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Muslim Gatsby(s) in the Shadow of the Towers: Trans-codifications of *The Great Gatsby* in Twenty-first Century Pakistani-American Fiction

The Great Gatsby, American identity, and ethnicity

The question at the core of this essay originates from the encounter between the national and the transnational in the wake of 9/11, and from the narratives about – or without – the nation: why (and how) has Gatsby, probably the most famous literary embodiment of the American Dream, become a matrix for the depiction of parables of rise and fall in ethnic transnational literature of the twenty-first century?

The Great Gatsby's influence on the American literary imagination is so pervasive that it has been said to have cast a “long shadow” on the decades following its publication.¹ The title character's evolution into an archetype, both American and universal, has been read as the consequence of how Gatsby merges materialism and idealism², and expresses in idealistic forms the “economy of desire” that has so powerfully molded the nature and discourse of American economy and ideology³ from Benjamin Franklin to Steve Jobs. Besides shaping hegemonic narratives about American identity, *The Great Gatsby* has also been an inspiration for several of the most important ethnic novels from the Thirties onwards.

The reasons Fitzgerald's masterpiece has been so appealing to ethnic writers are rooted in the ethnic echoes and allusions of the text itself. From the genealogical mysteries of the “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere,”⁴ a man who “could have sprung more easily from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York” (Fitzgerald 2021, 35), to Gatsby's wooing of Daisy, which for Tom is tantamount to “intermarriage between black and white” (Fitzgerald 2021, 84), *The Great Gatsby* inspires debate and reflections on ethnicity, as many contemporary studies underline. In the last twenty years, an abundance of works has drawn attention to the dynamics of racialization in the novel and tried to question, and in some ways disso-

1 Anderson 1985.

2 Balestra 2019.

3 Izzo 2015.

4 Fitzgerald 2021, 84. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

ciate, *The Great Gatsby* and the attraction of a universalized, imperial American ideal. Some notable examples include Walter Ben Michaels's analysis of the anxieties over race embedded in Fitzgerald's text (1997); Carlyle Van Thompson's study (2004); and Meredith Goldsmith's essay (2003), that retraces African-American and ethnic allusions and modes of self-definition in Jay Gatsby's story; Joseph Vogel's (2015), that explores the afterlives of Fitzgerald's novel as a multimedia text in the Obama era; and Benjamin Schreier's (2007), who deconstructs previous readings about the racial identities in a novel that, as he argues, is pervaded by a lack of faith in the stability and national significance of identity.

The interrelation between the universalized American ideal and embedded ethnicities in the novel is evident: Gatsby's attempt to experience "something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (Fitzgerald 2021, 116), so redolent of immigrants' hopes and expectations, invites a convergence, rather than an opposition, of the ethnic dreams and the "economy of desire" at the heart of American ideology, whose power of attraction has widened globally and has generated, especially from the last decade of the twentieth century onwards, a variety of forms of physical displacement and cultural deterritorialization. While Gatsby's obscure origins and surname imply a foreignness rooted in the old world, with allusions to racial diversities (the black vs white dichotomy and the fear of miscegenation) that date back to the origins of the history of the United States, the forms of Otherness in the twenty-first century, often the result of post-colonial scenarios, are no less threatening, especially after 9/11.

While the reasons for Gatsby's ethnic afterlives are rooted within the novel, historical and social contexts are also crucial to understanding the widespread influence of Fitzgerald's masterpiece during the first decade of the twentieth-first century. Seen from a US-centered perspective, the 1920s and the beginning of the twenty-first century have many elements in common: the scars left by unprecedented war scenarios (the First World War and the War on Terror) American society had to face; and the devastating economic crises, the Great Depression and the Great Recession, caused by the losses of financial speculation. Moreover, in both decades the urban setting (and New York in particular) ended up catalyzing the popular imagination as a synonym for economic success and excess, and, at the same time, as the site of encounters or clashes with "Otherness", that has, in turn, contributed to the dissemination of the dream – with the associated narrative of the dreamer's rise and fall – elsewhere, far beyond American borders.

Gatsby's contemporary ethnic afterlives encompass several shades of post-coloniality, as Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* testifies⁵. O'Neill himself, in commenting on

5 See Snyder 2013.

his novel (and on his Trinidadian Gatsby), pointed out that “we’re living in a globalized world, and as a consequence, the American dream narrative which is commonly attributed to Gatsby simply doesn’t work as a current premise”⁶. Yet, there are many facets and contradictions of Gatsby’s world and Fitzgerald’s analysis of that world extant in the post-national context: the relationships between center and peripheries (whether national or transnational), between outsiders and insiders, Self and Other, and the role played by “the American Dream” on a national and global scale.

The Asian Dream and the Pakistani Gatsby(s)

The process of redefining borders and boundaries inevitably involves questioning the ideological and cultural backgrounds of a nation and the increasing forms of deterritorialization of its culture. If the focus shifts to the Asian world, the similarities between the American 1920s and the beginning of the new millennium in the Asian context are even more striking. As Nina Martyris noted in her review of some contemporary Indian and Pakistani novels,

The story of Rising Asia has been described, correctly, as capitalism on crack. It has invited comparisons with America’s Gilded Age and Jazz Age, periods marked by the accumulation of enormous personal fortunes as well as great social upheaval in the form of strikes, financial scandals, and industrial expansion. [...] Asia is now going through a version of the American belle époque. And the Asian economic boom has begun to produce a similar shelf of literature that explores the dazzling as well as the more nightmarish facets of the Asian Dream, from the exuberance of material wealth and the hope it has unleashed to the frightening inequality, injustice, and ecocide undergirding it. [...] Shaped by the unbounded mythos of globalization, the Asian Dream makes the American Dream sound like the American Dream Lite, not just in terms of scale but also, since a whole century of moral permissiveness divides the two, in terms of the hedonism accompanying it.⁷

While, according to Martyris, the Asian Dream at the end of the twentieth century resembled the American Dream of the Gilded Age, the turn of the millennium marked a significant shift and heralded a more disillusioned vision of the future, with the emergence of tales more cautionary in tone about Asian prospects. This shift can be detected especially in Pakistani transnational fiction, written mainly by writers educated in England or the United States and situating themselves in liminal positions between East and West. In their reshaping of postcolonial

6 Reilly 2011, 13.

7 Martyris 2014, 175–6.

forms of migrancy, several of these writers (such as Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Ali Sethi, Mohammed Hanif, Maha Khan, and H. M. Naqvi) have explored the continuities between the American and the Asian Dream, as well as the aftermath and consequences of social and political reconfigurations of the “here” and “elsewhere”, especially after Pakistan became the eye of the storm in the War on Terror. As Paul Veyret noted, “Pakistani fiction in English participates in a global movement of both inscription and displacement of borders, suggesting in the writing of its authors a tension between defined lines and their erasure, between rigid frames of reference and its permeability. These authors’ fiction stands at the juncture of the paradoxical space expressed by a poetics of deterritorialization, displacement, and fragmentation.”⁸

It is not surprising that, almost one hundred years on, the ghost of Gatsby lives on in the dreams and hopes of migrants coming from the Asian world in 9/11 narratives, especially in the novels of Pakistani-American writers and their exploration and reconfiguration of the US role on the world scale.

In this essay, the investigation of the Pakistani afterlives of *The Great Gatsby* focuses on three novels written between 2007 and 2013: H. M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy* (2009), Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013). Mohsin Hamid and H. M. Naqvi have been labeled “in-outsiders” by critics:⁹ they are both Pakistani-born authors who migrated to the US to attend university and left the country after the terrorist attacks and the rise of Islamophobia, and although they are sometimes labeled “Muslim-Americans”, it would be more apt to define them as transnational. The first two novels are part of the so-called 9/11 fiction, while *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* moves beyond 9/11 and American borders and shifts the focus to the deterritorialized form of the American Dream. These novels constitute a funhouse where Gatsby’s shadow is depicted and refracted in a wide range of forms.

In H. M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy* (2009), both the “new Nick” and the “new Gatsby” are Pakistanis. The former is the narrator Chuck, who has recently migrated to the US from Karachi in order to attend New York University and he subsequently becomes a successful financial advisor; the latter is Shah, or “the Shaman”, whose memorable parties in his villa in upstate New York are the peak of the protagonist’s mundane activity. It is the disappearance of the Shaman after 9/11, and the subsequent search for him, “the Shaman Run”, that will lead to the arrest of the protagonist and his two friends, with them being suspected of being a sleeper cell and the Shaman of being a terrorist.

⁸ Veyret 2018, 3–4.

⁹ Nordinger 2018, 59.

In Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), the character most evidently linked to Gatsby is Jim, the inspirational American boss of a financial company, Underwood Samson. A man of humble and obscure origins, who chases the status that only "old money" can bring, he is a source of inspiration for Changez, the Karachi-born, immigrant narrator (and, in many ways Nick Carraway's heir), who envisions for himself – in the period before 9/11 – a successful life in the United States.

The last novel, Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), disrupts the binary opposition between narrator and protagonist and merges the Gatsby matrix and the popular form of the self-help book, turning Gatsby's dream into a formula (potentially) applicable everywhere, including the far East. Here the would-be Gatsby is the resourceful protagonist, capable of climbing the whole ladder of Pakistani society, whose dreams will end not in physical, but with economic death – when he falls victim to financial fraud.

In each of these texts, Gatsby's story is connected to Pakistani identity and, thus, to the Muslim world, the Other par excellence in the aftermath of 9/11.¹⁰ Investigating how "Gatsby's ghosts" have been used to mobilize the idea of Alterity and overcome the binary opposition that 9/11 induced, these novels question the political and cultural position of the US on a world scale, through the multiple facets and destinies of the American Dream.

A Dream buried in the Ruins of the towers:

H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*

Homeboy, H. M. Naqvi's debut novel, is a first-person narrative whose protagonist, Chuck, a young male middle-class Pakistani, arrived in New York City from Karachi to attend New York University on a scholarship, four years prior to the events of the plot. A self-proclaimed cosmopolitan and "metrosexual"¹¹ and initially a literature student, Chuck then becomes an investment banker analyst. When the company unexpectedly fires him after less than one year, in July 2001, Chuck decides to take a sabbatical and become a taxi driver. In the meantime, he enjoys the New York nightlife, clubbing with his friends: AC, a Pakistani immigrant and Ph.D. scholar, financially supported by his older sister Mini, who emigrated in the early 80s and is now a pillar of the Pakistani middle-class community;

¹⁰ On the relation between Pakistani identity and Muslim identity, see Chambers 2011, 122–134; Kanwal 2015.

¹¹ Naqvi 2009, 4. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

and DJ Jimbo, born and raised in Jersey City, one of the largest American hubs of Arabs and Muslims – where he grew up with his father, Old Man Khan, and his sister Amo. Certain that they had their “fingers on the pulse of the great global dialectic” (Naqvi 2009, 1), the trio has to change their minds after 9/11; especially after the failed attempt to discover what happened to a not-so-close friend, Mohammed Shah, “The Pakistani Gatsby” (Naqvi 2009, 21), whose parties they used to attend. Found by the police in Shah’s house, the three friends are suspected of being in a terrorist cell and are subsequently imprisoned, denied their rights, and almost starved. When they are finally released Chuck, despite his love for Jimbo’s sister Amo, decides to return to Pakistan – his future somewhere else, at least for a while.

In Naqvi’s novel, Fitzgerald is referred to from the very epigraph, through a quote about the 1920s from “The Crack-Up” (1945) and the “big sudden blows that come” and make you “realize with finality that in some regard you will never be a good man again” (qt. in Naqvi 2009) – a quote that creates a parallel between the Twenties and 9/11 that runs beneath the surface of the whole text.

There are few similarities between the plots of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Naqvi’s *Home Boy*, and the Gatsby figure in the latter is, significantly, an absence rather than a presence. He is referred to twice by Chuck before the “Shaman run”; then he comes to life (or to death) again when the trio explores his empty house and, at the end of the novel, when his obituary is found in the newspaper. The similarities are instead more evident between the characters of the two books, the clearest of which is the Pakistani Gatsby, Shah, who, despite his absence from the stage, is nevertheless crucial in the development of the plot, to the point that he becomes its epicenter. The Shaman and Fitzgerald’s protagonist share many common traits, from their obscure origins and rapid ascent to their capability for self-invention, and their attempt to create their own narratives:

A drifter, a grifter, an American success story, a Pakistani Gatsby. Apparently he quite literally jumped ship back and subsisted day to day, hand to mouth for years, working gas stations along Palisades Parkway and Queens Boulevard. This, however, was mostly hearsay. A few things we knew for sure: he told the Long Island natives whom he courted at hotel bars that he was an Arab sheikh, and sometimes it worked. In recent history the Shaman had managed to secure a position at a top-tier insurance company, and suddenly though not entirely unexpectedly, he was on the up and up. In celebration, he had leased a scarlet Mercedes 500 SEL and mortgaged one of those rubblestone and wood houses in Westbrook, Connecticut, where he hosted ostentatious parties while slinking soberly on the periphery. (Naqvi 2009, 21)

The Shaman’s retreat in upstate New York (bought with a mortgage), his ostentatious car (bought on lease), the parties where he was often “nowhere to be seen” (Naqvi 2009, 80) except for when he appeared in a “white linen jacket, a cream t-

shirt, and baggy trousers” (Naqvi 2009, 81), and his allegedly illicit business affairs in the cigarette market are not the only traits he shares with Fitzgerald’s character. Mohammed Shah is also an isolated man, whose parties are an antidote to the loneliness of his life, as the trio finds out when they explore his empty house. Like Gatsby, he is a man who will never be known for what he is, neither in life nor in death. His obituary in the newspaper, entitled “Mohammed ‘Mo’ shah: no friend of fundamentalism”, radically differs from the person he was and the life he led, and underlines the Shaman’s inability to fully control his own narrative – an inability that becomes evident, just as in *The Great Gatsby*, with his death. As Peter Morey notices, “the column paints a picture of someone unrecognizable from the party-throwing, cigarette-smuggling, pornography-consuming man about town Chuck remembers. He is made into an archetypal ‘good Muslim,’ fixed and valorized in death [...]. The short obituary co-opts Mo as it misrepresents him—the final instance of the split between appearance and reality that has been at the heart of the novel’s preoccupations. There is no space for the real Mo Shah outside of the ‘good Muslim/bad Muslim’ paradigm.”¹²

His death in the fall of the towers allows Naqvi to point his finger at the Islamophobia that 9/11 unleashed, but it also reinforces the interpretation of 9/11 as a “loss of innocence” – in this case, with the loss of one of the dreamers of the American Dream, a recurring trope in the interpretation of American history and a foundational element of its literature.¹³

Similarities also abound between the narrators of *The Great Gatsby* and *Home Boy*. Like Nick Carraway, Chuck is a newcomer too, naïve and innocent, and with strong ties to his widowed mother (after his father’s suicide), whose moral support and advice orients his choices. Both are employed in the financial sector: Nick was in the bond business, Chuck gets a job in banking after his graduation, because it “seemed grand at the time, and I looked and played the part” (Naqvi 2009, 29). In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick, feels like “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler” (Fitzgerald 2021, 7) after just a couple of days in New York; after briefly feeling lost, in *Home Boy* Chuck feels at home in the city to the point that he declares that “I’d since claimed the city and the city had claimed me” (Naqvi 2009, 3). In both novels, it is Gatsby’s death that leads to the narrators returning home (although in *Home Boy* this private loss is significantly within the public/collective one and its repercussions), despite their love for an American woman and the prospect of a successful career. Like Fitzgerald, Naqvi too depicts a circular journey marked by disillusionment, where the escape (and the return), be it to the Midwest or Kar-

¹² Morey 2018, 149.

¹³ Gray 2011, 2–4.

achi, is “not so much a destination as a frame of mind” (Naqvi 2009, 199). More than in Fitzgerald’s national context however, these patterns of return in novels set at the time of 9/11 are “interruptions of an experiment in cultural mobility”, as Birgit Däwes notes,¹⁴ with the sphere of movement shifting from a national or domestic scale to a transnational space.

The similarities between Nick and Chuck also extend to the narrators’ role and voice. Although Chuck is more mundane and ironic than Nick, they are both reliable narrators, and the moral center of the texts. Despite Chuck being Pakistani, his voice is full of echoes of American culture: his self-irony, his humor, and his use of the idiom of American youth culture are indebted to several American narrators, the most evident being Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (published in 1951 and itself influenced by Fitzgerald’s works), who is referenced in a key moment in the novel, when Chuck has to decide what direction his life will take and reflects on Holden’s question, “Where do the ducks fly in winter?” (Naqvi 2009, 245). And the answer will be the same: far away.

The affinity between Fitzgerald’s and Naqvi’s novels can be further perceived in the narrators’ relation to the city and the portrayal of New York, with the American metropolis on the eve of 9/11 being depicted as a “whole city [that] can turn into a feast in no time”¹⁵, explicitly echoing the Jazz age. Despite their migrant/immigrant status and their refusal to conform to the respectable city life the previous generations aspired to, the trio in *Home Boy* is remembered by Chuck as the center of the social scene, welcomed in nightclubs and embraced by the fashionable world of Jimbo’s blue blood fiancée – people without whom “New York’s not New York” (Naqvi 2009, 18). The ethnic contiguity the city seemed to embrace and encourage at that moment in time, very much reminiscent of Fitzgerald, is evident in the cosmopolitanism the protagonist and New York seem to share: “we had the Russians, the postcolonial canon, but had been taken by the brash, boisterous voice of contemporary American fiction; we watched nature documentaries when we watched TV, and variety shows on Telemundo” (Naqvi 2009, 1). However, like Nick in *The Great Gatsby*, when Chuck looks back on those days, from his outsider’s perspective, he’s aware that that world was a “masquerade” (Naqvi 2009, 17): “At the time we didn’t think that there was more to it than the mere sense of spectacle. We were content in celebrating ourselves and our city with libation [...] later we also realized that we hadn’t been putting on some sort of show for others, for somebody else. No, we were protagonists in a narrative that required coherence for our own selfish motivations and exigencies” (Naqvi 2009, 6).

¹⁴ Däwes 2011, 214.

¹⁵ Golimowska 2016, 90.

This masquerade and this ostentatious world has, however, its counterbalance: like *The Great Gatsby*, *Home Boy* creates an urban dichotomy by opposing the glamorous Manhattan with a “new” valley of ashes – in this case Jersey City, where Jimbo’s sister and father, Amo and Old Man Khan, live. Two entirely separate universes divided by the Hudson, Jersey City is, as Chuck says, “like Manhattan gone awry” (Naqvi 2009, 44). It is the realm of the working class and the underclass, largely Muslim, shaped – both before and after 9/11 – by economic rules and by the processes of “Othering”, of ethnic and economic marginalization and exclusion. In both Fitzgerald’s and Naqvi’s novels, it is this marginalization and exclusion that leads the two different “underworlds” to strike back and become the agents of suicidal death, individual as well as collective – be it Gatsby’s murder by Mr. Wilson (followed by the latter’s suicide) or the 9/11 suicidal attacks led by Middle-Eastern terrorists, whose previous economic and military involvement with the United States is underlined by AC in one of his attempts to find meaning after the tragedy.

As a consequence, in both novels death results in a sense of loss – the loss of life and the loss of meaning – the latter crucial in post-9/11 fiction. The void left by the towers, so pervasive in 9/11 iconography, is flanked in *Home Boy* by two significant absences/deaths around which Chuck’s life in the US and in Pakistan is built: the Pakistani Gatsby and his father. While the Shaman’s destiny will finally be revealed, Chuck’s father’s disappearance (probably a suicide) will never be explained to the narrator, thus resulting in an emotional and epistemological void in his life, that establishes a parallel between Chuck’s two worlds, the US and Pakistan.¹⁶

The double ending in *Home Boy* is significant for both the cross-reference to Fitzgerald’s novel and the transposition of the text to a contemporary ethnic context. The first, as said, is the solution to the mystery of the Shaman’s disappearance – his tragic death in the fall of the towers – through the discovery of the newspaper article on his death. The second ending shifts the focus to Chuck, whose story does not end with the reunion with his family in Karachi, but, after his decision and preparation for his departure, with a description of a migrant’s arrival in New York:

You take a flight from Karachi to Manchester to New York. Stretch your mouth at Immigration when you say ‘Haya doin?’ This may expedite the process. They appreciate familiar

¹⁶ Cilano underlines how: “the Shaman serves as one of the narrative’s absences, and the revelation of his death well after the three friends stand falsely accused of terrorism highlights the insufficiencies of post-9/11 domestic discourses that racially profile brown-skinned, apparently Muslim men. The novel’s other absence involves Chuck’s father, whose death in 1985, when Chuck was only around five years old, establishes a parallel between that historical moment and the novel’s post-9/11 present” (Cilano 2013, 201).

idiom. Don't get into a car with the man with sunglasses. Hail a yellow cab at the curb. You will cross miserable swaths of Queens: empty playgrounds bordered by barbed wire, boarded-up rowhouses, signs for MOT LS. [...] This will jar your sensibilities. You will think: *Is this it? America, land of the free, from sea to shining sea? Where are the skyscrapers? The long-legged blondes?* (Naqvi 2009, 215)

Regarding this epilogue, reminiscent of the “boats against the current” Fitzgerald evokes in the last lines, Morey notes how

this may amount to a flashback, returning us to Chuck's early and only partly narrated first days in the United States. However, the switch to the second-person pronoun ‘you’ draws us in as the putative subject of the scene and gives it a broader, symbolic resonance. In one reading, this ending could be an imaginative attempt to turn back the clock to before September 11, 2001, and thus to reclaim the past for its unrealized possibilities [...] However, in view of what has gone before in the novel, the epilogue perhaps more compellingly gestures toward the continued allure of New York as the great melting-pot city for all those migrants who come to buy into its dream, as yet unaware of the modern carceral nightmare it has become.¹⁷

In the transposition from the national to the transnational scenario, *Home Boy* underlines the pervasiveness of American culture and dreams outside its own borders, and at the same time the continuities between Chuck's two deeply interdependent universes. However, despite its transnational opening, Naqvi's vision remains deeply rooted in a national context, and in an American Dream that, although buried by the ruins of the Twin Towers, is destined to rise again from its own ashes every time a new immigrant boards a plane to New York, a ceaseless return with every new dreamer attempting to “run faster, stretch out our arms farther” (Fitzgerald 2021, 117) as suggested at the end of Fitzgerald's novel.

Gatsby and his double: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

In describing his novel in an interview, Mohsin Hamid said that “the traditional immigrant novel is about coming to America [...] I wanted to do the 21st-century polarity when the magnet switches and pushes them away. At its core, this is a story of someone who is in love with America, in love with an American woman, who finds he has to leave. It's a tragic love story”.¹⁸

¹⁷ Morey 2018, 149–150.

¹⁸ Hamid Qtd in Hartnell 2010, 337.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist has many elements in common with *Home Boy*: a first-person narrative told by a young Pakistani protagonist-narrator who defines himself in modern, cosmopolitan terms (in *Home Boy* the “metrosexual” Chuck, here the “western-educated urbanite” Changez¹⁹); the narrators’ love for an American woman; and a circular journey that has 9/11 as its turning point. Here too the American life of the protagonist is told retrospectively, this time in the form of a monologue addressed to a mysterious American apparently met by chance in a market in Lahore, after Changez moved back to Pakistan three years prior. For Changez as well, who migrated to the United States to study at Princeton on a scholarship, his American dream was within reach. Hired as a business analyst after graduation by a financial “boutique” company, Underwood Samson, he started to feel like “a young New Yorker with the city at my feet” (Hamid 2007, 51). After his graduation, he began a relationship with Erica, a beautiful girl from the Upper East Side who would become increasingly haunted by the memory of her dead boyfriend, Chris. 9/11 changed everything in Changez’s life: after the attacks, he started experiencing hostility towards Pakistani immigrants and every Middle-Eastern-looking man with a beard, and had to cope with Erica’s breakdown, the latter more and more incapable of coming to terms with the memories of the past and her loss, and finally sent to an asylum. However, 9/11 also allowed Changez to become aware of the effects of his job and the impact of redundancies on people in the US and abroad, to the extent that, thanks to an illuminating conversation with a publisher in Valparaiso, he came to see himself as a modern janissary, a servant of the American economic empire and of a company, Underwood Samson, that becomes an allegory for the United States, as the acronym and the name “Samson” suggest. Alienation and disillusionment led him to professional suicide and to the decision to go back to Lahore, where he would go on to hold a job as a university lecturer and take part in peaceful protests against the United States, despite remaining, as he states, “a lover of America” (Hamid 2007, 1). The novel ends abruptly when Changez and the American are about to part and four different possibilities are suggested to the reader: Changez could be a radicalized terrorist sent to the market to kill the American; the American could be an undercover agent contracted and sent to Pakistan to kill Changez; both of the above, or neither. As Hamid explained in an interview, the book is a “Rorschach inkblot test” exposing the reader’s interpretive strategies, prejudices and fears.

Explicit references to Fitzgerald’s text punctuate Hamid’s novel as well, especially in the passages containing Jim, Changez’s American boss. Jim almost immediately befriends Changez, whom he sees as a fellow outsider, and invites the

19 Hamid 2007, 54. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

young Pakistani to a party in his house in the Hamptons, “a magnificent property that made me think of *The Great Gatsby*. It was beside the beach – on a rise behind a protective ridge of sand dunes – and it had a swimming pool, a tennis court, and an open-sided white pavilion erected at one end of the lawn for drinking and dancing. A swing band struck up as we arrived, and I could smell steak and lobster being thrown on a grill” (Hamid 2007, 48). Here Jim tells Changez part of his life story, and the similarities with *Gatsby* become even more evident: it was Jim’s first glimpse of the *beau monde* at Princeton (reminiscent of *Gatsby*’s Oxford), where he was admitted for his merits, that triggered his dream of success and wealth (Hamid 2007, 49). As Hartnell argues,

Jim himself is the personification of the self-made man who pulled himself up from lowly beginnings – beginnings that he equates with Changez’s own. Yet in spite of his advice to Changez that he follow Jim’s lead by facing the future, there are signs that Jim is himself unable to bury the past. While he lives in an ultra-modern, trendy and minimalist loft in New York City during the week, he also entertains guests in a beach-side property that reminds Changez of *The Great Gatsby*. The swing band, cocktails, tennis courts and swimming pool that greet Jim’s guests are highly suggestive of the idea that Jim, like Jay Gatz, is chasing the status that only “old money” – the one thing that cannot be bought or invented – can bring. The novel thus strongly suggests that the supposedly meritocratic society represented by Underwood Samson is edged with an unspoken elitism that condemns outsiders like Jim and Changez to its fringes. Hamid thus incorporates into his own novel the paradox that shapes F. Scott Fitzgerald’s: that the myth of self-invention, while surely constituting the heart of the elusive notion of the “American dream”, is stalked by a classificatory logic that entirely contradicts the vision of a classless society.²⁰

The relentlessly forward-looking attitude (significantly encapsulated in the advice given to Changez that “power comes from becoming change” – Hamid 2007, 110), together with the fascination for the elitist world and the nostalgia suffered by the latter is a dichotomy that is explored throughout both the novels and reverberates in all its main characters: Changez, Erica, and the United States. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, nostalgia occurs as a theme mainly through Erica’s suffering for her lost lover, Chris – a highly symbolic subplot that again creates a parallel with Fitzgerald’s novel, in Daisy’s nostalgia for her past and what could have been, before her marriage with Tom.

Like Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*, Erica represents more than an individual love interest, and Changez’s attempt to be Erica’s protector more than an act of love. Erica is an emblem of American aristocracy, of the world Changez would like to belong to. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* makes explicit the relationship between

²⁰ Hartnell 2010, 342.

emotions and capital embedded in Fitzgerald's text. As Medovoi notes, regarding Changez's economic success and love affair, where the first becomes the means to fulfill the second (and vice versa), "both emotional life and finance capital in this novel operate according to a common logic of investment."²¹

Charmed by Changez and especially by her idea of his exotic background, Erica's interest is revealed to be transitory and fleeting, unable as she is to cope with the "loss of innocence" represented by Chris' death and by 9/11. As a synecdoche of the whole nation, (Am)Erica is the emblem of the seduction, with love and opportunities, of the success-hungry outsider Changez, a promise she is ultimately unable to fulfill. Like American promises, Erica too disappears, giving herself over to a self-destructive nostalgia. As Hartnell underlines, "Erica seemingly represents a romantic strain in American nationalism that looks back to a European past, a past that only partially captures the nation's roots and the make-up of contemporary America".²² Gripped by nostalgia for "tradition" (Chris as Christ/Christopher Columbus – both symbols of the Old World), the Am/Erica who used to welcome immigrants becomes unable to cope with changes and the shock of 9/11 – like the US, as Changez notes: "I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward: for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back" (Hamid 2007, 131).

As the love story between Changez and Erica suggests, the correlations between the characters in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* overlap and blur: although the Gatsby alluded to in the latter novel is Jim, Changez also shares many elements with Gatsby, and in turn Jim can be increasingly associated with Gatsby's mentor, Dan Cody. The promise of the American dream fascinates Changez as much as (and probably more than) it fascinates Jim – the wish for "change" explicit in the protagonist's name itself. Coming from a once prosperous family, Changez too has to shake off his own (and his family's) form of nostalgia and longing, "not for what my family had never had, but for what we had had and had lost. In this, Jim and I were indeed similar: he had grown up outside the candy store, and I had grown up on its threshold as its door was being shut" (Hamid 2007, 81).

Changez is thus eager to take advantage of his American status, to the point of becoming part of that group of people who fly first class and "who conduct themselves in the world as though they were the ruling class" (Hamid 2007, 21), with the same "extraterritorial smile" (Hamid 2007, 74) and an attitude predisposed to a disrespect of national borders and laws – like how Gatsby "disrespected" national laws with his illicit affairs. To an even greater extent than *Home Boy*, *The Reluctant*

²¹ Medovoi 2011, 650.

²² Hartnell 2010, 337.

Fundamentalist lays bare the mechanisms regulating desire and finance, with the latter explicitly equated with violence: “The economy is an animal” (Hamid 2007, 110) in Jim’s words, and the outsiders like Jim and Changez are, according to the former, its blood. The equation between finance and dominance/violence is further underlined in the last lines of the novel, with the ambiguity of the “glint of metal” as the American reaches for something when parting from Changez – with the latter suggesting and hoping it is the American’s business card holder and not a pistol.

Just as in *The Great Gatsby* and *Home Boy*, the social cost of that privileged world is soon made manifest, although in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the valley of ashes is no longer outside Manhattan, but beyond the United States borders, and it parallels the exploitation of capital gone global – through Underwood Samson and the United States. Whereas in the Twenties the imbalance could be mainly seen among different classes within US society, Changez’s journeys to Manila, Valparaiso, and Pakistan allow him to see the imbalance that aggressive capitalism generates in its encounter with third world countries.

Whereas Changez’s life before 9/11 follows Jim’s – and Gatsby’s – path, the attacks and their aftermath represent a turning point in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that corresponds to Nick’s disillusionment and return to the Midwest after Gatsby’s death: the broken American promise, with “the obvious connection between the crumbling of the world around me and the impending destruction of my personal American dream” (Hamid 2007, 106), finally leads Changez to realize that “finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power. It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination” (Hamid 2007, 177). It is only at this moment that Changez fulfills the prophecy of his name, but in antithesis to American expectations. The “threshold of a great change” (Hamid 2007, 170) is crossed with the protagonist’s awareness and change of perspective – this latter a keyword repeated over and over in the text, in reference to both Changez the character and Changez the narrator.

A pivotal step in this process and change of perspective is a key term underlined in the title – fundamentalism. As Gasztold and Haider argue, the novel establishes several parallels between the western idea of Islamic fundamentalism (and the eastern perception of this western idea) and the eastern vision of the “economic fundamentalism” that has become the imperative in American society. While “fundamentalism” is brought up by Erica’s father before 9/11 as a serious Pakistani problem (Hamid 2007, 63), the term “fundamental” and fundamentalism are mainly associated with the American milieu in the form of Underwood Samson (and thus figuratively the US). The company asks its workers to focus on the “fundamentals” with a “single-minded attention” (Hamid 2007, 112), concentrating on systematic pragmatism, efficiency and maximum return “with a degree of commitment that left one with rather limited time for such distractions” (Hamid 2007, 112)

and with “the task of shaping the future with little regard for the past” (Hamid 2007, 116). The novel seems to suggest that the whole of American society (and not only the world of finance) is shaped by these ideals and practices: the way Changez describes his years at Princeton is reminiscent of the strategies of Islamic fundamentalists: sleep deprivation, total devotion to the cause, focus on one aim, and lack of private life.

The symbolic death of Changez’s American dream does not equate with the erasure of the American models (Gatsby *in primis*), but with the awareness of their expansion into new geographical and cultural patterns. Changez’s change of perspective allows him to increasingly see the similarity between Pakistan and the United States – the “symmetry of the situation” (Hamid 2007, 97) that can be detected only retrospectively, in his backward glance. Like in *Home Boy*, where the Pakistani Gatsby’s loss parallels Chuck’s loss of his father, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* depicts the two countries as overlapping on similar voids coming from the past – be it the nostalgia they share over what has been lost, or the sense of superiority, in Pakistan’s case coming from a glorious past and the marvelous achievements of its civilization, “when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent” (Hamid 2007, 116).

Changez’s return to his home country alters his relation to Gatsby in terms of power relationship: his encounter with the mysterious American in Lahore turns Changez from “guest” to a “host”, like Gatsby throughout *The Great Gatsby*, willing to please (or so it seems) his guests. Like his predecessor, Changez’s sustained engagement with hospitality (in this case more provocative and ambiguous than in Fitzgerald’s novel) leaves the host exposed and vulnerable²³ to the uninvited guest, the Other/American entering his “house”/his country. As in *The Great Gatsby*, hospitality is posited not as the provision of security, but as a destabilizing element, that could be an unconditional welcome that is too ingenuous and innocent (if we assume the narrator will be the victim), or a subtle trap, if the narrator turns out to be the perpetrator of violence.

The ambivalence inherent in the open ending reinforces rather than negates the American model: should Changez be the victim or the agent of violence, he would either adhere to the model or subvert, but not transcend, it. However, despite the novel’s entanglement in the Dream itself, with Jim along, and Changez finally against it, Hamid’s shift from a national to an international scenario challenges and questions the role and consequences of national myths in a global context, and starts hinting at their transnational potential (and dangers).

23 Balfour 2017.

Decentering absences, voices, voids: Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

The deterritorialization and deconstruction of the American Dream culminate in Hamid's 2013 *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. Despite the unnamed hero never leaves his unnamed home country in Southeast Asia (which the author has identified as Pakistan in interviews), this novel not only parodies *The Great Gatsby*, but it also updates it to the myth of rising Asia and to the system of neo-liberal globalization.

As the title implies, the main focus is the protagonist's ascent as an entrepreneur. Narrated in the second person (an element that, together with the unspecified name of the country and characters, amplifies the representative quality of the story), Hamid's novel is structured as a self-help book that teaches its readers how to become successful in business in twelve essential steps or chapters, the title of each one being a piece of advice on how to advance socioeconomically in "rising Asia". Like in *The Great Gatsby*, the protagonist's rise parallels his love for a "pretty girl" (who also remains nameless) he encounters when both are very young and very poor, and whom he meets again at various stages throughout his life. Born into a very humble family in an extremely underdeveloped rural area, the protagonist's rise starts when the mother and the children (two boys and a girl) join the father in the city, driven by his mother's stubborn determination to keep the family together and allow her kids to have greater opportunities. Whereas the two other siblings will be less fortunate, the young narrator is able to climb the social ladder. First, he earns his living as a bicycle delivery boy selling pirate DVDs, then he attends university thanks to his membership in a religious (and repressive) organization before becoming a salesman of canned food with altered expiry dates. His great step forward occurs when he starts working for himself in the bottled water business, all the while resisting, compromising, and fighting with far more ruthless businessmen, corrupt politicians, and even killers. Rather than being a tragedy like *The Great Gatsby*, Hamid's novel ends with an anticlimax that reveals the parodic intent of the story: the protagonist's unscrupulous assistant and former brother-in-law cause him to lose his fortune while recovering from a heart attack, and he dies in his seventies in hospital dreaming of a life with the pretty girl, his last thoughts amongst the final words of the book.

Written in very concise and unadorned prose, the most striking formal feature of the novel is how a great arc of time and space is compressed into the narrator's tale, a quality which is reminiscent of Fitzgerald's novel, as Shivani notes.²⁴

As for the plot, *How to Get Filthy Rich* – through the use of the second-person narration following the protagonist throughout his life – enriches Gatsby's story by filling in the gaps in the economic and social milieu behind Gatsby's fortunes, and transforming his parable into an ironic “from rags to riches” and “from riches to rags” pattern. There are many similarities between Gatsby's world and that of the unnamed protagonist: like Gatsby, he must “learn from a master” too – in this case a second-hand car dealer and head of the counterfeit expiry date business, who is so unscrupulous that he does not hesitate to kill an employee who stole from him. There is also the urban contiguity between rich and poor, and their interdependence: “wealthy neighborhoods are often defined by a single boulevard from factories and markets and graveyards, and those, in turn, may be separated from the homes of the impoverished only by an open sewer, railroad track, or narrow alley. Your own triangle-shaped community, not atypically, is bounded by all three.”²⁵ Here too, the gap between rich and poor will never be bridged, as the epilogue of the story testifies, and everything becomes an “economic enterprise” (Hamid 2013, 61) – politics, personal relationships, and even education.

This may also explain why, in Hamid's text, the relationship between love and financial success at the core of Fitzgerald's story runs along two parallel lines, sometimes intersecting, but apparently unrelated. Love is an impediment to getting rich, as the author points out:

the pursuit of love and the pursuit of wealth have much in common. Both have the potential to inspire, motivate, uplift, and kill. But whereas achieving a massive bank balance demonstrably attracts fine specimens desperate to give their love in exchange, achieving love tends to do the opposite. It dampens the fire in the steam furnace of ambition, robbing of essential propulsion an already fraught upriver journey to the heart of financial success. (Hamid 2013, 37)

The protagonist's desire for success is not directly related to his desire for the “pretty girl”, who, working first as a hairdresser's assistant and then as a model, is economically independent from the beginning of the tale, and very proud to be so. The subversion of the female model, in contrast with the male one, also involves her physical appearance, with her physical traits not only con-

²⁴ “To entangle these conflicting ideas in as short a space as Hamid does is what leads to an explosive dynamic of awareness, makes this a novel for the ages, with deserved comparisons to *The Great Gatsby*” (Shivani 2020).

²⁵ Hamid 2013, 20. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

trasting sharply – and predictably – with Daisy’s (and the stereotype of the Southern Belle), but also not conforming to a conventional idea of Asian beauty:

Her looks would not traditionally have been considered beautiful: no milky complexion, raven tresses, bountiful bosom, of soft-moon-like face for her. Her skin is darker than average, her hair and eyes lighter, making all three features a strikingly similar shade of brown. This bestows upon her a smoky quality, as though she has been drawn with charcoal. She is also lean, tall, and flat-chested, her breasts the size, as your mother notes dismissively, of two cheap little squashed mangoes. (Hamid 2013, 38)

It is the “pretty girl” rather than the narrator who proves to be constantly forward-looking and “resistant to remembering” (Hamid 2013, 88). She shows agency in her life as someone who changes without allowing the world to change her (like Changez after his return to Pakistan and in contrast to the unnamed protagonist of this novel) – as she herself says, “When I change, I let myself change” (Hamid 2013, 87). The penultimate encounter between the pretty girl and the protagonist explicitly mocks Gatsby’s rendezvous with Daisy during one of his parties: in *How to Get Filthy Rich* the protagonist is one of the waiters rather than the host, a job he gets in order to meet his beloved. Since the protagonist’s success comes quite late in his life, in his forties, this reversed status disparity characterizes almost all their relationship – that ends, at least in the real world, with the protagonist’s marriage to a (conventionally) beautiful, intelligent, young and unloved girl.

Despite the lifelong desire for the same woman, *How to Get Filthy Rich* associates the propelling force of desire almost exclusively with the economy, the field where self-invention can supposedly take place. The protagonist’s personal rise and fall offer an overview of the crimes and compromises necessary to thrive as an entrepreneur in the under-regulated world of neoliberal capitalism, taking advantage of market “inefficiency”. Whereas in the Twenties it was Prohibition that allowed the illegal market to flourish, here the sale of expired canned goods takes advantage of the surplus of the economy and its dysfunctional modes and injustices. What the text also lays bare is the underworld of violence that makes (illegal) prosperity possible:

Becoming filthy rich required a degree of unsqueamishness, whether in rising Asia or anywhere else. For wealth comes from capital, and capital comes from labor; and labor comes from equilibrium, from calories chasing calories out, an inherent, in-built leanness that leanness of biological machines that must be bent to your will with some force if you are to loosen your own financial belt and, slightly expand. (Hamid 2013, 119)

As part of a corpus of texts that “denounces the capitalist, neoliberal notion of the self that is predicated on the idea of complete agency”, Hamid’s novel echoes the

American narratives dissecting the ills of the US capitalism rampant during the Gilded and the Jazz Ages, as Nina Martyris has argued.²⁶ Echoes of American culture are scattered throughout the novel, starting from the *Ur*-model of the self-made man, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Hamid's nameless protagonist does not only define himself as "self-made, on the rise" (Hamid 2013, 141); his dream of success through hard work, according to Effing, is based on the Protestant ethic that constitutes the foundation for widespread belief in the promises of global capitalism.²⁷ The American milieu is also evident in the nonfictional model Hamid parodies: that of entrepreneur narratives, from Steve Jobs to Bill Gates to Donald Trump, that have shaped American and non-American imagination from the advent of neoliberalism onwards.

However, the narrator of *How to Get Filthy Rich* also looks beyond the thriving Asian emulators of these entrepreneurial models²⁸ in his parody, as he makes clear in one of the self-reflective moments of the text:

It's remarkable how many books fall into the category of self-help. Why, for example, do you persist in reading that much-praised, breathtakingly boring foreign novel, slogging through page after page after please-make-it-stop page of tar-slow prose and blush-inducing formal conceit, if not out of an impulse to understand distant lands that because globalization are increasingly affecting life in your own? What is this impulse of yours, at its core, if not a desire for self-help?

And what of the other novels, those which for reasons of plot and language or wisdom or frequent gratuitous and graphic sex you actually enjoy and read with delighted hunger? Surely those too are versions of self-help. At the very least they help you pass the time, and time is the stuff of which a self is made. The same goes for narrative nonfiction, and doubly so for non narrative-nonfiction. Indeed, all books, each and every book ever written, could be said to be offered to the reader as a form of self-help. (Hamid 2013, 21)

Hamid's de-mythologization of the Asian Dream questions the American one and the very idea of the nation: the author's use of the term "Asia", as Mahmutovic argues, "denies that nation-state is the main unit of analysis and draws attention to the city as a global strategic space";²⁹ a "globality" of the discourse (as well as of the identity and economic model it criticizes) that parallels the universality of the protagonists, aptly referred to as "you" and "the pretty girl".

²⁶ Martyris 2014, 174–5.

²⁷ Effing 2009, 128.

²⁸ Among the most influential examples of Asian entrepreneurial models, the most important is probably Ratan Tata, the chairman of India's foremost industrial powerhouse, the Tata Group, from 1991 to 2012. See Walonen 2020.

²⁹ Mahmutovic 2017, 71.

Although geographically far from the New York of the American Dream, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is a cultural outcome of that dream in its extreme neoliberal version (and with neoliberal terminology) since, as Finch notes, it “puts pressure on the model of finance that stems from North America”³⁰ while, at the same time, showing its structural contradictions in one of the most recent examples of former third-world countries’ alliance with global finance.³¹

While underlining the systemic consequences of this economy, and its relation to society, the novel targets the idea of the self in the neoliberal system, and the excesses of the “capability of self-invention” that characterized the American Dream, to the point that it undermines its national foundation. As Poon highlights, “Neoliberal subjectivity endorses the care and transformation of the self in order to take the best advantage of a market economy. With material affluence as the goal, the means to achieving that is often seen as simply a matter of individual choice and personal will – to be entrepreneurial and enterprising, for example – rather than any advantage one might attribute to traditional indices of identity like race, ethnicity, gender, or family background”³² – the same illusions that lured Changez and Chuck.

Although the American Dream may be on its deathbed, like the protagonist of *How to Get Filthy Rich*, it has nevertheless not altogether exhaled its last breath, as the departure of the unnamed narrator’s son suggests: “your wife has left you and married a man closer to herself in outlook and in age, and your son has chosen not to return after studying in North America, which, despite Asia’s rise, retains some attraction for a young conceptual artist with craggy hip-bones and lips like buttered honey” (Hamid 2013, 179). The United States continues to propel fantasies of new selves and freedom; and although the dream may not be to “get filthy rich” in a predatory way, it nevertheless implies a surplus in the economy – both of the self and of the market.

Conclusions

Despite their differences, *Home Boy*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* all explore the social and economic transnational network through the lens of *The Great Gatsby*. These novels break free from the idea of a “rupture in history” as the dominant interpretative mode in the after-

³⁰ Finch 2018, 384.

³¹ Finch 2018, 384.

³² Poon 2017, 139.

math of 9/11, establishing parallels and attempting to find continuities, as all “re-writings” do, by relating the national to the global and emphasizing the shift of focus from the “individual” to the “collective/nation” and beyond.

In moving from the national to the global scenario, these narratives decenter the perspective, question the hegemonic US narrative through the geographical expansion of the narrators’ paths, and reshape American neoliberal imagination in its deterritorialized form. Naqvi superimposes 9/11 and the death of the Pakistani Gatsby, thus reinforcing the reading of 9/11 as the umpteenth loss of innocence. Hamid, on the other hand, uses the coexistence and the shift of the Gatsby figure from Jim to Changez (in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*) and the presence of Gatsby in the form of an ambitious young Pakistani who spends all his life in his home country (in *How to Get Filthy Rich*) to highlight the universal appeal of American models and their global form. In doing so, Hamid thus emphasizes the world economic network of the dream(s), its consequences, and its paradoxes, including, as Azeem notes, “the Pakistani diasporic subjects of empire confront[ing] a merger of imperialism and exceptionalism”.³³

In tracing the footsteps of Pakistani transnational subjects and transforming Gatsby’s Dream into an Asian Dream, Hamid and Naqvi turn Fitzgerald’s character into the emblem of the deterritorialized nature of American neoliberalism, laying bare the mechanisms and the neoliberal forces that regulate the “economy of desire”.

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33 Azeem 2016, 77.

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