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NARRATIVE CONTROL AND MICHIAVELLIAN RHETORIC: CHANGEZ AS A MODERN IAGO IN THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist engages with Shakespearean Machiavellianism by reimagining Iago's rhetorical mastery and strategic deception in Othello. While Iago manipulates perception to engineer Othello's downfall, Changez employs a similarly calculated ambiguity, not for personal nihilism but as an ideological assertion against Western hegemony. Through a close reading of both texts, this study examines how narrative control, dual identities, and pragmatic betrayal function as mechanisms of power. Drawing upon Machiavelli's The Prince, the analysis highlights how Changez, like Iago, refuses resolution, leaving both his interlocutor and the reader suspended in interpretive uncertainty. Unlike Iago, whose silence reinforces destruction, Changez's ambiguity becomes an act of defiant self-representation. In positioning Changez as a modern, ideological Iago, The Reluctant Fundamentalist transforms Shakespearean Machiavellianism into a tool of postcolonial resistance, revealing how narrative authority can challenge dominant geopolitical structures.

Keywords: Michiavellian, Hamid, Narrative, Iago

1. INTRODUCTION

Power frequently lies not in physical superiority but in the preeminence of words. Few characters exemplify this more completely than Shakespeare's Iago, whose mastery of language enables him to manipulate perception, conceal truth, and fabricate reality to his benefit. His infamous declaration—"I am not what I am" (Othello 1.1.65)—signals the fundamental deception at the heart of his character: he operates not as an agent of brute force but as an orchestrator of uncertainty. Likewise, in Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Changez wields narrative control as his chief instrument of power. As an unreliable first-person narrator, Changez dictates the reader's understanding of events, carefully framing his story to construct an identity that remains strategically elusive. Like Iago, he thrives in ambiguity, concealing as much as he reveals, thus positioning himself as a modern Machiavellian figure whose influence stems from rhetorical dominance rather than direct action.

The parallel between Iago and Changez has not been fully explored in critical discourse, yet their shared reliance on narrative manipulation suggests an illuminating connection. Scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt have discussed how Renaissance literature often reflects anxieties about power and performance, particularly in figures like Iago, whose authority derives from linguistic dexterity rather than noble lineage (92). The postcolonial critics have also examined Changez's monologue as a performance of resistance, using ambiguity as a means of unsettling Western epistemology (47). By reading Changez as a rhetorical heir to Iago, we can see The Reluctant Fundamentalist not merely as a novel about identity crises in a post-9/11 world but as a meditation on the enduring power of narrative as a political act.

This research paper contends that Changez, much to Iago, exploits narrative control to influence perception, constructing a persona that is yet approachable and enigmatic. This comparison provides an expanded perspective of Hamid's novel as a text that reinterprets Machiavellian strategies in a postcolonial environment.

Shakespeare's Iago is among literature's most enigmatic manipulators, a character who commands power not through status or brute force but through his mastery of rhetoric. His ability to shape perception allows him to control those around him, weaving a web of deception in which his victims unknowingly ensnare themselves. Michael Neill observes, Iago is "a master of the equivocal utterance," one who uses speech to "construct the very reality he pretends only to describe" (178). This linguistic dexterity not only grants him influence over Othello but also positions him as a figure of theatrical control—directing, prompting, and reshaping the narrative that others inhabit.

One of Iago's most effective rhetorical strategies is his ability to create suspicion without explicit accusation. When planting the seed of doubt in Othello's mind, he deploys calculated hesitations: Ha! I like not that. (Othello 3.3.35) This seemingly offhand remark, followed by his feigned reluctance to speak, forces Othello to demand further information, placing him in the role of an active participant in his own manipulation. Iago frequently employs rhetorical questions—"Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady, / Know of your love?" (3.3.94–95)—to introduce uncertainty while maintaining plausible deniability. Such moments demonstrate what Ruvani Ranasinha calls the "performative indirection" of Machiavellian discourse, in which ambiguity itself becomes a weapon (112).

Iago's manipulation extends beyond individual conversations to a broader strategy of narrative construction. His soliloquies serve not merely as windows into his thoughts but as active attempts to control the audience's interpretation. Consider his chilling assertion:

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse:

For I mine own gained knowledge should profane,

If I would time expend with such a snipe

But for my sport and profit. (1.3.384–87)

Iago does not simply reflect on his plans—he performs them for the audience, pulling them into his confidence. His direct address mimics the structure of a confessional monologue, a technique that Mohsin Hamid later adapts in The Reluctant Fundamentalist. Both Iago and Changez create intimacy with their listeners, drawing them into a carefully crafted illusion of transparency.

This establishes Iago as the prototype of the Machiavellian rhetorician: a character whose power lies in his ability to manipulate perception rather than dictate events outright. As we turn to The Reluctant Fundamentalist, we see how Changez adopts similar techniques, positioning himself not as a direct actor but as a storyteller who reshapes reality through the force of his narrative.

Much like Iago, Changez in The Reluctant Fundamentalist exerts control not through direct action but through storytelling. His monologue, delivered to an unnamed American interlocutor, is more than a recollection of past events—it is a calculated performance, shaping perception through strategic disclosure and omission. As Peter Morey notes, Changez's narrative is "an exercise in controlled revelation, in which gaps and silences are as telling as the words themselves" (137). His rhetorical strategies mirror those of Iago, who, as seen earlier, manipulates his audience by controlling access to knowledge.

From the outset, Changez establishes dominance over the conversation by framing it as a guided experience"Excuse me, sir, but 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). The interplay between politeness and subtle provocation echoes Iago's performative ambiguity. The phrase "do not be frightened" presumes fear on the part of the American, much as Iago's "I like not that" (Othello

3.3.35) presumes suspicion in Othello. Both statements function as self-fulfilling prophecies, leading their listeners into precisely the emotional states that the speakers have suggested.

Changez's control over the American extends beyond verbal manipulation to the very structure of the novel itself. The reader, like the American, is restricted to Changez's version of events, with no external perspective to counter his claims. This structural choice forces us into complicity, mirroring the way Iago's soliloquies draw Shakespeare's audience into his perspective. As Ranasinha observes, Changez's narrative is "less an autobiographical confession than a carefully curated act of persuasion" (102). His monologue is rife with deflections, as when he describes his emotional reaction to the 9/11 attacks "I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased." (Hamid 72)

By openly acknowledging the moral weight of his statement ("despicable as it may sound"), Changez paradoxically renders it more palatable, preempting outrage while maintaining an air of honesty. This technique is reminiscent of Iago's calculated half-truths, in which seeming candor conceals deeper manipulation.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between Changez and Iago lies in their ability to control silence as effectively as speech. Just as Iago refuses to explain himself in his final moments—"Demand me nothing. What you know, you know" (Othello 5.2.300)—Changez leaves crucial aspects of his story unresolved. The novel's ending, in which the American's fate remains uncertain, is a final act of narrative dominance. By withholding resolution, Changez forces the reader into a position of perpetual uncertainty, much as Iago leaves Othello and the audience grasping for meaning. Changez, then, is not merely an unreliable narrator; he is an Iago-like rhetorician, one who constructs reality through language while ensuring that his own motives remain inscrutable.

Both Iago and Changez derive their power not from brute force but from their ability to adapt their identities to the expectations of their surroundings. In The Prince, Machiavelli asserts that a successful leader must be able to "be a fox to recognize traps and a lion to frighten wolves" (69). This principle of strategic self-fashioning is exemplified in Iago's ability to shift seamlessly between roles—trusted ensign, loyal friend, and cunning deceiver. Similarly, Changez navigates the geopolitical landscape of post-9/11 America by adjusting his identity to suit his audience, moving from assimilation to subversion with remarkable fluidity.

Iago's adaptability is evident in his interactions with different characters, where he tailors his language and demeanor to gain their trust. When speaking to Othello, he adopts the voice of the reluctant informant:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock

The meat it feeds on. (Othello 3.3.165–67)

Iago frames himself as a concerned advisor, his warning cloaked in a tone of reluctant honesty. The effectiveness of this strategy lies in its subtlety—he does not accuse Desdemona outright but instead invites Othello to draw his own conclusions. As Jacobsen notes, Iago's power comes from his ability to "implicate his listeners in their own deception, making them complicit in their downfall" (318). This ability to mirror the desires and fears of his audience ensures that his manipulations remain largely undetected until it is too late.

Changez employs a similar strategy, shifting between cultural identities depending on his circumstances. In his early years at Princeton and Underwood Samson, he consciously molds himself into the model immigrant"I was immediately a New Yorker. I dressed in the style of my peers, lost my accent, and embraced the city's intoxicating energy." (Hamid 33)

This transformation aligns with what Ranasinha describes as the "performative assimilation" of postcolonial subjects, in which external conformity masks an underlying sense of dislocation (54). However, after 9/11, Changez undergoes a calculated reversal, growing a beard and adopting a stance of quiet defiance"It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to attract the hostility of those who would cast me as an outsider." (Hamid 130)

Same as Iago, Changez manipulates perception not through direct confrontation but through strategic ambiguity. His beard functions as both a declaration of identity and a provocation, forcing those around him to project their own assumptions onto him. As Morey argues, Changez's shifting self-presentation is not mere indecision but a form of calculated resistance, allowing him to "occupy multiple ideological positions simultaneously" (142). Both Iago and Changez exemplify the Machiavellian principle that survival depends on adaptability. Their ability to shift identities

ensures that they remain inscrutable figures, wielding power not through force but through the careful manipulation of appearances.

For both Iago and Changez, betrayal is not an impulsive act but a calculated maneuver, driven by Machiavellian pragmatism rather than emotion. Machiavelli famously argues that "a wise ruler cannot, nor ought he to, keep faith when such observance may be turned against him" (70). Iago and Changez embody this principle, treating personal relationships as instruments to be used and discarded in pursuit of their broader objectives. Their betrayals are not expressions of personal vengeance but deliberate acts of strategic abandonment, revealing their commitment to power over loyalty.

Iago's betrayal of Othello is particularly insidious because it unfolds under the guise of friendship. He constructs an elaborate deception in which he positions himself as Othello's protector while orchestrating his downfall. This duplicity is evident in his calculated reassurance: My lord, you know I love you. (Othello 3.3.118)

The simplicity of this statement masks its deeper irony—spoken in the very moment that Iago is leading Othello toward destruction. As Neill observes, Iago's deception is so effective because he does not impose his will directly but instead "allows his victims to believe they are acting of their own accord" (184). By presenting himself as a concerned confidant, he ensures that his betrayal remains undetected until its final, irreversible stage.

Changez's betrayal of the American Dream follows a similar trajectory. Initially, he embraces the values of his adopted country, excelling at Princeton and thriving at Underwood Samson. However, as his disillusionment grows, he begins a process of calculated withdrawal. His decision to quit his job is framed not as an emotional reaction but as an assertion of autonomy"I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged—in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither." (Hamid 168). This moment of self-awareness mirrors Iago's recognition of his own rootlessness. Just as Iago betrays Othello not out of hatred but out of a desire to assert control over an unpredictable world, Changez's abandonment of his career is less an act of rebellion than an assertion of agency in a system that seeks to define him. As Morey notes, Changez "does not simply reject America; he orchestrates his own departure on his own terms" (145).

The most striking parallel between Iago and Changez, however, is their ultimate rejection of those who trusted them most. Othello, who once saw Iago as his closest ally, is left utterly destroyed, while the American in The Reluctant Fundamentalist remains suspended in uncertainty, unable to discern whether Changez is friend or foe. Both Iago and Changez refuse to offer resolution, leaving their final betrayals open-ended. This calculated ambiguity is not a sign of indecision but a final assertion of dominance—by withholding clarity, they ensure that their power persists even after their active manipulation has ceased.

The culmination of both Iago's and Changez's Machiavellian strategies lies in their ability to manipulate uncertainty, ensuring that their influence extends beyond the immediate moment. Their final acts are not dramatic gestures of conquest or destruction but refusals to clarify their true intentions, leaving their respective audiences in a state of unresolved tension. As Morey observes, The Reluctant Fundamentalist "is structured around a narrative gap, an absence of definitive meaning that forces readers into a position of perpetual speculation" (146). This structural uncertainty mirrors the deliberate opacity of Iago's final words in Othello, transforming silence itself into a Machiavellian weapon.

Iago's last act is not an explanation but a withdrawal:

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.

From this time forth I never will speak word. (Othello 5.2.300–301)

This refusal to justify his actions denies Othello, and the audience, any sense of closure. As Jacobsen notes, Iago's silence is not a loss of power but "his final act of control, ensuring that the narrative of his motives remains forever unsettled" (320). By refusing to explain himself, Iago ensures that his legacy remains ambiguous, compelling others to fill in the gaps with speculation, thereby sustaining his influence even in defeat.

Changez's narrative builds toward an ambiguous climax in which the fate of the American interlocutor remains uncertain. The novel's final lines resist resolution"But why do you not react to my suggestion? If you will not tell me what you are thinking, then I may be forced to make assumptions of my own." (Hamid 184). This deliberate inversion of power mirrors Iago's manipulation of Othello—just as Iago leaves Othello to construct his own paranoid conclusions, Changez forces both the American and the reader to decide his true intentions without certainty. As Ranasinha argues, Changez's ambiguity "subverts the reader's expectation of narrative closure, making the act of interpretation itself a site of political engagement" (107). The novel's unresolved ending thus functions as an ideological statement, challenging Western anxieties about the unknowability of the 'Other.'

Both characters recognize that ambiguity itself can be a tool of power. By refusing to offer resolution, they transform uncertainty into an enduring legacy, ensuring that their narratives—whether of deception or defiance—remain unresolved, compelling, and, above all, unforgettable.

2. CONCLUSION

Iago and Changez demonstrate that Machiavellianism is not solely a political strategy but a mode of survival, a means of negotiating power within unstable systems. Their actions—whether Iago's manipulative betrayals or Changez's calculated resistance—exemplify Machiavelli's assertion that "a prince never lacks legitimate reasons to break his promise" (70). They wield deception, adaptability, and ambiguity not as defensive measures but as instruments of control, positioning themselves as the unseen architects of their own narratives.

The defining trait that unites them is their mastery of strategic ambiguity. Iago, through his silences, leaves Othello, and by extension the audience, ensnared in speculation, an effect that critics such as Neill argue "renders him a figure of almost mythical inscrutability" (191). Changez, too, refuses closure, his final conversation mirroring the calculated uncertainty that Iago employs. As Morey notes, Changez's resistance "does not manifest in direct action but in a rhetorical strategy that forces the reader into a complicity of interpretation" (148). By weaponizing the unknown, both figures extend their power beyond their physical presence, shaping the perceptions of those they leave behind.

Though, where Iago's Machiavellianism is ultimately nihilistic, Changez's is ideological. His self-fashioning and betrayal are not merely acts of self-preservation but a challenge to Western hegemony, situating him within a postcolonial form of resistance. As Ranasinha observes, Changez "deploys the tools of his colonizers against them, appropriating the very structures that sought to contain him" (110). In this sense, The Reluctant Fundamentalist reconfigures the Shakespearean Machiavellian archetype, transforming it from a figure of destruction into one of defiant narrative control.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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