



Telling Stories Sideways. Resentment and Nostalgic (Be)longings in Mohsin Hamid's Novels

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This article uses three novels by Mohsin Hamid – *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008), *Exit West* (2017) and *The Last White Man* (2022) – to describe how nostalgia is experienced in the contemporary world. In these novels, Hamid uses magical realism to portray nostalgia as a tension between dissatisfaction or resentment with a troubled present, often linked to the economic inequalities of capitalist society, and a longing for the restoration of an often idealised past in the future. The misleading appeal of nostalgia, which lures people into a comforting but false attachment to the past, can thus lead to resentment that justifies social discrimination, ethnic or religious violence, or economic exploitation. However, while providing a critical perspective on the restorative aspect of nostalgia, Hamid's work also explores what Svetlana Boym (2001, 2007) defines as its “reflective” character. This dichotomy allows the reader to see that nostalgia is not only an escape into the past or an attempt to revive it, but can also be an inquiry into how to transform its lament into an elegy of growth and connection.

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And false bliss, although false, is bliss.
Fernando Pessoa, *The Poem*

This article examines three of Mohsin Hamid's most important literary works in terms of the pervasive presence of nostalgia in today's world and its contribution to escalating global tensions in the form of racial hatred, ethno-religious conflict and economic inequality. I will discuss how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008), *Exit West* (2017a), and *The Last White Man* (2022) collectively expose the Janus-faced nature of nostalgia as a simultaneously backward-looking and forward-directed emotion. Specifically, this analysis will draw on Svetlana Boym's (2001, 2007) distinction between "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia to examine how these novels manage the delicate tension between these two facets of the same feeling. In both *Exit West* and *The Last White Man*, Hamid articulates the restorative aspect of nostalgia, which seeks to recreate and reclaim an often idealised past. This form of nostalgia, often manifested in the desire to restore lost conditions or reconstruct a sacred historical narrative, reveals its powerful, sometimes disruptive, influence on identity and cultural continuity. Conversely, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* illustrates how this regressive tendency is in tension with the reflexive strain of nostalgia, which does not merely indulge or luxuriate in the past, but also serves as a critical lens through which to interrogate the present and reimagine the future. Hamid poignantly navigates the inherent ambiguities that arise from this friction within nostalgia, deconstructing what is often seen as a harmless personal longing into a profound social commentary. This shift unravels how individuals and communities cope with the complexities of identity, belonging, and displacement amidst the swirling dynamics of political and ethnic conflicts that characterise the contemporary global landscape. Moreover, when interwoven with capitalist imperatives, nostalgia in Hamid's narratives serves as a robust analytical instrument, elucidating the extensive macroeconomic forces that influence the way personal memories and ambitions actively construct lived realities. This nuanced portrayal highlights Hamid's ability to capture and articulate the interplay between inner remembrance or intimate chronicle and collective history, showcasing how such narratives are deeply integrated with broader socio-political currents in an era of relentless change.

Race and migration in unconventional reconfigurations of time and space

In *Exit West*, a fragile romance envelops Saeed and Nadia amidst the chaos of their unnamed homeland,¹ which is under the tyrannical grip of a militant group enforcing religious extremism.² Without "the portals to each other and to the world provided by their mobile phones," (Hamid 2017a, 41) people are stranded in fear as the war engulfs their region and creeps into everyday life.³ In this dystopian reality, rumours begin to circulate about the emergence of doors that serve as more than just "on/off switches in the flow between adjacent places." (Hamid 2017a, 50) These doors transform into

¹ In a region that is presumably Middle-Eastern.

² It is probably Islam, as music is completely banned in the city, in line with Taliban attitudes.

³ Windows, for example, become potential death traps as they either provide an easy path for bullets or shatter into deadly shards.

magical portals, like wormholes piercing through the fabric of reality, allowing instant passage to distant places and an escape from the horrors of their war-ravaged country. Desperate for respite, Saeed and Nadia decide to cross these mystical thresholds in a migratory process that takes them to Mykonos and then to London. Harnessing the enchantment of magical realism, Hamid presents a unique vision of migration that challenges conventional spatial boundaries. The portals create direct links between arbitrary places (in the sense that they are physically independent), transforming the world into a network of connections reminiscent of a Deleuzian rhizome⁴ in which every point is potentially accessible from anywhere. This narrative redefines borders, viewing them not merely as physical demarcations but as constructs intertwined with capital and culture.

Just as the portals in *Exit West* transcend the conventional parameters of Euclidean geometry, a surreal transformation in *The Last White Man* questions the consistency of time and identity. Waking up one day to find that his skin colour has changed dramatically from white to brown, Anders wavers between reality and illusion in the vain hope of “undoing” (Hamid 2022, 6) his Kafkaesque mutation. He longs for his former self, to return to “[the way] he was before,” (Hamid 2022, 6) and perceives the “other man [now] staring him down [...] in the mirror” (Hamid 2022, 6) as an intruder who has taken over his house and snatched away his former life. Although his identity remains essentially unchanged, he realises that his new appearance is shaped by cultural stereotypes and prejudices that alter the way others perceive him. This makes him feel like a “creature that should not exist” (Hamid 2022, 8), an anachronism in a time and place alien to his former self. As he undergoes his physical transformation, Anders becomes aware of the antagonistic reactions of those around him. Everyday interactions become increasingly complex as unnoticed greetings and hostile glances make communication seem like a foreign language. Eye contact, which used to be a simple means of socialising with friends and acquaintances, is now fraught with anxiety as it could be misinterpreted due to the changed perception of his person. The alteration in his skin colour affects not only his appearance, but also his whole social identity. Indeed, his transformation disrupts the perceived continuity of reality for his white peers, for whom he seems to have emerged from another society, perhaps even foreshadowing the arrival of a new one to replace theirs. Familiar surroundings become alien to Anders as he feels transported not to another place but to another time. The power of language in shaping perceptions of reality is demonstrated by Anders’ decision to hide his transition, albeit temporarily, from his family. This strategic choice allows him to maintain a double existence: one rooted in the past, the other burgeoning in the present.⁵ As a narrative device consistent with magical realism, the gradual disappearance of the white “race” straddles the past and the evolving present within a single narrative continuum. It

⁴ Originally a botanical term for a horizontally growing plant stem, the rhizome was used metaphorically by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). The metaphor of the rhizome illustrates a distinct and non-uniform space where metric relationships are not fixed, but can be endlessly rearranged. Described also as a “a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations” (Deleuze 1986, 109-10), this rhizomatic space allows linkages in infinite ways, forming “a pure locus of the possible” (Deleuze 1986, 109-10). Because its unique nature transcends the limitations of perspective, which relies on the solidity and continuity of visible elements, it escapes the established laws of Euclidean geometry. The property of rhizomatic space is that, like an infinite labyrinth, it is capable of folding on itself in numerous directions: “A labyrinth is said to be multiple, etymologically, because it has many folds. The multiple is not merely that which has many parts, but that which is folded in many ways” (Deleuze 1991, 228).

⁵ Upon the revelation of his dramatic transformation, his father’s preference for death over a similar change of skin colour highlights deep-rooted racial anxieties and the fear of otherness.

creates a literary space in which time becomes fluid and societies from different eras seem to flow into each other like currents in the sea.

When Anders discovers that other people are undergoing a similar change in skin colour, gradually taking on varying shades of brown,⁶ the demographic landscape of the country shifts and “the mood in town [changes] more rapidly than its complexion.” (Hamid 2022, 49) The atmosphere becomes charged with the tension of impending conflict and his northern European surroundings⁷ begin to mirror the ethno-religious conflicts of some war-torn Middle Eastern countries. The evidence of unrest he receives on his phone symbolises the clash of worlds, a world of calm that has been lost and a new world of turmoil. This depiction of global chaos becomes incomprehensible to Anders, “impossible to make sense [of]” (Hamid 2022, 81), and emphasises the cognitive dissonance between his personal experiences and the unfolding reality. When the militants, guardians of racial purity, confront Anders and demand that he leave his house, their belief that he has betrayed his ethnic integrity reflects their warped sense of justice. Tragically, they are unable to see beyond their own prejudices to the common humanity of those they deem different.

The woes of global capitalism

Economic instability is the driving force and the pivotal link between the two stories presented so far, both of which are set against the backdrop of countries on the brink of social collapse. The novels interweave these themes and paint a picture of a world struggling with the repercussions of economic inequality and the unstoppable advance of technology. This precarious situation has a profound impact on the characters’ lives, social dynamics and individual psychology. In *Exit West*, Saeed’s parents, who were once financially secure as educators, find themselves bereft of that comfort. The decay of their surroundings is poignantly symbolised by the transformation of their house. Once a majestic example of colonial architecture, resplendent with wealth and elegance, it now stands as a crumbling relic in a neighbourhood that has transitioned from exclusive haven to bustling hub.⁸ Economic difficulties also play a key role in driving migration. Both novels describe how people from impoverished or conflict-ridden areas seek refuge in richer or more stable countries. These respond by “building walls and fences and strengthening their borders” (Hamid 2017a, 51) in an attempt to control the influx of migrants. However, these measures are often portrayed as ineffective, highlighting the complexity of global migration and its underlying causes.⁹

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, a novel that differs from the others examined in this article in its distinctly realist approach, critically examines the impact of the capitalist economic model on social insecurity. It focuses on the journey of Changez, a Pakistani

⁶ It is important to note that Hamid never uses the word “black” to describe the new colour.

⁷ As suggested by the names of his and other characters.

⁸ This decline is reflected in the disappearance of cultural centres (cinemas, bookshops, restaurants, and cafés) that once bustled with life but have now disappeared.

⁹ In this context, mobile phones prove to be a crucial means of communication, offering a semblance of continuity across different places and times. However, this constant connectivity also pushes individuals into the overwhelming expanse of the virtual. *Exit West* explores the psychological strain this can cause, particularly when individuals are exposed to unequal lifestyles. Those living in less fortunate circumstances are bombarded with images of affluence and luxury via their screens, reinforcing feelings of deprivation and resentment. The contrast between their reality and the lavish lifestyles displayed online underscores the deep economic divide and the emotional toll such exposure takes.

citizen who is forced to emigrate to the United States after running into financial difficulties in his home country.¹⁰ The decline in the purchasing power of the average worker and the resulting shrinking of the middle class reflects the impact of Western, particularly American, imperialism on the wealth and power of the local elite.¹¹ The result of this shift, which is not unique to Pakistan but rather reflects a global pattern, is an intensification of social inequality and class polarisation. Hamid metaphorically describes the modern economy as a living organism, evolving from physical labour to greater intellectual and managerial sophistication. In this changing economic landscape, people like Changez, who is symbolised as the “tailbone” (Hamid 2008, 105) of this organism “[who] came from places that were wasting away” (Hamid 2008, 105), have the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the cognitive functions of the economy, provided they possess the required skills and attributes. Changez’s nostalgic quest to restore his family’s lost prosperity in the face of economic hardship brings him to the attention of his employer at Underwood Samson. Jim, who has risen from poverty himself, recognises and appreciates Changez’s hunger for socio-economic progress as a powerful tool for multinational companies to harness and profit from. In Changez’s own words: “Most people I met were taken in by my public persona. Jim was not [...] where I saw shame, he saw opportunity” (Hamid 2008, 19).

As can be seen from this overview, in all three novels an abiding sense of nostalgia for a bygone time or era acts not merely as a backdrop, but as a central fulcrum around which the characters’ motivations, aspirations, and decisions revolve. What follows is a discussion of the extent to which this sentiment is not limited to a wistful recollection of a lost epoch, but rather embodies a visceral yearning to recapture an erstwhile period of prosperity or former heyday. While the characters in these stories seek restitution of a cherished past in which stability and continuity have not yet been lost to the inexorable flux of economic and social change, Hamid’s brilliance lies in identifying such nostalgic endeavours not only as a retrospective longing for what once was, but also as an anticipatory hankering for a potentially recapturable future.

On going “sideways”: nostalgia in contemporary political discourse

In an article for *The Guardian* (2017b), Hamid discusses the profound influence of nostalgia in contemporary society, emphasising its political power to motivate a variety of groups, all driven by a desire to return to what they believe to be a more prosperous past:

As I travel the world on my phone and computer and by foot and aircraft, it seems to me that nostalgia is a terribly potent force at this moment of history. Nostalgia manifests itself in so much of our political rhetoric. Islamic State and al-Qaida call for a return to the imagined glories of the early years of Islam. The Brexit campaign

¹⁰ The novel highlights two major socio-economic challenges in Pakistan: first, stagnant wages have not kept pace with the rising cost of goods and services. This imbalance has led to reduced purchasing power for average citizens, who can barely afford basic necessities. Secondly, the devaluation of the Pakistani rupee against the US dollar has driven up the cost of imports, further straining the financial resources of the population. These factors have not only contributed to a decline in living standards and financial security. They have also led to a dilution of wealth between generations, with each generation less prosperous than the one before. This concept is summarised in Changez’s reflection that “my grandfather could not afford what his father could, and my father could not afford what his father could” (Hamid 2008, 18, emphasis in the original).

¹¹ Businessmen with American connections have undermined the status of these elites, who were originally supported by the British colonialists.

was fought with a rallying cry of taking back control from Brussels, promising a return to the imagined glories of pre-EU Britain. Donald Trump emerged victorious in the US election wearing a baseball cap emblazoned with the words “Make America Great Again,” words chanted by his supporters, envisioning a return to the imagined greatness of an America recently victorious in the second world war. In China and India, too, leaders seek a return to imagined past greatneses, usurped by foreign invaders, colonisers and barbarians. All of these movements are, at heart, projects of restoration. (Hamid 2017b, n.p.)

Hamid’s view coincides with Svetlana Boym’s (2007) observation that the twentieth century consisted of two opposing phases. At the beginning, it was characterised by optimism and utopian dreams, like the dawn of a new day. Over time, however, this optimism faded and gave way to a pervasive sense of nostalgia that “remain[ed] uncannily contemporary” (Boym 2007, 9). On the international stage, political movements soaked in the ink of nostalgia often capitalise on this feeling. They romanticise a past that is seen as more stable and glorious than the present in order to create a sense of longing for a golden age.

Christopher D’Addario notes that although the term “nostalgia” has Greek roots,¹² it was actually coined in the 17th century by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, (1688) who used it to describe the deep homesickness of Swiss mercenaries abroad (2007, 14). This condition was characterised by a longing for home that was triggered by sensory reminders of one’s homeland. Boym expands this concept and defines it not only as a longing for a familiar place, but also for another, often simpler and more idyllic time. This form of nostalgia is an emotional journey back to a beloved past. Importantly, the focus of this nostalgic longing is not necessarily anchored in the authenticity of its temporal or spatial references. Instead, it often manifests itself as an idealised notion or a constructed memory, a phantom domicile that exists more in dreams and wishes than in a tangible reality.

Furthermore, Boym (2001) characterises nostalgia as both retrospective, looking back at the past, and prospective, shaping our visions of the future based on interpretations of the past. In essence, nostalgia attempts to traverse time as if moving through space, moving back and forth between different moments or eras:

Nostalgia [...] can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales. The future of nostalgic longing and progressive thinking is at the center of this inquiry. Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory. (Boym 2001, 12)

The chimerical territory of our nostalgic memories is often selectively shaped by current needs and desires. It can therefore provide crucial insights into our social values and aspirations, as it combines elements of the past, present and future in its composition. Boym uses an abstract cinematic metaphor to better convey her idea of nostalgia: “A double exposure or superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a

¹² A linguistic mosaic of the Greek roots *nóstos* (νόστος, meaning “homecoming”), and *algos* (άλγος, or “pain”).

single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface” (Boym 2001, 8). Nostalgia, as Boym sees it, resists simple or definitive representation and offers “a new understanding of time and space” (Boym 2001, 28). It overlays the present with traces of the past, creating a resonant palimpsest of memory and desire that fluctuates across different temporal contexts.¹³ As our perceptions and experiences change, so do the spaces filled by nostalgia, influenced by the shifting currents of reminiscence and emotion. Nostalgia is thus at odds with the modern perception of time as an irreversible flow moving from past to future without return. Nostalgia disrupts this flow, it does not adhere strictly to linear chronological constraints but oscillates, weaving together strands from both real and imagined circumstances. This weaving blends actual past experiences with idealised, sometimes fictionalised, versions of those experiences. Boym’s insights into nostalgia reveal it as a longing for a past that is not only idealised but is recognized as irrevocably lost, yet this recognition is not necessarily stagnant, it does not immobilise the nostalgic individual. Instead, as Boym suggests, this longing can be dynamically projected forward, affecting future hopes and expectations. Nostalgia thus becomes a creative force, not merely a reactive one; it shapes how we envision and strive towards our future, attempting to reclaim or reconstruct elements perceived as lost.

However, contrasting nostalgia with melancholy,¹⁴ Boym emphasises that whereas melancholy dwells in the solitude of individual consciousness and is often associated with loss and despair, nostalgia can be an empowering emotion capable of permeating both personal and collective memory. Indeed, beyond private sentimentality, nostalgia is woven into the social fabric. More than just a personal feeling, it can become a powerful force that connects individuals to broader historical and cultural narratives, shaping their lives “into a private or collective mythology” (Boym 2001, 10). The shared yearning for an idealised past can significantly influence political agendas and public discourse, colouring the way communities perceive their history and future possibilities. Thus, by understanding how personal stories fit into the larger context of group or national history, one can harness the potential power of nostalgia to shape a future that is consistent with shared values and aspirations. This subjective reweaving of historical meanings and imaginings allows for a flexible interpretation of both past and future, braiding our understanding of history into a flexible tapestry of future outcomes and scenarios tailored to fit both personal narratives and broader socio-political aims. Boym sees nostalgia as a historically contextualised feeling, “a symptom of our age” (Boym 2001, 11) encompassing an inner duality that makes it not an opponent of modernity,

¹³ In *Exit West*, Saeed’s telescope offers a vivid image of the nostalgic intersection of multiple timelines. Observing starlight projected from different historical periods is an authentic journey through time that gives him solace in the turbulence of the present: “On cloudless nights [...] Saeed’s father would sometimes bring out the telescope, and the family would [...] take turns to look up at objects whose light [...] had been emitted before any of these three viewers had been born—light from other centuries, only now reaching Earth. Saeed’s father called this time-travel” (Hamid 2017a, 14). Starlight is an evocative artefact of history, a ghostly echo of the past, each star representing the distant memories and dreams of eras long gone, but still reverberating in the moment. This theme is further explored when Saeed uses a smartphone app to identify celestial bodies. By holding his mobile phone up to the sky, Saeed experiences a juxtaposition of past and present, where technology serves as a modern conduit to historical wonders. The Mars he sees on his screen, a digital image taken at a different time, contrasts with the live view through the telescope, highlighting the temporal disparities between the two observations. It was “more detailed as well, though it was of course a Mars from another moment, a bygone Mars, fixed in memory by the application’s creator” (Hamid 2017a, 15).

¹⁴ Irma Carannante (2019) defines melancholy as “an emotional state resulting from a deep sense of helplessness and sadness.” (Carannante 2019, 208. Translation from Italian into English is mine) In the same study, the scholar points out that the etymology of the word comes from the Greek word *melancholía*, which is composed of *mélas*, *mélanos*, meaning “black,” and *cholé*, meaning “bile,” thus “black bile,” to designate one of the four humours that, according to Greek and Roman medicine, influenced the character and mood of people.

but a complex, inherent part of it similar to the dual nature of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, “doubles and mirror images of one another.” (Boym 2007, 9) Boym’s conceptualisation of nostalgia is essentially utopian, “no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes it is not directed toward the past either, but rather *sideways*. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space.” (Boym 2007, 9, emphasis is mine)

The “sideways” strain that Boym ascribes to the nostalgic subject is key to engaging with Hamid’s literary works. By telling his stories in non-linear reconfigurations of time and space, the author reveals the enigmatic appeal and the paradoxical power of nostalgic narratives. These stories can be as painful as they are comforting, as enlightening as they are befuddling. Nostalgic narratives combine a past (or pasts) that may never have really existed with a future (or futures) that is only a shadow in the realm of fantasy. This arbitrary connection recalls Boym’s analogy of the double exposure in photography, in which a picture is superimposed with its negative. The resulting image is neither authentic to the past nor an accurate predictor of the future. Rather, it is a constructed product of nostalgia, creating a dichotomy between idealised visions of the past and the unyielding realities of the present. Under the weight of our expectations and fears, nostalgia can distort our perception of the fabric of time, producing a hybrid chronology of selective memory, historical revisionism and imagined possibilities. Nostalgia, therefore, is not merely a reflection of our past experiences, but an active force that constructs and reconstructs human experience across the vast panoply of time and space.

The “chronostratic”¹⁵ interplay between individual and collective memory, between reality and imagination positions nostalgia as a powerful cultural and psychological phenomenon. As Boym articulates, its capacity to interlace these various threads – emotional, historical, personal, and communal – can profoundly shape both personal identity and collective ideology. Pankaj Mishra’s (2017) descriptions of economic hardship, perceived inequity and fear of extinction are particularly fertile ground for the infectious power of what Spinoza called sad passions,¹⁶ especially nostalgic feelings of a different, possibly safer and fairer past.¹⁷ Nostalgia’s arbitrary ordering of the emotional

¹⁵ The term originates from the field of geology and stratigraphy. It refers to the study of rock layers and their relationship to geological time and describes the subdivision of rock strata into units based on their age or time of formation. Each chronostratic unit represents a specific geological time interval. The concept seems especially well-suited to articulate the nostalgic process of temporal layering between history and imagination discussed here.

¹⁶ Spinoza (1985) suggests that an individual’s self-awareness emerges from ongoing interactions between the body’s affective dimension – its ability to be influenced by and affect the external world – and its experiences. He defines affect as the body’s reactions that either enhance or limit its power to act, along with the mental perceptions of these reactions. Thus, affect significantly influences the relationship between the body’s sensory and imaginative functions, impacting its capacity for action or encountering obstacles. Joy (*laetitia*) and sadness (*tristitia*), along with desire, constitute the three primary affects in Spinoza’s philosophy. The former is described as a passion that increases the power of the mind, the latter reduces it. All other emotions, such as fear, envy, hope, lust, pity and anger, arise from the interplay and varying degrees of these primary affects. Also, in Spinoza’s philosophy, the concept of affect is inextricably linked to that of conatus. The latter is defined as the effort of everything and everyone to persist in its essence and continue to exist. This effort, which is essentially the true and deep essence of an entity, its instinct, power or force of self-preservation, can be both individual and collective. Michael A. Rosenthal (2008) further observes that, according to Spinoza, our modes of narrating ourselves over time derive from our personal conatus. Historical narratives are thus constructed around these core self-concepts and their development over time, capturing the conatus with varying accuracy.

¹⁷ In *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (2017), Mishra paints a bleak picture of a world consumed by intense competition and the pursuit of material gain within a global, market-centric society. Mishra critically examines the tantalising but deceptive notion of universal wealth and prosperity, which has caused widespread discontent, especially among those who have been left behind in the economic race. Mishra uses Nietzsche’s (2006) expression “men of resentment” to describe embittered people who feel unable to rise in the social hierarchy and who therefore conspire to undermine those who are perceived as more successful. He illustrates how a pervasive sense of insecurity and fear, coupled with inflammatory political rhetoric, has led to the growing global trend of xenophobia and

landscape allows individuals to process their feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction. These emotions often lead to resentment towards scapegoats¹⁸ who are blamed for current difficulties and who also represent a threat to future stability. For example, nostalgia can be a driving force behind violent movements targeting minorities, driven by a desire to restore a society that reflects an imagined past of supposed harmony and grandeur. In this quest for restoration, those perceived as a threat to the desired social unity are often seen as legitimate targets for punishment or marginalisation. Cultural grievances fuelled by nostalgic sentiments oscillate between fractured timeframes in which the past and the future are manipulated to fit storylines of guilt and self-victimisation. These narratives often demand retribution against scapegoats and thus serve as powerful triggers for igniting ethnic, gendered and class-based conflicts.

Restorative nostalgia in *Exit West* and *The Last White Man*

Hamid often constructs fictional scenarios in which an idealised past overlays a present of uncertainty and risk for the future, evoking a deep sense of longing. However, in blending reality and fantasy, Hamid also employs narrative devices such as portals and physical transformations that “transport [his characters] to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be” (Hamid 2017a, 28), allowing him to explore nostalgia from unique and unconventional angles. In *Exit West*, the signs of contemporary discontent are obvious from the very beginning. Nadia is insulted on her motorbike by a man who sees her behaviour as a blatant violation of the traditional gender norms of their society. To him, a woman on a motorbike is a scandal. When Nadia ignores his comments, his reaction escalates into a violent outburst. The man’s anger goes beyond contempt for the transgression of gender stereotypes; it reflects a deep-seated resentment of the changing social dynamics that Nadia’s motorbike riding represents. His indignant remark: “didn’t she know it was obscene for a woman to straddle a bike in that way, had she ever seen anyone else doing it” (Hamid 2017a, 30) illustrates his frustration not only with Nadia’s flouting of gender codes, but also with the wider shift in social values that her actions herald.

intolerance, eroding democratic foundations and leading to the rise of chauvinist and authoritarian regimes, as well as widespread racism and misogyny.

¹⁸ René Girard’s (1989) theory of scapegoating is a critical exploration of how societies deal with internal conflicts and tensions. According to Girard, scapegoating is a mechanism through which communities channel collective frustrations, anxieties, and aggression towards an individual or a group, often without any justification for doing so. This process is not based on the actual guilt of the scapegoat; instead, the scapegoat is chosen as an easy target for the projection of societal issues. Girard sees the roots of scapegoating in religious rituals. Historically, many religions practised literal scapegoating during which an animal or person was symbolically burdened with the sins or problems of the community and then expelled or killed. Girard argues that this ritualistic practice has evolved into a more figurative form of scapegoating, where a person or group becomes the focus of collective blame for wider societal problems: “Such things can happen, especially in our time, but they cannot happen, even today, without the availability of an eminently manipulable mass to be used by the manipulators for their evil purposes, people who will allow themselves to be trapped in the persecutors’ representation of persecution, people capable of belief where the scapegoat is concerned” (Girard 1989, 40). The role of manipulation and the susceptibility of the masses to being manipulated is a crucial aspect of Girard’s theory. He suggests that scapegoating relies on the presence of a highly manipulable group of people. These individuals are swayed by the manipulators or those in positions of authority, such as priests in religious contexts or leaders in political and social spheres. The manipulators create and propagate the illusion of victimisation, convincing the community that the scapegoat is the source of their suffering. This process not only diverts attention from the real issues but also legitimises persecution against the innocent party. Girard’s commentary is particularly poignant in the context of our modern times, where scapegoating and mass manipulation can be amplified by media and technology, reaching a wider audience and creating larger, more polarised groups.

The pervasive fear of the future emerges as a dominant and widespread anxiety. It casts a shadow over societies like a looming storm cloud, creating a powerful and unifying force that transcends geographical and ideological divides. In militant-controlled areas, strict social norms are relentlessly enforced and any deviation is ruthlessly suppressed. The militants wield fear of change as a tool to maintain their tight control over society, especially over migrants, who are depicted as traitors. Those who attempt to escape through the portals are met with swift and brutal consequences, highlighting the militants' self-serving pursuit of power and disregard for the welfare of their people. Similarly, migrants in London are perceived as unwanted and threatening intruders. The locals see them as potential harbingers of economic, cultural and personal upheaval. This fear feeds a nostalgic narrative of rejection, in which the demand for the deportation of migrants reflects the same ruthlessness of the militants, who in turn use the fear of miscegenation made possible by the portals to fuel resentment against migrants. A stark example of this manipulation is a staged attack in Vienna resulting in the massacre of unarmed civilians. This terrorist act is a strategic move to incite further backlash against migrants, including from their own region, and to heighten global hatred and tensions. Recognising similarities between London's hostility and her hometown's militancy, Nadia questions the efficacy of her and Saeed's relocation.¹⁹ Her reflections highlight the persistent nature of prejudice and the universal challenges faced by migrants, revealing a global pattern of fear and discrimination, regardless of their destination. This enmity cuts across ideological lines, and creates an uneasy alliance between militants and nativists, both of whom reject the transformative impact of migration. This echoes the argument posited by Rossella Ciocca and Sabita Manian²⁰ (2021, 20-1; 3) that, despite the technological advances in communication, the modern world is held together more by mutual distrust and fear than by a sense of collective duty and shared destiny.

In *The Last White Man*, Oona's mother is the epitome of the pernicious effects of nostalgia combined with racism, a potent brew that easily feeds into conspiracy theories. As a staunch advocate of ethnocentrism, she believes that the undisputed biological superiority of whites makes them the "elect" (Hamid 2022, 50) and predestined stewards at the top of human hierarchy, the rightful heirs of a once glorious past that is now in decline. After the loss of her husband and son, she perceives the world as increasingly hostile to her group: "A world that did not care and was getting worse all the time, worse and worse, and more and more dangerous, a danger you could see all around you" (Hamid 2022, 23). The fact that her people's skin colour is changing from white to brown reinforces her sense of victimhood and makes her susceptible to far-right, paranoid conspiracy theories. She becomes convinced of a "plot that had been building for [...] decades, maybe for centuries, the plot against their kind, [...] the only people who could not call themselves a people in this country" (Hamid 2022, 50). This belief is so deeply ingrained and impervious to contradictory evidence that rational discussion is futile. Oona's unsuccessful attempts show that arguing with her only deepens the divide: "To argue was to prolong, to engage was to lose." (Hamid 2022, 24) Her intransigent belief in these prejudiced narratives aligns her with the ruthless actions of the militants and

¹⁹ Sabita Manian and Brad Bullock (2020) have noted that "as displaced citizens, [Saeed and Nadia's] home country of exit hardly matters since it is non-Western. [...] Their staying on the margins of the refugee camp in Mykonos does not alter their status, nor do others accept their attempts to adopt the status and role of tourists. They are not true exiles, since they are not expelled by the state or shunned by their culture of birth, yet they share the stigma of exiles who are permanently displaced [...]" (Manian and Brad Bullock 2020, 108).

²⁰ The two scholars refer here to Hannah Arendt's (1968) concept of negative solidarity.

their sympathisers, confronted with the overlapping issues of time, race and generational change in a society undergoing rapid transformation. They feel an immediate need to do something about what they see as forced racial assimilation: “There was no time to wait; [...] If we did not act in this moment, there would be no more moments and we would be gone.” (Hamid 2022, 89) This urgency symbolises the fear of racial integration, which threatens to eradicate their group’s supremacy and, if not resisted in time, to consign them to oblivion. Hamid’s use of magical realism, in this case the spontaneous change in skin colour, forces characters like Oona’s mother to face the unexpected and highlights her intense fear of a future that looks different from the one she anticipated. Her inability to adapt to a changing world fuels persistent prejudice and the adoption of irrational beliefs, highlighting the link between her constructed realities and the breakdown of her sense of security. Conspiratorial fears also surface in the portrayal of the two opposing groups in *Exit West*, the militants and the government. However, although present in both novels, they are subtly woven into the narrative, leaving it open to the reader’s interpretation, much like a canvas inviting personal projection of unconscious fears.

From this perspective, radio as a metaphor for the spread of hate and division in society plays a significant role in both *Exit West* and *The Last White Man*. Oona’s mother is portrayed as an avid listener to conspiratorial and racist radio stations. Hamid also suggests a parallel behaviour among the militants around Nadia and Saeed, in whose hearts and minds the poisonous teachings broadcast over the airwaves also resonate. The radio is thus a channel for the propagation and normalisation of intolerance in society, and serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers of unchecked hatred spread by mass media. Like a noxious gas, it seeps effortlessly into the collective consciousness and poisons it from within. In both novels, the militants are deliberately stripped of individuality and depth, eschewing specific villainy in favour of a broader representation of hostility and dogmatism. They are cast as archetypal antagonists, hollow bogeymen devoid of humanising attributes, their presence an overarching silhouette of hatred and armed bigotry ready to turn to violence at a moment’s notice. Anyone who subscribes to such divisive credos could be considered a militant. The potential for such extremism lies dormant in society, needing only the right frequency to awaken it in the receptive masses.

Ernest Renan, a philosopher renowned for his often controversial ideas, provides valuable insights into the ways in which nostalgia intertwines with notions of national belonging to fuel hostility. Renan (2000) challenges common beliefs about the formation of nations, viewing factors such as race, language and geography as passive elements rather than active architects of a nation’s identity.²¹ Rather, he sees a nation as a “spiritual principle” (Renan 2000, 19) based on both the past and the present: the former as a collective repository of ancestral memories, the latter as a consensus to live together and preserve a shared cultural heritage. From this perspective, Renan compares the development of a nation with the growth of an individual, as both require considerable

²¹ Starting with the concept of race, Renan notes that many nations are the result of the amalgamation of different ethnic groups: “The noblest countries, England, France and Italy, are those in which the blood is most mixed” (Renan 2000, 14). He argues that racial diversity, rather than homogeneity, often characterises most nations. On the subject of linguistic unity, Renan recognises that a common language can strengthen cohesion and contribute to national identity, but rejects the idea that it can forcibly unite a community. He cites Switzerland as an example of a multilingual nation that nevertheless retains a unified national identity. He also criticises the territorial paradigm, which sees nations as entities defined by geographical borders, claiming that “mountains cannot divide up states” (Renan 2000, 18). While geography may outline the physical boundaries of a nation, it does not inherently shape its identity or cohesion.

effort, sacrifice and commitment. National identity is deeply rooted in the shared experience of suffering, which serves as a testing ground for a collective consciousness and unites people in a “common effort” (Renan 2000, 19) to survive. According to the philosopher, in fact, nations do not emerge from peaceful associations of people with common languages or values. Instead, they are often born out of conflict and resistance to oppressive forces that threaten the fabric of the community. Overcoming adversity becomes an integral part of the nation’s cultural heritage, passed on to future generations. These descendants are bound by this legacy and rely on it to validate their existence in the present. To deny this heritage would be to risk losing their claim to the future. The transmission of past glories and the collective will to preserve them are the essence of national identity, whose affection is directly linked to the sacrifices of the ancestors and their contribution to the creation of the nation, which, like a cathedral, is built on its heroic past.²²

If, then, a nation is founded on the relationship between time and memory, Renan goes on to observe that in creating a sense of belonging, nations engage in a selective process of remembering, just as an editor carefully chooses what to include and what to omit from a narrative. A nation’s endurance depends on its ability to preserve certain memories while ignoring others: “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.” (Renan 2000, 11) Selective memory, historical inaccuracies and collective amnesia are critical to maintaining the illusion of a unified and coherent consciousness: the search for historical truths could potentially destroy the nation’s core values by bringing light to uncomfortable revelations about past violence, sacrilege, or injustice.²³

In *The Last White Man*, Oona’s mother is dismissive of the violence perpetrated by the militants and downplays their actions. “Fated to, as her ancestors had been fated to live in eras of war [...] and calamity” (Hamid 2022, 51), she refuses to accept that the attacks were initiated by whites and instead attributes them to enemy mercenaries allegedly hired to discredit the white community. She constructs a conspiratorial narrative in which even in the ranks of the “enemy” there are supposed sympathisers of the white cause who kill members of their own party. In a defence mechanism that leaves her worldview unchallenged, she portrays her group as victims of malevolent outside forces and the militants as the defenders of her race, the harbingers of an upcoming return to a state of moral and social equilibrium in which injustices will be redressed and, more generally, her imagined ideals will be realised. When Oona attempts to challenge her mother’s views, she is met with intense anger and a piercing sense of despair. Oona’s cautious and rational approach makes her mother feel like “drowning and to have no belief at all” (Hamid 2022, 88). At the heart of her mother’s anguish is the existential crisis of accepting doubt to creep in as if she had no firm belief to hold her, no lifeline to connect her to a glorious past and a hopeful future. Her faith, which compels her “to be worthy of her roots” (Hamid 2022, 51), corresponds to Renan’s idea of national belonging as a collective reinterpretation of history combined with a joint aspiration to continue its greatness. The confrontation with the harsh truths of reality,

²² Remarkable personalities and achievements form the basis of national consciousness. Renan succinctly encapsulates this in the Spartan chant: “We are what you were, we will be what you are” (Renan 2000, 19), a seemingly unadorned mantra that epitomises the continuity of nationhood, in which the present is linked to historical antecedents by the obligation to preserve a common cultural heritage for the future.

²³ Renan illustrates this with the example of France: “No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacre that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century” (Renan 2000, 11).

which relentlessly expose the weaknesses in her ideology, is a challenge that Oona's mother cannot face. Her perception of outsiders as a threat to her community triggers a complex psychological and temporal paradox. An example of Orwellian doublethink,²⁴ she asserts that people of colour are free to pursue their aspirations, as long as they do so away from white communities. On the one hand, she rationalises the segregation between white and dark people as a mere preservation of white personal space, claiming that it is a harmless form of separation without supremacist intentions. Yet white superiority is definitely there: "it was not that we were better than them, although we were better than them, how could you deny it" (Hamid 2022, 89). Her skewed perception of reality is maintained through a concoction of selective memory and cognitive dissonance which allows her to conveniently deny and assert white supremacy, in keeping with her nostalgic biases and prejudices. Like a navigator lost in the currents of the present, she longs for the familiar territories of the past, distorting the map of reality to fit her nostalgic journey, a deliberate mixing of facts and timelines in which her idealised and revered history is interwoven with the future she longs for, a seamless golden thread of time that gracefully negates the existence of the "other" or justifies their marginalisation.

Hamid's clever use of magical realism conjures up a metaphorical "cultural" pandemic that dwarfs in power any biological counterpart, exposing the hidden prejudices and anxieties associated with racial blending. The change in skin pigmentation, though physically harmless, becomes a powerful catalyst for the reawakening of nostalgic fears and prejudices. The demographic shift culminating in everyone, including Oona's mother, no longer being white signals the end of an era. The poignant death of Anders' father, the last white man, marks a historical turning point, symbolising the eventual dissolution of white privilege and the beginning of this "new order." When Anders and Oona have a daughter, her grandmother tries to describe to her a bygone era of white supremacy that is now as remote to her granddaughter as a mythical land in a fairy tale. Rather than inspiring a sense of glory, these stories create discomfort in the younger generation and "a potent sense of loss" (Hamid 2022, 178) in her grandmother, underlining the harsh reality that the world she longed for is gone forever. However, the new colour uniformity is not the result of the conscious maturing of cultural and social understanding. Rather, it is a kind of enforced conformity in which the skin colour of the former minority becomes the new norm. This transition to a seemingly harmonious society does not indicate the resolution of internal conflicts or the healing of deep-seated divisions. It is an adaptation born of necessity, a response to the lack of alternatives. The real menace lies not in the change itself or in the presence of diversity, but in the deep-rooted, almost instinctive fear of the other and the innovations they bring. The precariousness of social balance leaves open the possibility that latent prejudices may resurface under new circumstances, which could lead to renewed social instability.

Outgrowing resentment: reflective nostalgia in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

So far, our discussion has centred on a particular kind of nostalgia that, following Boym (2001), can be described as restorative in that it is focused on the reconstruction

²⁴ A mental balancing act in which she simultaneously holds two contradictory beliefs without acknowledging their contradiction.

or revival of what is old or lost in an effort to restore a sense of history and identity. However, Hamid's work recognises the complexity and ambiguity of nostalgia, and that it can also develop in other directions. As mentioned earlier, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores Changez's transition from his family's declining status in Lahore to his integration into the capitalist system of the United States. At Underwood Samson, a symbol of American corporate power, Changez is tasked with focusing strictly on financial "fundamentals" and assessing the value of companies. Sherman, the vice president of Underwood Samson and Jim's subordinate, is passionate about the company's performance-driven ethos: "We're a meritocracy [...]. We believe in being the best. You were the best candidates at the best schools in the country. That's what got you here." (Hamid 2008, 42) This philosophy reflects the essence of the American dream, in which merit is considered the ultimate measure of worth, regardless of race, religion, gender or social background. Underwood Samson's philosophy, as articulated by Sherman, is proof that talent and hard work are recognised and rewarded, and that these are the most important factors for career success. Changez becomes a financial analyst steeped in the ruthless system of financial capitalism, exploring the seductive yet damaging effects of power and the moral dilemmas associated with the pursuit of wealth and prestige. As he immerses himself in the task of business valuation, Changez realises the significant impact of his appraisals. However, this power comes with a keen sense of the resentment and frustration felt by those affected by their financial assessments. This realisation presents Changez with a moral quandary, as he suppresses his compassion for the workers whose jobs may be jeopardised by the pursuit of corporate efficiency, eclipsed by the benefits of his highly paid position.

In this professional landscape of efficiency and unconcerned pragmatism, Changez's background gives him unique advantages. His Pakistani upbringing instilled in him a deep respect and deference to authority and taught him the qualities of loyalty and commitment that make him an exceptionally effective player in the American business environment. His cultural background and the challenges of his upbringing enable him to thrive in a system that values these qualities:

Perhaps it was my ability to function both respectfully and with self-respect in a hierarchical environment, something American youngsters – unlike their Pakistani counterparts – rarely seem trained to do. Whatever the reason, I was aware of an advantage conferred upon me by my foreignness, and I tried to utilize it as much as I could. (Hamid 2008, 50)

Changez's recognition illustrates how his unique cultural perspective and experience enhance his ability to succeed in an environment that highly values his attributes. Juan-Batista, the head of a Chilean publishing house, draws a historical parallel between Changez's experiences under American capitalism and the janissaries of the Ottoman Empire. The janissaries, made up of boys taken from Christian families in the conquered lands and moulded into loyal and fearsome soldiers for the Muslim army, serve as a powerful symbol in his comparison. Juan-Batista points out that Changez, like the janissaries, is conditioned to "disrupt [...]. the lives of others" (Hamid 2008, 158) for an empire to which he did not originally belong. Much like the janissaries, freed from the memories of their former lives, Changez finds himself as a Pakistani immigrant in America detached from his roots. Driven by necessity and ambition, he abandons his personal history and emotional attachment to his homeland to join the Western capitalist "project of domination" (Hamid 2008, 164). In a world where "finance

was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power” (Hamid 2008, 164), the most committed and effective actors often come from poor backgrounds seeking opportunities. Changez leverages his foreignness to become a highly effective instrument of subjugation within the global capitalist structure. This regime turns ethnic diversity into a mechanism for its own sustenance and strength. However, by giving vulnerable and impoverished groups an apparent advantage in terms of access and thus the opportunity to succeed, it inadvertently provokes jealousy or envy in some whites. These individuals may see people of other ethnicities as intruders or undeserving beneficiaries, leading to a society divided by resentment and misunderstanding, where racism and hate speech can flourish.

At the same time, Changez faces the envy of less fortunate immigrants who have not been as successful in integrating into their new society. They see him as a traitor, a sentiment that echoes the contempt expressed by the militants in *Exit West* for those who leave for the fertile pastures of wealthier nations. This is crystallised in a unique episode in which Changez encounters a Filipino man at the wheel of a jeepney during a car ride. Changez is struck by the man’s open hostility and piercing contempt, a vision so unsettling that it burrows into his mind. The intensity of the unspoken accusation hangs over Changez like an unwelcome shadow. It casts a pall over his spirit that, on the surface at least, seems disproportionate to its cause. He feels as if he was “play-acting when in reality [he] ought to be making [his] way home.” (Hamid 2008, 75) It brands him as a sell-out, or an actor who, in the midst of his performance, becomes estranged from the character he is supposed to be portraying. The thespian’s contradiction aptly conveys Changez’s existential predicament: in his pursuit of the American dream, he finds himself reciting lines that increasingly alienate him from the narrative of his ancestral identity, even as he strides along the affluent boulevards of his adopted homeland. This encounter illustrates the common tensions faced by immigrants who succeed abroad, the constant negotiation of identity between the achievement of personal goals and a sense of betrayal or alienation from those who cling to the traditional values and struggles of their home culture. For Changez, this moment is a poignant reminder of the uncertainty that underlies the permanent balancing act of his dual existence: between maintaining his original cultural identity or assimilating into his new environment.

Changez’s romantic involvement with Erica serves as a metaphorical representation of his desire to integrate into American society. However, Erica is ensnared by the tendrils of nostalgia for her deceased boyfriend Chris, an archetype of the “Old World appeal” (Hamid 2008, 34). This lingering sorrow has carved a deep rift in Erica, a “crack inside her” (Hamid 2008, 67) that makes Changez a Sisyphean contender against the looming spectre of her past love. Changez himself confesses to feeling overshadowed by “the presence of a rival – albeit a dead one – with whom I feared I could never compete” (Hamid 2008, 90). This struggle is so palpable that Changez occasionally experiences the unsettling sensation of being haunted, as if touched by a ghost. The restorative nature of Erica’s nostalgia, which is consuming, self-sustaining and “just feed[ing] on itself” (Hamid 2008, 111), she describes as “go[ing] in circles” (Hamid 2008, 111). This unyielding grip of the past prevents her from building a genuine emotional connection with Changez and thwarts any embracing intimacy with him. In an attempt to bridge this gap, Changez suggests that Erica imagine him as Chris in a moment of closeness, “pretend” (113) he is him. Changez’s proposal is a clarion call to Erica to overcome the illusory time barrier that prevents her from accepting him into her life. At first, this

approach seems to work. Later, however, Changez worries that his tactics have inadvertently deepened Erica's descent into nostalgia, further alienating her from the present and widening the gap between them. Erica's inability to let go of Chris' ghost and immerse herself in reality with Changez is emblematic of an enduring grief, a pathological form of melancholia encompassing broader motifs of loss, memory and the challenge of embracing change. Changez's proposal, though driven by a desire for connection, may paradoxically have reinforced Erica's escape into her idyllic past.

Changez exposes the intractable nature of Erica's nostalgia, which not only immerses her in the depths of her past, but also anchors her in a faux present as she reaches for a phantasmatic future that always remains elusive, like a mirage on the horizon. This nostalgia functions like a fortress of memory, its ramparts too high and its gates too fortified for an outsider like Changez to breach. It is presented as a strict religion, full of dogmatic rituals and unyielding decrees that irrevocably exclude the possibility of conversion for those not born into its doctrine:

Perhaps the reality of their time together was as wonderful as she had, on more than one occasion, described to me. Or perhaps theirs was a past all the more potent for its being imaginary. I did not know whether I believed in the truth of their love; it was, after all, a religion that would not accept me as a convert. But I knew that she believed in it, and I felt small for being able to offer her nothing of comparable splendor instead. (Hamid 2008, 121)

The invocation of nostalgia as a selective and exclusionary religion serves to highlight the profound segregation and inaccessibility of certain emotional or cultural enclaves, particularly those characterised by ethnic difference, to outsiders. The speculative potency that Changez ascribes to Erica and Chris's past sheds light on nostalgia's tendency to sanctify and ossify memories, rendering them impervious to the regenerative effects of contemporary realities or the entry of new participants. This predicament is illustrated by the allegory of high finance, a relentless and unforgiving machine that demands the loss of cultural identity and historical lineage in return for participation. Within this machinic behemoth, an authentic, reciprocal relationship is replaced by a hierarchy of supremacy and subordination in which immigrants must conform to the template of the dominant cultural paradigm, often at the expense of their own histories and selves. In an American society riven by racial and ethnic divisions, Hamid notes that the ability of a Muslim immigrant like Changez to fit into the fabric of the present is extremely narrow and limited.

In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Changez observes a "dangerous nostalgia" (Hamid 2008, 122) gripping America. This retrospective nostalgia clothed the symbols of American patriotism in the sepia tones of past valour, striving for a resurrection of times past. In the weeks of national trauma that followed, America's response was consumed by an escalating, self-righteous anger, a feeling Changez clearly felt in his interactions with Erica. This burgeoning anger was triggered by President Bush's first speech after the attacks, in which he drew heavily on the United States' hallowed past, equating it with the very idea of freedom itself to declare war on "terror".²⁵ After 9/11 Changez perceives a creeping wave of racist hostility towards

²⁵ Katie Rose Guest Pryal (2005) and George Lakoff (2006) have explored the terminological implications of such a declaration. The war's emphasis on terror avoided identifying a specific or even loosely defined enemy such as Islamic extremism. Instead, it targeted the emotion inherent in the concept of terror, fear, a universal and enduring facet of the human experience: "Bush declared war on an emotion – 'intense fear' – that has always and will always exist. [...] By declaring war on terror, America's enemy became ephemeral and eternal" (Guest 2005, 368). This

people of the Islamic faith swelling within the nation. A series of harrowing stories emerge, painting a bleak picture of retaliation gone wrong: “Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people’s houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centres for questioning or worse” (Hamid 2008, 102). Although Changez admits to feeling “remarkably pleased” (Hamid 2008, 80) and a perverse sense of satisfaction at the sight of a seemingly indomitable America “visibly brought [...] to her knees” (Hamid 2008, 81), he initially conceals his inner turmoil with feigned shock and joins the collective outrage sweeping America. But when the United States unleashes its might and begins bombing Afghanistan, Changez can no longer find a foothold in his former life. He feels a growing alienation from the system he once tried to integrate into, a widening gap between himself and the United States that contradicts his former identity as an ambitious New Yorker. He remembers the halcyon days of his homeland, a time when it was a bastion of culture and historical prowess, untarnished by the corrosive stereotypes now flickering across Western television screens. This self-reflection awakens in Changez a longing not only for the past but also for a proper recognition of his ancestors’ legacy. Finally, he acknowledges the relentless pressure of the American capitalist ethos to abandon his cultural identity and forget his ethnic roots in order to join its ranks. In his role at Underwood Samson, he saw himself as someone who shaped the future by meticulously working out what would come next from the present reality. However, this intense preoccupation with the future forced him to increasingly neglect his own past and cultural heritage. The more he focused on his career, the more he distanced himself from his own roots and identity. At the height of his professional success, when he had fully mastered the skills of his field, Changez appears to be a staunch fundamentalist of Western imperialism. Despite his professional success, after the attack on the Twin Towers he is internally torn between the rich history and heritage from which he comes and the momentum of a future in which he, along with other janissaries, could wield great power and influence in the service of Western capitalism. To achieve this, however, Changez would have to completely let go of his cultural and historical identity.

Noting that “it is the thrust of one’s narrative that counts, not the accuracy” (Hamid 2008, 126), Changez feels that the jingoistic rhetoric emanating from the United States makes the population insensitive to the wider pain that binds humanity. By clinging to egocentric sagas that trumpet their unique suffering and supposed superiority, Changez argues, Americans are part of a grand illusion, a narrative legerdemain that hides the elite’s ulterior motives behind a veneer of nationalist fervour. This grand narrative, which manifests itself particularly in the war on terror, becomes a smokescreen for the devaluation of the lives of people in the Middle East who, with blithe indifference, are reduced to the status of “collateral damage” (Hamid 2008, 186). Changez sees a parallel in the corporate world of Underwood Samson that mirrors this socio-political landscape. The “casualties” of downsizing and restructuring are similarly dismissed in financial terms as collateral damage, a cold euphemism that belies the human cost. Similarly, the

narrative framing transformed the conflict into a profoundly human struggle that transcended the traditional boundaries of warfare. The United States thus sought not territorial gains but temporal sovereignty, a rhetorical manoeuvre to implicitly underpin its infinite legitimacy, or at least a lifespan coextensive with that of humanity. This strategic narrative was not intended to culminate in an unequivocal triumph, but rather to perpetuate the conditions for an uninterrupted American presence and to forge a future in which the nation’s influence and ethos would remain defining forces. As Lakoff noted, in the war on terror America faced an elusive, formless enemy that provided President Bush with a vast arsenal of “special war powers that could be extended and used indefinitely, even against American citizens” (Lakoff 2006, 11).

geopolitical skirmishes over counter-terrorism are merely a cover for American interests. Indeed, terrorism is narrowly defined in the American lexicon as violence perpetrated by non-state actors against civilians. This definition grossly excludes deaths caused by military operations, thereby trivialising the existence of people living in war zones, whose lives are marginalised as expendable assets in a strategic calculus. This interpretation supports and rationalises the US military excursions in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as its strategic manoeuvres in Pakistan and India, the cost of which is measured in human lives. Such selective, hypocritical blindness to state-sanctioned violence drives Changez's disillusionment as he comes to realise a painful truth: in the grand theatre of global conflict, his life and those of his countrymen are seen as expendable pawns. The American narrative, with its myopic definition of terrorism, conveniently overlooks violence perpetrated by individuals in uniform or in the name of financial gain. Such endorsed forms of violence, while less overt, are just as effective in a narrative that justifies aggression as a tolerable by-product through a prism of nostalgic righteousness.

The demystification of the fallacies inherent in the anti-terrorist and capitalist logic behind the US nationalist narrative marks a turning point in the story. It represents an epiphany in Changez's personal odyssey, which leads him to the rejection of American ideologies. Educated at institutions such as Princeton and Underwood Samson, Changez eventually decides to break away from his role in the capitalist ruling structure and reconnect with his Pakistani heritage. As noted by Nina Liewald (2012), his decision to take a step back and critically evaluate the system marks the transition from a mere instrument in the global game of financial imperialism and global corporate interests to an advocate for his home country. He attempts to view American society through the lens of a former janissary, using the analytical skills honed during his education and career in the service of Pakistan. But this new path also brings with it a series of psychological challenges and possible reprisals: "America might react [...] by sending an emissary to intimidate me or worse. Since then," he says, "I have felt rather *like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe*" (Hamid 2008, 191, emphasis is mine), perhaps an indirect reference to the enigmatic American interlocutor to whom Changez tells his story for the entire novel.

When he finally reflects on his relationship with Erica, Changez comes to the conclusion that his own behaviour had been inconsistent. His decision to pretend to be Chris, to disguise himself as a simulacrum of Erica's former love, was a sign of his inner turmoil, an attempt to connect his own fragmented self with another's longing for days gone by. However, this act only served to sink them both even deeper into the mire of their respective delusions, reinforcing their alienation from a concrete existence. His wavering identity, torn between different cultures and eras, prevented him from fully engaging with Erica or offering her an alternative perspective to her fixation on the past.

Conclusions

Hamid's work can be seen as a crucible in which nostalgia is both the substance and the catalyst for an alchemical transformation that turns the emotional lead of longing into the gold of creative expression. His prose dissects nostalgia, which is usually cloaked in the warm tones of sentimentality, to reveal its potential for empowerment, both in hostility and in self-discovery. This intellectual probing is consistent with

cultural theorist Boym's dual typology of nostalgia, which divides it into restorative and reflective:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. These distinctions are not absolute binaries, and one can surely make a more refined mapping of the grey areas on the outskirts of imaginary home-lands. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. (Boym 2001, 13)

As this article hopefully demonstrates, Boym's dichotomy of nostalgia provides a profound analytical framework for the critical examination of Hamid's narratives. According to Boym, nostalgia is restorative when it attempts to resurrect an idealised past from the ashes of time. At a national level, it is usually characterised by an unshakeable belief in a monolithic cultural narrative, often driving political agendas that yearn for a return to a supposed golden age in order to rebuild the fortress of tradition from the supposed ruins of historical truth. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, captures the essence of longing without the compulsion to return and embraces the contradictions of modern existence. It seeks to understand and absorb the essence of the past in multiple ways, rather than to reproduce it in its absolute form. Boym points out that these distinctions are not rigid and that both qualities of nostalgia are not isolated or mutually exclusive. They mix like colours on a palette, blending into a colourful landscape of memory and desire.

Rather than simply indulging in the "midnight melancholias" (Boym 2001, 14) of restorative nostalgia, Hamid's narratives highlight its contradictions and selective or idealised past interpretations. Viewed through the lens of Boym's theory, however, he also proves sensitive to the liberating potential of nostalgia and confronts the ethical and creative challenges it entails. Characters like Saeed and Oona's mother cling to an unchanging vision of truth and home in restorative nostalgia. Others, like Changez and Nadia, embody reflective nostalgia, questioning knowledge, beliefs and allowing doubt. Hamid takes a particularly critical look at restorative nostalgia, portraying it as a paradoxical and ultimately unattainable quest for a past that is forever out of reach. As a result of the impossible desire to merge different epochs into a seamless whole, such a nostalgic feeling, in its desire to "protect [...] the absolute truth" (Boym 2001, 13), can take on the role of a dangerous political provocation and fan the flames of unquenchable discord. Restorative nostalgia, which forms "the core of recent national and religious revivals" (Boym 2001, 13) is always on the lookout for convenient scapegoats at which it can direct the arrows of blame, rather than recognising the inherent fallacies of its own aspirations. The supposed enemy becomes a reluctant combatant in a war that is cut out of the fabric of time and memory.

At the same time, as Hamid himself explained, his magical realism harnesses the power of the fantastic to escape the centrifugal forces of the spiral of restorative nostalgia. By tapping into the pulsating energies of contemporary society, he also explores that quality of nostalgia that dissects our present with "all the madness and insight and unexpectedness and wisdom" (Hamid 2017b, n.p.) and points the way to conceivable futures. Far from being merely a passive longing for an idealised past, reflective nostalgia "is about [...] grasping the fleeing present" (Boym 2007, 13), an active confrontation with the agonies of history. Nostalgia here is a scalpel that cuts into

the surface of collective memory, exposing the raw nerves of our shared contribution to historical wounds. It is a more constructive force based on the acceptance of the pain we have inflicted on each other and a willingness to move on. It dwells in the furnace of pain, not to wallow in it, but to transform suffering into self-knowledge, into a mirror that reflects the myriad fractures we have inflicted on our collective humanity. By eroding the hardened ramparts of resentment, reflective nostalgia creates a new landscape in which positive, conscious relationships can flourish. It asks us to recognise and remember our history in order to forgive, rather than trying to reclaim a mythical past in the service of revenge. Even with all the narrative ambiguities arising from the tension with his mysterious American interviewer, Changez is the embodiment of this transformative journey, navigating the dangerous course between the regrets that seeks to enshrine the past as a perpetual echo, and the destructive force of an anger that threatens to devour the future. In order to unlock the powerful essence of nostalgia, to use memory to dissolve rather than perpetuate the cycle of resentment, an understanding of this sideways motion may be necessary.

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