

Understanding Identity and Power in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores the transformation of Changez, a young Pakistani who initially embraces the opportunities offered by the United States but gradually becomes critical of American economic and political power. Set against the background of 9/11 and its aftermath, the novel examines identity, migration, belonging, capitalism, imperialism and cultural suspicion. Changez's movement from Princeton to Underwood Samson and eventually back to Lahore represents more than a personal journey: it dramatizes the difficulties faced by an individual caught between cultural worlds. This paper argues that Changez's transformation should not simply be understood as a movement toward religious fundamentalism. Instead, the novel complicates the meaning of "fundamentalism" by connecting it with economic ideology, nationalism and unquestioned loyalty to systems of power. Changez's relationship with Erica, his employment at Underwood Samson, his encounter with the idea of the Janissary, and his conversation with the unnamed American collectively reveal the tensions between assimilation and identity. Through the form of the dramatic monologue and its deliberately ambiguous conclusion, Hamid ultimately asks readers to examine how fear and political assumptions shape perceptions of the cultural Other.

Keywords: *identity; alienation; 9/11; fundamentalism; capitalism; imperialism; migration; ambiguity*

Introduction

At the beginning of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez appears to be an example of successful assimilation. Coming from Lahore to study at Princeton, he performs exceptionally well academically and enters the competitive world of American corporate capitalism. His employment at Underwood Samson seems to confirm his achievement of the American Dream. Changez initially admires the United States. Princeton offers him intellectual prestige, while Underwood Samson gives him financial success and professional recognition. He learns to perform confidently within American elite culture. Yet his success conceals an important contradiction. He belongs to America professionally without completely belonging to it culturally. This tension becomes visible during his holiday in Greece with Erica and her wealthy American friends. Changez becomes conscious of differences in wealth and background. Although his family in Lahore possesses social status, its declining financial position makes him aware of his comparative economic disadvantage.

His relationship with Erica intensifies this desire for acceptance. Erica represents a world into which Changez wishes to enter but which he can never fully possess. His attraction to her therefore parallels his attraction to America itself. Critics have consequently read Erica as an allegorical figure whose relationship with Changez reflects the troubled relationship between America and its immigrant or non-Western Other. Changez's early experience is thus

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characterized by attraction rather than rejection. He does not arrive in America as its enemy. On the contrary, his later disillusionment becomes meaningful precisely because he had once desired so intensely to belong to it.

9/11 and the crisis of identity

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 constitute the decisive historical interruption in Changez's American experience. After 9/11, he becomes increasingly conscious of being perceived not simply as a successful Princeton graduate and corporate employee but as a Pakistani and Muslim man. The change occurs both externally and internally. Externally, the political climate surrounding him becomes more suspicious of people who look like him. Internally, Changez begins questioning the identity he has constructed in America.

One of the novel's most disturbing moments is Changez's admission that, when he sees the destruction of the World Trade Center on television, he initially smiles. The reaction does not mean that he celebrates the deaths of innocent people. Rather, he is unsettled by his own response to the symbolic humiliation of a superpower. Hamid deliberately makes this reaction uncomfortable because it prevents readers from placing Changez neatly within familiar moral categories.

The incident exposes the divided nature of his identity. Professionally, he participates in American capitalism; emotionally and politically, however, he increasingly recognizes himself as belonging to a world subjected to American power. His beard eventually becomes an outward sign of this changing self-perception. In post-9/11 America, it is easily interpreted through stereotypes of Islamic fundamentalism. Yet Changez's political transformation is not primarily religious. Contemporary criticism has similarly observed that religion plays a surprisingly limited role in his ideological change. Hamid thereby encourages us to ask what the word "fundamentalist" in the title actually means.

Underwood Samson and the fundamentalism of capital

The title acquires another meaning through Changez's employment at Underwood Samson. The company trains its employees to evaluate businesses according to financial value and repeatedly emphasizes the need to "focus on the fundamentals." At first, Changez accepts this philosophy enthusiastically. It rewards intelligence, discipline and efficiency. Gradually, however, he recognizes the human consequences of reducing businesses and communities to economic calculations. Underwood Samson can therefore be read as representing a form of economic fundamentalism. Its worldview assumes that financial value is the fundamental measure by which decisions should be made. Employees are expected to suppress emotional, cultural and ethical considerations in favour of economic efficiency.

This is significant because it destabilizes the conventional association of fundamentalism exclusively with religion. Changez is suspected of becoming a Muslim fundamentalist, yet the novel places him within other systems equally committed to their own "fundamentals": corporate capitalism and nationalism. His ideological transformation therefore involves questioning not merely America but the value system he has internalized while working for Underwood Samson.

The janissary moment: recognizing complicity

Changez's encounter with Juan-Bautista during his assignment in Chile produces one of the novel's most important moments of self-recognition. Juan-Bautista compares him to a **Janissary**. Historically, Janissaries were elite soldiers of the Ottoman Empire, many of whom were recruited as Christian boys and trained to serve the empire, sometimes against communities from which they had originated.

The analogy disturbs Changez because he recognizes himself in it. His education and professional abilities have enabled him to join an immensely powerful economic system. But he begins to wonder whose interests his intelligence serves. Until this moment, Changez has regarded his professional success as individual achievement. The Janissary comparison forces him to see that achievement politically. He has been trained by an imperial centre and now participates in extending its economic power.

The significance of the metaphor lies in **complicity**. Changez realizes that domination does not always depend upon direct coercion. Powerful systems can recruit talented individuals from elsewhere, reward them generously and make them participants in structures that may ultimately work against their own societies. His decision to abandon Underwood Samson follows from this realization. It represents his refusal to continue functioning as what he now perceives to be a modern Janissary.

Erica, Chris, and the politics of nostalgia

Changez's relationship with Erica provides an emotional parallel to his relationship with America. Erica is unable to overcome the death of her former boyfriend, Chris. Although Changez loves her, he cannot compete with the memory of the dead man. After 9/11, Erica retreats increasingly into the past. Changez similarly observes America turning toward an idealized understanding of its own past. The parallel has led many critics to interpret Erica as an allegorical representation of America. Wang, for example, argues that the failed relationship between Changez and Erica develops into a broader allegory of the troubled relationship between Pakistan and the United States.

Even the names encourage such a reading: **Am-Erica** contains Erica, while Chris can suggest cultural memories associated with Christian America. This symbolism should not, however, reduce Erica merely to a political device. Her grief remains psychologically meaningful in its own right. The connection becomes particularly powerful when Changez attempts to enter Erica's emotional world by allowing her to imagine that he is Chris. Symbolically, Changez can gain intimacy only by temporarily suppressing his own identity and becoming someone whom Erica can recognize. His relationship with America follows a comparable pattern. His assimilation succeeds as long as he can perform the identity America expects of him. Once his Pakistani identity becomes more visible after 9/11, the relationship becomes increasingly difficult.

Return to Lahore: from assimilation to resistance

Changez eventually returns to Pakistan and becomes a university lecturer. He emerges as a public critic of American foreign policy and participates in political activism. The transformation might appear to complete the movement promised by the novel's title: the successful immigrant has become the "fundamentalist." Yet Hamid refuses such an easy conclusion. Changez does not become a religious extremist. His opposition is principally political. He objects to American intervention and what he regards as unequal relations of global power. The important question therefore becomes whether political dissent itself is being interpreted as dangerous because it comes from a Pakistani Muslim man.

The adjective "**reluctant**" becomes crucial. Changez has not followed a simple path from moderation to extremism. He has reluctantly abandoned a system that once attracted him. His transformation is produced through a series of experiences that make his earlier assimilation increasingly impossible. The novel thus complicates the binary between fundamentalist and liberal, East and West, Pakistani and American. Changez has inhabited both worlds. His criticism of America emerges partly from his intimate knowledge of it.

Dramatic monologue, suspicion, and the unnamed American

The novel's form is central to this complexity. The entire narrative is presented as Changez's conversation with an unnamed American in Lahore. Yet readers never directly hear the American's words. We know his reactions only through Changez's responses. The result is a dramatic monologue in which one voice paradoxically creates the presence of another.

This structure reverses conventional relations of observation. In many Western representations after 9/11, the Muslim man becomes the suspicious figure who must be watched. Hamid reverses the gaze: Changez observes the American, interprets his movements and wonders whether he may be armed. At the same time, the reader becomes suspicious of Changez. Mandala White argues that the novel's formal ambiguity is crucial to its engagement with the paranoia and uncertainty of the post-9/11 environment. Rather than allowing one perspective to emerge as unquestionably true, the narrative makes uncertainty itself part of its political meaning. The reader consequently participates in the novel's politics of suspicion. Is Changez dangerous? Is the American an intelligence operative or

assassin? Are the men following them attackers, or is the American merely interpreting unfamiliar surroundings through fear?

Hamid deliberately refuses to answer these questions.

Conclusion

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is ultimately less concerned with identifying a fundamentalist than with questioning the assumptions through which fundamentalism is recognized. Changez's journey from Princeton student to corporate analyst and finally political critic traces a movement from assimilation to resistance. But his transformation cannot adequately be described as radicalization in a religious sense. Instead, his experiences expose several competing fundamentalisms: the economic fundamentalism represented by Underwood Samson, the nationalism intensified by 9/11, and the ideological rigidity through which East and West begin to view one another.

The Janissary metaphor provides the intellectual turning point because Changez realizes that success within a powerful system can also involve complicity with it. Erica's inability to escape Chris similarly parallels the destructive possibilities of nostalgia. Together, the personal, economic and political narratives illuminate Changez's growing inability to sustain his American identity. Most importantly, Hamid makes the reader part of this conflict. The dramatic monologue deprives us of an objective perspective, while the ambiguous ending forces us to confront our own assumptions. If we automatically imagine Changez as a terrorist because he is bearded, Pakistani, politically critical of America and accompanied by unknown men, the novel has revealed something about the interpretative habits through which fear constructs the Other. If we automatically assume that the American is an assassin, we may be reproducing the same process in reverse.

The unresolved ending is therefore not a failure to provide closure. It is central to Hamid's argument. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* asks us to recognize that political identities are frequently constructed through suspicion, stereotypes and selective narratives. The final question is consequently not simply whether Changez has become a fundamentalist. It is whether fundamentalism may also lie in the rigid ways individuals, institutions and nations interpret those whom they have learned to regard as the Other.

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