

## The Transcendental Signifier in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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### Abstract

*A person's life is governed by a primary source that serves as a guiding beacon on day-to-day affairs, both short-term and long-term. An anchor is needed to keep a person's life in a particular direction. This anchor, the Transcendental Significant, gives meaning to the events of a person's life and shapes the identity and the consequent perceptions and motives of a person's life. This investigation is an attempt to discover the transcendental signifier that dominates and governs the life of Changez, the protagonist of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, who makes his association with a native or foreign land secondary. This research follows a qualitative research model; within which he uses the descriptive approach as a means of exploring the Transcendental Significant. For content analysis, the research uses Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as a theoretical framework.*

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## 1. Introduction

Perhaps the main differentiating factor between the people of this world is the different supreme signifiers in the light of which people carry out their business of daily life. A particular signifier gives the followers of that signifier a particular framework to adopt in their life. The more people believe in the reason for a specific signifier, the more different they behave compared to those who follow another set of signifiers from a different school of thought.

Among the different signifiers that intervene in the life of a person, there is always a primordial or transcendental signifier that gives meaning to the rest of signifiers and, consequently, to a person's life. It is in the light of this Primary Significant that a person weighs and values the different phenomena of life and forms a general perception about the events that take place. It implies that people who have different transcendental signifiers can see the world differently, which confirms the fact that the variety of differences in the behavior of two people for the same thing is due to the fact that there are different signifiers at stake and each one of the two people associates a different meaning to a particular event and sees the same phenomenon from a different perspective due to the influence of the signifier (Royle, 2003).

If literature is a reflection of life, it is quite natural to assume that whatever the characters of a particular literary work undertake or traverse in a respective plot and setting, they do it because of the Transcendental Signifier they adhere to and believe in to be true. Perhaps the reason behind the existence of the binary in the form of protagonist and antagonist, hero and villain is due to the same signifier that both parties adopt in their roles. A hero is a hero because he follows the generally accepted and popular signifier among the audience, while the villain is a villain because he either follows another signifier or rejects the popular signifier. Thus, the difference between the characters, the actions they undertake in a literary work, the motives with which the characters evolve and develop, and their perception of life, in general, is due to the Transcendental Significant that they follow (Glendinning & Eaglestone, 2008).

The diasporic literature is perhaps one of the best genres of literature that explains the way Transcendental Signifier(s) shape(s) the way people approach their life and view the world. There are those who leave their homeland and move to another geographical place; whereas there are people from those geographic locations that allow the influx to settle in their geographic locations. Both, the people arriving and the native of the particular geographic location have different signifiers in the light of which they form and devise their respective ideology for living life, and then they live their lives following that ideology. With reference to Pakistan, where a large number of people go to foreign countries and try to settle there, the most representative contemporary diaspora work in English can be *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid. The protagonist of the novel aspires for America, but when he has achieved it, he returns to his homeland. This research aims at identifying the dominant transcendental signifier in the novel that governs the movement of the protagonist to the West and the kind of experience he has under the light of the signifier with which he gives meanings to all that happens to him during the stay in the West that ultimately persuades him to retreat to his native land.

### 1.1. Significance of the Research

This research intends to benefit the readers of diasporic literature in general and the readers of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in particular by identifying the main *Transcendental Signifier* that causes the Pakistanis to move from their native land to the West. In addition, the research aims to bring to light the kind of experience the protagonist in the novel has due to the different signifier he follows and when the life in the West fails to comply with the meanings his respective signifier has for life. Also, how he reacts to it and how his notion of the West in general and his personality in particular changes. The readers of this research may, therefore, have a philosophical understanding of the events that take place in the novel and the way they influence the protagonist.

### 1.2. Research Questions

- Which Transcendental Signifier dominates the proceedings and developments in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*?

## 2. Research Methodology

This research is classified as qualitative research and the methodology is descriptive and exploratory. The technique adopted in the research for the analysis of data is close reading, where important and significant elements of the novel are discussed, analyzed and interpreted.

## 3. Literature Review

Discussion of the contemporary world, be it philosophy, history, ideology, or rational thought of any kind, is not complete without the mention of Derrida. The Algerian philosopher is known for his view of philosophy in general and language in particular in a way that goes against all conventions perceived or established by humans.

Calcango (2009) points out that the greatest legacy that Derrida left for the knowledge base of this world is deconstruction. He is the father of deconstruction, and it is under the lighthouse of deconstruction that postmodern philosophers and linguists find justification for their debate. In addition to the linguistic and philosophical implications of deconstruction as proposed by Derrida, it has far-reaching influence on the human logic and rationale.

Deconstruction is not something about which Derrida comes about out of the blue; rather, Derrida has his influences. Derrida (1989) from his adolescent is deeply influenced by the writers like Gide, Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre and Rousseau, who in their own way and in their own respective times raised their voices and presented their opinions containing deconstructive thoughts against the hegemonic societies, the coercion brought by religion, the human incompetency pertinent to the use of language and so on. Therefore, the deconstruction brought forward by Derrida has lurked in the human consciousness in one way or another throughout times, but it is he who gives it a name and proposes it in the form of a theory.

The fact is established that in the proposition of his theory Derrida has influences of other scholars and philosophers; it is rational that for a better and clearer understanding of Derrida, a substantial understanding of his influences and predecessors in the knowledge base of *structuralism* is imperative. Saussure is considered to be the father of structuralism because it is he who identifies the preliminary structure behind the language and its conveyance of meaning. To Saussure (1919) the core of a language or a linguistic system lies in reciprocal determination. In other words, in language there exists binary opposition where the *signifieds* are differentiated from one another on the basis of what they are not. The 'red' color is 'red' because it is 'not blue', 'not green', 'not yellow' and so on. Ergo, it is the existence of differences in language that make it what it is. There is no similarity or coherence in what a signifier can signify or how a signified can be described with a particular signifier. The relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary and this arbitrariness in addition to the binary opposition is the core of a language. This binary between the different signifiers is the dominant feature of the language and it makes sense of the whole linguistic system.

Derrida (1979) argues pertaining to *structuralism* that like other systems of the world that are created by man, there should also be a genesis of structuralism, whether it is the structure of the world or its ideologies at a philosophical level, or it is the structure of the language that exists in the form of the signifier and signified relationship which exists in binary opposition. If there is to be a structure in language, it is quite natural that this structure has some kind of genesis and this genesis is what gives meaning to the structure. Language or the understanding of the world, it has a genesis, and that genesis is crucial to the making sense of it all and preventing it from being ineffective (Roffe & Reynolds, 2004).

It is in his book *Of Grammatology* (1974) that Derrida takes the matter of signifier and signified and their genesis to a philosophical level. In the book, Derrida discusses the *metaphysics of presence* the primary motivator of which is the transcendental signified. It is the primary or genesis signified that transcends all the other thoughts and signifiers; nonetheless, all the signifiers imply to it in all their meanings. Thus, this transcendental signified is actually represented by a transcendental signifier that then gives meanings to all the signifiers adopted by people.

It is this transcendental signifier that people place in the center of the logo (logo-centrism) and the rest of all that is left in the center is all because of this signifier. It is because of this transcendental signifier that the signifiers fall into binaries and it is with the approval of this transcendental or primary signifier that the rest of the signifiers get to be appropriate or proper (Royle, 2003).

Humans, throughout their history, have been under the influence of one or the other transcendental signifier. For people of earlier times, it would be religion or the existence of God that was the primary signifier and it is in the light of it that people would give meaning to their lives and the actions they undertake in life. Then there comes the time of renaissance, where human is placed in the center of it all and thus the human wants, desires, intellect and reasoning above all are what give meaning to the life, making the humans get into present and God go to absence. At present, people in this world have different transcendental signifiers that predict the meaning that they have for life and the happenings that take place in it. There are people who still keep religion at the

transcendental place, while there are others who consider culture or their human ability as the transcendental meaning maker.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a novel by Mohsin Hamid, published in 2007. In the novel, he gives the character of Changez who lives in Pakistan and then moves on to USA to live the American dream. However, it is 9/11 that changes everything for Changez and he sees the same world in a different way and therefore behaves differently. It is a fair assumption that there is a particular signifier that shapes the world and gives meaning to it for Changez. This way by identifying the Transcendental Signifier one can find the rationale behind the motives and his thinking process, and how he gives meanings to life and its events.

This study will use Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) – a theory that Maslow presented in the form of a paper in which he classifies human needs into five categories. These are arranged in a hierarchal order. These are the primary human needs and after the fulfillment of one, the human moves towards the other need; however, sometimes it also happens that one needs supersedes the others and for the fulfillment of that particular need, an individual leaves the rest of the needs.

At first, Maslow gives the physiological need that is at the base of the hierarchy. This need category comprises all the physiological needs that have to do with human survival. Needs such as food, shelter, air, water, and sexual gratification are all primary physiological needs of a human, and without them, the human body cannot survive and resultantly would crash.

The second is the safety or security need category in which come all the needs have to do with human safety and security. This security is not just limited to the security of human life; rather, economic, social, and the well-being of people in the family are other needs that humans consider and strive to fulfill.

The third is the category of need, entailing the needs related to love and belongingness. Gaining the love and belongingness of other people is another human need with the glass of which they see the world. Humans want love from family and friends and they also wish to be intimate with their loved ones, making sure they belong to the group.

The fourth need is *esteem*. Humans have this need of gaining esteem from which they wish to gain value and recognition from others in their social circle.

The fifth is the need for *self-actualization*. It is in human nature to actualize their best abilities. This need is related to the human potential and a human striving to be what he or she ought to be; thus, if a man is what he ought to be, he or she is said to be self-actualized.

#### **4. Data Analysis**

In the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the protagonist, Changez is a national of Pakistan, who moves to the United States to secure his future and keep the troubles and worries of Pakistan as much at bay as possible. He goes to the United States (US), where he is on scholarship at Princeton University. He completes his degree with distinction and lands an equally good job at Underwood Samson. In the meanwhile, he also develops an interest in Erica who also reciprocates the feelings although with not the same extent. In the United States, he enjoys a better lifestyle, has money, is in love with Erica, and has a job that makes him feel better about himself and also the possibility of achieving what he

wishes to achieve. However, things change once the event of 9/11 takes place. The external stimuli, as well as the general notion of Changez regarding the United States and its perks, also change, and from there onwards, for him, the US does not represent what it initially used to represent. Hence, for him, the only place left to go is to go back home.

Throughout his progression and regression, the character of Changez can be analyzed with the help of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. These five needs stand in the form of the Transcendental Signifier which gives meaning to the world of Changez and the kind of connotations each of the elements of this world carries for him. The migration of Changez from Pakistan to the US, the kind of life he enjoys there and the same place changes its meaning in the eyes of Changez. All these take place because the Transcendental Signifier with the help of which Changez is viewing the world loses all its meaning. Hence, it causes Changez to see the same world from a different perspective.

At the base level of the hierarchy, Maslow gives physiological and safety needs. The physiological needs are the needs that are concerned with human's basic needs and instincts such as air, food, health, sexual gratification, and so on. The safety needs are concerned with the security that a human wants to feel pertaining to health, finances, and life in general. These are the two primary needs that every human wants to fulfill and it is after the fulfillment of these needs that a person is able to move on to the higher level of need fulfillment.

The lack of fulfillment of these two needs in Pakistan is one of the major elements that cause Changez to move to the US. These two needs make him think about moving to the US because there he won't be worried about these two needs and could focus on other things in life. Although throughout the novel, Changez gives hints of how these two needs are not being met in Pakistan, the meeting that he has with the father of Erica and his comments about Pakistan give an appropriate picture of the plight of Pakistan with reference to these needs. Erica's father says:

Economy's falling apart though, no? Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes, while everyone else suffers. Solid people, don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism". Reluctant Fundamentalist (62).

The comments from Erica's father are evident about the difficult situation Pakistan is in and the kind of level of physiological and security needs that the people of Pakistan would have achieved. The constantly falling economy, the corruption that takes place in the country, the poor living conditions, the decreasing purchasing power of the people and, above all, the religious and cultural fundamentalism, stand in the way of a person who feels physiologically fulfilled, or safe from life, finances or health perspective. Therefore, in a country like Pakistan, to have these two needs fulfilled is something impossible for ordinary people and Changez is not among those out of the ordinary people.

At another point in the novel, Changez tells his silently listening partner about the condition of his family by saying, 'But we are not rich..... Salaries have not risen in line with inflation, the rupee has declined steadily against the dollar, and those of us who once had substantial family estates have seen them divided and sub-divided..... and when the time came to send me to college, the money simply was not there.'" (11)

Changez did not belong to a wealthy family. Being part of a poor family means that Changez is above all concerned with securing his future, a future in which he can feel financially secure. The need for this kind of security for Changez is not met in Pakistan. Therefore, for him, America has a whole different meaning when viewed from the perspective of security in general and financial security.

Similarly, the comments of Changez about the increased sensitivity of sight for a women's body in Pakistan shows the physiological need of sexual gratification unmet and his point of view regarding the poorly constructed pavements of Lahore also shows the place not fit for living compared to the standards of the United States. Thus, for Changez, it is quite normal to consider the US as a resort where he neither has to worry about his safety and physiological needs because every need of his is being met there. He has a dream job in which he earns plenty of money, money the likes of which he could never earn in Pakistan and this much earning allows him to live a better life, "..... And with impunity spend in an hour more than my father earns in a day" (42). Hence, for Changez, United States provides him with the security of every kind and offers a better place for fulfillment of physiological needs.

However, things change for Changez after 9/11, and the very same US that offers him a better and safer place for living changes into a place where he starts receiving safety threats. Changez narrates one such incident to his listening partner about his experience in New Jersey by saying: "Often I would emerge into the car park to find that one of the tires of my rental car was punctured – far too often for it to be mere coincidence" (109).

This experience is one of the experiences Changez has pertaining to his security in the US. People would abuse him on the subways, come to him in anger and try to provoke him, call him 'Fucking Arab', and so on to make him feel unsafe. Thus, America that was providing a better place of living with security to Changez, starts changing, with which the opinion and reflection of it for Changez also starts shifting. It eventually leads to Changez to prefer the same unsafe and unhealthy life in Pakistan.

At the third level of his theory of needs, Maslow gives the need for love and belongingness. This need refers to the inclinations that a person has towards being loved and being a part of a particular social group. This need can be classified into levels like feeling the need for being loved by family, friends and at an intimate level by a partner.

Analyzing the pre-immigration situation of Changez from the perspective of this need, one can easily see in Pakistan, other than his being a part of the family. He does not have any other human association at any other level. He does not have a wife or a girlfriend and nor does he have any friend, who can be of the social standing of his family in the society. However, things change for him in this regard when he immigrates to the US.

First, he gets to enjoy social belonging with his colleagues at Underwood Samson. In Pakistan, he has not such group with whom he could enjoy and party, primarily because people with whom he wants to party, belong to wealthy strata of society; whereas, he is not among the wealthy ones. However, he shares the same expense card with all his colleagues there; it allows him to party with them as well. As Changez says, "So I gave in to the pleasure of being among the wealthy young fellowship" (17).

At another occasion, Changez tells about his experience in New York by saying, "I was in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker" (37). Changez

with his job and education is able to mingle with the society of New York, the possibility of which would have been difficult even in his own society in Pakistan.

His working with Underwood Samson also allows him to enjoy a better prestige in the society of the US, where only the money and the company one belongs to matters. “.....my Princeton degree and Underwood Samson business card were invariably sufficient to earn a respectful nod of approval” (97). His educational background and the company he works for allow him to interact with other people and be social with them without any hindrance. Ergo, the need of being social among other people and having the general nod of approval in the social circle is fulfilled for Changez in the US.

The other level at which the immigration to the US is able to fulfill the need of love and belongingness for Changez is his relationship with Erica. In Pakistan, Changez had no love interest, nor was there any indication of it. Erica brings light into his life and gives him another element of interest for his stay in US. “..... in the foreground shimmered Erica, and observing her gave me enormous satisfaction” (24).

It is in the company of Erica that Changez finds solace and a friend with whom he likes spending time and for whom he could bear it all. Changez is so much in love with Erica that he is even willing to bear the fact that she is somewhat psychologically disturbed for the loss of her childhood friend and love interest Chris. Nevertheless, Changez bears all the hostilities of post 9/11 days in the hope of being together with Erica. However, it all starts losing meaning when Erica is unable to reciprocate the feelings of love and compassion for Changez. Till the end of the novel when Changez considers coming back, he keeps on reconsidering his decision just if Erica would somehow correspond with him, giving him a reason to stay in the US. However, this feeling of love does not reciprocate and he goes back to Pakistan.

At Underwood Samson as well, the social standing of Changez also changes and where once he enjoys recognition and distinct standing among his peers. “...at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whisper and stare” (148)

America that once offered social recognition and assimilation to Changez changes and after 9/11 Changez is no more a blended New Yorker; rather, he is just an outcast, a terrorist and an ethnic anomaly.

Moving on to the next level of needs, which give meaning to the way Changez sees the world, comes the need of self-esteem. As the name indicates, this need is concerned with a person feeling recognized among the social circle and gaining their respect accompanied with a certain level of autonomy. According to Maslow, in order to move towards the need of a higher level, it is necessary that the needs at the lower level should be fulfilled (not considering the exceptions). For Changez to move towards the need of self-esteem, it is imperative to have the first three needs fulfilled first, which from the earlier analysis shows is not the case. The lack of money, no distinction in education and the middle class problems are preventing Changez to move on to the next level of needs and pursue self-esteem.

His arrival and scoring a job in Underwood Samson allows him to pursue the need of self-esteem and make him feel something of himself as well. Changez remarks his view of the US with regards to the need of esteem in the following way: “This, I realized was another



world from Pakistan; supporting my feet were the achievements of the most technologically advanced civilization our species had ever known” (38).

Changez is at the height of the self-esteem in the US compared to whatever he has ever experienced in Pakistan. He thinks of himself as something out of the world, a feeling that he has never experienced before in Pakistan. “I was in my own eyes, a veritable James Bond – only younger, darker, and possibly better paid” (72). Changez ensures that he earns the respect of his fellows and all those who come in contact with him; this is why; he works two jobs to ensure he could remain social with his university fellows. Further, on interview at Underwood Samson he feels offended when Jim asks him about the financial aid he is on for studies. For him, his self-esteem is of grave importance and he in no way wants to feel inferior to his fellows and peers, which is why he wants to be a part of Underwood Samson because it allows him to gain the social recognition and a better place among his circle of friends, “... making my concerns about money and status things of the distant past” (16).

For Changez, everything is going well. He enjoys a job that gives him recognition, a girlfriend who is white in colour, and money that allows him to stand high in the society, both in the US and in Pakistan. However, things take a turn when the twin towers fall. He is in Philippines when the towers fall. When he come back with his colleagues to the New York airport, he receives a different treatment at immigration. “I was escorted by armed guards into a room where I was stripped down to my boxer shorts.....” (85). This is a serious dent on the self-respect of Changez. The magnitude of it feels great to him in comparison to what he has enjoyed before the 9/11 scenario. Similarly, the kind of treatment he receives from random and strange people in the US as a response to 9/11, and the silent and strange treatment which he receives from his co-workers at Underwood Samson, all serve as a dent on his self-esteem and make him reconsider his position and decision regarding staying in the United States.

“I knew in my senior year that I was something special. I was a perfect breast, if you will – tan, succulent, seemingly defiant of gravity and I was confident of getting any job I wanted” (5). Changez knows that he is something special, however, how special he is or what these powers of his could help him achieve could never have been possible while staying in Pakistan, because there he is not able to satisfy even his basic level needs, let alone the need of the highest level.

For Changez, moving to the US means going to a place where he could actually rise to his full potential and be what he wants to be – for him it is a place where he could achieve his dream, which in actual is the American dream. Everything that Changez does in the US before 9/11 all take him a step closer to his American dream. He has admission in the best university, which has the best scholars and teachers. All this means that he would be in a better position to rise to a higher level of professional excellence. Regarding universities, Changez says at one point, “America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education” (38). If Changez were something special, his specialness and uniqueness would have been polished by the American universities.

In addition to the universities that make Changez realize his dream of actualization of self, it is his job at Underwood Samson as well that complement in Changez’s actualizing. When he joins Underwood Samson, his sentiments are, “I felt empowered, and besides all manner of new possibilities were opening up to me” (42). Job at Underwood Samson allows him to get wealthy, to achieve a better social status, to send huge checks back home

and a secure long lasting future of success and glory, which is all he dreamed of and all he has wanted to be when he was in Pakistan.

Things start to change for Changez after 9/11 from self-actualization perspective as well. Changez has considered America as a land of his dreams in which he could achieve his dream job; however, that land starts to change and everything in it starts reacting differently to Changez. He is earning money even after 9/11; however, the recognition, the prestige and the love that money is supposed to bring in his actualized dream is no more there. It all makes Changez reconsider the way he actualizes his potential whilst all the tries. He makes ensure that the dream does not fall apart. This sentiment of his is evident from him where he says: "I prevented myself as much as was possible from making the obvious connection between the crumbling of the world around me and the impending destruction of my personal American dream" (106).

All the experience that Changez has in the post 9/11 scenario makes him think all over again about what he thinks of his potential and perceives it to be in materialized form. He becomes skeptic of what he is, what his intentions are and how he is utilizing his potential. On his trip back home, he thinks about the same issue in an introspective manner, "And what was I abandoning them for? A well-paying job and a woman whom I longed for but who refused even to see me? I grappled with these questions again and again" (142).

After the experiences of 9/11, the thinking of Changez changes and he starts actualizing himself as not a single being; rather, he places himself in the bigger picture. He could have continued with his life in the US and bore or ignored minor insults for the sake of money and esteemed job, but he sees things differently and places himself as an Other and compares himself with the West, which causes him to lose everything which he wants and makes him re-think about what he actually wanted. All this thinking is evident when he says, "In other words, my blinders were coming off, and I was dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of my arc of vision" (165). His considering himself a part of a greater whole and not some isolated element cause him to leave his shallow dream of actualization and find other means of actualizing his potential.

## **5. Conclusion**

In Pakistan, Changez is not wealthy; he has education like the majority of other people. He has no love interest or a group of friends; his social standing in the country is nothing. He has potential but in the country, there are not enough opportunities or means available that could help him materialize his true potential. The transcendental signifier of human needs gives meanings to all these needs under the influence of which Changez considers moving to the US.

For Changez, the US is a land of dreams where all the troubles and worries that he faces in Pakistan won't be present and he would be allowed to fulfill all his needs. Changez is a Muslim, but he does not see or despise the US as a place where he could easily drink alcohol and indulge in pre-marital sex, which shows that for him religion is not the transcendental signifier that gives meaning to things; rather, for him, it is his needs that give meanings to the world. Similarly, after the 9/11 scenario, the US is the same where there is alcohol, the chances of sexual intercourse without difficulty exist, a chance of earning big money and enjoying a lavish lifestyle, but for Changez, none of it is available

anymore. He is threatened for life; he has lost respect because of his ethnicity, break up with Erica, his constant thinking of the broader whole change the meaning of the US for him, and he comes back to Pakistan. The same Pakistan where it is difficult for him to fulfill his needs, but the meaning of Pakistan as a place changes for him because fulfilling his hierarchy of needs in Pakistan is easier compared to the US in the post 9/11 scenario. It is the transcendental signifier of his needs that gives meaning to his life in general and the US/Pakistan in particular. Wherever he finds his needs fulfilled easily, that place holds a greater and higher preference for him, and the aspiration for the native or foreign land is a matter of secondary importance for him.

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