

Discourse, Address, and Neo-Colonial Subjectivity: Rereading Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

This paper revisits Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) as a text of neo-colonial critique, building on a body of postcolonial scholarship that reads Changez's disenchantment through Kwame Nkrumah's theorization of neo-colonialism. Where earlier readings treated neo-colonial power chiefly as theme, this paper argues that Hamid's central formal device i.e., Changez's sustained, silencing monologic address to an unnamed American is itself a linguistic enactment of the very neo-colonial relation the novel critiques. Combining Nkrumah's political-economic framework with insights from discourse analysis on address, deixis, and narrative voice, the paper traces how the novel's recurring “you” positions the American listener, and by extension the Western reader, as the object of an asymmetrical gaze historically reserved for the colonized subject. The novel does not merely narrate neo-colonialism; it restages it at the level of form.

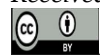
Keywords: Neo-colonialism, Discourse Analysis, Address, Mohsin Hamid, Postcolonial Literature, Narrative voice.

Introduction

Kwame Nkrumah, writing at the moment of formal decolonisation across Africa and Asia, described neo-colonialism as imperialism's final and most dangerous stage: a condition in which a state possesses “all the outward trappings of international sovereignty” while its economic system, and consequently its political direction, remains controlled from outside (Nkrumah, 1965, pp. 1–2). For Nkrumah, this control operated less through the direct occupation associated with classical colonialism than through finance, trade dependency, and the installation of local elites whose authority derived from foreign patrons rather than from their own citizens. Nkrumah's framework has proven durable for postcolonial literary criticism precisely because it names a form of domination that persists after the flag comes down.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has, since its publication in 2007, become something of a set text for this kind of reading. Changez's passage from Lahore to Princeton to the

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valuation firm Underwood Samson, and his eventual return to Pakistan as a university lecturer and agitator, has been read as a case study in exactly the economic and psychological dependency Nkrumah described (Nawaz, Ali, & Saddique, 2021; Mleitat, Hamamra, & Qabaha, 2023). Rereading the novel almost two decades after its publication, alongside its subsequent scholarship, reveals a significant gap: scholarship has largely treated neo-colonialism as something the novel represents, without asking what the novel's own mode of address, most notably its insistent, unanswered “you” *performs*.

This paper argues that Hamid's formal choice of a one-sided dramatic monologue is not incidental to its neo-colonial critique but constitutive of it. Changez speaks; the American never does. That asymmetry of voice, sustained across an entire novel, restages the very asymmetry of power that neo-colonial theory describes, except with the historical positions of speaker and silenced listener reversed. Drawing on discourse-analytic work on address and deixis alongside Nkrumah's political framework, the paper proceeds in four parts: a review of existing neo-colonial and discourse-oriented readings of the novel; a brief account of the discourse-analytic concepts used here; a close analysis of address, silence, and reported speech in four key passages; and a discussion of what a discourse-analytic supplement to neo-colonial reading contributes that thematic analysis alone cannot.

Literature Review

Scholarship on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has clustered around several concerns. A first cluster reads the novel through the economic logic of neo-colonialism directly, applying Nkrumah's model to Changez's recruitment by Underwood Samson and his description of Pakistan's dependency on American aid and sanctions (Nawaz, Ali, & Saddique, 2021; Haider, 2012). A related strand, drawing on Wallerstein's world-systems theory, situates Changez's migration itself as a structural transfer of skilled labour from periphery to core, arguing that his scholarship and corporate career are less a personal achievement than a mechanism by which American capital regulates the human resources of the Global South (Mleitat, Hamamra, & Qabaha, 2023).

A second cluster reads the novel through the lens of post-9/11 racial formation, examining how Changez's beard, his detention at immigration, and the surveillance of Muslim communities in the novel dramatize the Islamophobia that Edward Said had already identified as constitutive of Western discourse about the Muslim world (Maqableh, 2022; Chowdhury, 2018; Tilwani, 2019). Vera Kennedy (2018) traces how Changez's shifting beliefs unsettle any stable opposition between American and Islamic “fundamentalism,” arguing that both are structured by the same totalizing logic. A third cluster treats the novel as a self-conscious literary artefact, attentive to its debts to Camus's *The Fall* and to the ambiguity of its unresolved ending, which withholds confirmation of whether the closing “glint of metal” belongs to a camera or a weapon (Hartnell, 2010; Shymchyshyn, 2022).

A smaller but directly relevant strand has begun to treat the novel's language, rather than its plot, as the primary object of analysis. Riaz et al. (2024) demonstrate how discourse constructs and reinforces social identities through lexical choices and established discursive practices. Tahir et al. (2025) show how political discourse can reinforce hegemony by constructing authority and dominance through rhetorical strategies. Their findings highlight the role of language in maintaining unequal global power relations. Hussain et al. (2025) demonstrate how literary language shapes

identities and worldviews through narratives, metaphors, and symbolic representations. Their study highlights the power of language in constructing meanings and relationships within a post-colonial context. Sattar et al. (2021) demonstrate that discourse functions as a site where ideology, power, and subject positions are constructed through language. Their analysis highlights how linguistic choices can reproduce or challenge established power relations, providing a useful lens for examining Changez's address and the negotiation of neo-colonial subjectivity in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Sukhera et al. (2024) illustrate how literary discourse constructs meaning through recurring images, motifs, and symbolic representations. Their study highlights the role of textual language in shaping broader perspectives and interpretations. Tahir et al. (2024) demonstrate how cultural narratives and media representations shape socially constructed identities through repeated exposure to idealized images and behaviors. Their findings highlight how discourse and representation can influence perceptions of identity. Younas and Riaz (2024) illustrate how political discourse constructs identities through ideological representations of marginalized groups. Their findings highlight the role of language in sustaining power relations and shaping subjectivities. Hussain et al. (2026) show how media discourse can reproduce hegemonic power by privileging institutional voices and marginalizing affected communities. Their findings highlight how discourse shapes public meaning through selective representation and ideological framing.

Sarah Ilott (2014) argues that the novel's second-person address is designed to engage and implicate the reader directly in judging the politics of the text, rather than allowing a comfortable, distanced reading position. More recently, Hussain, Ajmal, and Akhtar (2023) apply Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics to trace how Changez's transitivity patterns i.e., the grammatical roles he assigns himself as actor, goal, or sensor across the narrative shift, as his ideological position hardens, suggesting that his radicalization is enacted grammatically before it is stated thematically.

These two strands: the neo-colonial/political-economic and the discourse-analytic, have so far run largely in parallel rather than being brought together. Studies applying Nkrumah's framework treat the novel's content as evidence of neo-colonial critique but do not examine how the novel's mode of address participates in that critique. Studies of the novel's language, meanwhile, have examined address and transitivity as evidence of Changez's individual psychology rather than connecting these devices back to the political theory of neo-colonial dependency that so much of the novel's content invokes. This paper joins the two: it treats the novel's monologic form as a deliberate discursive strategy that performs, rather than simply illustrates, a reversal of neo-colonial positioning.

Theoretical Framework

Two bodies of theory inform the analysis that follows. The first is Nkrumah's (1965) account of neo-colonialism, summarized above: a condition of nominal sovereignty combined with externally directed economic and political control, in which aid, trade dependency, and elite formation substitute for direct occupation. Nkrumah's insistence that this is a relation rather than a location, something enacted between unequal parties rather than a fixed geographic state is what makes his framework portable to a text about an individual relationship, Changez's monologue to an American stranger, rather than only to a text about states.

The second is a set of discourse-analytic concepts concerned with address and voice. Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) distinction between the dialogic and the monologic is useful here: a dialogic text keeps open the possibility of the other's answering word, while a monologic one forecloses it, granting a single consciousness authority over meaning. Hamid's novel is monologic in a literal, structural sense. The American's replies are never given, only inferred from Changez's responses to them and this paper treats that foreclosure as meaningful rather than as a mere stylistic economy. Related to this is the linguistic category of deixis, the way pronouns and demonstratives ("you," "here," "now") anchor meaning to the immediate situation of utterance. Because Changez's "you" is aimed simultaneously at the silent American character and, by the conventions of second-person narration, at the reader holding the book, the deictic address does double duty: it interpolates the reader into the position of the American, making the reader's own silence and unease part of the text's meaning, an effect Ilott (2014) identifies as central to the novel's political function. Finally, the paper draws loosely on the notion, developed in systemic functional linguistics and applied to this novel by Hussain, Ajmal, and Akhtar (2023), that grammatical choices about who acts and who is acted upon in a sentence are not neutral but encode a speaker's positioning of themselves and others within a field of power.

Read together, these frameworks suggest a specific question: if neo-colonialism is a relation in which one party retains the outward form of sovereignty while a more powerful party controls the substance, what happens when a formerly silenced, formerly spoken-for subject seizes total narrative control over the encounter, while the economically dominant party, America, embodied in the unnamed listener, is reduced to silence? Is this a resolution of the neo-colonial relation, an inversion of it, or, as this paper will argue, a demonstration that discursive reversal and material neo-colonial dependency can coexist without cancelling one another.

Analysis

The Architecture of Address

The novel's frame is a single evening at a café in Lahore, in which Changez addresses an unnamed American in direct, unbroken second person: "Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you" (Hamid, 2007, p. 1). From its opening line, the novel establishes an extreme asymmetry: Changez speaks for roughly two hundred pages; the American's words survive only as fragments voiced by Changez himself, so that even the American's speech is mediated entirely through the Pakistani narrator's control. This is a formal inversion of the colonial travel narrative and the classic anthropological monograph, genres in which a Western observer speaks about and for a non-Western subject who is denied direct address. Here, the positions are exchanged: the presumptively American listener is spoken at, described, and interpreted by a Pakistani narrator who withholds from him any independent voice.

Because the second-person "you" of direct address collapses, in the reading experience, onto the second-person "you" of address to the reader, this inversion is not confined to the fictional American; it extends to whoever holds the book. Ilott (2014) reads this as the novel's central political mechanism: rather than allowing a Western reader the comfortable position of observer, the text conscripts that reader into the silenced position historically occupied by the colonial or neo-colonial subject. The reader, continuously and suspiciously addressed without any oppor-

tunity to reply, is placed at the level of form in a position analogous to that of the dependent state in neo-colonial theory: addressed, positioned, and denied the power to respond.

Grammar of Disenchantment

The shift in Changez's political consciousness is frequently discussed thematically, but it is also traceable grammatically. Changez's initial description of his hiring at Underwood Samson casts him overwhelmingly as an agent, an actor achieving outcomes. As his disillusionment develops, Hussain, Ajmal, and Akhtar (2023) observe a shift toward constructions in which Changez is positioned as the object of others' actions rather than the subject of his own, he is quarantined, subjected to, separated. This grammatical passivation coincides with, and arguably enacts, his growing recognition that his agency within the American corporate system was always conditional. His now well-known description of his own former function, "I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire" (Hamid, 2007, p. 152) names directly what the transitivity pattern of the surrounding prose has already been demonstrating: that his professional "success" placed him grammatically, and therefore ideologically, in the position of instrument rather than agent.

His reaction to the September 11 attacks makes the same point about voice rather than grammar. Watching the towers fall on a television screen in Manila, Changez recalls: "I stared as one — and then the other — of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (Hamid, 2007, pp. 72–73). The confession is delivered without hedge, directly to the silent American, in a moment where the novel's monologic structure does the most ideological work: because the American cannot answer, cannot register shock, cannot moralize in real time, Changez's confession stands unmediated and unchallenged on the page, precisely the discursive privilege historically denied to the colonized or immigrant subject speaking about violence done to, or by, imperial power.

The Disappeared Student and the Reversal of "Who Speaks for Whom"

When one of Changez's own students disappears in Pakistan, presumably at the hands of security forces operating within the American-led "war on terror," Changez erupts into direct political accusation: "no country inflicts death so readily upon inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America" (Hamid, 2007, p. 182). What is notable, read discourse-analytically rather than only thematically, is who is permitted to say this, and to whom, without interruption. In the traditional neo-colonial arrangement Nkrumah describes, the disappeared, the dependent, and the dominated do not typically address their condition directly to the imperial power; they are spoken about, in reports, treaties, and news coverage authored elsewhere. Hamid's novel grants Changez exactly the direct, uninterrupted address to American power that neo-colonial subjects are structurally denied, even as, materially, the asymmetry of power between Pakistan and the United States that Changez describes remains fully intact within the world of the novel. Discourse and material dependency move in opposite directions simultaneously: Changez gains total narrative authority over the encounter precisely at the moment, the novel insists that Pakistan's political and economic subordination has not ended.

The Unresolved Ending

The novel's final pages return to the frame narrative and refuse to resolve it. Changez remarks that the waiter following them appears threatening and observes something catch the light in the American's jacket, a "glint of metal" (Hamid, 2007, p. 209) without clarifying whether it is a business-card case, a camera, or a weapon. Structurally, this ambiguity is only possible because the American has no independent voice with which to explain himself; the reader is left, like the neo-colonial power the novel implicitly indicts, uncertain, watched, and unable to control the terms of its own representation. Anna Hartnell (2010) reads the novel's earlier scene of Changez and Erica's lovemaking, in which Changez asks Erica to imagine him as her dead American boyfriend Chris, as a "deceptively simple" allegory for the violent penetration of American space that 9/11 represented (p. 340); the ending performs an inverse version of the same structure, penetrating the security of an unnamed American body with uncertainty rather than desire. Where Erica, whose name Ali (2016) reads as a near-anagram of "America," cannot survive contact with a desire she cannot fully assimilate, the American of the frame narrative cannot resolve, and the reader cannot resolve for him, whether he is in danger, a formal enactment of the epistemic vulnerability that the novel elsewhere assigns to the "war on terror's" targets rather than its authors.

Discussion: What Discourse Analysis Adds

Reading *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* through Nkrumah's neo-colonial framework identifies the novel's content: Changez's recruitment, his disillusionment, his account of American aid and sanctions and his return to activism in Pakistan. It does not, however, explain why Hamid chose the specific and unusual form of a one-sided dramatic monologue to deliver that content, rather than, say, a conventional first-person retrospective narrative or a dialogic exchange between equals. The discourse-analytic supplement offered here suggests an answer: form and theme are doing the same ideological work from different directions. Nkrumah's neo-colonialism names a condition in which the substance of power is controlled from outside while the form of sovereignty is retained. Hamid's monologue produces something like a mirror image of this at the level of narrative discourse: Changez retains total control over the form of the encounter who speaks, who is silent, how events are framed, while the novel simultaneously insists that Pakistan's underlying economic and political position relative to the United States, the substance of the neo-colonial relation, has not meaningfully changed.

This matters how we read the novel's politics. A purely thematic neo-colonial reading risks implying that Changez's disillusionment and his eventual activism constitute a kind of resolution or resistance to neo-colonial dependency. A discourse-analytic reading complicates that optimism: Changez wins the argument, linguistically and narratively, but the novel gives no indication that Pakistan's structural position has shifted as a result. The satisfactions of address; of finally being the one who speaks, who withholds, who unsettles, are real, and Ilott's (2014) account of reader implication suggests they are not merely symbolic; they genuinely destabilize a Western reader's habitual comfort. But Hamid is careful, in the novel's ambiguous and possibly violent ending, not to let discursive reversal stand in for political change. The "glint of metal" refuses to tell us whether Changez's rhetorical victory converts into anything more.

This point is relevant beyond this particular novel. Studies of post-9/11 novels have generally followed two approaches. Some focus on what these novels represent, such as surveillance, detention, and racialization, while others focus on narrative techniques such as unreliable narration, direct address, and the mixing of genres. The analysis above shows that these two approaches do not have to be treated as separate or competing methods. When a novel deals with the unequal distribution of voice and power between different groups, as many neo-colonial and postcolonial works do, examining who is allowed to speak, who is silenced, and how pronouns position the reader and characters is not simply a matter of literary style. These formal choices are also part of the novel's political argument.

Conclusion

The current study examined the relationship between the novel's content and its most distinctive formal choice: an unanswered, unanswerable monologue addressed to an American who never speaks. This paper has argued that the monologue is not a neutral vehicle for neo-colonial content but a discursive strategy that restages, and partially inverts, the very power relation the novel describes. Changez is granted the narrative authority historically withheld from the neo-colonial subject; the American, and by implication the Western reader, is placed in the position of silenced object. Yet the novel does not allow this discursive reversal to substitute for material change, and its refusal to resolve whether the closing gesture is hostile or benign preserves, to the last page, the uncertainty that neo-colonial dependency imposes on those subject to it. Reading Hamid's novel today, in a period marked by renewed debate over migration, securitization, and the political voice of diasporic subjects, this formal argument retains its force: the question of who is permitted to speak, and who must listen in silence, remains as central to neo-colonial critique as the economic dependencies Nkrumah first described.

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