between erasure and inscription, naming and deleting. Hamid’s writing leans towards the generic and the allegorical as, once again, the opening sentence is programmatic of the whole novel: “In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her” (Hamid, 2017: 1). The indefinite articles and the use of the almost notional plural — these “refugees”, who have no origin, no labels — highlight the book’s propensity to avoid categorization and grouping. The characters’ names, Saeed and Nadia, although Muslim-sounding, do not link them geographically to any particular place on the map: the anonymous city of their youth is located somewhere between the East of the Mediterranean and the Hindu Kush. The reader has to make a not-so-educated guess to situate the plot somewhere between Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq.

Furthermore, Nadia’s “flowing black robe” is never named although one might recognize an abaya. The refusal to name and label is even found in descriptive details such as “the blue tattoo of a small mythological bird” (Hamid, 2017: 9) inked on a woman’s right ankle. Hamid’s refusal to describe certainly underlines his “ludic” approach to mimetic fiction and the power of realistic writing to assign a place. The “exits” westward and the dangerous journeys are not described except as magical moments of border-crossing through mysterious dark doors, and the text even shifts genres and becomes a parody of C. S. Lewis’s children’s fantasy novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), but without the Christian symbolism and the fantasy of the original as the magic, or rather unexplained, element serves as a political allegory. Hamid’s uncoupling of obvious signifiers and signified transforms his text into a protean novel, equally difficult to categorize. It’s only when languages (Igbo) and a Western city (London) are named, that labels and categories reappear as if once in the relative haven of one of the Western world’s most multicultural places, linguistic and religious identities could, paradoxically, be reasserted. Similarly, during the opening chapter, Hamid plays with a series of platitudes: “Location, location, location, the estate agents say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians” (Hamid, 2017: 9). It is as though language as a mimetic tool is itself trapped by the petard of its arbitrary nature: the refusal to label and categorize is Hamid’s ironic strategy to cover the fractured territories of reality.

According to Aamir Mufti, the contemporary Pakistani novel in English confirms “the process of international validation” (2016: 172) by various instances such as the British and American publishing industry, the literary prizes circuit, and, of course, last but not least, the academic world. As the author of these lines, a white European male, I am aware of my — albeit modest — position in the endorsement of Pakistani fiction

in English. Mufti identifies the situation of contemporary South Asian fiction in English as having jumped out the frying pan of Orientalist essentializing and subalternization into the fire of Anglicist globalization. By apparently breaking new aesthetic ground, South Asian novels have, since *Midnight's Children*, provided the former colonial powers with new forms of exploitative images and metaphors of the subcontinent. In other words, although the English novel has been metamorphosed by the incorporation of “chutnified”, “mongrel”, “Hinglish”, and Oriental modes of narrative such as the *Mahabharata* or *The Arabian Nights*, this “tropicalization” of fiction is only superficial and has complied with the expectations of a largely Western audience. Pakistani fiction in English is the flavour of the month, with the added “frisson” of jihadist Islam. Mufti’s book provides a convincing study of the genealogy of “global literature” by tracing its origins to the aesthetics and ideology of Orientalism, and the case he makes of globalization being yet another form of assimilation of exotic elements into mainstream discourse is persuasive. Writers like Hamid, Shamsie, and Aslam, and also Mohammed Hanif and Daniyal Mueenuddin, have demonstrated their awareness of these complex issues at stake first of all with irony, and second by exhibiting precisely a type of aesthetic resistance in their approach to fiction writing. The novels under scrutiny share the same involvement with the politics and history of Pakistan while creating artistic objects wholly alert of their aesthetic tensions.

According to Hamid, “Pakistan is a market-leader [...]. The Most Dangerous Place in the World™” (Granta, 2010: n.p.), while Mohammed Hanif quips that to write about Pakistan the best advice is “Must have mangoes”, before enumerating the metaphorical, political, and poetic uses of this typical South Asian fruit. Moreover, the political stereotyping and “framing” of the South Asian Muslim has been addressed repeatedly by these authors in numerous articles and essays, another proof of the authors’ commitment to deconstructing Western stereotypes. Indeed, for Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin the image of Muslims in Western media is more akin to a “refraction” of fears and misunderstandings amplified to serve a political agenda, than a “reflection of reality” (2011: 3-4). According to Pascal Zinck, novels such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Burnt Shadows* offer “an insight into Islamic terrorism, not perceived as merely a response to Islamophobia, but as a reaction to and a by-product of cultural globalisation” (2010: 1). At the same time, the characters represented in the novels — Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Parvaiz in *Home Fire* — do not share the writers’ predicament and personal trajectories. Indeed, coming from upper-middle-class Anglophone backgrounds, some of them, like Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie, have had the combined advantages of elite education in Pakistan at the Karachi Grammar School, then an international education on a North American or British university campus, thus placing them in the position of the cosmopolitan novelist. In fact, as Sarah Brouillette sums up, quoting Leela Gandhi on Salman Rushdie’s cosmopolitanism, “the figure of the new/postcolonial Indian English novelist is in a deliciously ‘win-win’ situation, speaking from an ‘enviable position’ of simultaneous privilege and dissent, articulating a special kind of subversion that comes with social status” (2007: 87). Like their predecessor Salman Rushdie, the new generation of Pakistani novelists renew “the paradigmatic figure of this privileged simultaneity” (Brouillette, 2007: 87) and as Janet Wilson points out, Hamid’s narratives underscore the “assimilation of Western and Muslim values into a new cultural

synthesis in which global forces sharpen economic divisions while also promoting social mobility and new possibilities for individual self-determination” (2017: 184–85). Indeed, the dominant characteristic of the novelists under scrutiny in this paper is their ability both to educate Western readers “to a certain degree about ‘other’ realities” (Brouillette, 2007: 60) in keeping with a broadly anti-imperialist liberal discourse, while at the same time staying in congruity with the very type of multinational capitalism these writers sometimes appear to denounce. By rising above the apparent paradox of holding a literary “passport that identifies” them “as being from a region of underdevelopment and pain” (Brennan, 1989: 7) and deconstructing national narratives of belonging, contemporary Pakistani novelists make the most of these apparent contradictions.

In conclusion, the contemporary Pakistani novelists under scrutiny here rise above the pitfalls of the dialectic process of Anglicization and Orientalization identified and denounced by Mufti. By embracing the social and political issues that define South Asia such as the impossibility of laying to rest the ghost of partition, the aftermath of the War on Terror on Pakistani society, or the framing of Muslims in the West by the media and extreme political discourse, Pakistani fiction in English furnishes the complex novels demanded by complex times. Perfectly aware of the paradoxical nature of their marginal position, these authors venture beyond the mere allegorization of some national narrative and work well beyond their assigned location of “postcolonial” authors “writing back”. Although postcolonial problematics live on, “the rules of the game have changed” (Morey, 2011) and the novels produced by Pakistani novelists have shifted their dialectics from a colonial/postcolonial historical tension towards a colonialism/globalization tension. Indeed, according to Paul Jay, Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* (2000) offers a new paradox. Although the novel focuses on the disruptive consequences of the forces of economic globalization on an emerging Pakistani middle class struggling for lack of the right social connections it “ends up obfuscating the relationship between these forces and those Pakistan experienced under British rule” (Jay, 2010: 106). Indeed, Hamid’s perceived ambivalence about globalization only underlines the dialectical relationship that binds colonialism and globalization since these two histories are identical (Jay, 2010: 116). And this dialectic defines Pakistani fiction in English. Whether, according to Mufti, Pakistani novelists remain caught up in postcolonial exotic and Orientalization demands remains to be seen, but with the balance of economic power tilting East, and with the spectre of religious nationalism rising in India, Pakistan finds itself, thanks to the forces of history, at the centre of a fine balance. Shamsie’s, Aslam’s, and Hamid’s latest publications seem to have proved that they have transcended the Orientalist/Anglicist oscillation Mufti feared and to have combined entirely in their writing the vernacular traditions of Pakistan and South Asia with the protean form of the global novel. The relationship with English literature is neither agonistic nor subaltern; it is instead, a Baroque, Deleuzian line of flight without origin or centre, a rhizome. Midnight’s children have thrived and multiplied, and now midnight’s grandchildren are the new voices from the Land of the Pure.

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Notes

1. This quotation is taken from “How to Write About Pakistan”, in the online material to accompany *Granta*’s Pakistan issue. Short pieces were contributed anonymously by four novelists, Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Daniyal Mueenuddin, and Kamila Shamsie. This is taken from Part II, written by Shamsie (personal conversation).
2. For the connection with Albert Camus, see Hutton (2016).

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