Listening to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: Aural Recognition in a Post-9/11 Democracy

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Abstract

This article focuses on Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and explores the challenges of reciprocal recognition and the impact of power dynamics on trust between the West and Muslim communities in post 9/11 America. Bart Moore-Gilbert's critique of existing models of recognition politics, specifically models developed by Fukuyama and Taylor, reveals the limitations in addressing the Muslim experience and Islamic fundamentalism within western liberal-democratic societies. The failure of ocular-centric approaches – prevalent in the western tradition – to adequately represent the Muslim experience, guides me towards sound theories which provides the theoretical underpinning to this analysis. Thus, I denote this shift as a practice in decolonial listening. Drawing on Nicole Furlonge's analytical framework of "listen in print" and the concept of "aural recognition," I argue for a more comprehensive recognition through an aurally-engaged practice of reading and political engagement. Ultimately, I advocate for listening to develop trust and for a compassionate stance towards lives and encounters of Muslim minorities in post 9/11 America.

Keywords: Muslim experiences, recognition politics, sound theories, post-9/11 studies, interfaith distrust

In *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writings*, Bart Moore Gilbert introduces the general Muslim experience, and specifically Islamic fundamentalism, into existing, secular-liberal democratic frameworks of political discourse, with particular attention to models developed – on the basis of recognition politics – by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and Last Man* and by Charles Taylor in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. Fukuyama's model suggests that the new productive era of recognition, has enabled a reciprocal recognition between citizens; but, as Moore-Gilbert contends "With the qualified exception of class relations, Fukuyama has little to say about the struggle for 'recognition' amongst groups within nation-states" (184). Similarly, Charles Taylor criticizes the formulation of recognition through a "difference blind fashion" and calls

for a more "hospitable" form of liberal society. Though Taylor's faith in a more hospitable approach resonates with minorities within western democracies in general, his "engagement with Islam is scarcely less limited. The issues posed by Muslim immigration to the West elicit a single paragraph in the essay," referring only to the Rushdie affair (Moore-Gilbert 185). This guides Moore-Gilbert towards his inquiry of Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Kureishi's *The Black Album*, as both works represent the Muslim experience within and outside western liberal-democratic societies pre and post-9/11, and because, notably, the idea of Islamic fundamentalism is central to these texts. His analysis revolves around the degree at which these two novels engage with Fukuyama and Taylor's formulations of recognition politics. Moore-Gilbert concludes by propounding the texts' failure to adequately represent the Muslim experience and Islamic fundamentalism, and questions "whether it can ever be represented adequately in the current climate of vexed relations between the West and certain Muslim formations" (197). Moore-Gilbert thus calls for a "new kind of social imagination," and a shift in emphasis within "'the politics of recognition' towards the acknowledgement of what is new" (197). In my inquiry, I answer Bart Moore-Gilbert's call for a new conceptualization. Specifically, instead of an ocular-dominant analysis that is central in the western tradition – as quoted in *Sound and Literature*, the "sensory hierarchy binds vision to knowledge" (Anna Snaith 7) – I aim to extract recognition aurally. First, I highlight the withdrawal of recognition from Muslims after the incident of 9/11 by contrasting our protagonist's sense of belonging pre-9/11; and centering on the notion of "inter-racial distrust," I propose that the termination of recognition is symptomatic to a rise in "inter-faith distrust" post-9/11. I engage with the idea of a "discourse of distrust" as my assertion is that Mohsin Hamid's narrative choice of a dramatic monologue is deliberate because it compels readers to pose as listeners. I accept Hamid's coercion and take the form of a listener and attempt what Nicole Furlonge conceptualizes as "listen in print" that allows for new ideas to emerge and to trace a more comprehensive "aural recognition." I further attempt to "generate trust" which I label as an act of "decolonial listening" as it exposes the power-disparity that exists between our Muslim protagonist and the American interlocutor. In the end, we fail to achieve an absolute "Aural Recognition" due to a lack in reciprocity from the west's end. However, my resolve to listen to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is not to derive a complete recognition but a more comprehensive recognition of the Muslim quotidian in post-9/11 America.

Mohsin Hamid represents the Muslim condition on either side of 9/11 through Changez's sense of belonging as a New Yorker pre 9/11, and his growing disillusionment towards the USA post-9/11: "Nothing troubled me; I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet. How soon that would change! My

world would be transformed …" (Hamid 33). It can be said that, prior to the transformation brought on by 9/11, Fukuyama's model of a democratic state held true with a sense of reciprocal recognition between citizens, and "Thus the economic system represented by Underwood Samson (as its initials suggest, a metonym for the 'US') welcomes workers irrespective of ethnicity or geographical origin" (Moore-Gilbert 191), and it is here at Underwood Samson/US, Changez feels so much at home that, "On that day, I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee" (27). Even when Changez wears a white *kurta* on the subway he feels recognized as a true New Yorker, "It was a testament to the open-mindedness and—that overused word— *cosmopolitan* nature of New York in those days that I felt completely comfortable on the subway in this attire" (35), and it is only after 9/11, on the same subway where Changez felt recognized, he became the victim of verbal abuse because of his beard: "More than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers" (78). To add to this withdrawal of recognition, Moore-Gilbert says

> Changez becomes increasingly liable to the cruder forms of racist exclusion, most notably when he is misrecognized as a 'fucking Arab' during his mission to New Jersey. The 'recognition' he has thus far earned is progressively withdrawn, even in Underwood Samson, once he rebels against the new dispensation by the simple measure of growing a beard." (192)

If Underwood Samson is a metonym for the US, then the people at Underwood Samson can be considered a metonym for the citizens of US: "at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares" (Hamid 78). In *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*, Danielle Allen critically analyzes acts of citizenship and reveals that "An honest look at the political situation in the United States leads to a related recognition that among our core political problems is not racism, but interracial distrust" ("Talking to Strangers" xiv), and that "Within democracies, such congealed distrust indicates political failure" (xiii). Centering on the concept of "Interracial Distrust," I propose that there is a rise in "Interfaith Distrust" against the Muslim community in post 9/11 America.

My assertion of an "Interfaith Distrust" can further be supported by Mohsin Hamid's narrative choice. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is structured in a first-person monologue with dramatic registers that situates the reader in a stifling, affective space of distrust. The western interlocutor whom the narrator addresses is never given a voice, rather, Changez's answers guide, or rather, force the reader to formulate questions in alignment with Changez's monologue. Moore-

Gilbert's echoes this:

> Changez's western guest never speaks directly and everything is reported through a narrator whose account, he himself hints, should not necessarily be taken at face value. This reinforces the claustrophobic nature of the reading experience, aligning the reader with the American, making him/her struggle to gain sufficient distance to make decisions about whether Changez is, indeed, a 'fundamentalist' and, if so, of what kind. (195)

However, what Moore-Gilbert fails to extract is the deliberation behind Hamid's narrative choice. This guides my discussion towards *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, where Stepto explores writing strategies of African American writers and how "Distrust motivated them to improve their writing skills and to venture into new areas of inquiry and writerly performance" and Stepto conceptualizes as a "discourse of distrust" (198). This distrust formulates a new mode of writing that "accommodates the performative aesthetic of oral storytelling" by opting for a narrative voice that takes on the role of a story-teller (200). Thus, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the Muslim protagonist poses as a story-teller and the cramped nature of the narrative structure is explained by Stepto as how it coerces "authors and readers … into teller-hearer relationships" (200). I find the use of the term "hearer" quite intriguing as Stepto emphasizes that "only the storytelling paradigm posits that readers, in 'constituting' themselves through engaging the text, become hearers" (200). His assertion, as mentioned in Furlonge's *Race Sounds: The Art of Listening in African American Literature* is that "a 'discourse of distrust' runs through African American literature, leading writers of these texts to embed within their fiction heavy instruction about how to listen to each text and explicit chastisement when reading goes awry" (3). Each time I return to Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I am reminded of how sound moves us: "Excuse me, sir, 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" (Hamid 1). First, it is the quivering of the body of the reader / listener generated by the sonic; second, it urges the reader to shift emphasis from the visual – the "beard" as the stereotypical reduction of Muslims in a post-9/11 climate – towards the aural, and to listen to the speaker with sonic attentiveness. Thus, by endorsing the idea of a "discourse of distrust," Hamid invites the reader to take on the responsibilities of hearing/listening to what Changez has to say.

In my exploration of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I embody the role of a listener and attempt what Nicole Furlonge, in her ground breaking text *Race Sounds: The Art of Listening in African American Literature*, terms "Listen in Print" as a way of interpreting texts that allow for new understandings

to emerge when texts are approached through listening (12), and "to cultivate a practice of engagement that attunes readers to print as it provokes or calls forth an aurally inflected, multisensory reading practice" (3). I, likewise, draw on Furlonge's framework of listening in print, and extend this aural manner of engaging politically, culturally, and intellectually with texts towards Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In her development of an aurally engaged citizenship, she defines "Aural Recognition" as the desire "to be listened to and be afforded the chance to listen" ("Race Sounds" 120). In *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, Taylor urges "Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (26) and that "What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition but the conditions in which the attempt to be recognized can fail" (35). My assertion is that the shift in emphasis from the need for recognition to scrutinizing the failure of recognition is what led Furlonge to shift from the ocular to the aural and focus on "Aural Recognition." I expand on this notion and lend my lidless aural cavity towards Changez, the protagonist of Pakistani-Muslim heritage and I listen in print in order to derive – if not fully – a more comprehensive recognition, particularly an "Aural Recognition" of the Muslim experience and Islamic Fundamentalism within and beyond post 9/11 western democratic societies.

Danielle Allen holds a rather dejected position regarding the solution to distrust between citizens: "I cannot now offer some simple policy solution to democracy's difficulties. They're irresolvable; we have rather to learn how to live with them." ("Talking to Strangers" 102). Even though Allen does not directly point towards the importance of listening as a solvent of distrust, Nicole Furlonge urges that "her study does point to the necessary work of listening in conversation between citizens, between strangers, as a key way of developing habits that can improve the workings of democracy" ("Race Sounds" 15). In *Listening for Democracy: Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation*, Andrew Dobson explores a similar "distrust" in democratic practices. Dobson, in stark contrast, advocates for listening and disperses hope that beyond the management of distrust, productive possibilities of reducing distrust may emerge through listening, and it is because "the roots of distrust often lie in monological talking and the concomitant impression that no real dialogue is taking place" ("Listening for Democracy" 89). Dobson attempts to "Generate Trust" in modern democracies by employing the faculties of listening. Dobson's employment of the ear is deliberate: "to explore the role that listening might play in democracy, and to outline some institutional changes that could be made to make listening more central to democratic processes" (2); and thus, it will not be unfair to define the administration of sound theories into the political realm as an act of aural decolonization as it entails a shift from traditional, institutionalized democratic

practices. The term "decolonial" entails that there exists a power disparity and this becomes procedurally visible as Changez partakes in unidirectional dialogical exchanges with American interlocutor throughout the novel. In the initial pages, we see the American take a seat with his back pressed against the wall:

> "You prefer that seat, with your back so close to the wall?"
>
> "And will you not take off your jacket? So formal!" (Hamid 10)

Both gestures – the safeguarding of any phenomenon that is beyond the central and the peripheral vision, and the reluctance towards taking off a protective layer so as not to expose oneself – point towards an exercise of power that enables one to express reluctance to listen. A more direct form of domination is seen when Changez escorts the American interlocutor to his hotel: "Yes, you are right: they have paused. What do you mean, sir, did I give them a signal? Of course not! I have as little insight into their motivations and identities as you do" (104). The ability to confront the other with the absence of consequences renders the power-disparity even more prevalent and creates the dichotomy of powerful and powerless. Andrew Dobson defines this relationship as "listening and the withholding of listening are exercises of power in themselves. This power can be expressed through the refusal to listen to particular others, or the refusal to listen to whole identities" ("Listening for Democracy" 8). However, listening as an analytical process can also be deployed as a "solvent of power":

> This effect is found, for example, in committees of truth and reconciliation, when the previously powerful are forced to listen to the previously powerless. There is evidence to suggest that this turning of the tables is experienced as power by those who have been systematically marginalized and excluded. (Dobson 8).

Therefore, centering on Mohsin Hamid's narrative choice and the deliberate "muting" of the dominant western voice is not just an attempt at shifting emphasis from the visual to the aural, but is also an attempt to restore the power disparity between the west and Muslim communities to pave the way for a more comprehensive understanding of the Muslim experience.

One notable moment that shrieks out of the print is when Changez speaks about Juan-Bautista:

> But your expression, sir, tells me that you think something is amiss. Did this conversation really happen, you ask? For that matter, did this so-called Juan-Bautista even exist? I assure you, sir: you can trust me. I am not in the habit of inventing untruths! And moreover, even if I were, there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than

> any of the others I have related to you. Come, come, I believe we have passed through too much together to begin to raise questions of this nature at so late a stage. (Hamid 90)

Changez believes the American and he are beyond the stage of distrust; however, the American's distrustful gesture indicates that the generation of trust has not been reciprocal, rather one sided. With regards to the lack of reciprocity, Dobson says "Trust (at least where it has to be negotiated rather than assumed) is a function of understanding which is, by definition, a matter of reciprocity" and "reciprocity is best understood as *dialogue*, which is the respectful interplay between speaking and listening" (89). Towards the end of the novel the discordance of trust becomes more prevalent:

> Ah, we are about to arrive at the gates of your hotel. It is here that you and I shall at last part company. Perhaps our waiter wants to say goodbye as well, for he is rapidly closing in. Yes, he is waving at me to detain you. I know you have found some of my views offensive; I hope you will not resist my attempt to shake you by the hand. But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards. (Hamid 108)

Though we notice a fleeting distrust towards the American, it still does not manage to overtake the one-sided "trust" Changez has developed as he hopes the American is not reaching out for a gun, rather a business card holder. Taking Dobson's model of "Generating Trust" into account, it can be said that, due to a lack of reciprocity from the axis of the west, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* fails to account for an absolute recognition of the Muslim experience in post-9/11 America. Hamid's creative endeavor "mutes" the dominant voice, and though Changez is afforded the chance to be listened to, he is not actually listened to. Through listening, new understandings of "Interfaith Distrust" have emerged, and conflicts have become more apparent, and as I discuss at the beginning of this article, my aim is not to achieve a complete recognition, but to trace a more comprehensive aural recognition by employing my ear in a practice of decolonial listening. Dobson ends his inquiry into generating trust, by propounding that "Listening, especially apophatic listening leading to dialogue, can be a route to lowering levels of distrust" (90), and by drawing on that, I lend a trustful ear towards the reluctant fundamentalist.

In conclusion, the analysis of Bart Moore-Gilbert's exploration of Muslim experience and Islamic fundamentalism within western liberal-democratic societies, as well as the critical engagement with Fukuyama and Taylor's

recognition politics models, exposes the intricacies of reciprocal recognition and the challenges faced by minorities in post-9/11 democracy. Listening to Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* or emphasizing the power of a decolonial, aural analysis in understanding the Muslim experience, reveals the nuances of interfaith distrust and the impact of power dynamics on recognition. The narrative urges the need for a shift towards a more comprehensive recognition, advocating for a new social imagination and aural engagement to reduce distrust between the dominant and the minority within democratic societies. My exploration of listening highlights the potential of aural recognition in developing understanding and trust, ultimately calling for a more inclusive and empathetic approach towards Muslim lives and experiences in a post 9/11 political context.

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