**Superiority and Shared Suffering: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Dispossessed***

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin examine how our ethical fundamentals shape us, both as individuals and as collectives. Both novels assert that there is an inherent moral compass inside each individual based on the principle of compassion for other human beings on account of shared suffering. However, both novels also convey that there is another equally human urge to be superior to others, again both as individuals and as members of collectives. In this contradiction between unity and division exists a cyclical human struggle for power between a higher, "superior" class and a lower, "inferior" class apparent within both novels. Hamid exemplifies this struggle through observations of extreme nationalism and racism in post-9/11 America, whereas Le Guin focuses more on political philosophy within her fictional worlds of Urras and Annares. Through comparing both the inner workings of the protagonists and their relationships to the societies they belong to, it becomes clear that both authors believe capitalist society is rooted in the human urge for superiority above all else, a vapid and meaningless structure based not on ethical fundamentals but on the potential for the elite to maintain power and wealth.

The two novels' protagonists were starkly different at the beginning of their stories. For one, Shevek's moral compass stays intact throughout the course of the novel due to his strong ethical and scientific fundamentals. Shevek is a man of science, and it dominates his perceptions. During the liftoff sequence at the start of the novel, Shevek is soothed by geometry, and makes sense of the disorienting experience of spaceflight through mathematical concepts of space and dimension: "He tried to tell himself that he was in an airship. No, in a spaceship. The edge of the plain flashed with the brightness of light on water, light across a distant sea. There was no water in those deserts. What was he seeing, then? The stone plain was no longer plain but hollow, like

a huge bowl full of sunlight. As he watched in wonder it grew shallower, spilling out its light. All at once a line broke across it, abstract, geometric, the perfect section of a circle. Beyond that arc was blackness. This blackness reversed the whole picture, making it negative. The real, stone part of it was no longer concave and full of light but convex, reflecting, rejecting light. It was not a plain or a bowl but a sphere, a ball of white stone falling down in blackness, falling away. It was his world" (Le Guin 20). This simplification of experience into mathematical concepts is reflective of the true nature of Shevek as a scientist, who's only motive stronger than the Odonian principles he holds so dear is his passion for scientific discovery and truth. Not only does this quote reveal the tendencies of Shevek's mind, but also his humility. In other words, his ability to accept his insignificance in the universe when it presents itself. This becomes apparent towards the end of the quote, when he sees the stone planes of Anarres falling away into space, and he describes it as "a ball of white stone falling down in blackness, falling away. It was his world." In this life-changing moment, leaving one's community, one's planet for the first time, his identity as an Odonian, one who lives their life based on community and mutual aid, affects the way he processes. He sees his world fading away, everyone he's ever known, and he's able to let it go, simplifying it as only "a ball of white stone falling down in blackness." This is revealing of his Odonian nature, as he was raised to live without ego, and can detach from his significance quickly when the fact of insignificance presents itself. The nature of Odonianism is revealed in bits and pieces throughout the novel, through Shevek's own inner thoughts and through his conversations with others. While discussing the idea of leaving Anarres with his friends, Shevek speaks on his beliefs about collectivity and mutual aid, which is inextricable from his identity: " Are we kept here by force? What force—what laws, governments, police? None. Simply our own being, our nature as Odonians." (Le Guin 75). With this in mind, it is predictable and

understandable that the capitalist nature of Urras contrasts with Shevek's fundamentals from growing up on Anarres, and actions to rebel against Urras along with his return to Anarres align with his values from the start.

On the other hand, Changez changes a lot throughout the course of his life, and undergoes a transformation that makes him realize the fallacies and faults of capitalism through his own lifestyle. Changez is raised in a family who comes from wealth, and attends an Ivy league university. He is shaped among the elite and although he is humble compared to his peers, he has a strong ego and personal ambition driving him to be a member of the elite and wealthy class. He illustrates this early on in the novel, "Every fall, Princeton raised her skirt for the corporate recruiters who came onto campus and, as you say in America, showed them some skin. The skin Princeton showed was good skin, of course– young, eloquent, and clever as can be– but even among all that skin, I knew in my senior year that I was something special" (Hamid 11-12). Although it's true that Changez is intelligent and at the top of his class, the tone created through sexualized metaphor reveals a deeper flippancy and indulgent pride in his status as an elite among elites. Coming from a historically wealthy family in Pakistan, Changez's motivating force– his fundamental goal– is to restore money and prestige to his family name. He is historically attached to a global "higher class" of families and groups that have maintained wealth through generations. His attachment to restoring his family name illustrates both ego and the need for collective superiority in the human psyche. He doesn't think about a greater good for society or the people around him, he wants to assert the superiority of himself and his family financially and socially. As a model representative of American higher education and business, Changez exemplifies how morality in terms of compassion and mutual aid is not a part of the fundamentals of a capitalist society. The way that Shevek contrasts him, at least who he was

when he entered Underwood Samson, is illustrative of how Le Guin intentionally created a fundamentally anti-capitalist protagonist to serve as foil to reality, and to criticize the emptiness of a society that is motivated by money as means to assert personal superiority.

The events of 9/11 awakened a need for real fundamentals in Changez and changed him into someone more like Shevek, someone who sees into the immorality and greed of the elites in a capitalist society and looks for something more honest and ethical to live for. However, the stirrings of realization that America isn't all it's meant to be begins earlier in the novel. Changez begins to see the workings of the wealthy when he falls in love with Erica. At dinner with Erica's family, Erica's father makes extremely ignorant and hypocritical comments on the state of Pakistan: "'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? They have a real issue with fundamentals.'" (Hamid 90). This instance is one of the first times Changez experiences subtle racism, and the subtlety hiding behind intellectualism and the superiority complex of the rich white American elite is an intentional irony on behalf of Hamid. He creates this irony through the hypocrisy of Erica's father to remark on the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers from his Manhattan penthouse. But in this ironic representation lies Hamid's real thoughts on the fundamentals of the United States. Just like Underwood Samson's focus on fundamentals, the idea of a structure based on profit instead of humanity and mutual aid is ironic in itself. To say that Pakistan has a real issue with fundamentals in his tone of "typically American undercurrent of condescension" illuminates through irony how Hamid sees the United States as having the real issues with fundamentals in that they have none outside of the upholding of the wealthy and the financial interests of the elite. It's also significant that Changez falls in love with a white woman

and that this experience takes place with a white family, because it's instances like these that enlighten Changez to the reality that the elite class in America has been historically white Americans who still have ideals of superiority over others. In short, Changez discovers that racism is alive and well in America, and that it coexists and feeds off of American feelings of superiority. Changez is slowly realizing all of this when 9/11 occurs, and his feelings of vindication to see America fall prove that all his observations of American need for superiority being tied in with race and wealth have led him to hate America, and to hate his role in its elite class.

Although Shevek and Changez start out opposing one another in fundamental values, they end in the same place, with similar disillusionment and depression with the realization that they are just a tool for others' agendas to maintain their feelings of superiority. The realization that their life's work isn't amounting to anything besides upholding the elite class and the oppression of the lower working class breaks them both and causes them to change the course of their lives entirely– Shevek quits his job at the University and goes back to Annarres, and Changez gives up on his job at Underwood Samson and returns to Pakistan. Both men realize that the antidote to this system is the idea of compassion for their fellow man, the part of human nature that is lacking in the fundamentals of capitalism, a system born from a need to feel superior. Both novels deal with the philosophical issue of the significance of suffering in human life, and shared pain as a unifier between seemingly separate groups of people. One of Hamid's most direct criticisms of post-9/11 American society comes after Erica's disappearance, during Changez's final days in New York. He writes; "As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority" (Hamid 109). This idea of shared pain is

the most direct connection between *The Dispossessed* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist.* In *The Dispossessed,* Shevek uses this same term at his going away party, while discussing the true nature of Odonianism with his peers: " I'm trying to say what I think brotherhood really is. It begins- it begins in shared pain" (Le Guin 97). Beyond criticizing the system of capitalism as empty and oppressive, both novels assert a philosophy on human nature and society, the idea that humanity can unite through acknowledging shared pain, and this unity can be an antidote to division, war and further suffering.

In conclusion, both authors use their protagonists as a kind of case study in the individual under capitalism in order to reveal the true nature of capitalism as an oppressive force that is inextricable from racism, exploitation, and death. Neither author presents a solution, but one thing is clear that they agree upon; there is an inherent need for superiority present in the capitalist system that causes human suffering and division, and unification through the generally shared pain of existence under capitalism is the first step towards escaping this harmful structure.

Works Cited

Guin, Le Ursula. *The Dispossessed*. Reprint, Harper Voyager, 1994.

Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. First, Harvest Books, 2008.