

The View from the Borderlands: U.S. Foreign Policy and September 11th

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Two significant contributions to the September 11th political dialogue are Arundhati Roy's essay "The Algebra of Infinite Justice" and Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The South Asian perspectives supplied by both Roy and Hamid are valuable to American readers because the authors present ideas not generally acknowledged in mainstream American media. The critical analyses offered by Roy and Hamid focus on U.S. foreign policy and its connection to the September 11th attacks. The authors are concerned with how the United States conducts itself in the world politically, economically, and militarily. Both examine the harmful consequences of U.S. foreign policy in developing countries, and use Afghanistan as an example.

Anger and an impetus for immediate action after September 11, 2001 led the United States government to channel its energies into a plan for retribution that evolved into a war on terror. Arundhati Roy's essay "The Algebra of Infinite Justice" and Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* both assess America's reaction to September 11th from an Indian and a Pakistani perspective, respectively. Both writings examine the consequences of September 11th and question the U.S.'s authority and influence in the world. Each author analyzes the injurious aspects of U.S. political and economic conduct in other countries, especially Afghanistan, and associate this in part with the terrorist attacks of 2001. It is important to examine U.S. foreign policies because of the power and influence the U.S. wields in the world. This paper portrays two perspectives from the Indian subcontinent, an area of interest to the U.S. and the rest of the world because of its nuclear power, and examines the ways in which the writings of Roy and Hamid set out to educate readers about the many different responses to September 11th. Although Hamid and Roy present their ideas through different literary mediums, their ideas correspond and contribute to the political dialogue concerning September 11th.

Roy's tone is fierce as she presents arguments and facts about September 11th and U.S. foreign policy in order to educate readers, while Hamid writes about the experiences of a Muslim living in the United States in order to reveal a perspective not generally known to most Americans. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* describes the experiences of a Pakistani man named Changez who lives and works in America at the time of September 11th. After attending Princeton, Changez is employed at Underwood Samson, a prestigious firm in New York City that values commerce. At

the beginning of the novel he states that he is a “lover of America,” although his analysis of the U.S. is colored by the conflicting emotions he experiences as a foreigner living in New York City.¹ Changez begins to feel as though his contribution to the American economy has betrayed his own values and feelings of nationalism because, “finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power.”² Changez is confronted with the idea that his work in the United States is similar to that of the historical role of the janissaries, who were Christian boys seized by the Ottoman Turks and later trained to fight in Muslim armies.³ Changez is troubled with the possibility that he has abandoned his values for the sake of his financially stable career in the U.S, and his decision to ultimately leave the U.S. results from his confusion about where he belongs.

Changez’s personal convictions and his experiences of racial discrimination from suspicious and resentful U.S. citizens post-September 11th convince him to leave America and return to his home in Pakistan. Changez is angry with the U.S. government’s reaction to the September 11th attacks for a variety of reasons. Changez is personally connected to some of the geographic locations facing attack or intimidation by the U.S. after September 11th. Even though he is well paid for his work, Changez is conflicted because he is unwittingly promoting U.S. interests at a time when he is upset by its invasion of Afghanistan and the potential threat to his own country of Pakistan. His concern for his family and his homeland guide American readers toward a more empathic perspective, one where the U.S. response to September 11th is seen not as righteous retaliation but as disruptive and possibly dangerous for actual people. The novel offers a sense of understanding and connection on a more personal scale than can be supplied by factual sources alone, for instance when Changez describes the rumors he has heard about attacks on Pakistani cabdrivers and FBI raids on Muslim residences.

Roy also evaluates some of the deleterious aspects of the U.S. response after September 11th. After the attacks, America sought payback and launched itself quickly into a war. However, as Roy points out, the U.S. government seemed unsure about who exactly the enemy was. In order to convince the American people to support its military endeavors, the government persuaded its people that “America’s commitment to freedom and democracy and the American Way of Life” were being attacked.⁴ It was easier to direct anger and grief into a war against terror in nations singled out for Islamic fundamentalist activity and ostensible connections to the attacks, without understanding that “terrorism has no country.”⁵ Roy asks what exactly America has avenged with its war and how more violence is going to stop the threat of terrorism. Roy implies that U.S. reasons for going to war on the claim of upholding its democratic values are hypocritical, because the United States has supported dictators and terrorists in the past to achieve its own particular foreign policy aims. Roy identifies those who died in “Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Panama, at the hands of all the

¹ Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 156.

³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴ Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2001), 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

terrorists, dictators, and genocidists who the American government supported, trained, bankrolled, and supplied with arms.”⁶

Hamid’s novel and Roy’s essay evaluate U.S. political and economic authority around the world and make a historical and material connection between the power of the United States and the September 11th attacks. Changez smiles when he first hears about the destruction of New York’s World Trade Center. This is clearly intended to shock readers. Changez explains that he smiles because the terrorist attacks symbolized a blow to the economic power of the U.S., a power he has seen used to further U.S. political and military interests at the cost of the welfare of other countries. He is not thinking of the innocent people killed but of the symbolism of the great towers coming down. Changez’s perspective provides readers with an understanding of why some parts of the world feel antagonistic toward America’s military actions and economic capability. Hamid’s novel is written as a monologue, where Changez recounts his experiences to a silent American listener in his homeland of Pakistan. The American’s reactions, in the form of facial expressions and body language, are revealed to the reader by the narrator. After Changez tells how he smiles, he notices that his listener’s hand has “clenched into a fist.”⁷ Changez explains that he is “no sociopath,” and his smile at the attack on a symbol of America’s economic power is just as perplexing to him as it is disturbing to his listener.⁸

The novel offers new ways in which to look at the attacks and view some of the possible motives behind September 11th. Hamid shows how U.S. actions aggravated the already existing tensions and hostility that some countries in the Middle East felt toward the United States. Changez’s experiences as a Pakistani give him an inside perspective into some of the reasons why other countries are resentful toward the United States. After realizing that he does not want to work for an American company anymore, Changez admits that he had “always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world,” identifying specifically the domineering ways in which the U.S. interfered with the concerns of other countries.⁹ Similarly, Roy in her essay points out that instead of the attacks being an assault on American democracy and freedom, the hijackers’ targets were the symbols of U.S. political and economic authority.

Roy also explores the military, economic, and political dominance of the U.S. in her essay and links its foreign policy to September 11th. Contrary to the belief held by many Americans after September 11th, Roy notes that the “American people ought to know that it is not them, but their government’s policies that are so hated.”¹⁰ The U.S. war on terror was based on the idea that U.S. freedoms such as free speech and religion had to be defended from future terrorist attacks, but Roy exposes past actions of the U.S. government that were contrary to these values it claimed to protect, such as “military and economic terrorism, insurgency, military dictatorship, religious bigotry, and unimaginable genocide.”¹¹ Roy suggests that damaging U.S. foreign policies might be one of the reasons for the anger that led the terrorists of September 11, 2001 to

⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁷ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 72.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 156.

¹⁰ Roy, *Power Politics*, 108.

¹¹ Ibid.

attack symbols of U.S. economic and military authority. Roy reveals a lack of surprise at the September 11th attacks in her essay, something that Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shares when he smiles as he first sees the news of the destruction of the World Trade Center on television. She explains that the terrorist attacks were an indication of a far greater problem, which the U.S. helped to create through its despised military and economic policies.

One of the examples used in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and “The Algebra of Infinite Justice” to further argue that the U.S.’s foreign policies played a part in provoking September 11th is the case of Afghanistan. Changez feels angry when he first learns of American troops invading Afghanistan after September 11th to take control of a Taliban command post, because Afghanistan is a neighbor of his home of Pakistan and is a fellow Muslim country. Changez’s anger is fueled not only by watching the news and observing the “mismatch between the American bombers with their twenty-first century weaponry and the ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesmen,” but also by the fact that the U.S. helped to create some of the problems in Afghanistan that made living conditions worse for the Afghan people.¹² Hamid and Roy both wonder how the U.S. is going to accomplish its goal of eradicating terrorism by spreading fear and hatred among the citizens of countries it invaded for political reasons after September 11th. For instance, Changez is concerned about the civilians killed in Afghanistan because of their proximity to terrorist groups. From their native countries near Afghanistan, both of these authors are aware of the damage done to civilians while the U.S. attempted to avenge the deaths and destruction in its own country.

Roy describes U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in her article, demonstrating that past interference by the U.S. further pushed Afghanistan into economic ruin and helped to create the Taliban. In the 1970s, the U.S. supported Islamic militant groups in Afghanistan in their fight against the encroaching forces of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, fighting continued in a civil war until the Taliban took control.¹³ After September 11th, the U.S. put pressure on Pakistan to stop supporting Afghanistan, its neighbor and ally, even though U.S. policies, years earlier, had funded and encouraged terrorists in Afghanistan to further American interests. This helps to explain Changez’s anger in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* concerning U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Even though Changez is a fictional character, he speaks for many in his part of the world as well as the Middle East. Roy is disappointed with the lack of U.S. media coverage about its Afghan invasion, and this suggests that the U.S. is not willing to acknowledge that it helped to enable a terrorist group that not only violated human rights in Afghanistan, but contributed to the feelings of distrust and hatred of U.S. policies that were in part responsible for the September 11th attacks.

Arundhati Roy and Mohsin Hamid’s writings significantly contribute to the critical conversation about September 11th and to the political dialogue about some of the detrimental effects of U.S. foreign policies. Roy’s “The Algebra of Infinite Justice” and Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are similar in that they both analyze the impact of U.S. foreign policy before and after September 11th in Afghanistan and in South Asia generally, and they make a connection between the U.S.’s prior political and military actions to the terrorist attacks in 2001. The U.S.’s

¹² Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 99.

¹³ Roy, *Power Politics*, 114.

system of democracy and the prized freedoms of its citizens are important to protect and uphold, but both authors point out that the U.S.'s past interventions in the Middle East have not espoused these values, and thus it must honestly examine and reassess its policies to create healthier and more productive foreign relationships.

References

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