

Asian American Belonging Revised in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* and Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

*The paper examines narratives by Jhumpa Lahiri (the author of *Unaccustomed Earth*) and Mohsin Hamid (the author of *Reluctant Fundamentalist*) as exemplary accounts of identity quests by Asian migrants to the US who negotiate their bicultural identity and re-configure their private spaces as responsive either to cultural roles or to global events such as 9/11. It is insufficient to view these global authors merely as third world cosmopolitans (M. Mukherjee), or to frame texts as comparison literature – products of the imagination of the global literary market (R. Walkowitz). In the overlaps of Western or Eastern cultures, these transnational negotiations examine the meanings of acculturation for a model minority professional and mother (in Lahiri) or an exiled Muslim (in Hamid). Choosing not to ignore intricate issues of identity bound up with dislocations and displacement in the US context, the article applies selected comparative tools (as provided by S. Hall, L. Lowe, A. Appadurai and F. Wu) to spell out the challenge for transnational scholarship, and urges the examination of the large emerging body of transcultural South Asian fiction with diversified narrations that re-imagine topics within the current stream of world literature identity politics.*

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, Mohsin Hamid, Unaccustomed Earth, Reluctant Fundamentalist, Asian American transnational literature, 9/11, third world cosmopolitans, comparison literature, global literary market

In the post 9/11 era, major social transformations have affected transnational cultural production, and South Asian American literature is no exception. Comparing transformative time-bound experiences of migration and examining responses to America's selective

acculturation constitute major themes of Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2006) and Jhumpa Lahiri's story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Hamid presents the tale of a former overachiever in the US named Changez, who is of Pakistani origin. He faces the transformations of the public mood in the aftermath of 9/11, becomes disillusioned with US democracy, and leaves for Pakistan. The novel takes place in a café in Lahore where he tells a nameless American listener the story of his conversion into a fundamentalist. Lahiri, on the other hand, narrates a tale about the personal dilemmas of Ruma, a lawyer, a mother, the wife of an American, and a daughter of a relocated Indian American, while she is mourning for her deceased Bengali mother. The dilemmas portrayed in the story concern multiple identity quests and personal responses to acculturation and uprooting; Lahiri poses questions about belonging to the "unaccustomed earth" – standing for the US.

Specifically, both novels contribute to the discourse on the belonging of Asian migrants in the United States, where cosmopolitan engagement and acculturation policies are significant factors in the formation of general culture and politics. Since 9/11, transnational texts invite the impression that Asian American sentiments and relations have been disrupted, yet are still developing in a direction congruent with cosmopolitan (not ethnic-blind) principles. Both texts reveal that cosmopolitan principles invite and develop the new identity ethics of literary imagination:

[C]osmopolitanisms seek to establish principles of interpretation and encounter in the context of cultural diversity and political conflict, yet these principles are often formulated within and throughout the interactions they serve to manage. Indeed, theorists regularly invoke works of literature and other cultural artifacts to exemplify ethical paradigms, even as these paradigms seek to make visible, if not suspect, such acts of exemplarity. (Walkowitz, "Cosmopolitan Ethics" 221–2)

While promoting diversity, these cosmopolitan texts invite new pro-ethnic ethics and call for differentiation rather than simple binaries and negations (Hall 233–46). In both novels, the protagonists' cosmopolitan and transcultural experiences are complex and challenge the horizons of the readership's expectations. These cosmopolitan writers transgress traditional migrant Asian narratives. They point to trivialities, paradoxes, and intimate personal dilemmas. As Asians who experienced relocation to the US (Hall 236), they evaluate the impacts of personal choices. Both books offer moving though ambivalent accounts of transnational experiences, while touching on sensitive issues of acculturation in argumentative and even debatable ways, evoking criticism mostly among first generation migrants. Nevertheless, both authors' imagination is less ideological and political, more complex and subtle; it cultivates the new transnational ethics, as discussed by Comparison Literature (more below). Both texts also illustrate the complexities of acculturation, discussing migration and nostalgia for the ancestors' homeland while commenting on the deepening sense of the loss of their roots in the South Asian Diaspora, as if the omnipresent and complex sense of loss has replaced the initial excitement and commitment of belonging to the US which was felt by the first generation of migrants.

Third World Cosmopolitans?

Strategies of cosmopolitanism differ in both novels; cosmopolitanism requires a quest for complexities. Both authors could be labeled as third world cosmopolitans, due to the obvious cartography of their roots. Meenakshi Mukherjee explains the label:

The category of writers called Third World Cosmopolitans are globally visible, are taught in postcolonial classrooms all over the world, and are hailed in the review pages of Western journals as interpreters and authentic voices of the non-Western world. The precondition for belonging to this club is that she/he must write originally in English. Implicit here is an erasure of the diversity of India. (239)

According to Mukherjee, the current third world cosmopolitans have close personal experience of both worlds – East and West. They are “qualified” to discuss South Asian mythologies, criticize India, or show uncritical nostalgia; yet their memory of the homeland/ancestor-land is rather selective. They frequently point to the social ills of South Asian society, the paradoxes of the modern and traditional worlds, the differences between local and global, individual and collective, secular and orthodox. They also mirror the West as they examine the American dream or the sentiments of transnational Asian migrants. Nevertheless, among the third world cosmopolitans there are many authors who opt to relocate to the West permanently, and thus the label “third world” becomes rather inaccurate as a description of them.

The majority of the authors from the current generation of transnational authors-cosmopolitans have tended to move to and write in the West¹ for various reasons, usually connected to their careers and publishing options. They mostly belong to the first generation of migrants born in South Asia, and often narrate tales set in their eastern homeland. Unlike the East, the West is often depicted in a rather negative way. Nevertheless, transnationals like Lahiri and Hamid do not fall within this the paradigm. Lahiri locates her texts in US settings (not taking sides with East or West). Hamid narrates his story while physically sitting in the East, though most of his tale is set in the US. Their voices are strongly US-aculturated, and from this perspective they explore the lives, emotions, limited options, dilemmas, expectations, or generational confrontations of first and second generation migrants. Both authors choose to accept the United States as their homeland for some period of their lives, though Hamid feels exiled. Nevertheless, both seem to have overcome their nostalgia for their original ancestral land, a nostalgia which is common among many Asian authors. Other members of this contemporary group of transnational authors seek alternative means of expression; for example, Kiran Desai opts to be rather rootless and sets her narration *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) in India and the US, taking sides with the uprooted cosmopolitans such as herself, who live in a borderless global space. On the other hand, India-based Arundhati Roy presents uprooted individuals as doomed wrecks who can be reborn only when re-rooted in the Indian soil and when they come to terms with their communal spirit and family traditions, however harsh that may be (as in *The God of Small Things*, 1996).

Lahiri and the emerging second generation of Asian transnational writers aspire to prove that their geographical origin is not the only criterion by which their work should

be evaluated. In her writing Lahiri is preoccupied with her Bengali descent, yet she was born in London and lives in New York. Although South Asian families and traditions are at the centre of her work, her major theme is the search for the connections of transnationals like herself to places that are undefined by family roots. According to her, one does not necessarily feel the strongest attachment to the country of one's birth or ancestry: instead, her characters grow connections to places that allow them to experience personal growth. These notions are the prime concern of her collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. She is the voice of the incoming second generation of American South Asian writers settled in the "unaccustomed earth" of the US.

In the title story "Unaccustomed Earth", transnational characters planted in the US environment may change, mature, and progress, or they may fade and eventually perish. The relocation to the US seems to be no guarantee of emotional security and stability. Lahiri questions acculturation and traditions alike. The title "Unaccustomed Earth" is used not only as a powerful metaphor, but in a very material sense as well. A Bengali American grandfather shows his grandson Akash how to sow seeds and grow plants, while the grandson plants Lego blocks along and a plastic dinosaur instead. Thus, as symbols of the international, the foreign and the prehistoric are buried in the particular US garden plot:

Akash nodded. He picked up a plastic dinosaur forcing it into the ground.
'What colour is it?' her father asked.
'Red.'
'And in Bengali?'
'Lal.'
'Good.'
'And neel!' Akash cried out pointing to the sky. (44–45)

These objects do not have a chance to become rooted and to grow in the American soil, unlike the seeds planted by the first generation migrant grandfather. Lahiri also explains that the grandfather wishes to help his grandson feel connected to the soil and family ancestry, while neither Ruma nor her husband plant seeds around their house, and Bengali is not spoken in their home. Their connection to the American soil is mediated and indirect.

The plotline concerns the widowed grandfather's visit to his daughter's new home. Ruma is married to an American. The story revolves around her settling down in a new luxurious home in Seattle. Her dilemma is: should she share it with her father or not? Without consulting him, she wonders whether her father should move in with them. Yet her father's concern is different: should he tell his daughter that he has a new girlfriend and, by telling her, cast a shade on the memory of her deceased mother? Using this seemingly simple plot, Lahiri describes minor tensions and details before the story comes to its climax, revealing an urgent sense of loss, sadness, and yet also hope.

The character of Ruma is ambivalent regarding her nostalgia for her Indian ancestry as she mourns for her Indian mother. Ruma is a second generation migrant who adapts to her new homeland well, but who mourns for her mother's ways. Women are seen as transmitters of culture, but Ruma's mourning for her mother can be seen as missing the actual person, not merely as an expression of nostalgia for the motherland. Perhaps it is nostalgia for someone living a culture that has now gone, though that culture was in fact

rather bothersome when she was living in it. However, Ruma's father, a representative of the first migrant generation, seems to have negotiated his origins better, and he has seamlessly transformed himself into a retired Westerner, living alone in a condo and traveling on package tours. Juxtaposing the parallel reactions and preoccupations of the first and second generations of relocated Asians to the US, Lahiri thus examines generational differences and gaps, diverse expectations, commitments, sentiments and levels of acculturation that bring about changes between generations.

Lahiri seems to question the clear borderline between the first and second generation migrants which was delineated in her previous work. In *The Namesake* (2003), her earlier novel, she criticizes Asian American culture for suffering from the unmediated vertical transmission of culture from one generation to another, yet in "Unaccustomed Earth" she is more ambivalent. While the characters in *The Namesake* personify the possibilities of living between cultures, the differentiating experience of "Unaccustomed Earth" is less clear. Although the grandfather seems to be content and rooted in his American homeland, his US-born daughter Ruma seems uprooted, confused, desperate and lost. Moreover, she starts missing her Indian mother, and is struck by how much her father "resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere." (23)

Indeed, the grandfather appears as a truly assimilated transnational, yet he wishes to reproduce his Bengali identity and project it onto his grandson. He wonders:

The temptation was the boy, but he knew that the boy would forget him... The more children grew, the less they had seemed to resemble either parent – they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way... Oddly, it was his grandson, who was only half-Bengali to begin with, who did not even have a Bengali surname, with whom he felt a direct biological connection, a sense of himself reconstituted in another. (54)

The story "Unaccustomed Earth" describes the dilemmas of new Asian Americans: Do I want to identify with my parents' Bengali ancestry and their ways? Or do I fully accept American land, culture, values and traditions? Lahiri shows there is no simple answer. These dilemmas are ascribed to her Bengali immigrants in the West, yet they appeal universally.

The examples of cosmopolitan identification described by Lahiri in new South Asian literature are rather complex. Other helpful criteria are suggested by Stuart Hall, who proposes two ways of constructing cultural identity. First, there is a collective identity based on shared history; this is the notion depicted by Hamid. Second, there is an identity that is unstable, metamorphic and contradictory (Hall 233), as depicted by Lahiri.

To conclude the discussion of so-called third world cosmopolitans, it is not sufficient to treat transnational voices as authentic voices; the voices need to be heard and evaluated. The text by Lahiri presents attitudes, stances and double or multiple identity consciousness, comparisons, and persistent self-reflection that question the otherness of the third world cosmopolitans (Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Ethics 2*).

Transnational Literature = Comparison Literature

For a better understanding of cosmopolitan engagement and the global impact of contemporary transnational texts written by Asian American authors, it is essential to examine the concept of comparison literature as proposed by Rebecca Walkowitz:

Novels such as these are part of an emergent genre of transnational fiction whose preoccupation with comparison is stimulated in part by the historical conditions of the global literary marketplace, and in part by several related developments such as the flourishing of migrant communities, and especially migrant writers, within metropolitan centers throughout the world. In addition, comparison literature responds to the ongoing problem of statelessness and post-Holocaust debates about the treatment of minorities. And it joins the renewed effort to imagine transnational and/or cosmopolitan paradigms that offer alternatives to national models of political community. (“Comparison Literature” 567)

Walkowitz coins the term “comparison literature” to address emerging literary developments in the post-9/11 era. Current literary production focuses on themes of diverse experience, displacement, and deterritorialized space (Appadurai 25–30), imagined communities, and inter-cultural or inter-racial conflicts. Specifically, South Asian prose discusses immigrant communities experiencing the pressures of cultural assimilation, and their responses to it. Comparison literature suggests tools and frameworks for evaluative responses to South Asian particularities. This concept reminds us to consider the bigger picture of the global literary market as shaped by current and emerging cultural policies and preferences, which seem to highlight the importance of narratives of incoming transnationals such as Lahiri or Hamid as transformative of the Anglo-American literary canon. Last but not least, similar narratives invite a raising of consciousness in those who have experienced relocation, who are bi-cultural individuals or who describe the borderless global experience.

Asian American / Transnational Protagonists

Lahiri’s characters tend to be immigrants from India who have to come to terms with their American-reared children. They are exiles who straddle two countries, two cultures, yet belong to neither: too accustomed to freedom to accept the rituals and conventions of home, yet too rooted in Indian tradition and family roles to embrace American ways fully. When they become parents, Lahiri’s Indian-born parents live model minority lives – like Ruma’s father, they are not estranged illegal immigrants fighting poverty. They envision the American Dream for their children – they send them to brand-name schools so they may get prestigious jobs, and live in roomy houses like Ruma – but they are also cautious about the pitfalls of life in this unaccustomed land, and they are isolated by their difficulties with language and customs. Like Ruma, the children are often emotional outsiders: they grew up translating the mysteries of the American culture to their bi-cultural understanding, trying to belong. Often they struggle to balance both Bengali and American cultures in the family home, much as their mothers did, but they may fail completely, unable

to feel at home in either culture; they always experience themselves as standing slightly apart, not participating wholeheartedly in their American lives and family roles.

Ruma's role as a mother makes her uncomfortable and lost; she struggles to do justice to both worlds, resembling her Indian family-oriented mother while also being an American career-minded mother. Suddenly she finds herself conflicted; deep inside she wishes to resemble her mother, while on the outside she strives to act out her role as an ideal middle-class dedicated American wife. By contrast, her father is able to come to better terms with his bi-culturality, and he observes how trapped Ruma becomes. Ruma's transformation from an easy-going successful lawyer into a lost and unhappy non-American is noticed by her father: "She now resembled his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly" (35). Thinking about his wife's unhappiness in the early years of their marriage when they first relocated to the US, the father realizes that "he had always assumed Ruma's life would be different" (35). But if his daughter chooses the life in Seattle that she could have led in Calcutta – where she would at least not have been isolated and lonely – then the question of another kind of freedom is raised, as well as the question of loss. Ruma seems to embody loss and emptiness, even though she impersonates the achiever of the American Dream – she has a good career, a fine-looking broad-shouldered successful American husband, one son, and the second one on the way. Though she may suffer from the "feminine mystique" (Friedan 1983), the middle-class American women's malady stemming from a home-centered existence, she suffers from cultural melancholy instead.

In fact, Lahiri seems to suggest that Ruma's identity is affected less by her location than by Indian family ways. She was born on American soil, but she is torn, wishing to reproduce Indian motherhood and womanhood. Using the tale of Ruma, Lahiri poses questions about in what conditions transcultural women-migrants can lead fully-fledged American lives. While visiting Ruma in Seattle, her father asks her a very American question: Will this make you happy? He is urging Ruma not to isolate herself, to look for work, he reminds her of the importance of the Western value of self-reliance. The father's statement is directed at the readers, reminding them that there are major value differences which Asians must overcome.

Anglo-American culture and Asian American culture are marked by qualitative differences. According to the sociologist Frank Wu, Anglo-American qualities culturally stressed and appreciated are "[i]ndependent thinking, imaginative problem-solving, emphasis on ability, independence, self-confidence, individuality, self-expression, individualistic orientation, and relatively egalitarian relationship among children and adults" (47). On the other hand, Asians prefer and value "memorization, task persistence, emphasis on effort, interdependence, traditional values, group harmony, self-control, modesty, obedience, collectivist orientation, and vertical hierarchy of status difference" (47).

These qualities seem to be exploited by model minority myths, when Asians are seen as nerds, or overachievers, as the "new Jews" or "honorary whites." Yet Lahiri seems to create counterpoints: she brings up the other side of the story – the model minority is under the pressure of a double standard, and many individuals, like Ruma, are under immense pressure to preserve the traditional family and its values, while also achieving success and belonging to the US culture.

South Asian Muslim and Diverse Voices on Transculturalism

Mohsin Hamid's character Changez from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* would have followed the path of a model minority achiever, yet September 11 interrupted his path to success. The general acceptance of Muslims was disrupted, and hysteria against them came to dominate the American scene. Experiencing the consequences of the public hostility toward Muslims, Hamid felt an urge to respond as an author. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid parallels his personal experience with the life story of his protagonist Changez. Like his protagonist, Hamid grew up in Lahore, Pakistan, and attended Princeton and Harvard.

The novel is delivered as a monologue of the narrator's life story. It is narrated by Changez, speaking to an American visitor in Pakistan. They meet in a restaurant in the Old Anarkali district of Lahore. Changez tells his story to an anonymous visitor. He begins: "Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America" (1). Changez goes on to describe his family history, his journey to the US on a scholarship, his achievements and how he turned into a bearded and generally re-aculturated Pakistani. Changez presents himself in the description as "...a modern-day Janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine" (152). Changez was doing well in New York until 9/11. Now he is a teacher and political activist in Lahore, which is why his monologue is, predictably, political. He wonders

...how it was that America was able to wreak such havoc in the world—orchestrating an entire war in Afghanistan, say, and legitimizing through its actions the invasion of weaker states by more powerful ones, which India was now proposing to do to Pakistan— with so few apparent consequences at home. (131)

Hamid voices communal sentiments and responses to the US's unfortunate foreign policy, as well as disagreement with US military actions. The novel is a time-bound response to world events after 9/11. Nevertheless, Hamid also reflects the general concerns of Pakistani transnational writers, and adds to their calls for acceptance, even as they are in the process of re-imagining themselves. According to the Pakistani scholar Muhammad Safeer Awan, Western scholars tend to debate South Asian Muslim identity in terms of global migrancy and the formation of multicultural societies in the West. Yet the authors, even as they narrate as insiders, are re-examining the harmonizing effects of different cultures, as they seek either to reach a compromise or to assimilate to the host culture. Furthermore, Awan urges Western scholars to re-evaluate the role of the bi-cultural author and to listen to diverse experiences and views in order to reformulate exilic perspectives. Such a challenge to the Western audience is represented by Hamid at "times of need". Yet we also need taxonomies and perspectives to explore the complexities of South Asian transcultural production.

9/11

9/11 cannot be forgotten; much sensitivity has been awakened in the US and worldwide since then. Overnight, the US residents (like Hamid's protagonist Changez, and like Hamid himself) came under suspicions for having foreign-sounding names and an exotic bearded appearance. America's spirit of openness, as a land where people could build new identities (third world cosmopolitans and Muslims alike), was damaged. In the aftermath of the events, Hamid decides to narrate a one-sided conversation presented to an American, who represents the US society that misunderstands the migrants' world. Hamid explains his approach to the writing:

One reason for having this formal structure is that by creating half of a conversation, a conversation of which you only hear one half, and where the other party of the conversation is only present as an echo, a space opens up in the novel, a vacuum that the reader is invited to fill. The *Reluctant Fundamentalist* plays a kind of game where Changez, the narrator, a Pakistani man with a beard, comes upon an American man with a crew-cut in a bazaar in Lahore, in Pakistan, and starts speaking to him. It is unclear why Changez is deciding to do that... (Hamid, "Slaying Dragons" 225)

Besides touching upon transnational and American sentiments, Hamid's narrative addresses complex dilemmas of Muslim Asian American relations after 9/11. Here Hamid's and Lahiri's novels explore, challenge and even transgress sentiments towards migrants as well as perceptions of South Asians in the West. The texts negotiate cultural collisions and cultural assimilation in America. Nevertheless, the US is still projected as a place where the rest of the world comes to reinvent itself – experiencing excitement and anxieties, and facing the necessity of leaving behind the constrictions and comforts of distant customs and traditions.

Marking Asian American Differences: Inherited, Modified, Invented

Asian American constructs should not be limited to the traditional categories of social hierarchy and family. It is also essential to pay close attention to the differences between first and second generations of South Asian migrants, since they deal in multiple ways with "histories of exclusion and differentiations that have traditionally placed Asians apart from America." (Lowe 138)

Lisa Lowe warns us not to approach Asian Americans as an amorphous monolithic mass, but to reconsider social, cultural, and economic distinctions that vary across generations and communities, as well as the following factors: "the disruption and distortion of traditional cultural practices – like the practice of parental sacrifice and filial duty or the practice of respecting hierarchies of age – not only as consequence of displacement to the US but also as a part of entering a society with different constructions of gender roles" (Lowe 134). Similar patterns are represented in "Unaccustomed Earth". In the text, Ruma, a Bengali-American mother and lawyer, seems to reproduce her mother's way of life when she gives up her job and follows her husband to a distant city where they await the birth of their second child: "Growing up, her mother's example — moving to a foreign place

for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household — had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now" (22). Ruma seems to lose herself, unable to reflect on her current state, afraid to re-establish links with her widowed father, whom she sees as a burden rather than as a support and companion.

Nevertheless, Ruma illustrates Lowe's claims that Asian American culture is partly inherited, partly modified, and partly invented — yet significantly shaped by the dominant representations that deny or subordinate Asian and Asian American cultures as "the other." This seems to be the message of Changez's monologue as well. He feels an urge to re-define and justify his transformation to an American listener. Calling himself a lover of America, he is one of two Pakistanis in his Princeton class; he does better than most Americans and reaches his senior year without a single 'B' grade. He agrees to contribute his talents to US society in return for being allowed to join the elite. He gets a dream job with the Underwood Samson Valuation Company.

Yet this overachiever is forced to revolt. On acculturation Hamid finds himself in agreement with Lowe, who makes the following observations on recent acculturation trends:

Once arriving in the United States, very few Asian immigrant cultures remain discrete, impenetrable communities; the more recent groups mix, in varying degrees, with segments of existing groups... [T]he boundaries and definitions of Asian American culture are continually shifting and being contested from pressures both inside and outside the Asian-American origin community. (Lowe 138)

Yet the speed and trends of acculturation seem to vary: while Ruma "marries up" and is on the way to being acculturated (or lost), the "overachiever" Changez seems to end up exiled, lost, bewildered. The war on terror hits him hard, in so far as he is subjected to public xenophobia, to the megalomania of politicians, resulting in irrational fear of the other. Hence Changez is reminded of being "the other" once again. The existence and acculturation of Muslims in the West is disrupted, and Changez as a Pakistani expatriate experiences his exile and raises his voice in response to the events of 9/11. Seemingly humbly, he presents his perspectives on the "war on terror". Changez is concerned; he might sound too insensitive to American ears, but on the other hand he reminds readers that his nation is not the one which stirred up the tension. In the novel Changez apologizes, and reminds:

But once more I am raising my voice, and making you rather uncomfortable. Besides I apologize; it was not my intention to be rude. In any case, I ought instead to be explaining to you why I did not speak to Erica of my fury at seeing American troops enter Afghanistan. (102)

Though he describes the US with nostalgia, he firmly explains why he cannot live there any more and why he has lost some of his appreciation for American culture. Growing his beard, Changez opts to identify with his home culture (where all Muslim men grow beards), and he demonstrates his disapproval with the monolithic treatment of Muslims. Gradually, as he explains, he loses interest in his job, the woman he loves and his US existence.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist uses highly symbolic first names of people who are related to Changez in order to highlight intercultural dialog in hard times. Until 9/11

Changez seems to be happily achieving and loving his college sweetheart Erica (standing for Am-erica). After that, he is stripped of his illusions and forced identity. At this moment his personal transformation begins. Erica starts mourning her mysterious missing ex-lover Chris (standing for Christianity), and her relationship with Changez deteriorates.

Changez reports he cannot forget that overnight he is suddenly no longer treated as a prominent citizen, but as somebody with second-class citizenship:

America was gripped by a growing and self-righteous rage in those weeks of September and October as I cavorted... Pakistani cabdrivers were beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was riding mosques, shops, and even people's houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse. (94)

Changez witnesses the moment in American history and he observes "how the syncretic nation fails to become the first universal nation the world has ever seen" (Awan "Global Terror" 6). Due to the sudden misunderstanding and lack of communication, Muslim individuals such as Changez himself, and Americans such as the anonymous listener or Changez's girlfriend Erica, seem hardly able to establish communication and clear up their mutual misunderstanding and avoid harmful generalizations in the aftermath of 9/11.

Conclusion

Cosmopolitan ethics, morals, worldliness and transcultural politics as well as transnational identities, as explored in Lahiri's title story "Unaccustomed Earth" and Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, are subject to change as products of comparison literature, partially shaped by the demands of the global literary market. Nevertheless, the texts also reflect personal stances on topics of US immigration discourse. These texts represent examples of the transformative wave of emerging Asian American writing. These texts represent the current voices of emerging globally-known Asian American writers, who belong to a US-aculturated generation of West-based Asians who work in cultural overlaps. These writers can no longer be labeled "third world cosmopolitans", but must instead be perceived as transnational writers presenting time- and place-sensitive bi-cultural narratives. Narratives offer particular individually nuanced as well as unique scenarios. The authors' backgrounds reveal much of the writers' ethnic backgrounds, as they seek to come to terms with the unique particular aspects of their immediate experience of acculturation. Nevertheless, the texts are not focused on intimate encounters with the writers' ethnic communities, but serve as universal quests for aspects of the identity of immigrants who steer a path between US acculturation and nostalgia for their homelands. Last but not least, the texts have been widely distributed and favored by the global literary marketplace, which is fond of authors with transnational visions who explore the theme of identity politics. Asian American literature has attracted a rich response from flourishing migrant communities. In addition, both narratives by Lahiri and Hamid respond to the treatment and self-perceptions of minorities in a post-national or rather borderless global space, in which protagonists of South Asian origin are connected to Eastern and Western spaces and their cultural meanings. In that sense, Hamid represents a Muslim voice which pays

close attention to Asians who enter, re-enter, are expelled from, or migrate to the West and contest the limits of the utopian borderless global space in the post-9/11 era. On the other hand, non-Muslim Asian American-acculturated cultural production as represented by Lahiri focuses on self-presentation, gender roles, family ties and debates about belonging. These current cultural productions apparently contain no unifying grand narrative, and the texts address intersections of gender, sexuality, class and religion in transnational Asian America. The term “transnational” therefore proves to be a particularly useful concept for examining a type of Asian American cultural production which is emerging rapidly. The texts by Lahiri or Hamid show that various particularities must be addressed, including heterogeneous migratory strands, personal and national histories, religious, familial and generational affiliations in reaction to world events, and that this multitude of factors helps to determine the credibility of the authors’ voices as their texts are published and made known in other environments. These texts refer to continuous migrations, both uni-directional and bi-directional migration among numerous locations and cultures. Simply put, these examples of widely read and anthologized Asian American literature invite critical attention not only to the works themselves, but also to the sites of production (places, communities). Both texts explored in this article encourage transnational debates and invite readers to re-imagine the new geographies of literary production while encouraging them to understand the particularities of various ethnicized historical experiences and legacies across cultures.

Notes

¹ In the United States there are Mohsin Hamid, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Meena Alexander, Anjana Appachana, Samina Ali, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ru Freeman, Bharti Kirchner, Thrity Umrigar, Bharati Mukherjee, Talat Abbasi, and Bhapsi Sidhwa, to mention just a few.

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