

True or false:
analyzing behavior in
the reluctant
fundamentalist



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In Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the author directs the reader's attention to the sense of distrust and suspicion that many Americans notably have toward Middle Easterners and Muslims in general after 9/11. By doing so, Hamid is forcing the reader to confront this truth and either relate to it or feel guilty in the realization that it is a reaction based primarily on biases in the media's description of a terrorist. America's idea of a terrorist in post-9/11 culture has essentially been boiled down to a Disney villain-esque portrayal of Middle Easterners and Muslims, with the perceived enemy being a dark-skinned, long-bearded, turban-wearing replica of Jafar from Disney's *Aladdin*. Through a carefully constructed narrative that uses one-sided dialogue between the characters Changez and "the American," Hamid throws this prejudice in the face of the reader, but also cleverly allows room for varying interpretations of the true nature of Changez—is he harmless, or is he exactly what many Americans fear he might be?

The narrator, Changez, is constantly reassuring the American he is telling his story to that he is not in harm's way. The first few sentences of the novel bring awareness to the reality that the typical Middle Eastern Muslim's appearance frightens many Americans and puts them on edge. Changez says, "Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America" (1). Having established the commonality of this notion of prejudice toward the bearded-Muslim in American culture, the author proceeds to arouse the reader's own xenophobic tendencies by portraying Changez as an individual who is overly eager to convince the American character of his innocence. An example of this is evident when Changez is discussing the tea brought in by the waiter. He says, "Do not look so

suspicious. I assure you, sir, nothing untoward will happen to you, not even a runny stomach. After all, it is not as if it has been poisoned. Come, if it makes you more comfortable, let me switch my cup with yours. Just so" (11). The fact that the author does not give the American character any dialogue contributes to the dubious nature of Changez because we can only know what the American is thinking or saying via the narrative reaction of Changez. Hamid purposely employs this literary device in order to keep the reader feeling guilty about prejudices but also to retain some degree of truth in the suspicion of ill-will as well. After all, Changez does act bizarrely by approaching the American unsolicited and diving into a lengthy and intimate discussion of his past. Who does this? It is suspicious, and that is exactly what Hamid seeks to capitalize on. There is truth in the argument that Americans—and people in general for that matter—often attribute malevolence to a stranger who is overtly friendly and generous without any known pretext. This could be viewed as unwarranted paranoia, but the fact that this is the method used by many criminals to gain their victims trust also means that it's naive to not be skeptical as well. It is a dichotomous predicament that evokes notions of Shakespeare's Hamlet and begs the question: Is it paranoia if the suspicion is validated? Such is the case with Hamlet, as he is ultimately murdered just as he feared he would be. Hamid chooses not to provide closure and instead leave the scene up to interpretation.

Hamid seems to enjoy toying with the reader's feelings toward Changez. Changez's relationship with Erica can be seen as a parallel to his desire to be accepted and embraced by a nation that is plagued by xenophobia. Erica's

inability to relinquish herself from her past mirrors Americans inability to accept changes (read: Changez) that threaten to erase the nostalgia of pre-9/11 America. Erica wants to love Changez, but she can't; just as America can't seem to shake the overwhelming prejudice toward Middle Eastern Muslims despite wanting to view itself as a country tolerant of all races, creeds, and languages. By developing this tragic love story, Hamid aims to create sympathy toward Changez. Why can't Erica and America accept him for who he is? Why does Changez boss ridicule him for growing a beard? It's just a beard. At the same time, Hamid also insinuates that Changez is growing resentful of American intolerance. Changez says:

Sometimes I would find myself walking the streets, flaunting my beard as a provocation, craving conflict with anyone foolhardy enough to antagonize me. Affronts were everywhere; the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment in history—not just from the government, but from the media and supposed critical journalists as well— provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger. (167)

By calling it “ your country,” Changez has removed himself from any identification with America. He goes on to say that “[s]uch an America had to be stopped not only in the interest of the rest of humanity, but also in your own” (168). Changez anger and commitment to “ stop” America’s current course of anti-Muslim sentiment raises the question, what did he do? This question is never directly answered in the novel. Changez acknowledges this question, saying, “ What did I do to stop America, you ask? Have you really no idea, sir? ...I will tell you what I did, although it was not much and I fear it may well fail to meet your expectations” (168-9). Despite promising to <https://assignbuster.com/true-or-false-analyzing-behavior-in-the-reluctant-fundamentalist/>

answer this question, Changez never actually does. He mentions that he became a “lecturer” at a university and “persuaded [students] of the merits of participating in demonstrations for independence in Pakistan’s domestic and international affairs;” however, this hardly addresses the “affronts” that angered Changez so much (179). The open-endedness of this question hints at the idea that the answer is found in the reader’s own interpretation of the end of the novel. Does Changez stop American arrogance and intolerance by showing an American his good nature and friendship by sharing a lunch, divulging intimate details about himself, walking him home, and ending the meeting with a handshake? Or is there something more sinister in the fact that he has the American cornered in a dark deserted street while the waiter “rapidly clos[es] in” and “wav[es] at [Changez] to detain [the American]” (184)? Does Changez stop American intolerance the way the Trenchcoat Mafia kids stopped the bullying at Columbine? Does he subscribe to Martin Luther King’s philosophy of non-violence to address racial intolerance, or Malcolm X’s philosophy of “any means necessary”? Changez claims to be “no ally of killers,” and yet, he also admits to “intervene[ing]” in a “scuffle” that ends up with him having “bruised knuckles” (181; 179). It wouldn’t be accurate, therefore, to say that Changez is completely non-violent and morally incapable of inflicting harm. But to what extent Changez is violent is a question left up to the reader.

Hamid’s brilliant use of the narrative to create both suspicion and guilt in the reader results in a thought-provoking acknowledgement of American paranoia post-9/11. The author’s contrived suspicion toward Changez assists us in identifying our own preconceived notions, either about Muslims or

Americans, or both. Many individuals sympathetic to the plight of Muslim acceptance in America post-9/11 may have their own generalized ideas about America's extent of racial intolerance and, ironically, they may be guilty of their own intolerance toward Americans as a whole. Hamid acknowledges possibility that the reader will be dismayed by the American character's distrust of Changez, or even have suspicion about the American, and Hamid nurtures this suspicion by purposely portraying the American in a dubious and indiscriminate manner. Hamid even ends the novel with the suspicion that it is the American who is the "undercover assassin," not Changez (183). Why else would someone so apparently nervous around Middle Eastern Muslims be in Pakistan? Not for vacation, presumably. Still, there is no other real suspicion that is raised about the American in the novel, and the American's capability to do harm with the ambiguous "glint of metal" in his jacket would appear to result more from a sense of obligation to defend himself from a perceived threat rather than to assassinate Changez (184). Perhaps Hamid is revealing that our suspicions about both characters are completely unfounded on a logical level. Maybe the American is just taking out a "business card" and the waiter just "wants to say goodbye," as Changez postulates (184). Why must we be so pessimistic and assume that something bad is about to happen, particularly between a Pakistani and an American? These are questions that Hamid raises, and through the narrative he shows us that people tend to let personal biases get in the way of seeing something for what it is and not what it could be. How we as readers interpret the characters in the novel will illuminate the extent to which 9/11 has affected our judgment of ourselves and others, and in this way, Hamid is providing us with a valuable lesson of introspection.

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