

The Reluctant Fundamentalist Analysis

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (Literary Masterpieces, Volume 3)

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is told from the first-person point of view in the present, as a kind of prose dramatic monologue addressed to Changez's unnamed guest at a restaurant in the Old Anarkali district of Lahore, Pakistan. With first-person narration there is usually a problem with the reliability of the narrator, and that is the case with this novel. As is the case with Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, which are much shorter, the speaker not only tells his own story but also gives his readers information that they must weigh and interpret. In effect, there are two stories, the one Changez tells about why he became an Islamic fundamentalist and the account of the interaction between Changez and his listener. Those two stories are intertwined throughout the novel.

Changez's story begins with his trip to America, where his outstanding record at Princeton University leads to his job with the Underwood Samson company, which evaluates businesses. Before he joins the company, he and some other Princeton graduates travel to Greece, where he falls in love with Erica, who is still recovering from the death of her fiancé, Chris. Jealous of the time she devotes to Chuck and Mike, Changez reveals his incipient anti-American feelings, feelings that deepen after 9/11. He finds his American rivals to be "devoid of refinement," disrespectful of their elders, and insistent on having things their way. When Chuck mimics his mannerisms, Changez states that his dream is to be the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability; he suggests that it is only a joke, but later events indicate that it is not. Erica, however, he considers above reproach, belonging more to the camp of the classy actress Gwyneth Paltrow than to the camp of the vulgar pop star Britney Spears.

After Changez assumes his post with Underwood Samson, Erica's parents invite him to their home in the Hamptons, where he interprets Erica's father's comment, "You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism," as an expression of typical American condescension. While Changez becomes Erica's unofficial escort, she cannot forget Chris, and their "affair" is never really consummated. She drifts away from him and from life and finally is sent to a clinic, then disappears. Erica's mother gives him Erica's manuscript, but to his dismay he is not even a footnote in the book. What seemed so attainable is out of reach.

His business career follows a similar pattern. Jim, who interviews him for the job at Underwood Samson, sees his potential, notes that he is "hungry" (ambitious), and that like Jim, he is a "shark" and "outsider," a term that initially suggests that they both come from disadvantaged backgrounds. At Underwood Samson, efficiency is the god, and the training is "mental judo for

business." Changez excels in this competitive environment, emerging first in the class and being assigned to work in the Philippines, where he does an outstanding job. The bombing of the World Trade Center's twin towers changes everything. He actually smiles at the 9/11 event, is "pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents," and relishes the notion that America has been "brought to her knees." Like other Muslims, he experiences some persecution: He is profiled at the airport, called a "fucking Arab" in the company parking lot, and encounters some prejudice at work. Nevertheless, he receives a good review and a bonus for his work.

He then returns to visit his family in Pakistan, where he discovers that he is seeing things through the eyes of a foreigner, an "entitled and unsympathetic American." The family home has not changed; he has changed. Even his parents sense that he is divided in his feelings about America. Partly as a result of what he begins to see as self-contempt, he begins to grow a beard, an act that only causes more apprehension when he returns to Underwood Samson. He asks himself "how it was that America was able to...

(The entire section is 1645 words.)

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