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Literature and the Economy of Globalization

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Abstract: At first glance, literature and economics seem entirely different dimensions of the individual's existence. If the former enables escapement in a fictional haven, the latter does not allow any distancing from immediate reality. Still, without compromising its independence, but sometimes also forcing concessions, economy is a prerequisite for literature, generating thematic and stylistic mutations. And this is even truer in the context of globalization that requires a reconsideration of both economy and society. The present paper will discuss the connections between literature and economics, in the global context, as evidenced in the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid.
Keywords: Literature, economy, globalization, identity, conflict.

The term 'globalization', not in any way new, designates, without a doubt, the most important economic and social phenomenon of recent times that alters the way in which the human being conceives reality. Even though since 1962 Marshal McLuhan was talking about a 'global village' brought about by the new technological innovations (McLuhan, 2011, 25), it was Theodore Levitt who, in 1983, authored the term in *Harvard Business Review* journal. In the article entitled "The Globalization of Markets", he characterizes the phenomenon as a new stage of world economy, generated by technology, which annuls the major differences between various parts of the world (Levitt, 1983). The result is a new commercial reality that of the global markets for products standardizing consumption beyond any national or regional borders (*Ibidem*). Moreover, on a more drastic note, Noam Chomsky defines globalization as "a very specific form of international economic integration designed in meticulous detail by a network of closely interconnected concentrations of power: multinational corporations, financial institutions" (Chomsky, 2006). Both definitions emphasize the fact that national boundaries, though not dissolved, become more and more meaningless, as people are exposed to the same cultural and economic realities, despite the national background. In this context, multinational companies become the main vehicle for globalization, as they remap the world according to a market-oriented world-view. Moreover, a certain life style is promoted, based on the idea of wealth and comfort, both attributes of consumption.

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From this point of view, the force of globalization derives from a power narrative, with hegemonic attributes, meant to manipulate the individual conceived as consumer. This hegemonic discursive product speculates the psychological connection between the individual and the products he or she consumes and derives its power from the fact that it employs all aspects of the individual's life, and, by that, it is resembles Foucault's perspective, by creating 'useful individuals' by isolating him in his needs (Foucault, 1995, 255). Therefore, by promoting as ideal a certain life-style, intimacy is invaded by mediating the individual's relation to the world around him through the possession of certain products. And this is easily translated into sales figures by world corporations. This form of hegemonic discourse promotes a power narrative concerning an ideal life style based on comfort and well being, guaranteed by consumerism. The outcome is a new form of exile, because, being exposed to the same economic realities, people do not have the same power to consume these realities. This is what puts people on the move, as individuals choose deracination in order to pursue this idealized life style. Economic considerations seem to reorganize values, as notions like home, nationality, identity etc. are set against this economically-determined context.

Despite the many contradictory forms, and by targeting the individual in his intimate connections with the objects around, the hegemonic discourse of globalization encompasses everything, leaving no exteriorities. Moreover, it generates new realities and restructures human relations based on the grand narrative that rearranges the entire world in various rhizomatic networks at a global level. That is why Imre Szeman asserts that

> although globalization is at one level real and has real effects, it is also decisively and importantly rhetorical, metaphoric, and even fictional; it is reality given a narrative shape and logic, in a number of different and irreconcilable ways. (Szeman, 2010, 68).

In this context, the Derridarian "there is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida, 1997, 602) takes an unexpected reality turn, as it appears that nothing can escape the hegemonic discourse of globalization.

Literature itself is caught amid these global networks, on the one hand, as a bearer of anxieties related to the rapid shifting reality, and on the other, as product, part of a generalized economic system. This too has been the field of controversies, as opinions vary from that there is nothing new under the sun when asserting the connection between literature and globalization (O'Brien, Szeman, 2001, 611) to that literature comes as a response to the new global realities, encompassing the individual's anxieties to the rapid shifts of the world (Gupta, 2009, 65). Although one might argue that writers have always had a global consciousness long before globalization was in place, literary studies worldwide are, at this moment, in need of a reconfiguration in order to be, using J. H. Miller words, "a concomitant of economic and financial globalization, as well as of new world-wide telecommunications" (Miller, 2011, 252). It is not new that literary texts have to respond to the economic and social changes of the world and the writer is strongly linked to his time, but nowadays, the interdependence is

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more visible than ever; the condition of the writer is deeply linked to the consumer society, and the role of literature seems to be outlined in connection to the new realities by employing social, political and economic descriptions of the phenomenon. The global novel seems, as Liam Connell asserts, "to incorporate the patterns of international relations into structures of their everyday lives". Moreover, it concerns how the experience of consumption can be represented as global (Connell, 2004, 83).

Therefore, the relations between the economic aspects and literature surface across the fields of both disciplines. First of all, scholars point out a commodification of literature, that apparently looses it's autonomy by being inscribed in the same evaluation system of all other cultural commodities. Due to the fact that literary institutions are globalized (see the entire publishing and selling industry), writers orient their discourse to the real and immediate requests of readers perceived as consumers. As Liam Connell asserts, texts are read within certain structures of distribution shaped as international structures of commodity exchange (*Ibid.*, 80). The researcher places emphasis on the experience of consumption that can be represented as global because of the technological developments that enable people to consume the same cultural products and be aware of the fact that everybody else does the same. This erases (to some extent) cultural differences and reshapes the idea of community, creating a certain type of inter-subjectivity addressed in contemporary literature. In this type of literature concerning globalization, economic considerations surface in the narrative, as narrative is concerned with merging "cultural and economic models of internationalism into a unified process of commodification", as Connell asserts when discussing J.M. Coetzee's novel *Youth* (*Ibid.*, 89).

The business of selling literature generates, no doubt, alterations in the structure of the literary discourse, on either a thematic or linguistic level (Black, 2009). There has been much talk among scholars about the linguistic particularities employed in the process of selling literature, as the global dimension of the literary text seems to be guaranteed by translatability into the "global English" (*Ibidem*). On a thematic level, literature becomes the expressions of cultural diversity rekindling the issues of identity. For example, Shameem Black sees the urge to assert national identity through art as a consequence of economic globalization, particularly for the countries that encourage capital investment from abroad. The explanation would be that "they're trying to get rich through connections to the outside world, but want to have a sense of themselves as a coherent and individual place" (*Ibidem*). By this, national identity becomes less and less a functional paradigm, as "literature is becoming defined less by a nation than by a language in which authors from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds write" (Paul Jay, 2010, 33). Cultural identity seems no longer defined by national borders as translation enables texts to be transmitted and communicated across languages and becoming part of a social existence in a community (Tomlinson, 2003, 270).

Therefore, because of the pertaining economic aspects of globalization, literature becomes indeed a bearer of the human anxieties related to the economic and social instability. Moreover, it is a medium where the individual can "explore the limits of self reflection" in the new way in which the writer manages to picture "life

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englobed" (Israel, 2004, 5). In fact, literature becomes one of the main tools for understanding globalization, because literary texts deal with different political, economic and social aspects regarding the phenomenon. Even not addressing it directly (in the sense that authors don't write explicitly about it, but the narrative gets translated and hence travels around the world due to literary institutions), or even creating narratives against this phenomenon, most of the writers seem to employ globalization at some point in their work. Basically, produced within the hegemonic discourse of globalization, contemporary literature addresses it in one way or the other.

One of the novels employing globalization at a thematic level and explaining it by addressing anxieties related to the globalized world, is Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The novel tells the story of a young Pakistani who chooses deracination from his home culture, but ends up by reconsidering his entire system of values when realizing that beyond the immediate success brought about by becoming an American, his own identity is at stake. The hegemonic discourse of globalization reverberates at an individual level and generates an identity search that bears the main character in a journey across spaces, cultures, and nations. Educated at Princeton, Changez, the narrator and main character, is recruited by one of the most important companies of financial evaluation in the United States. He comes to America seduced by the financial opulence of a certain life style according to which he constructs his entire worldview and redefine dominant aspects of the world around. Even the idea of home, central to construing one's identity, is weighed against the life-style narrative that Changez pursues into reality. For example, when visiting his girlfriend's house, he finds himself fascinated by the wealthy environment and includes this fascination in explaining his feeling of familiarity and belonging:

> I felt a peculiar feeling; I felt at home. Perhaps it was because I had recently lived such a transitory existence (…); perhaps it was because I missed my family and the comfort of a family residence (…); or perhaps it was because a spacious bedroom in a prestigious apartment on the Upper East Side was, in American terms, the socioeconomic equivalent of a spacious bedroom in a prestigious house in Gulberg, such as the one in which I had grown up (Hamid, 2007, 53).

Therefore, home, as the identity matrix of the individual is equally connected to a birth place, a nation and a family, and also to the possibility of materializing a certain fictitious narrative of a life-style promoted through a power narrative considered ideal by the individual. In fact this is what motivates Changez in the first place, because, as globalization emphasized the economic differences between countries, Changez asserts that he tries to regain in America the same financial status his family has lost in Pakistan. Moreover, the differences between Pakistan and America are constantly emphasized, and even when it seems that economic realities have taken a back seat, they surface, clearing the fact that this is the true mechanism that puts things on the move. Still, this economically mediated world-view is not characteristic only to American culture. For example, Changez mother wipes his forehead with a bill, for good luck. The gesture proves that culture and economy are linked in shaping a unitary worldview, that, despite

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the fact that differs from one area to another, they employ the same concerns of the human being regarding stability and safety. The hegemonic discourse of globalization just underlines the importance of the economic aspects, by imposing as ideal a certain life style. At the same time, it designs a measure tool for the quality of life exploiting the affective connection between an individual and his belongings. Nevertheless, this connection is by no means new, as the cultural gesture of Changez's mother proves that economic stability is deeply connected with the concepts of luck and faith. That is why the differences brought about by the implementation of such a narrative are so striking to the narrator himself who confesses to a real crisis when faced with the discrepancies between his American life-style and that of his family, back home:

> There are adjustments one must make if one comes here from America; a different way of observing is required. I recall the Americanness of my own gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing. I was struck at first by how shabby our house appeared, with cracks running through its ceilings and dry bubbles of paint flaking off where dampness had entered its walls (…). I was saddened to find it in such a state—no, more than saddened, I was shamed." (Hamid, *op.cit.*, 124)

This does not mean that the native culture is left behind, or annulled altogether, as Changez constantly asserts it as a constitutive part of his identity. But he blends it in the multicultural kaleidoscope of American landscape, emphasizing its exterior aspects, not by asserting it, for now, as a structural part of the self. For example, he wears his traditional shirt, a white kurta, to more than one formal occasions, taking advantage, as he confesses, of the "ethnic exception clause that is written into every code of etiquette" (*Ibid.,* 48) in order to hide his real financial status. In this landscape of multiculturalism, cultural otherness is accepted, even valued as sign of diversity and consideration towards the very close cultural other, itself a product of current realities. Nevertheless, for Changes, it enables a permanent comparison between Pakistan and America, a comparison placing emphasis on the economic inequalities enforced by globalization.

The comparison traverses the entire narrative shaped as a story told to an American stranger, somewhere in Lahore. The narrator offers his help in what seems a casual encounter between two strangers, nonetheless, constantly reminding about the cultural differences between the two. The tourist seems uneasy being outside his comfort zone constituted by the dominant American culture. He is restless and nervous and Changez's discourse is meant to reassure the tourist of his safety, pointing out the exotic beauty of the world around, that seem to be untouched by the uniforming forces of globalization. The context apparently created is that of an exteriority that generates insecurity constantly exploited by the narrator. Changez's story is interrupted by the permanent reassuring of his listener's safety. For example, at some point, the narrator interrupts his story in order to address his interlocutor: "You seem worried. Do not be; this burly fellow is merely our waiter, and there is no need to reach under your jacket"(*Ibid.,* 2). Mentioned as such, these anxieties constitute apparent gaps in the linearity of the novel, in a continuous back and forth between the

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first-person narrative of Changez's life and the permanent reassurance of safety of the American 'tourist'. This reassurance seems useless, at a first glance, taking into consideration that there are no evident reasons for a real threat.

Telling his story in a first person narrative, Changez constructs himself as a product of the grand narrative of globalization. From this point of view, he is the embodiment of deracination mediated by economic grounds that remain throughout the novel the main vehicle for the constant movement of the individual. And not only in search for a place of belonging, as Changez's job in the multinational company takes him in various parts of the world, where he has to evaluate other companies according to a very strict system of efficiency created as a measure tool. Therefore, the image of a globalized world is shaped as an economic totality brought about by multinational companies that redesign national borders. Multinational corporations, defined by Noam Chomsky as "masters of mankind" (Chomsky, 2011), are, in fact, symbols of the globalized world, a new social context where the only important thing, as the narrator himself confesses, is to produce. And this imperative redesigns human relations, according to a particular type of culture based on working relations. It is a form of "corporatist brotherhood", as the narrator defines it, a form of affiliation that ends once with leaving the company. Just like the concept of home, belonging is also reconsidered, because it is ensured by being an active part of such a working community. And here, another emphasis is placed on the physical aspects that resurface as a proof of acceptance. This points out a carefully chosen diversity serving the interests of the company, but hiding, in fact, a profound uniformity:

> We were marvelously diverse, says Changez. And yet we were not: all of us, Sherman included, hailed from the same elite universities: Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Yale; we all exuded a sense of confident self-satisfaction; and not one of us was either short or overweight. It struck me then - no, I must be honest, it strikes me now - that shorn of hair and dressed in battle fatigues, we would have been virtually indistinguishable. (Hamid, *op. cit.,* 38)

Although differing in aspects, all these characters are fundamentally the same, all products of the same power narrative. Part of the elite company, they benefit from the materialization of their own life-style narrative, that, is fundamentally the same for all of them, and is reduced to spending huge sums of money on satisfying immediate needs. Moreover, through their jobs, they become agents for promoting this hegemonic discourse and the neoliberal politics reinforced by American culture.

Still, this economically mediated perspective proves its faults, and Changes is soon forced to reconsider his stand, in an identity crisis generated by the nine-eleven events. Finding himself on a border between worlds, the narrator grows aware of the side effects of this hegemonic discourse that modifies the entire world structure:

> I wondered how it was that America was able to wreak such havoc in the world—orchestrating an entire war in Afghanistan, say, and legitimizing through its actions the invasion of weaker states by more powerful ones, which India

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> was now proposing to do to Pakistan—with so few apparent consequences at home". (*Ibid*., 131)

This definition changes the focus from the economic benefits to the social repercussions. In this context, he finds himself more connected to his home culture that he regards now as victim of neoliberal politics. Reconsidering his position in relation to the global hegemony that he can now perceive further than the immediate financial benefits, he ends up by resigning his job and moving back to Pakistan.

In this economically mediated worldview, literature enters as a disruptive factor. Nonetheless, subject to globalization, as aforementioned, it is equally evaluated according the same set of values: literature is a product useful as long as it produces profit. In fact, in working with a publishing company, Changes outlines such a economic view over literature:

> the owners wanted to sell, and the prospective buyer—our client was unlikely to continue to subsidize the loss-making trade division with income from the profitable educational and professional publishing arms. Trade, with its stable of literary—defined for all practical purposes as commercially unviable—authors was a drag on the rest of the enterprise; our task was to determine the value of the asset if that drag were shut down (*Ibid,* 142).

Therefore, the task is simple: if the literary division does not make profit, it has to be shut down, regardless of other non-economic values. Even the language used to describe this situation is shaped on economic grounds, leaving no place for outlining any other type of sensibility. In fact, it characterizes the language used throughout the entire novel, constructed middle way between literary and economic. The novel itself is, in this context, a product of the contemporary world, addressing anxieties related to globalization and being, at the same time, a bestseller. Nonetheless, literature manages to remain the only thing that, somehow escapes being totally economically determined. The reason is outlined by Imre Szeman in "Globalization, Postmodernism and (Autonomous) Criticism" in which the author discusses the functions of the literary studies in relation to the hegemonic discourse of globalization. One of these functions is that of outlining a different view on reality, by constituting a reality *per se*, and reminding of the fictitious character of globalization discourse (Szeman, 2010, 76). Although Szeman talk about literary studies in particular, we consider that the work of fiction has the same role. In fact, this is proven by Erica, Changez's girlfriend, a woman who lingers between worlds. She comes from a rich family and is very socially skilled; on the other hand, she is strongly traumatized by the death of her first lover. Erica manages to escape reality only when she isolates herself in fiction. Moreover, she connects to Changez, because he is able to construct, through narrative, a different world. She is constantly asking him to tell stories about his home-country and family. In fact, their relation is based on reciprocal narrative generated by nostalgia. If Erica accepts her longing for her lover, this being, in fact, the reason for her mental distress as entrapment in her own past, Changez grows aware only when telling stories, when he manages to extract himself

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from the economically mediated context of his job. From this point of view, the narrative flows on two levels. On the one hand, there is the professional development of the protagonist, generated by the need of transforming an idealized life style into reality. Changez's is driven by what his boss calls "a hunger". Jim, who is also the recruiter, perceives immediately the gap between Changez's self-imposed image and his real financial status and speculates his drive in pursuing the master-narrative of globalization that brought him to America in the first place. On the other hand, there is the relation with Erica used to frame the narrative of his own past. This relation ultimately fails, as Erica secludes herself in her own world of fiction, and Changez is unable to fully grasp her need to transform everything into fiction as a way to keep past alive. Still, despite the failure, the relation constructs the character outside the economically mediated context. Moreover, Erica's condition proves that literature as fiction can enter the hegemonic discourse of globalization and create, from within, an alternative that, in her case, becomes definite in that it replaces reality.

In fact, literature is the other red string that holds the story together. The author discusses it's status, both as an alternative to the economic mediated reality, and as a product caught in this reality. Either way, it is also the decisive factor in altering Changez's worldview. On the backdrop of tumultuous relations between America and Pakistan, he is sent to evaluate the aforementioned publishing company in Chile. He meets the vice-president and is seduced by his stories of the janissaries as destroyers of their home culture, acting in the name of a greater, foreign force. Henceforth, Changez's inner conflict, generated by the conflict between worlds and reinforced by the old man's story, will culminate with the feeling of treason. If, up to the point of the nine-eleven events, he was struggling to prove his belonging to American culture, he will henceforth reconsider it, by identifying himself with the characters in the story. Moreover, political and economic reasons menace the safety of his home country, because, generated by the nine-eleven attack, America starts a war and catches Pakistan in the middle of the conflicts. In this context, Changez perceives himself as an agent of the American economy that brings about the destruction of his home country, but at the same time, because his national identity reverberating in his physical aspect, he is regarded as a menace for the Americans.

As a result, he quits his job and returns back home, becoming a lecturer at the local university. Nonetheless, economy continues to connect worlds, because, despite the fact that he gives up the American life style and renounces the financial advantages of being part of it, he disseminates his world view, shaped middle way between home culture and American culture, in classes of financial education. In the end, seems like Changez manages to come to terms both with his inheritance and economic mediated world-view. It is not a story of a failure of the master-narrative of globalization. On the contrary, it proves that there can be no exteriorities, except for the ones that presuppose, as in Erica's case, total seclusion from the outside world.

Still, this first person narrative blends with a different one that casts shadow over the accuracy of the story. Changez becomes the unreliable narrator by excellence, constantly inserting marks of doubt in his discourse and situating himself middle way

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between plots. He, as author of the first-person narrative entraps his listener, trying to distract him from the objective world around. Moreover, his constant attempt to reassure the listener that there are no reasons for his constant anxieties, emphasize the character's attempt to construct a fictitious view over immediate reality. The first person narrative is meant to outline a coherent self, but fails in doing so, as he is constantly shifting between real and assumed identity. Throughout the novel, Changez changes drastically as a character, becoming, from and advocate of globalization, a suspect in a terrorist attack. The American 'tourist' might be, in fact, an agent, and the ending of the novel suggests an armed conflict. Nevertheless, narrative is meant to function as a decoy from the problematic and conflicted reality, an alternative, nonetheless, in which the two protagonists, storyteller and listener, are intimately connected by the act of narrative. In fact the last line of the novel underlines thus exact connection: "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, *op.cit.*, 184)

To conclude, such a novel addresses globalization explicitly, but takes an unexpected turn in regard over literature. Despite its status as a commodified reality (in which it was turned by the hegemonic discourse) literature manages to maintain to some extent, its independence in creating alternative worldviews that envision differently the status of the individual. In fact, if literature constitutes itself as a counter-discourse, its role is to insert doubt and relativity in the hegemonic discourse of globalization, to emphasize its fictional character and assert itself as an alternative. And this is what the story does, in fact. First of all, by turning a narrative favoring globalization into a narrative against globalization, and secondly, casting doubt over the surface layers of meaning. The narrator constructs a deceiving context for telling the story, faking a relation of friendship and openness towards the other, but inserting certain remarks aimed at deconstructing this view. In the end, the game between obvious discourse and elements of doubt inserted within underlines the conflict between cultures hidden under the images carefully constructed through the master narrative. Still, Changez's story proves that it is not possible to deconstruct this worldview but from within. Exteriority is conceived as gaps within the narrative, which allow the emergence of different layers of meaning. It is only after the main character turns his dream into reality, by moving to America and becoming a successful analyst, he is able to see the entire picture and to construct his personal view, on the border of the master-narrative, middle-way between American and Pakistani culture. This enables the protagonist to preserve his individual autonomy; but it is a problematic stand, because the strong conflict between worlds reverberates in Changez's interior conflict that makes him an unreliable narrator. The story he tells is the product of this conflict, and the listener is equally conflicted. Nevertheless, it is only during narrative that the two can set aside reality as common grounds between worlds. When the story ends, the unclear and conflicting situation bursts in, leaving the ending unclear.

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