



THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL IN MOHSIN HAMID'S
THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST

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ABSTRACT

The life of Changez is crisscrossed by personal and political events and though, in the best fashion of an objective analyst, one tries to keep these issues compartmentalised, they do overlap. It is these areas of overlapping that become interesting as they illustrate the maxim, "The personal is political and the political is personal." The two parts of the study show how Changez's life becomes an eddy caught in the cross currents of international geopolitics, especially in the aftermath of the attacks on the twin towers of WTC and what it means to be a Pakistani, however privileged, in America in the midst of such literally earth-shaking events. The second part looks at the no less turbulent love affair of Changez and Erica, the two alumni of Princeton University, though belonging to unequal social ranks. In the personal and political turmoil in which the fragments of two lives are tossed about, a pattern begins to emerge, a synthesis of the apparently disparate aspects of life.

KEY WORDS : war on terror, WTC, fundamentalist, corporate America, Underwood Samson

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The sustained monologue running to 184 pages by Changez, the narrator and protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, reminds one of Albert Camus' *The Fall*. Just as the crisis of conscience brings about the fall of Clemence, Changez's deepening insight into the power structures of America results in his disillusionment with it and ultimately his opposition to it. Built into this narrative of corporate America and the nexus that exists between it and the academic world, there is also a fascinating love story of Erica and Changez. The fact that the heroine of the novel is named Erica which is only a shortened form of America may not be entirely coincidental. As we shall see, there are quite a number of similarities between Erica and America, the personal and the political, which make *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* a compulsive read.

Changez, a scholarship student from Pakistan with an exceptional academic record, gets admitted to Princeton University, an institution coveted by both the Americans and foreigners alike. Scholars like Changez turn out to be much better than their American counterparts as the process of filtering is much more rigorous to them and which explains his selection by Underwood Samson Company, a company which does the valuation of other companies. Explaining the way the corporate America chose its elite employees, Changez says:

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. (4)

Jim, the recruiter, takes an immediate liking to Changez for he senses in the young man anger and hunger, a potent mix which can take him to the heights of success. Jim fails to understand that the sharp intelligence of Changez will also enable him to see through the shallow success of the business world and its insensitivity to the misery of the fellow humans. Beneath the glitz, glamour and "expense paid" credit card accounts, there lurks greed and competition of a kind which makes men less than human. Changez is often advised by his instructors in Underwood Samson to pay attention to the "fundamentals" by which it is meant the finance of the company that he is asked to evaluate. This breeds a narrow, compartmentalized attitude which precludes a holistic approach, like for example the human factor. Often this incurs the wrath of the employees who will inevitably be turned out of the corporations in which they have been slaving for years. And the employees of Underwood Samson are also subject to this same law of sacking or expulsion if they are found lacking by the rigorous standards of the company. As a senior manager explains to Changez the terms and conditions of working in a firm like this,

"We're a meritocracy," he said. "We believe in being the best. You were the best candidates at the best schools in the country. That's what got you here. But meritocracy doesn't stop with recruiting. We'll rank you every six months. You'll know your rankings. Your bonuses and staffing will depend on them. If you do well, you'll be rewarded. If you don't, you'll be out the door." (35)

This is how corporate America functions because this is how the capitalist system functions: the survival of the fittest and the most ruthless. This is profiteering carried to a sublime height which is bound to collapse by the weight of the very factors which it excludes from its consideration: the happiness of a mass of people rather than the select few, the distribution of wealth to the whole of the society rather than to the handful of capitalists who own powerful corporations. Changez in the beginning shares the same capitalist ethos. After he

comes first at the end of the training programme, he says: "I felt bathed in a warm sense of accomplishment." (45) Changez, whose name can be similar to Chengis Khan, the ruthless conqueror, can also be pronounced as "changes" meaning he changes a lot after the fateful collapse of the twin towers of the WTC after the terrorist attack on September 11. The first reaction of Changez on seeing the collapse is one of glee:

"...I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre collapsed. And then I *smiled*." (72)

And he explains the reason for it. It is the glee that the weak feel when a bully is punished, a re-enactment of the David-Goliath myth.

It is America's answer to this attack that eventually changes Changez into abandoning his success story in America and return to Lahore at a time when India was seriously contemplating an attack on Pakistan after an abortive attempt on Indian Parliament. America's war on terror has taken it to fight against the Talibans in Afghanistan and the ruthless deployment of modern technology against the primitive weapons of Afghans makes Changez angry at the unequal "mismatch" (99):

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. (100)

When Afghanistan was earlier occupied by Russia, John Rambo, an American commando (played by Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo III*), fights it with the help of the mujahedeen. The current war against the Talibans is a complete reversal of the American sentiment shown in the movie.

When Changez is in limbo, unable to decide whether to quit America or stay, it is the old man Juan-Bautista, the chief of the publishing company which has run into financial difficulties and awaiting a takeover, who gives him the necessary insight into his situation.

"Have you heard of the janissaries? "No," I said. "They were Christian boys," he explained, "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 utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to.”(151)

In the same way the janissaries were trained to fight their own civilization, Changez is being trained to fight his own people under the garb of “war on terror.” Changez does not hesitate any longer to leave America and go home carrying with him the skills he has acquired in Princeton and Underwood Samson to fight against a monolith which has lost all its glamour now. He now has a greater penetration of the way America was able to get its way with the help of its economic might:

...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. (156)

Then comes the moment when Changez decides not to be a part of it any longer and thanks Juan-Bautista inwardly for resolving the conflict for him. (157)

America is not ready to introspect. It only wants to punish and dominate. As Changez says eloquently,

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. (168)

Changez’s campaign against America after he becomes a university teacher is so successful that his comrades think an attempt on his life could be made by contract killers hired by America whose attempt to kill world leaders is rather legendary (Fidel Castro, for instance). In fact the person with whom he was carrying on his monologue appears to be one such undercover assassin judging from the bulge of his pockets stuffed with firearms.

If Changez’s relationship with corporate and political America is one of twists and turns including some hairpin bends, his love affair with Erica is no less so. They are both from Princeton and the trip to Greece cements the mutual attraction. Erica finds Changez’s courtesy exuding an old world charm and Erica’s obvious intelligence coupled with extraordinary beauty has a magical spell on

Changez. But even in such a state of heightened courtship Changez finds Erica “spacing out” meaning there are inexplicable spells of aloofness which baffles Changez a lot. Only later he understands that Erica is, has been and always will be in love with her girlhood sweetheart, Chris, who has died of lung cancer. The reason for attraction towards Changez is she finds Chris in Changez and nothing more. Her extraordinary fixation on her dead lover, her inability to find interest in anything outside this relationship brings about her doom and it is probable she commits suicide by diving into a river after a long spell of treatment in a mental clinic.

This unusual love affair of Changez and Erica and the eventual end of it have thrown up quite a few parallels between Changez and his distancing from America. Already the naming of Erica and its resonance with America has been pointed out.

After the attacks on the WTC, there is a transformation within America as it tries to recover its moral superiority, honour and power which it undoubtedly had after the Second World War. New York, which till now enjoyed cosmopolitanism unique to itself, becomes part of America in the way it begins to exhibit its patriotism in the American flags, in the floral and other tributes paid at Ground Zero. It begins to live in a state of nostalgia of its past grandeur. This is quite similar to Erica’s deep embeddedness in her own Chris-dominated nostalgia out of which she is unable to emerge.

The one occasion that Changez is able to have satisfactory physical union is when he asks her to imagine him as Chris. Suddenly Erica opens up physically and psychologically. Satisfactory though this moment is, it also shames Changez for he could gain Erica only through such “role playing”. A different kind of role playing is done by him, that of an overachiever and go-getter, in order to gain entry into the affluent world of corporate America. Role playing is also an important soft skill that a business executive is expected to have as part of his curriculum. Changez’s redemption is reached when he abandons role playing altogether.

Changez joins and organizes protests against America “to advocate a disengagement from your country by mine.” When international

television networks arrive at the campus, Changez's declaration on American belligerence gets worldwide publicity.

I stated to them among other things that no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America (182)

Later he realises that his political actions are not without a personal edge to them because he believes that Erica might be watching and perhaps respond:

If Erica was watching – which rationally, I knew, she almost certainly was not – she might have seen me and been moved to correspond. (182)

Though his Underwood Samson training has taught him the value of keeping issues compartmentalised, Changez finds that the personal and the political are not that easily separable.

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