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Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Written Task Two Outline

Power and Privilege

Research Question: *How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?*

Thesis: In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Moshin Hamid characterizes Americans by the assumptions they make toward the Pakistani immigrant, Changez, in order to critique the detrimental effect that preconceived notions have toward immigrant minorities.

- I. The condescending tone that Hamid uses in the characterization of Americans as ignorant when Changez meets Erica's parents, solidifies Hamid's critique of the pain caused by assumptions.
 - A. "elderly doorman, who adopted a coldly disapproving expression that would not have been out of place on the face of the gatekeeper of one of Lahore's larger mansions had I driven up in a small and rusted automobile" (49)
 1. "Coldly disapproving expression" assumption that Changez is out of place at Erica's apartment setting the mode of distrust and fear and dislike
 2. Portrays immigrants as out of place/ preconceived idea about origin of Changez.
 - B. "'Solid people, don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right?'" (55)
 1. "Raped" dramatic and descriptive diction that makes assumption about Pakistan/ has a painful connotation and association with danger
 2. Tone of condescension characterizes the American as feeling to have a sense of superiority over Changez.
 3. Ignorant and generalized view of Pakistanis
- II. The author uses the symbol of Changez's beard, to show the detrimental effects of assumptions, in conjunction with the assumptions made based on this appearance in order to underscore America's aversion to foreigners.
 - A. "the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on your fellow countrymen. More than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers" (130)
 1. "Verbal abuse" and "strangers" (who are by definition unfamiliar) show assumptions because appearance is the only possible point of judgement
 2. Characterize Americans as ignorant
 3. Beard is a symbol of identity and difference from mainstream American identity.

- B. “at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares.” (130)
 - 1. US = Underwood Samson, Beard = difference from American
 - 2. Characterizes assumptions of America and detrimental effect of beard
 - 3. Beard is a symbol of identity shift away from US
- III. During the conversation between the narrator and the American, Hamid characterizes the American as close-minded by highlighting the assumption he makes tied to the narrator’s appearance to ultimately show the detrimental result of assumptions made by Americans.
 - A. “Perhaps you have drawn certain conclusions from my appearance, my lustrous beard; perhaps you have merely followed the arc of my tale with the uncanny skill of a skeet shooter ... but enough of these speculations!” (76)
 - 1. Assumption about beard (beard motif)
 - 2. Characterizes Americans as ignorant and exclusive
 - 3. Hamid uses the diction “lover” and “American” to establish a tone of uneasiness and suspicion
 - 4. Underscores the idea of assumptions made about thoughts of foreigners toward Americans

How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?

Notorious as a period of unrest and fear, the time surrounding the 9/11 attacks in America sets the backdrop for Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Hillstrom). Similar to other books by Hamid, this novel forms social commentary about America (Mukherjee). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* follows Changez, a young adult from Pakistan as he retells his experiences working at Underwood Samson, a company based in New York, over a meal with an American man at a point later in time. Hamid explores the idea of assumptions and fear in America during the turbulent time around 9/11 through Changez's narrative. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Moshin Hamid characterizes Americans by the assumptions they make toward the Pakistani man, Changez, in order to critique the detrimental effect that preconceived notions have toward immigrant minorities.

The condescending tone that Hamid uses while characterizing Americans as ignorant when Changez meets Erica's parents, solidifies Hamid's critique of the pain caused by assumptions. Erica's parents, upper-class Americans, live in a building with a doorman. Upon arriving at the front of Erica's building, Changez is observed by the "elderly doorman, who adopted a coldly disapproving expression that would not have been out of place on the face of the gatekeeper of one of Lahore's larger mansions had I driven up in a small and rusted automobile" (Changez 49). Through the description of the doorman's face, Hamid illustrates the assumption made by the doorman that Changez does not belong. This assumption is shown through the comparison Hamid makes juxtaposing Changez's arrival to being at a mansion in a "small and rusted automobile." By illustrating Changez as seeming "small and rusted" also

shows how the doorman is condescending toward Changez, thus demonstrating Hamid's critique of the preconceptions made by Americans toward immigrants.

During the meeting between Changez and Erica's parents, Erica's father makes generalizations about Pakistani immigrants portraying the extent to which Americans are blinded by preconceived notions. He believes that Pakistanis are, "'solid people, don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right?'" (55). Erica's father juxtaposes his apparent acceptance of Pakistanis with a harsh critique of Pakistan. This illustrates the thinly veiled ignorance and American aversion toward foreigners due to assumptions. The diction "raped" has a strong negative connotation and implies suffering. The use of this word therefore shows the painful impact of assumptions. Furthermore, the tone used by Erica's father is condescending and sure, characterizing him as close-minded and how he believes in American superiority. Throughout the meeting between Changez and Erica's parents, Hamid illustrates the many assumptions made by the Americans to ultimately provide social commentary on the hypocrisy in American ideals.

The author uses the symbol of Changez's beard, a representation of his shifting identity, in conjunction with the assumptions made based on this appearance to underscore America's aversion to foreigners. On the subway after 9/11 Changez expresses surprise at the "the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on your fellow countrymen. More than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers"(130). Hamid characterizes Americans as blinded by their assumptions as he describes that "strangers" are verbally attacking Changez. Because strangers are attacking him and Hamid specifies "a man of my complexion," the author

makes it clear that these attacks are based off of only his appearance. Because Changez faces this negativity multiple times, Hamid emphasizes both the detrimental compounding impact of assumptions and the widespread aversion to foreigners Americans have. Hamid uses the symbol of the beard to represent Changez's fracturing identity and simultaneous division between him and what is socially accepted in American society.

Hamid explores this further when he describes Changez's experience at Underwood Samson with a beard. He explains how due to his beard, now "at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares" (130). Underwood Samson symbolizes the United States. Because Hamid uses the beard to symbolize Changez's identity splitting from what is accepted at Underwood Samson, the author shows American's exclusivity toward foreigners. Similarly, the "whispers and stares" emphasize the extent to which preconceived beliefs inform behavior of Americans. Hamid couples these elements to construct his commentary on the destructive effect that assumptions have on the immigrant minority.

During the conversation between the narrator and the American, Hamid characterizes the American as close-minded and suspicious by highlighting the assumption he makes tied to the narrator's appearance to ultimately show the detrimental result of assumptions made by Americans. Separate from the story told by Changez, he and an American share a meal in Lahore. During the meal, Changez points out to the American, "perhaps you have drawn certain conclusions from my appearance, my lustrous beard; perhaps you have merely followed the arc of my tale with the uncanny skill of a skeet shooter ... but enough of these speculations!" (76). Hamid points out the effect of Changez's beard to emphasize both the difference between the two sides and the growing tension. Highlighting the beard motif along with the "certain

conclusions” characterizes the American as close-minded. By using the diction “skeet shooter” Hamid portrays the mood of suspicion and danger to show the negative effects of assumptions. Through the conversation between Changez and the American, Hamid makes social commentary critiquing the preconceived notions of Americans.

Despite America’s appearance as a country of freedom, Moshin Hamid explores the reality behind the facade of acceptance (Mukherjee). Hamid characterizes Americans as ignorant when he describes their assumptions made toward Changez due to his looks. This ignorance is a catalyst for polarization and aversion from acceptance. During the transitional time immediately before and after 9/11 when *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* takes place, Hamid follows Changez as he retells his experience in America, which is riddled with ignorance, over dinner with a suspicious American. Throughout this novel, Hamid explores how assumptions made by Americans, whom he describes as an exclusive group, ultimately have a negative impact on Changez.

Word Count: 996

Works Cited

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