

## ***The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

Mohsin Hamid. Harcourt, Inc: Orlando/Austin/NY/San Diego/Toronto/London, 2007.

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There are many points of contact between the author and the central character of this 'fundamentally' anti-America novel, *Changez*. Both are raised in Lahore, Pakistan. Both are Princeton educated, intellectually sophisticated, socially skilled and have developed familiarity with American culture from personal experience.

In the book America is skillfully silenced as a non-speaking American is made to listen to the 184-page monologue of a 25 year-old Pakistani. *Changez* was the former high-earning, top trainee in an elite, highly lucrative American business worth assessment company named Underwood Samson. This itself is significant, for here is a man skilled in assessing not only businesses but also people. At the very start *Changez* perceptively identified this man to be an American from his bearing alone and his monologue is interspersed with an accumulating appraisal of this quiet American that injects a growing tension to this novel. This novel will allow America no opportunity to respond to the developing critique mounted against it. "America" is now on *Changez*' turf or is it Hamid's? For the setting is provided by Old Anarkali Bazaar by Mall Road, Lahore.

I lived for seven years in Pakistan, often traveling to Lahore, indeed residing in Lahore itself for two years. I remember shopping outings to Anarkali Bazaar and Gulberg. I was conveyed by rickshaws along Mall Road. I have drunk plenty of sweet chae and savoured many a flavoursome Pakistani meal. My appreciation of these experiences perhaps makes it easier for me to do what I think Hamid wants me to do, to learn to see things through the eyeballs of this anti-America Pakistani.

*Changez* is a Muslim and he is anti-America. It is tempting for Americans, and perhaps other Westerners too, to hastily conclude from this that *Changez* is anti-America *because* he is a Muslim. Indeed, even *Changez*' beard almost provocatively baits such stereotypes, as the very first words of the book imply. Here the book counters simplistic 'Clash of Civilisations' thinking. The title is deliberately provocative. For if anti-Americanism and fundamentalism are one and the same thing then the fundamentalism of *Changez* is not shaped by his religion but by his experience and assessment of America itself. Since there are aspects of that experience *Changez* still values he finds himself to be a 'reluctant fundamentalist'. Indeed, he can even introduce himself to the American as "a lover of America".

There are two names that matter in this book: *Changez*, whose assessment of America *changes*, and the girl Erica, an apparently deliberate contraction of "America." Erica's beauty, *Changez*' futile love for her and his frustrated attempts at intimacy, his attempt to get close to her by being someone he never was, her isolating preoccupation with a past lover now dead and her mysterious "end" - all these seem to perform quasi-analogical functions. For this young Pakistani, for example, is enamoured by the beauty and flavour of New York, has a period in which he is "hungry" for an intimate relationship with American financial success and power, becomes disillusioned with an America "increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous

nostalgia” and hints at the “end” to which America is heading, especially through the backdrop interplay between the quiet American and a lingering, hostile waiter.

But there is tremendous irony in Changez’ perspective. For he realizes that he too is held to a past he can never forget. So, for example, recalling how Princeton made everything possible for him, he comments as he now sits in Anarkali bazaar:

Princeton made everything possible for me. But it did not, could not, make me forget such things as how much I enjoy the tea in this, the city of my birth, steeped long enough to acquire a rich, dark color, and made creamy with fresh, full-fat milk. It is excellent, no?

The language itself is telling - “rich, dark color”, “fresh, full-fat milk”. Yes, Changez clings to a life that is a part of him. But though Changez has experienced many aspects of what many consider to be the American dream, it can never be home for him. Lahore has a colour and freshness and life and vibrancy he never could find in America.

The critique of American culture develops in the following manner:

*1. Changez’ cynical assessment of his Princeton education*

Initially, “Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible.” But then:

Looking back now, I see the power of that system, pragmatic and effective, like so much else in America. Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of the meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. And for the most part, we were happy to do so. I certainly was, *at least at first*. (my emphasis)

*2. Changez’ irritation with American cultural insensitivity*

Changez holidays in Greece with a group of Princetonians, where he first becomes enamoured with Erica. He describes behaviour he observed which irritated him:

The ease with which they parted with money...thinking nothing of the occasional - but not altogether infrequent - meal costing perhaps fifty dollars a head. Or their self-righteousness in dealing with those whom they had paid for a service. “But you *told* us,” they would say to Greeks twice their age, before insisting things be done their way. I, with my finite and depleting reserve of cash and my traditional sense of deference to one’s seniors, found myself wondering by what quirk of human history my companions - many of whom I would have regarded as upstarts in my own country, so devoid of refinement were they - were in a position to conduct themselves in the world as though they were its ruling class.

*3. The disturbance Changez experienced when he compared America and Pakistan*

Looking down on New York from his office 41-42 storeys high Changez realizes he is standing in a different world from Pakistan with his feet supported by “the most technologically advanced civilization our species had ever known.” He reflects to the quiet American:

Often, during my stay in your country, such comparisons troubled me. In fact, they did more than trouble me: they made me resentful. Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our

national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed.

#### 4. *Changez' experiences of American condescension*

Erica's father asks Changez how things were back in Pakistan and Changez answers that they are quite good. Erica's father then comments,

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.

Changez reflects:

I felt myself bridle. There was nothing overtly objectionable in what he had said; indeed, his was a summary with some knowledge, much like the short news items on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*... But his tone - with, if you will forgive me, its typically *American* undercurrent of condescension - struck a negative chord with me, and it was out of politeness I limited my response to 'Yes, there are challenges, sir, but my family is there, and I can assure you it is not as bad as that.'

#### 5. *Changez' sense of humiliation at feeling the need to act like an American*

Changez recalls a business trip to Manila where he explains:

I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an *American*. The Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues, accepting them almost instinctively as members of the officer class of global business - and I wanted my share of that respect as well.

So I learned to tell executives my father's age, 'I need it *now*'; I learned to cut to the front of lines with an extraterritorial smile; and I learned to answer, when asked where I was from, that I was from New York. Did these things trouble me, you ask? Certainly, sir; I was often ashamed. But outwardly I gave no sign of this.

On this same trip he becomes particularly disoriented at receiving an openly hostile stare from the driver of a jeepney. Later when one of his American colleagues spoke to him, Changez remembers:

I looked at him - at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his obvious immersion in the minutiae of our work - and thought, you are so *foreign*. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside.

#### 6. *Changez' pleasure at seeing the destruction of the twin towers*

Many reviews of Hamid's book speak of the terrorist attack on the twin towers as the turning point of the book. This is misleading. Changez' sense of unease with America has already been well and truly simmering away, as the above five points, all made early in the novel, make clear. This is how Changez recalls what happened as he realized what he was watching was not fiction but news:

I stared as one - and then the other - of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased.

Changez sees the evident disgust in the face of his American listener and notices his large hand clenching into a fist. He then hastens to assure him that he is no sociopath, who is indifferent to the suffering of others. He admits his own sense of perplexity at his sense of pleasure at the slaughter of thousands of innocents. He reflects:

But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack - death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes - no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees.

Seeing that these words only serve to intensify the displeasure of his American listener Changez challenges:

But surely you cannot be completely innocent of such feelings yourself. Do you feel no joy at the video clips - so prevalent these days - of American munitions laying waste the structures of your enemies?

Changez accepts that unlike Americans at war he himself was not at war with America:

I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed? I did not know, then; I knew merely that my feelings would be unacceptable to my colleagues, and I undertook to hide them as well as I could. When my team gathered in Jim's room later that evening, I feigned the same shock and anguish I saw on the faces around me.

### 7. *Changez' experience of being treated as a possible terrorist*

As soon as the team was able to Manila Changez finds himself escorted by armed guards into a room where he is made to strip down to his boxer shorts. He is the last person to board the plane and recalls:

I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty; I tried therefore to be as nonchalant as possible; this naturally led to my becoming stiff and self-conscious.

Upon arriving back in New York he is again separated from his team at immigration and ends up being subjected to another inspection. His team didn't wait for him and he so he was forced to travel to Manhattan that evening "very much alone."

He hears rumours at the Pak-Punjab Deli that "Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; that the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people's homes; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into the shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse." He dismisses these as mostly untrue and, clad in his armour of denial, focuses on his job.

### 8. *Changez' growing disenchantment with American economic philosophy*

In this novel it is Changez' boss, Jim, who becomes the spokesman for American business-speak. Changez largely paints Jim in a positive light, but as the story develops Changez is unsettled by various aspects of Jim's persuasive worldview. Jim, knowing that post 9/11 Changez has experienced some victimization, seeks to reassure him:

"Don't let it get you down, Changez," he said. "Time only moves in one direction. Remember that. Things always change."

Jim goes on to suggest that he and Changez are two of a kind:

"You're blood brought from some part of the body that the species doesn't need anymore. The tailbone. Like me. We came from place that were wasting away."

Changez finds himself to be uncomfortable with the idea that the place from which he came was condemned to atrophy.

### 9. *Changez' anger at America's dealings with Muslim nations*

For two weeks after America began to bomb Afghanistan Changez avoids the evening news. Then one evening he chances “upon a newscast with ghostly night-vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan for what was described as a daring raid on a Taliban command post.” Changez recalls:

My reaction caught me by surprise; Afghanistan was Pakistan's neighbour, our friend, and a fellow Muslim nation besides, and the sight of what I took to be the beginning of its invasion by your countrymen caused me to tremble with fury.

Changez also bristles at the stereotypical and imperialistic manner in which American television cast Pakistanis, without any respect shown for their proud history:

For we were not always burdened by debt, dependent on foreign aid and handouts; in the stories we tell of ourselves we were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels but rather saints and poets and - yes - conquering kings. We built the Royal Mosque and the Shalimar Gardens in this city, and we built the Lahore Fort with its mighty walls and wide ramp for our battle-elephants. And we did these things when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent.

### 10. *Changez' sense that America was trying to relive the past*

In a context in which Changez explicitly draws an analogy between Erica's mentally unbalanced clinging to the deceased Chris and America, which he viewed as “increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia”, involving a return to an exclusive American identity. He explains:

There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as *duty* and *honor*. I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look *back*. Living in New York was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War; I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in Technicolor but in grainy black and white. What your fellow countrymen longed for was unclear to me - a time of unquestioned dominance? of safety? of moral certainty? I did not know - but that they were scrambling to don the costumes of another era was apparent. I felt treacherous for wondering whether that era was fictitious, and whether - if it could indeed be animated - it contained a part written for someone like me.

This sense that America was narrowing its sense of identity from which it excluded people like Changez was cemented by an incident that occurred shortly afterwards. He is accosted by a belligerent man who calls him a “f...g Arab”.

### 11. *Changez' anger at seeing the changes that had taken place in himself*

At a time when India and Pakistan seemed to be on the brink of war, Changez pays a visit home in Lahore. He describes how shabby his house now looked and how shamed he felt to see furniture in urgent need of reupholstery and repair:

This was where I came from, this was my provenance, and it smacked of lowliness.

But as I reacclimatized and my surroundings once again became familiar, it occurred to me that the house had not changed in my absence. *I* had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country's elite. This realization angered me; staring at my own reflection in the speckled glass of my bathroom mirror I resolved to exorcise the unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed.

*12. Changez' growing need to assert his own identity*

Returning to America, following his trip back to Lahore, Changez, despite knowing the difficulties it might pose at immigration, resolves to keep his beard:

It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind; I do not now recall my precise motivations. I know only that I did not wish to blend in with the army of clean-shaven youngsters who were my co-workers, and that inside me, for multiple reasons, I was deeply angry.

Back in America he finds that his beard does make him an object of verbal abuse by complete strangers and an object of suspicion in the workplace, but refuses to shave it off.

*13. Changez' disgruntlement at the seeming impunity with which America caused damage in other nations*

He comments,

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 was now proposing to do to Pakistan - with so few apparent consequences at home.

He also finds perplexing America's maintenance of neutrality between India and Pakistan. He reasons that since American bases were already established in Pakistan, all America needed to do to end tensions was "inform India that an attack on Pakistan would be treated as an attack on any American ally and would be responded to by the overwhelming force of America's military." He sees America's neutrality as effectively favouring the larger of the two powers, namely India.

*14. Changez' disillusionment with the pursuit of financial security*

Jim, recognizing Changez' discontent, takes him to do a business worth assessment of a publishing company in Valparaiso, Chile. But Changez' heart is not in and he performs poorly. He reflects:

Yes, I too had previously derived comfort from my firm's exhortations to focus intensely on work, but now I saw that in this constant striving to realize a financial future, no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one's emotional present.

*14. Changez' sense of being personally exploited by America*

Changez is influenced by the perceptive chief of the publishing company, Juan-Bautista. Juan Bautista asks him, "Does it trouble you to make your living by disrupting the lives of others?" He then tells Changez about the janissaries, Christian boys "captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to."

These words plunge Changez into deep introspection:

There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. Of course I was struggling! Of course I felt torn!

*15. Changez' decision to distance himself from American imperialism*

On the plane back to New York he now realizes:

...I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role. Moreover I knew from my experience as a Pakistani - of alternating periods of American aid and sanctions - that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power. It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision.

*16. Changez now believes he sees clearly the true America as a place in which he does not belong*

Changez' next decision is to look at America with "an ex-janissary's gaze". As he frees himself from a focus in parts and looks at the *whole* of American society he is struck by how traditional the American empire appears:

Armed sentries manned the check post at which I sought entry; being of a suspect race I was quarantined and subjected to additional inspection; once admitted I hired a charioteer who belonged to a serf class lacking the requisite permission to abide legally and forced therefore to accept work at lower pay; I myself was a form of indentured servant whose right to remain was dependent upon the continued benevolence of my employer. *Thank you, Juan-Bautista*, I thought as I lay myself down in my bed, *for helping me to push back the veil behind which all this had been concealed!*

*17. Changez sees America's post 9/11 actions as an engagement only in posturing*

He confronts his American listener:

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. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own.

Along similar lines he later observes, having just mentioned the invasion of Iraq:

A common strand seemed to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie's concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killings of civilians by killers *not* wearing the uniforms of soldiers. I recognized that if this was to be the single most important priority of our species, then the lives of those of us who lived in lands in which such killers also lived had no meaning except as collateral damage. This, I reasoned, was why America felt justified in bringing so many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq, and why America felt justified in risking so many more deaths by tacitly using India to pressure Pakistan.

*18. Changez now becomes active in stirring up anti-America sentiment*

Now having secured a position as a university lecturer he makes it his mission on campus "to advocate a disengagement from your country by mine." He discovers that it was not difficult to persuade his students to participate in demonstrations for greater independence in Pakistan's domestic and international affairs. He observes that such demonstrations were labeled by the foreign press as anti-American.

Changez claims no inside knowledge of an alleged attempt on the part of one of his students to assassinate a coordinator of an American effort to provide development assistance to Pakistan's rural poor.

In a TV interview Changez stated "that no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America." It is at this point in the novel that we begin to suspect that perhaps the quiet American has been sent by America to either intimidate or kill Changez. For Changez, since this interview, has felt "like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe."

Skilfully, the novel has played out the fear, suspicion and hatred that now characterizes American-Muslim relations. It does this particularly by building up the tension between the quiet American and a hostile, intimidating waiter who comes from a tribe which spans both sides of the border with neighbouring Pakistan. The novel will finish with this hostility being brought to an undisclosed conclusion, just as the end of the story of American-Muslim conflict remains to be written.

As the book moves to this open ending, Changez comments:

It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins.

### **Conclusion**

The important thing about this book is not so much whether the reader agrees with this critique of America or not. What this novel does show is how anti-America feeling might develop and indicates various key factors that may shape such perspectives. In particular, it is crucial to avoid stereotypes that simplistically presume that anti-Americanism on the part of a Muslim must be produced by Islamic indoctrination. This novel demonstrates that it is possible for a Muslim to develop contempt for America on substantially non-religious grounds.