Us vs Them

A Critical Analysis of American Society in the Wake of 9/11
As Seen Through Muslim-American Literature

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay explores the dominant rhetoric of American society in the wake of 9/11 as seen through fictional narratives by Muslim-American writers, it also delves into how that rhetoric was shaped by politicians and the media. The novels employed in this essay are The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid, Home Boy by H. M. Naqvi and A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. The essay examines the temporality of the novel, in particular when it comes to historical fiction, and to what extent time is under the author's control. It looks into migration and the myth of return in immigrant writing and the power of nostalgia both in writing and politics, such as with Donald Trump's infamous slogan “Make America Great Again”. Additionally, it analyses the attacks on September 11 as a national trauma that destroyed Americans' illusion of invulnerability and looks at how trauma can be translated in writing. It scrutinises the cultivation of fear both on a domestic and nation-wide scale, in particular it focuses on the fear of the imagined 'other' cultivated by the American administration and media following 9/11. This leads into the legitimisation of war, principally the War on Terror; a war that has cost upwards of $6 trillion as of 2019. It discusses Americans' fear of Muslims and, the oft-forgotten other side of the coin, Muslim-Americans fear of American society at large. Throughout, it looks at how the novels at hand both translate and shape experience, arguing that fictional narratives have the potential power to bridge the gap between Muslim-American immigrants and the rest of American society and increase empathy for an ethnic minority that has, in past years, been painted as the 'radical enemy.'
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"In history it is the thrust of one’s narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one’s details."
-Mohsin Hamid, The Reluctant Fundamentalist

Introduction

On September 11, 2001 four passenger airliners were hijacked. One of the planes was crashed into the Pentagon, one was initially flown toward Washington D.C. but crashed in a field in Pennsylvania and two planes were flown into the north and south towers, respectively, of the World Trade Centre in what has become a social epoch. It is often said that everyone remembers where they were when they saw the fall of the Twin Towers; what has now become iconic imagery of the 21st century. In hindsight, these historic events bear a similar culturally explosive potential to The Crusades and the Inquisition or the Holocaust, at the heart of which lies a similar representation of the hostile Other (Witkowska et al vii-viii). These attacks did not merely alter the geo-political infrastructure of the world but the very idea of the self underwent a drastic alteration as ethnicity and religious identity came under the microscope (Mansoor 8).

America is a multi-cultural society, built up of immigrants from all over the world. Yet the dominant rhetoric of both the American administration and media in the wake of 9/11 was wildly xenophobic and alienated an ethnic minority within the United States with disastrous consequences. This thesis will explore the discourse that followed 9/11 and how it shaped American society, additionally, it will seek to shed light on how literature both translates experience and shapes it by studying said discourse through novels written by Muslim authors. It will explore how trauma fractures time and how the national trauma of 9/11 is translated in the novels at hand. Moreover, it will look at the migration experience and the myth of return before exploring the legitimisation of war through a conscious cultivation of fear of ‘the other.’ The novels employed in this study are The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid, Home Boy by H. M. Naqvi and A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini.

This thesis seeks to explore the possibility of the novel as a tool for societal change, arguing that emotive fictional narratives from the Muslim world have the power to incite empathy for a group of people that has largely been dehumanised in the dominant rhetoric of the 21st century. It argues that narratives from countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan are vital to combat the onslaught of hate speech levelled at people from that region of the world. Additionally, it explores not only Americans’ fear of Muslims but Muslim-Americans’ fear of American society following 9/11.
1. The Effects of 9/11 on American Society

1.1. Media

It can be said that the fall of the Twin Towers, that came so shortly after the start of the new millennium, “began time anew. […] [People] were presented with a new era, the post-9/11 era” (Grusin p. ix). In their 1999 book Remediation, Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter outlined the contradictory aim of the media for immediacy and hypermediacy. At the end of the 1990s, media attempted through the double logic of remediation to both “erase themselves and to proliferate multiple forms and practices of mediation. […] Different technologies of mediation were classified in relation to how close they came to presenting an unmediated reality.” (1). Grusin went on to coin the term “premediation” in his 2010 book which adopted the term as a title, as a counterpart to remediation. The media logic of premediation predates the attacks on September 11 but after the fall of the Twin Towers the logic intensified and deepened. Premediation aims to prevent the global mediasphere from a repeat of the systematic shock that followed 9/11 by “perpetuating an almost constant, low level fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack” (2). The general public of the 21st century demands immediacy from the media. The binary logic of reality, versus mediation is no longer a concern, but rather mobility, connectivity, and flow. ‘The real’ is no longer that which is free of mediation but rather that which is completely enmeshed with various networks of mediation (3).

Mohsin Hamid explores this peculiarly twenty-first century need for immediate coverage of ‘the real’ in his 2007 novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist when Changez, the main protagonist, watches a newscast of American troops executing a “daring raid on a Taliban command post” (Hamid 113). Changez calls the coverage of the raid “partisan and sports-event-like” (113). Broadcasts such as these are immediate and depict events more-or-less as they occur but despite that they can not be considered entirely ‘real’. There is a considerable awareness in the news industry of what attracts views. Media enterprises are a business and as such, what is likely to attract views shapes the news coverage that reaches the public. War, famine, crime, and violence are not considered the norm within society yet those are the stories that dominate the news (Gilkes 317). “What events are reported is not a reflection of the intrinsic importance of those events, but reveals the operation of a complex and artificial set of criteria for selection.” Following the selection of what is to be reported, the information at hand is condensed for publication or broadcast (Fowler 2). H. M. Naqvi also discusses this phenomenon in the novel Home Boy, where the main protagonist, Chuck, a Pakistani man living in New York at the turn of the century, remarks that “the
news was all bad. […] Above all, death recurred on TV, in vivid colour, charred bodies among concrete ruins, like pornography” (56).

The media response to 9/11 was immediate and volatile. The country’s news outlets promoted discourse that, in hindsight, appears facile and xenophobic, that - whether intentionally or unintentionally “worked the citizenry patriotism and anger to a feverish pitch” (Jones 63). In the process, any hope of a serious sociopolitical engagement of the tragedy was dwarfed by the common rhetoric. Ann Coulter wrote an article that was published in the National Review on September 13 2001 where she stated

This is no time to be precious about locating the exact individuals directly involved in this particular terrorist attack […] We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We weren’t punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That’s war. And this is war

This attitude of indifference as to whether innocent people were caught in the crossfire was widespread. The people demanded action without a need for specificity. Even those who were not personally responsible for the terrorist attack were considered a threat or, at best, possible collateral damage. By targeting sites other than military sites the attackers successfully popularised the mindset that “anyone and anywhere is fair game in this ‘new war” (Jones 62). This was the mindset that was most popularly broadcast in the wake of the attacks.

H. M. Naqvi mentions this dominant rhetoric, almost in passing, in Home Boy when Chuck finds himself leafing through dailies and weeklies at a Moroccan’s newsstand. He comes across an oft quoted article published in The New York Post that stated “the response to this unimaginable 21st-century Pearl Harbour should be simple and swift - kill the bastards. […] As for cities or countries that host these worms, bomb them into basketball courts.” (Dunleavy).

The American people were grief-stricken and demanded that someone - anyone - be held accountable. “The charge was led by Fox News but others were not far behind” (Jones 63). The Reluctant Fundamentalist explores this when Changez states that “as a society [America was] unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united [them] with [their attackers]”, instead, the American people “retreated into myths of [their] own difference” (190). The government and media, alike, even “supposedly critical journalists” (190). Lance Morrow, a respected essayist and writer, published an article in Time magazine that bore the title “The Case for Rage and Retribution” in which he unabashedly encouraged people to cultivate their hatred, calling for a “unifying, Pearl Harbor sort of purple American fury--a ruthless indignation that doesn't leak away
in a week or two.” In the article, he professed that “anyone who does not loathe the people who did these things, and the people who cheer them on, is too philosophical for decent company. It's a practical matter, anyway. In war, enemies are enemies” (Morrow).

These media pundits employed loaded and highly emotive language in order to influence a grieving nation by appealing to emotion (Matusitz 190). Bold claims that “this is war” (Coulter) and labelling a group of people as the enemy were designed to invoke a heavily propagandised image of the Muslim world. A U.S. minority was effectively labeled as ‘other’ with vague phrases such as “people like this,” (Eagleburger) playing to American sentiment and consequently paving the way for “political, social, and economic xenophobes to take centre stage without challenge or shame” (Jones 64). The questions of what brought about the September 11 attacks and how America would respond became the most important questions in the months following the events. “The American political landscape has yet to completely recover from the consequences” (64) as will be further discussed in the following chapter.

1.2. Politics

On September 20, 2001, President Bush addressed a joint session of Congress where he condemned the terrorist association al Qaeda, which, he claimed was very influential in Afghanistan, going on to proclaim that “any nation that continues to harbour or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.” In an attempt to assuage criticism from Muslim allies (Haddad et al 3) he addressed Muslims directly, claiming Islam’s teachings “are good and peaceful,” and that “those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah.” Attempting to convince the American people not to single anyone out “for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith” while promising to “give law enforcement the additional tools it needs to track down terror here at home” was always going to be a hard line to tread. The White House maintained that the War on Terrorism is not a war against Islam, but for many Americans this distinction proved difficult to grasp (Haddad et al 3). H. M. Naqvi artfully juxtaposes the president’s broadcast words with the reality many Muslims faced in the wake of 9/11. As President Bush’s address rings out in the background, promising that America “will define its times, not be defined by them,” Chuck, AC, and Jimbo find themselves held at gunpoint by FBI agents for suspected terrorist activity (Naqvi 102). Under these circumstances, the protagonists’ reality lends a satirical edge to Bush’s promise that “this will not be an age of terror. This will be an age of liberty here and across the world.”

In the years following the terror attacks on September 11th, reality for Muslim-American
immigrants has shifted and morphed. According to the FBI’s annually tabulated data concerning hate crime in the United States there was a surge in reported hate crimes against Muslims immediately following the terror attacks of 9/11. There had been 28 reports of such crimes in the year 2000 but in 2001 the number of reported crimes skyrocketed to 481\(^1\) (Levin). However, as H. M. Naqvi’s scene of Chuck, AC, and Jimbo’s arrest depicts, Muslim-American immigrants do not only face discrimination from the general masses, but are also systematically oppressed by authorities and federal agencies.

This trend in anti-Muslim sentiment was employed by Republicans in the 2008, and to a lesser extent in the 2012, presidential elections in America. During the 2008 presidential campaign rumours began to circulate that Democrat Barack Obama was Muslim\(^2\). Building on his middle name, Hussain, a fringe group known as the Birthers claimed Obama’s birth certificate was falsified, accusing him of not being a “natural-born citizen”\(^3\) and therefore constitutionally ineligible to be president\(^4\) (Pham 86). Dalia Mogahed\(^5\), said in 2008 that Gallup’s data showed that only 34 percent of Americans claimed to have no prejudice against Muslims. Obama’s opponents actively employed these anti-Muslim sentiments in an attempt to render him untrustworthy in the eyes of the public.

When Trump ran for president in 2016 he sought support from the same conservative groups who had long challenged Obama’s competency as president\(^6\). Trump’s willingness to make

\(^{1}\)It is worth noting that other government data, such as The Bureau of Justice Statistics which does not rely on official police reports but rather on almost 200,000 residential crime surveys “indicate a far higher annual average of hate crime […] with over half stating that they never reported such offences to the police”. After the initial spike in 2001, the number of reported hate crimes against Muslim immigrants receded again and between the years 2002 and 2015 the reports ranged between 105 and 160 annually, still a much higher average than that of the years preceding the attacks on 9/11.

\(^{2}\)Google searches of the phrase “is Obama Muslim” and other comparable phrases first noticeably spiked in January and February 2008, just prior to Obama’s official announcement that he was running for president. The surge can be attributed to the so-called “madrassa story” that claimed he had attended a radical madrassa while living in Indonesia (Giardina 138) as well as a photograph that surfaced of him wearing a turban during a senatorial visit to Kenya in 2006 (MacAskill). Another spike occurred in October and November of the same year, leading up to the election.

\(^{3}\)A “natural-born citizen” is a term coined by the Birther movement, meaning a person who is born to two United States citizens as well as being born within the United States, as opposed to a “born citizen” who only needs to be either.

\(^{4}\)The rumours gained enough ground that in July 2009, six months after Obama was sworn in, 58 percent of self-identified Republicans claimed they were unsure whether Obama was born in the United States (Giardina 138)

\(^{5}\)President Obama’s advisor on Muslim affairs and chairman for the Gallup Centre for Muslim Studies from 2006 to 2012.

\(^{6}\)The 2016 elections featured the widest gap since 1980 between college-educated and non-college-educated white
explicitly racist and sexist remarks during the campaign, paired with the presence of an African American president and the fact that he was up against the first major-party female nominee, made him an appealing option to less educated white voters, who tend to exhibit higher levels of both racism and sexism (Schaffner 10; Glick et al. 433). Consequently, it can be said that Donald Trump is among the “political, social, and economic xenophobes” (Jones 64) that 9/11 aided in taking centre stage. In fact, it did not take Donald Trump long to follow through on his xenophobic policies. Trump was sworn into office on January 20, 2017 (Smith) and seven days later, on January 27, he employed the “Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” While the order does not explicitly identify Islam or Muslims as the primary target of immigration restriction, the countries believed to be of “particular concern” are all countries of Muslim-majority. This has lent the executive order the popular name of the “Muslim Ban” in common vernacular (Ayoub and Beydoun 224). “For Muslims, especially those remembering the wounds of the post-9/11 era, the Muslim Ban singled another state-sanctioned attack on their faith and community” (226).

voters’ choice of candidates. While Trump had only a 4 point advantage over Clinton among white voters with a college degree, his margin among non-college educated whites was nearly 40 points (Schaffner 9-10). The reason for this was a subject of much debate, with two primary explanations being offered. Some claim that the economic recovery that took place during Obama’s presidency left behind America’s working class and that Trump’s populist economic message that focused on protectionism resonated with this group. The second explanation is that racism and sexism was a deciding line in the election.

7 The Executive Order calls for a “suspension on issuance of visas and other immigration benefits to nationals of countries of particular concern,” and claims the purpose of this is to “protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States” (Trump.)

8 Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

9 The Executive Order also contains a clause of exception for refugees of “religious minorities” within the subjected states.

10 Trump, himself, also referred to it as such at every step before its enactment (Ayoub and Beydoun 225)
2. 9/11 in the Internal World of the Novel

2.1. Temporality of the Novel

“You know how it ends: Everybody dies” (Beigbeder 1). Thus begins the novel Windows on the World by Frédéric Beigbeder and it manages to encapsulate the experience of reading 9/11 fiction in a way few other lines do. The reader knows, in most cases before they even begin reading, that the novel in their hands is unlikely to end with everyone unscathed. That is the nature of books centred around a historical tragedy. H. M. Naqvi begins his novel Home Boy in a way that is not dissimilar; in a way, beginning at the end: “We’d become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We weren’t before” (1). By beginning the novel in such a way the narrator cements the idea that this novel is about a specific event with which the reader is presumed to be intimately familiar. This cold opening also functions to upset the temporality of the novel from its very beginning and manufactures a sort of intimacy between the narrator and the reader by this shared knowledge of where the novel is headed (Quay and Damico 126). 9/11 can not be escaped, even in the interior world that is the novel and by starting out with the consequences of the events that will later come to pass the narrator refuses to allow the reader to delude themselves into believing that escape is possible. Biegbeder expands on this point later on in his novel when he states that although this may be jolting “it is more appalling still to allow you to imagine what became of them [the victims]” (272).

Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist does not begin in a way as jolting as the works previously mentioned, instead he eases the reader into the narrative. Changez, the main protagonist, starts the novel out by introducing himself to an unnamed American in a busy Lahore marketplace. As he attempts to assure the American that there is no reason to be frightened of him as he is “a lover of America” (1) so, too, does he assure the reader of this.

Hamid completed the first draft of The Reluctant Fundamentalist in the summer of 2001, before the September 11 attacks occurred (Hamid March 2007). He had set out to explore the experiences of alienation that migrants face in the United States but found that after the attacks occurred he could not ignore “the political and social upheaval” 9/11 had launched. He felt that “just as in [the] exterior world, there was no escaping the effects of September 11 in the interior world that [is the] novel” (Shlezinger 9). It took seven years and as many drafts for the novel to emerge in its published form (Hamid March 2007) giving Hamid ample time to explore the ripple effects this hypermediated shock had on the world around it. Thusly Hamid manages to play on the expectations of the reader, knowing that his work will be viewed through the lens of a post 9/11 audience, who will project their own experiences of the subject matter onto the text. And who,
additionally, are likely to have their own preconceived notions of Muslim immigrants in America.

The story unfolds over the period of a day and is written in monologue style as Changez unravels the story of his life in America to the unnamed American. Hamid makes use of the frame narrative, weaving Changez’s story into his conversation with the American, whose words are solely related to the reader through Changez himself. The purpose of this is threefold. Firstly, as alluded to, the reader gets to know Changez as the American does and is thereby introduced to him as a stranger they gradually learn more about. Secondly, this forces the audience to engage in an active reading, “[calling] upon [them] to judge the novel’s outcome and shape its ending” (Hamid, March 2007). The form allows Hamid “to mirror the mutual suspicion with which America and Pakistan (or the Muslim world) look at one another” (Hamid, March 2007) and creates a dynamic in which the reader is forced to question the narrative. Thirdly, the frame narrative allows Changez to consider events in hindsight. His experiences are not relayed to the reader as they occur but rather as he now views them. This creates a kind of camaraderie between Changez and the reader since both the reader and the protagonist are, at least partially, aware of where the story is headed. This enhances the sense of foreshadowing that runs throughout the novel. Hamid overtly plays with this dynamic, at no point lulling the reader into a false sense of security. On the contrary, whenever Changez’s story of his life in America is going smoothly he deliberately disrupts the temporality of the text with overt statements, such as: “how quickly my sense of self-satisfaction would later disappear” (73).

A direct parallel can be drawn between these instances in The Reluctant Fundamentalist and certain scenes in H.M. Naqvi’s Home Boy. Although most of the latter novel occurs in a post 9/11 New York where time passes in a linear fashion, Naqvi affords the reader glimpses of the world as Chuck knew it before the fall of the World Trade Centre. These instances are filtered through the double lens of the narrator and the reader, both of whom are aware of what is to come, lending the text a similar edge as the one achieved by Hamid through his use of the frame narrative. The picture Naqvi paints of New York before the fall of the Twin Towers is a slightly idealised version, viewed through the haze of nostalgia. The reader is told that “institutionalized racism was only a few generations old and latitudinally deep,” (15) suggesting that it is a relic of the not-so-distant past, but that “in New York you felt you were no different from anybody else; you were your own man; you were free” (15). There is a certain amount of romanticism to be found in these descriptions and although Chuck admits that “New York could be a lonely place” (16) he manages to find pockets of joy in places where he feels no different from the next man. Then, just as Hamid does, he disrupts the scene with Chuck stating that “over the course of a year, these places became fewer and farther between” (16).
Imbedding the narrative with the consequences of an event before the event itself has been allowed to make its introduction disrupts the temporality of the text and unsettles the reader. “Trauma destroys time” (Stolorow 158) and by breaking up the linearity of the timeline, the author is capable of capturing the way in which trauma and grief transcend time, affecting not only the present and possible future but also shifting a person’s perspective of the past. Khaled Hosseini makes use of this when leading up to the breaking point of his novel, A Thousand Splendid Suns, when one of his main protagonists, Laila, is reunited with her childhood love, Tariq. The scene stands out as a stark contrast to the rest of the novel, which progresses in a linear fashion. It is emotionally charged and one of the rare instances in the novel where the reader feels a sense of hope blooming. However, in this scene, Hosseini intermittently disturbs the narrative flow, inserting the events that followed so that the reader experiences them simultaneously (325-335). As Laila tells Tariq of his illegitimate child so, too, does her son tell her husband of her visitor. This serves a twofold purpose. First, it effectively quenches the hope the reader may have otherwise have felt throughout reading of Tariq’s visit, effectively replacing it with a sense of foreshadowing and dread. Second, it mimics how Laila is likely to see the events, looking back on them. It is unlikely that she would ever be able to untwine the memories of Tariq’s return and the subsequent trauma. The two scenes are entangled in a way that exists outside “the standard sun-kissed chronology of events” (DeLillo 85).

9/11 was not only experienced as an individual trauma by those who lost loved ones in the attacks. The destruction of landmarks and bodies was projected onto television screens across the world on a loop and dominated Western news cycles. America was brought to a standstill; catapulted into a state of national trauma. “Paralleling the responses of victims of individual trauma, [Americans’] illusion of invulnerability was destroyed” (Janoff-Bulman et al 326). In an essay titled “In the Ruins of the Future”, published less than two months after the attacks, Don DeLillo argues that at the conclusion of the twentieth century America had firmly established itself as a powerhouse of technological and economic might that functioned permanently “in the future”. “This futurity is emblematized by the Twin Towers,” (Gourley 2) a symbol of America’s economic dominance. Through the fall of the towers, America was visibly brought to its knees (Hamid 83). DeLillo goes even further, arguing that it was “the high gloss of [America’s] modernity” that drew the attackers’ fury. Stating that “The terrorists of September 11 [wanted] to bring back the past” (DeLillo 2001). If that was indeed their goal then it may be argued that they succeeded in bringing about a return to the past, in certain aspects. “The Bush administration’s strategy in response to 9/11 reflected old and deep patterns of American attitudes to the outside world, and right-wing American attitudes to other Americans” (Lieven 1). This was paired with an active and conscious fanning of
patriotism by both politicians and the media. Mohsin Hamid discusses this visible shift in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* when Changez returns to America from Manila. He says American flags “invaded New York after the attacks”, all seeming to proclaim “We are America […] the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath” (90). In fact, Anatol Lieven, has argued that patriotism may be a misnomer although it is the way in which most Americans prefer to discuss their attachment to their country (Lieven 3). Instead, he labels it nationalism and argues that “[t]he chauvinist, religiously, and racially bigoted sides of American nationalism […] [undermine] the ability of American democracy to conduct reasonable discussion of policies and interests” (2). When Donald Trump ran for president he appealed to the far-right wing of America, playing off the bigotry that had been allowed to fester in the wake of 9/11. He engaged in explicitly hostile racial rhetoric that appealed to lower class, uneducated, white Americans (Schaffner 9-10), bolstering this group’s perception of “racial distinctiveness and disadvantage” (Valentino et al 758). When Trump announced his candidacy, he described America as a nation who was falling behind and blamed this largely on America’s supposedly lax immigration policy (Trump 2015). Throughout his campaign he employed a wildly nationalistic sense of nostalgia which can be encapsulated in his slogan: “Make America Great Again.” It is a mark of the same “dangerous nostalgia” that Changez felt America increasingly gave into in the wake of 9/11, stating that he “had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time [he] was struck by its determination to look back” (Hamid 130-131). No matter the dangers of this nostalgia and exactly what renaissance Trump was looking to bring about, the longing to return, whether it be to a geographic location or to a state of being when things seemed simpler, is something most people can relate to. It is a unifying idea, appealing to wide array of people, and a theme that many immigrant writers elect to explore.

2.2. Migration and the Myth of Return

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Home Boy* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are all novels of return, depicting what Dany Laferrière has called “the voyager’s two great moments” - that is: departure and return (Ireland 23). This sets up a dialect between contrasting concepts associated with these two poles: “rupture and reconnection, loss and recovery, home and exile, uprooting and belonging” (23). It emphasises the idea that home is a place one can return to, “both in the geographical and emotional senses” (23). Tamara Palmer Seiler describes this two-way nature of the immigrant journey as a “voyage of transformation whose direction is both away from and toward home” (100). In this sense, recent accounts of immigration may be viewed as contemporary
versions of archetypal voyages and homecomings such as those of Odysseus or the prodigal son (Ireland 24). However, these modern accounts of return often lack the happy traditional denouement of the prodigal son’s homecoming (29). Instead, the emigrant’s return is viewed “as the outcome of a failed migration experience which did not yield the expected benefits” (Cassarino 255). That is true of both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Boy.*

The plot lines in these novels run parallel, they both depict Pakistani men who temporarily thrive in the metropolis of New York City, whose life is thrown into a flux after the fall of the Twin Towers and who subsequently return to Pakistan. Furthermore, they both explore the chasm between the representation of the city - that has reached mythological status in popular culture - and the reality of their circumstances. The New York of their imaginings, viewable only through the narrator’s haze of nostalgia, is a city to whom all can belong. As Chuck says: “you could […] spend ten years in Britain and not feel British, but after spending ten months in New York, you were a New Yorker, an original settler” (Naqvi 15) This thought is paralleled by Changez who, when reminiscing about the city, states: “I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker” (Hamid 37). Yet, such convictions become untenable in the aftermath of 9/11. The reader watches on as New York falls into the clutches of the same narcissistic and acutely nationalist rhetoric as the rest of America, that was “gripped by a growing and self-righteous rage in those weeks of September and October” (Hamid 106). Changez, in an ironic twist on his allegorical name, tries his hardest to ignore the changes 9/11 sparked in American society. He clings to his father’s belief that the social upheaval is of a temporary nature and attempts to convince himself that the stories he hears of Muslim men disappearing, “perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse” are mostly untrue (107). Both Chuck and Changez seek normalcy in the wake of 9/11, Changez clad in his “armor of denial” (108) and Chuck clinging to his belief “that there [is] something heroic in persisting, carrying on, in returning to routine, to revelry” (Naqvi 6). The narrative follows a similar path, down to both protagonists being called an Arab by malicious members of the public in a location they previously considered relatively safe. In *Home Boy* the word is hyphenated and partially italicised: “A-rabs” (23). The hostile manner in which it is said is then further emphasised by the narrator who repeats it to himself, stating that “it was the first time [he’d] heard it spoken that way, like a dagger thrust and turned” (23). In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist,* Changez remarks that the “encounter had an intensity that was for [him] unprecedented” (134). In both novels this instance serves as a turning point where the protagonist is forced to come to grips with the fact that despite their bid for normalcy, “things [are] changing” (Naqvi 24). New York is no longer a place in which they feel at home and, as Chuck stares out at the empty expanse of his New York apartment for the last time, he appears to recant his earlier
The theme of return is rarely as simple as geographic location and immigrant fiction features many a protagonist who journeys back to their native land only to discover their homecoming far more problematic than they had imagined. It is therefore often referred to as ‘the myth of return.’ In the words of Émile Ollivier, “going back to one’s past is truly painful when everything has changed” (Ireland 29). That is not necessarily to say that the native land itself has undergone a dramatic change, often protagonists will find that although much remains the same, they are the ones that have undergone a transformation and thusly the feeling they longed for evades them, even upon their return. Hamid explores this phenomenon when Changez temporarily returns to Pakistan to visit his family. He recalls “the Americanness of [his] own gaze” (Hamid 140) as he looked upon the house he had grown up in. He is both saddened and shamed at the shabbiness of his childhood home, feeling that it “smacked of lowliness” (141). He views Lahore through the eyes of a foreigner, but not just any foreigner, rather “that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American” who annoyed him so (141). When in Chile, Changez reflects on what he perceives as his fragility of identity. He feels that he lacks “a stable core” and is unsure where he belongs, “in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither” (168). He identifies with the Janissaries, “Christian boys […] captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army” (172) feeling that his work in America goes directly against the grain of who he is by birth. He comes to the conclusion that he “had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world” (177) and he refuses to be a part of it any longer. The supposed failure of his migration experience is emphasised by a phone call to his brother, in which he is informed that, having been fired, his family will look after him. He does “not say that [he] had hoped to be the one looking after them” (183). After returning to Pakistan, America remains a focus point for Changez who notes that “it is not always
possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred […] something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us” (197). Particularly, he remains focused on Erica, the girl with whom he fell in love, stating that “[he] brought something of her with [him] to Lahore - or perhaps […] lost something of [himself] to her that [he] was unable to relocate in the city of [his] birth” (195). His return to Pakistan can be seen as a revival, putting an end to the sense of estrangement he experienced while in America. Yet it is worth noting that his focus remains resolutely on America. He is of the belief that America needs to be stopped “in the interest not only of the rest of humanity” but also in the interest of America itself (190). He inspires and engages in gatherings labeled “anti-American” by Western media (203) and because of this he is “plagued by paranoia” that an emissary will be sent to intimidate him “or worse” (208). Changez is the product of two contrasting cultures and his return to Pakistan is a return only to a geographic location, his mind remains focused on America.

Interestingly, H. M. Naqvi allows Chuck’s return to Karachi to remain inexplicit. The reader follows the protagonist’s thought process as he reaches the conclusion that he will leave America but the moment of departure is depicted only through Chuck’s words: “Then, when it was time to go, I left” (Naqvi 214). Instead of detailing his geographic return, the author makes a temporal return and, just as he began at the end, he ends with the beginning; with Chuck’s arrival in America. The text is marked with a sudden shift from the first person singular pronoun, to the second person. This accomplishes two things, firstly a sense of detachment from Chuck and secondly, the inclusion of the reader who may experience this as a direct address to them and therefore experience Chuck’s feelings as their own. The passage is only two pages long but wildly emotive as the protagonist moves from disappointment as New York fails to meet the expectation exacerbated by the mythology surrounding it, to “profound sentimentality” when thinking of Karachi. “Then the road inclines, and when you look up, you see spires and masts and growths of iron. You recognize the Empire State Building from the movies, the Citicorp Tower, the Chrysler building, and when you glance south, you see the world-famous World Trade Center” (215) the loneliness and despair abate, replaced by elation. “This is it, you think, America, land of the free, from sea to shining sea” (215). The words read as satirical when preceded by the hardships Chuck has been dealt by America and serve to emphasise the mythological nature of the idea of America as the immigrant’s utopia. The novel concludes with the line: “You start humming, ‘Start spreading the news…’ You realize you never knew all the words” (215). This functions as a reminder to the reader that Chuck will never truly belong in America; he bears the mark of an outsider; someone who doesn’t know the words.

There are two main types of homecoming to consider when it comes to immigrant writing of
return: “imaginative return through memory and actual journeys to the homeland” (Ireland 24). Both can be seen in Khaled Hosseini’s novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The text explores the struggle of women in Afghanistan under fluctuating rule with a story that spans three decades, taking place in the years 1973-2003. There are two main protagonists in the novel, Mariam and Laila; two drastically different women with vastly different upbringings who find themselves married to the same man. Mariam was born in a *kolba* just outside of Herat, the third-largest city in Afghanistan, but at fifteen she is married to a man who transports her to Kabul, the country’s capitol, where she lives out the rest of her life. Mariam never makes the return journey to the place of her birth, the return is done by proxy, with Laila visiting in her stead. It can therefore be said that it is a homecoming through imaginative return. In a way, Laila’s return to the *kolba* is not a return to a geographic location but a return to Mariam who was her sanctuary in the years she spent married to Rasheed. “[There], Laila can lay her cheek on the softness of Mariam’s lap again, can feel Mariam swaying back and forth, reciting verses from the Koran, can feel the words vibrating down Mariam’s body, to her knees, and into her own ears” (Hosseini 389). Although there is a sense of mourning to the text, Hosseini manages to evade the danger of succumbing to grief or paralysing nostalgia, instead managing to bring about closure for both Laila and the reader. Through Laila, Mariam also receives a long overdue apology from her father; an apology that can by no means turn back the hands of time but that manages to provide some relief for the wound that had been allowed to fester between them for all those years.

After her brief visit to Herat, Laila returns to Kabul, the city of her birth. She does so not only for her own sake but the sake of her mother, who wished, above all else, to be there when Afghanistan was finally free; who wished that her sons could see their dreams come true through her eyes. So, too, does Laila wish for her parents to see a free Kabul through her eyes (378). In April 2003 the drought that plagued Afghanistan finally ends, the rain symbolising renewal and rebirth; the washing away of the old and the possible growth of a prosperous future. She longs for her parents to see the changes Kabul has undergone but, like Jalil’s letter to Mariam, “Kabul’s penance has arrived too late” (398). Her return to the city is not entirely faultless, as she struggles to reconcile herself to the fact that “the warlords have been allowed back to Kabul” but she “has decided she will not be crippled by resentment” and so it warrants only about a page’s worth of text (398). Overall, the narrative concludes in a hopelessly optimistic way, a decision that will be further discussed in the following chapters.
3. The West vs The Rest

3.1. The Cultivation of Fear

Fear can take many forms. “[T]here is rational and imaginary fear; there is fear that paralyzes and fear that excites active retaliation; there is fear that is hardwired and fear that is induced by specific historic circumstances; […] there is fear that serves the powerful and fear that mobilises against the powerful” (Prewitt et al 1130). In A Thousand Splendid Suns Mariam lives in a constant state of fear of her husband; “of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament [and] his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path” (97-98). After four years of marriage she sees clearly just “how much a woman [can] tolerate when she [is] afraid” (97). The reader is afforded several glimpses of this all consuming fear that grips Mariam in the face of Rasheed’s abuse, a fear she likens to the fear of a goat, released in a tiger’s cage (234). It is this build up of paralysing, rational fear that lends the first time she acts against Rasheed such a monumental feeling. When she fears for Laila rather than herself, she is compelled into action and as she brings the shovel down on Rasheed for the second and last time the thought crosses her mind that for the first time she is taking action and making her own decisions regarding the course of her life (341). Rasheed rules through fear on a domestic scale, much as the Taliban are shown to rule nationwide.

Fear also ruled America in the wake of 9/11. However, unlike the Taliban who used fear of themselves in order to repress action against them, the American people feared an enemy “difficult to define, characterize or even locate geographically” (Witkowska et al 84). This fear was cultivated by the Bush administration who strongly encouraged and imposed a vague and dangerous dichotomy of ‘us vs them’ as demonstrated in Bush’s public address, just over a week after the attacks occurred. “Either you’re with us or you’re with the terrorists” (Bush) he proclaimed, prompting a round of applause. This kind of language, sets up a “binary opposition that excludes all forms of the in-between and therefore requires great simplifications, […] inappropriate to a multicultural society” (Witkowska et al 84-85). As depicted in the Media chapter of this thesis, the media, at large, perpetrated the same kind of vague and dangerous discourse. The idea of Muslims as dangerous ‘subjects’ or the unknown ‘other’ was propagated by the media and American government alike. This imagined identity of ‘other’ demanded that they be “identified, scrutinized and either rejected or changed” (85). Changez, who previously believed himself impervious to the consequences of this rhetoric because of his privilege (Hamid 107-108), notes the difference in people’s perceptions of him as soon as he grows a beard. “It is remarkable” he notes to the
American “the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on your fellow countrymen” (148). Refusing to conform identifies Changez as a threat to the American people at large and thus someone to be rejected. This sudden shift in how Muslim-American immigrants are viewed is studied in both The Reluctant Fundamentalist and Home Boy but the realisation of this change in reality evades Chuck until he finds himself imprisoned. “In prison,” the narrator states, “I finally got it. I understood that just like three black men were gangbangers, and three Jews a conspiracy, three Muslims had become a sleeper cell.” One day, he imagines the pendulum will swing back and public apologies issued, “[i]n the interim, however, [he] threatened order, threatened civilization. In the interim, [he] too had to adhere to an unwritten code” (Naqvi 121).

Hamid translates this fear of a nation to the reader through foreshadowing, constantly reminding the reader that Changez’s life in America will not have a happy ending. However, the reader does not only experience a sense of foreboding when it comes to Changez’s story of America, but furthermore regarding how he and the American to whom he tells his story will part. The two characters “transcend any representation of real individuals” becoming instead the symbolic agents of the “us vs them” or “the West vs the rest” dichotomy (Witkowska et al 86). As the waiter pays increasing attention to the pair, the American repeatedly reaches for his presumed gun, and Changez’s superficially friendly remarks get ever more sinister, the reader is not certain who is the hunter and who the hunted. Hamid has remarked that this is because of premeditation that proliferates “multiple remediations of the future, both to maintain a low level fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock […] experienced on 9/11” (Grusin 4). People have been led to believe that politically-motivated homicide is “as likely to kill [them] as cancer or cholesterol […] [they] have been encouraged to lose a sense of perspective” and so they are already afraid (Hamid 2007).

H. M. Naqvi remarks on the result of this cultivated fear during the scene that depicts the arrest of Chuck, AC, and Jimbo in Home Boy. He ascertains that although Chuck and AC are aware that Jimbo is what he terms a “gentle giant” he is a large man, “the sort you may not want trailing you in a dark alley.” And as the events of that day transpire “with the momentum of inevitability,” with Jimbo thundering down the stairs at Mohammed Shah’s house in Connecticut, Chuck theorises that “maybe Holt [one of the FBI agents questioning them] felt as if he were in a dark alley,” prompting him to draw his gun (101). He later questions the inevitability of their arrest, throwing out questions to which he has no answer, and to which perhaps none exist:
[What] if AC had cooperated with the feds like a sane human being or Jimbo had not come charging down the stairs like the Light Brigade? What if we had left earlier? What if we hadn’t left [New York] at all? And although nobody said it, I am certain that the following question was in the back of everybody’s mind: what if 9/11 never happened? (174)

In *Home Boy*, in particular, the fear of American society is depicted as a two-way street; white Americans’ fear of the vaguely depicted ‘enemy’ and Muslim-Americans’ fear of the social climate and authorities, each feeding off the other. After his release from prison Chuck remarks that the authorities give him “existential heebie-jeebies”, they have, to him, “become what scarecrows or clowns [are] to some kids, avatars of the Bogeyman.” (197). He remembers when a police presence was reassuring but that sense of reassurance has been replaced by fear and the feeling of being a marked man (205). Traumatised and shocked after the jail experience, Chuck feels homeless. The city where he once felt at home has turned to a mighty stranger and he is unsure when or whether he will feel safe there again. “Maybe it’s just a phase, maybe it’ll pass and things will return to normal, or maybe […] history will keep repeating itself” (205-206). It is this fear, paranoia and profound sense of loneliness that drives him to move back to Karachi; trauma forcing him to escape. In contrast to that, it is not a personal confrontation with racism, violence or discrimination that prompts Changez’s return to Lahore but rather the “political action undertaken and justified as a consequence of 9/11” (Witkowska et al 89). When he watches U.S. bombs rain down on Afghanistan, Changez feels betrayed: “Afghanistan was Pakistan’s neighbour, our friend, and a fellow Muslim nation besides” (Hamid 113). Viewing himself as a “servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship” to his own (90) is the driving force behind his return. Even in the last true moments the reader is shown of America it is made clear how firmly the nation finds itself in the clutches of fear, as Changez’s jacket, left behind as a symbolic offering for Erica - a wish for warmth, causes a security alert (191).

3.2. The Legitimisation of War

“I stared as one - and then the other - of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled” (Hamid 82-83) says Changez to his American companion, whose disgust at this reaction becomes immediately apparent. He goes on to explain that he “was caught up in the symbolism of it all” and that, at that moment, the victims of the attack were not on his mind (83). When the American reluctantly admits to feeling the same sense of joy when seeing “American munitions laying waste to the structure of [his] enemies” Changez responds: “But you
are at war, you say? Yes, you have a point. I was not at war with America” (84). Yet, although not an outright war, Changez has conflicting ideologies to those of the American war machine as is made clear to the reader when Changez says that he “had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world” (177). Interfering in the affairs of others to the point where Changez claims that America played a central role in each of the major conflicts that ringed Asia, if not through the deployment of troops then through finance (177).

In an impromptu history lecture, held at a bar, AC recalls how the Mujahideen fought the Soviets in Afghanistan “with World War II rifles” until America supplied them with Stinger missiles and AK-47s. “We invited them to Washington” he says “and, ah, compared them to the Founding Fathers. They were the good guys, chum. Osama B. was one of them” (Naqvi 10). As he continues the disquisition, AC moves on to the Taliban, deeming them the Mujahideen’s progeny who were “hailed as heroes” when they first swept through Afghanistan, bringing with them order for the first time in decades (10). They soon revealed another side to themselves, transmogrifying into the villains of modern civilisation, but AC states “they’re not much different from their fathers - brutes with guns - except this time they’re on the wrong side of history” (10).

Afghanistan’s shifting leadership is depicted in much more detail in A Thousand Splendid Suns. The reader is told of the murders of government officials by the Soviet forces, who, upon seizing power, promise to bring about “a glorious new era in the history of” Afghanistan (Hosseini 100). While characters within the novel have differing views on the Soviet occupation and some of the atrocities the armed forces committed are mentioned “by and large the book presents the Soviet occupation as an ineffective attempt to bring Afghanistan into modernity by ‘liberating women, abolishing forced marriage, raising minimum marriage age, etc.’” (Fitzpatrick 249). Indeed, Laila’s father tells her that the Soviets’ desire to create opportunities for women is “one of the reasons people […] took up arms [against the Soviets] in the first place” (Hosseini 133). The Cold War is never mentioned and only alluded to a couple of times throughout the text. The first of these instances is when Rasheed says not to expect help from America; that once the Soviets “collapsed” Afghanistan stopped being of use to them (206). This sentiment is echoed in Home Boy by AC who states that, to the best of his recollection, “some guy in [president Bush’s] administration” referred to the last “great” conflict of the Cold War as “‘the obscure Afghan civil war’” but that by then “everybody had lost interest in the region” (Naqvi 9).

When the Soviets left Kabul, people gathered on the streets to watch “the line of tanks, armored trucks, and jeeps” leave the city (Hosseini 152). “The jihad was over” (157). What stands out to a reader, at least somewhat, familiar with the shifting power dynamics and wars of Afghanistan, is the people’s cautious optimism every time a new regime is replaced that this time
will be the last time. This time Afghanistan will know peace. Time and again the reader watches on as the people are proven wrong. The Mujahideen, who had united in the fight to rid Afghanistan of the Soviets, fell victim to the troublesome marriage of guns and ego (168) and, “armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy [they] found the enemy in each other” (169). A devastating civil war broke out, displacing millions of Afghans. Many fled for Pakistan which, in 2018, was still home to, at minimum, 1.38 million registered Afghan refugees and likely over a million who were outside the formal registration system (Hashim). Despite this, Laila’s mother remains a devout believer in the Mujahideen, prompting Laila to remark that “they would stay until the war ended and they would stay for whatever came after war” (Hosseini 149).

The arrival of the Taliban is celebrated by Rasheed. Even in the unlikely event that the reader had never heard of the Taliban before picking up this particular novel, Rasheed’s loathsome demeanour and domestic abuse has invoked the reader’s contempt long before this point. His resolute belief that the Taliban are pure and incorruptible and that they will bring “peace and order” (267) therefore foreshadows that whatever the Taliban may bring, it will not be peace. The Taliban seized control of Kabul and introduced a “hard-line version of Islam,” banning women from work and implementing Islamic punishments such as stoning and amputations (“Afghanistan profile”). The Taliban's rise to power did not prompt U.S. involvement until the attacks of September 11.

On September 18, 2001 George W. Bush signed into law a joint resolution, authorising the use of force against those responsible for the attacks on 9/11 (Pub. L. No. 107-40). On September 20 he addressed a joint session of congress and the American people, identifying al Qaeda as the perpetrators of the attack. Furthermore, he stated that “The leadership of al Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country.” He went on to make several demands of the Taliban, including that they “[d]eliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land” or “share in their fate.” However, Afghanistan was not the only country of supposed concern for the Bush administration and he went on to proclaim that the War on Terror may start with al Qaeda but it “will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated” (Bush). The United States, who had cut down on military expenditure since the Cold War, used the attacks on September 11 as an excuse to implement the rearmament program, as called for in a report issued by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) 12 months prior. The report, titled *Rebuilding America's Defences*, proposed a major and sustained increase in military funding, an aggressive arms buildup and a more extensive projection of US power abroad (Gibbs 318-319). The fear of American society as a whole, expertly cultivated by the Bush administration, has allowed the United States government to spend a staggering amount on the War on Terror. The government has not carried
out a comprehensive accounting of the cost of the war but the recently published Afghanistan Papers state that the war in Afghanistan, alone, has cost around $1 trillion (Whitlock) and Business Insider reports that according to the same source, the Costs of War Project at Brown University, the total cost of the War on Terror has exceeded $6 trillion (Zeballos-Roig) as of 2019.

Hamid likens Changez’s experience of watching the United States military “with their twenty-first-century weaponry” fighting against the “ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesmen below” to the film Terminator “but with the roles reversed so that the machines were cast as heroes” (113). For Americans, belonging, as they do to “a country that has not fought a war on its own soil in living memory” (144) the concept of living in a country occupied by hostile troops is an abstract one. For Laila, who lost her parents in a military strike, the framing of the war as a necessary evil that will bring about a positive change is abhorrent. She reasons with herself that

Maybe this is necessary. Maybe there will be hope when Bush’s bombs stop falling. But she cannot bring herself to say it, not when what happened to Babi and Mammy is happening to someone now in Afghanistan, not when some unsuspecting girl or boy back home has just been orphaned by a rocket as she was. Laila cannot bring herself to say it. It’s hard to rejoice. It seems hypocritical, perverse. (Hosseini 375)

But despite Laila’s reluctance to view the U.S. invasion as a thing that is in any way positive A Thousand Splendid Suns reaffirms the American enterprise in Afghanistan “as a well-intentioned and necessary occurrence” (Fitzpatrick 250). The book ends in 2003 with the Taliban supposedly ousted and Afghanistan in the midst of being rebuilt thanks to the presence of the American army. In reality, things are not quite so simple. Although Taliban forces were removed from Kabul they remained active in much of the country and the U.S. army and Nato are still actively involved in Afghanistan with protracted peace talks between the Taliban and the U.S. having broken down as recently as September 2019 (“Afghanistan profile”). But as Changez says, “In history it is the thrust of one’s narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one’s details” (Hamid 135).
4. The Novel as a Tool for Societal Change

The path of violence, chosen by the American administration in the wake of 9/11 has, throughout this essay, been shown to have widespread support in American society. That is not to say there were no critics of this path. American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler, has ardently argued against the military violence and retribution that followed this experience of great loss and vulnerability. She has argued that the attacks ought to have been viewed as an opportunity to “recognize how mutual vulnerability and loss link us to the greater global community” (Gauthier 4). This opinion is echoed by Changez in The Reluctant Fundamentalist when he claims that America, as a society, was “unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united [them] with those who attacked [them]” choosing instead to retreat into myths of their own difference (Hamid 190). From Butler's perspective, the attacks brought a reality to American society that had been far-removed from them in years past, and created conditions of similarity that had the possibility of enabling “Americans to sympathetically identify with the many suffering others previously beyond their scope of consideration” (Gauthier 4). The rhetoric of fear that has throughout this essay been shown to be the dominant voice of both American politics and media after 9/11 swallowed up any hope of the attacks resulting in increased empathy. That is perhaps understandable; “as various writers have pointed out, one’s ability to empathize is sorely tested when one is under duress” (2).

Additionally, it is hard to empathise with statistics. In October 2019, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan released figures “showing record-high levels of civilian casualties in the third quarter of 2019.” They documented 8,239 civilian casualties (2,563 killed and 5,676 injured) in the first nine months of 2019 (UNAMA). These statistics are staggering but easily forgotten. Hamid raises this very point through his protagonist when Changez rationalises his reaction to the fall of the Twin Towers. “Death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes” (Hamid 83) he says. This is precisely why the novels discussed in this thesis are more than simply texts of fiction. They are possible tools in offsetting the way Muslims are often depicted in Western culture. They work against the popular rhetoric of Muslims being nothing more than “crazed and destitute radicals” (116) by giving a deeply emotive and humanising account of Muslim experience both in the West and East. The very fact that the narrative is fictional allows a reader who may have preconceived notions regarding Muslims to detach from the fear of the so-called ‘radical Islamic terrorist’ brought on by the dangerous ‘us vs them’ rhetoric and empathise with the characters in a way they may previously have been unable to.

The 2018 edition of A Thousand Splendid Suns includes a postscript by the author, Khaled
Hosseini. There he discusses how, following the publication of his first novel, *The Kite Runner*, he received letters from readers all around the globe, moved to action by his writing and seeking ways in which they could help the people of Afghanistan, either through financial or other means. “In those letters [he] saw the unique ability that fiction has to connect people who dress differently or practice different religions” through universal themes and human experiences, such as “friendship, guilt, forgiveness, loss and atonement” (Hosseini 408). He also knew that following up a novel that incited such response would be a difficult task to undertake but depicting the need Afghanistan has of its women became the imperative behind the writing of his second novel. It is his attempt to explore the inner lives of Afghan women “and look for the very ordinary humanity beneath their veils” in the hope that through doing so he may leave the reader with a “sense of compassion and empathy for Afghan women” whose suffering he claims “has been matched by very few groups in recent world history” (412). The narrative does have its faults, notably the depiction of the Muslim man as the cruel oppressor of women and the glorification and supposed necessity of foreign occupation in Afghanistan (Fitzpatrick 248-250) but that does not negate the validity of the text and its central goal. Despite its faults Hosseini does manage to capture the resilience of the Afghan people, in particular Afghan women, who, despite their lives being “marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief […] find a way to survive, to go on” (384). The narrative follows the protagonists through a difficult life's journey, inciting empathy from the reader at every step. As Binyavanga Wainaina wrote in his memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, “The world is divided into the sounds of onethings and the sounds of manythings.” “One bee does not sound like a swarm of bees” (16); the narrative of two women's suffering does not invoke the same response as the phrase ‘8,239 civilian casualties in 2019’ or ‘1.38 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan.’

A research conducted by P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp in 2012 found that emotional transportation influences readers’ reactions in terms of changes in empathy. That is not to say that every fictional narrative will provoke sympathy or empathy with the reader. Characters may behave in ways the reader disapproves of and consequently they are not sympathetic towards them. However, the research showed that fiction has a greater potential of eliciting an empathetic response with the reader than non-fictional texts. Transportation into fictional narratives causes people to sympathise through the characters’ felt emotions, while sympathy for people in non-fiction can create a felt obligation in the reader to act against something they are powerless to stop, which results in lower empathy (Bal et al 9). Another explanation is that non-fiction requires people to suspend their disbelief while fiction allows the reader to become engaged in the story without having to question the absolute truth of the narrative. These changes in a person's empathy are guided by an *absolute sleeper effect* and may therefore take some time to present themselves.
“[T]he process of transformation of an individual needs time to unfold. […] The effects of fictional narrative experience may flourish under an incubation period” in which people think back on and relive the story they have read. Throughout this incubation period “changes in empathy become internalized and part of the self-concept” (9-10). This all serves to prove Changez’s earlier words that death is most moving when it is fictional and occurring to a character with whom one has built up a relationship (Hamid 83).
Conclusion

The attacks on 9/11 occurred almost a decade ago. A decade that has been marked by distrust, fear and marginalisation. During that decade a vocal strand of American society, prompted and lead by their government and media, has largely retreated into myths of their own difference and superiority as showcased throughout this thesis. It is essential to the progress of the world as a whole to combat these nationalistic ideas; to look beyond where we come from and seek an outlook in which “the old differentials between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and a new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival” (Gauthier 2). Narratives such as the ones discussed in this thesis have the possibility to help the world work towards that goal. Unifying themes in fictional narratives help bridge the imagined gap created by differences in religion or countries of origin by humanising a group of people that has been painted as the enemy of Western civilisation. America is a multi-cultural society, built up of immigrants from all over the world and that should be celebrated instead of dismissed.

This thesis has explored the dominant rhetoric of American politics and media and how that rhetoric may be shifted and shaped through novels written by Muslim authors. It has discussed the national trauma of the September 11 attacks, the fragmentation of time that trauma causes and how said trauma is translated through writing; a trauma that fiction may help society heal from. This goal has been made explicit both throughout the thesis and the novels at hand. As Hamid wrote in the penultimate paragraph of The Reluctant Fundamentalist, “you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorist, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (208-209).

This goal is not an easy one to reach - working against the dominant rhetoric of the last decade - but mutual vulnerability and loss has the possibility of linking a person to the greater global community. The process of transformation of an individual needs time to unfold and a societal change of this nature will take even longer. However, it is not only a goal worth working towards but a conclusion that needs to be reached if the world is ever to heal from the chasm between the East and the West, exacerbated by the fall of the Twin Towers. There is a desperate need for a change in perspective and, in the words of Mohsin Hamid, “power comes from becoming change” (110).
Works Cited


Wainaina, Binyavanga. *One Day I Will Write about This Place: a Memoir*. Farafina, 2013.
