

Reluctant fundamentalist essay sample



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“ It’s like I’m an oyster. I’ve had this sharp speck inside me for a long time, and I’ve been trying to make it more comfortable, so slowly I’ve turned it into a pearl.”

‘ The Reluctant Fundamentalist’ a ‘ brief and charming story; a ‘ seething commentary on the events of post 9/11 and the resentment it has created in the minds of non-western world for the way America has conducted itself after the attacks. A monologue narrated by a young bearded Pakistani man Changez to his unnamed American guest with whom he meets in one of the oldest and busiest districts of Lahore Anarkali. Changez tells his guest about his life and experiences of America; narrating the days he has spent in America first as a student and then as a successful wall street professional, professing himself as a lover of America and describing his journey from Pakistan to Princeton and then to Underwood Samson as a dream comes true. Later, in spite of his success in the roles and prospects given to him by the host land; he experienced qualms about his contributions in those tendered roles as well as on the America’s role in the world.

Changez belongs to an upper class family whose wealth has diminished over the generations due to economic adversity, and family vice, but still whose social standings persists. He moved to America from his native city of Lahore to study on scholarship at Princeton. At the top of his class at Princeton, he is snapped up by the renowned “ valuation” firm of Underwood Samson. He was given a pre-employment bonus and went on vocations to Greece with fellow Princeton students where he met with Erica and subsequently fall in love with her.

Erica a beautiful young woman; ‘ a lioness: strong, sleek and invariably surrounded by her pride’ as Changez depict her. She is an aspiring writer, and from an élite family living in Manhattan New York. Though troubled from the death of her childhood friend and sweetheart Chris from cancer she was ‘ struggling with a current that pulled her within herself’. Her life after meeting with Changez seems to be on a track of normalization for she likes to be with him; and it serves as a mediation that heals herself from her misery.

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She likes it when he talks about Pakistan, his family, culture and way of life in Lahore; for she tells him ‘ I love it when you talk about where you come from...you become so alive’. On their return to America from Greece she helped Changez settling in New York. She takes him to places she used to visit with Chris; and invites him to a family dinner at her apartment. She showed him the painting Chris has made while he was in school, her novella she plans to publish and introduce him to her parents.

Even she likes Changez, somehow finds it difficult to start a relationship with him; for she existed internally at a degree of remove from those around her... some part of her...was out of reach, lost in thoughts unsaid. The inability to adjust herself in a new relationship; made her increasingly introverted and depressed, for she knows he loves and cares for her; just like she did for Chris. For Changez the thought that she is constantly obsessed with the imaginations of Chris; he finds himself persistently in the presence

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of a competitor; one who was invisible and unknown to him. Desperate to win her affection; he even tried to impersonate as Chris for his attempt to win her soul, for his desires to love her. For a moment she believed him, transformed into another world with him; a transition that Changez explains as, “ It was as though we were under a spell, transported to a world where I was Chris and she was with Chris” he made love to her, described the feeling for getting something as being someone else incite a feeling of both satiation and ashamed.

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“ You’re a watchful guy. You know where that comes from? It comes from feeling out of place...Believe me. I know” Soon after joining the Underwood Samson with other trainees Changez for his passion and hard-work stand out among his colleagues earning commendation of his colleagues and superiors. Jim the vice president of the firm develops a personal liking for him for his zest, dedication and an understanding of what he calls ‘ fundamentals’ of success. “ You’re a watchful guy. You know where that comes from? It comes from feeling out of place...Believe me. I know”. Jim himself is an outsider in America; quite successful in pursuit of his American Dream; sees in Changez a reflection of his past. Soon, Changez start getting important assignments, traveling from one part of the world to the other with top of the firm’s executive

While he is in Manila working on a valuation project he see as the twin towers collapse from the TV screen of his hotel room and somehow his first

reaction was a smile; a strange sentiment on the thought that someone so visibly has brought America to its knees as he narrate the accounts of his initial reaction of the event to his guest. The events of 9/11 greatly affected the way the life used to be, for America that he believes to be a nation who always looks forward was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia; “ The country looks backwards, at how things were better once upon a time. It has also churned up the old thoughts in Erica’s minds, for she looks backwards too. Chris is her lover from childhood, a lover with “ Old World appeal” from a time when life was simple and innocent and she is “ disappearing” into the same “ powerful nostalgia” as America as nation is...”

He returns to Pakistan during Christmas holidays, and finds his country threatened by the looming war from neighboring India following the events of terrorist attack on Indian parliament in New Delhi. He wanted to stay in Lahore as he do not wanted to leave his country and home in the midst of a crisis; but from the shove of his family returns to New York explaining it as “ I would soon be gone, leaving my family and my home behind, and this made me a kind of coward in my own eyes.” On his return to New York he was under suspicion, face discrimination at the airport first, then on the streets and public places and in the office too. Frustrated with the misrepresentation of Muslims as religious fanatics in the American media, he refuses to shave off his beard that for him was a symbol of his Muslim identity. It was a form of his protest to the America’s perception towards his people after 9/11.

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Troubled by his love affair with Erica who became extremely sick from her emotional and physiological deterioration; and from that of the fears of an emerging war at home with an evidently superior and powerful competitor has started affecting his performance at work and was mirrored in his growing physical and ideological estrangement from America. “ I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged” Jim who still considers him as valuable asset to the firm notices this and despite the bleak economic situation assigned him with an important assignment of valuation of a publishing house in Santiago; Chile, considering a change would serve a positive effect on him.

Changez however preoccupied with thoughts of Erica and of troubled political situation in Pakistan started neglecting his tasks in order to chase Erica for a reply who stop responding to his emails and phone calls, and surfing on internet for stories in order to follow Pakistani affairs online. Juan Batista who works in the publishing firm for years at first maintain a hostile attitude to the Changez and the other senior executive who were there to evaluate the publishing firm. Noticing his indifference to work Juan Batista invites Changez to meal, tells him with the story of Janissaries, the young Christian boys who fought against their own civilization under the Muslim rule; taken by their masters when they were too young. He then asked Changez how old was he when he first comes to America, however on his reply he did not say anything to him. The meeting however serves as a catalyst; solidifying his views and resentment for United States for Juan challenges his role and integrity in America, and for that Changez considered himself as a modern day Janissary and the role he has been playing forever

transforms his idea of American dream and substitute it to that of a Reluctant Fundamentalist.

He returns to New York from Santiago; leaving his assignment in the middle knowing that would result in losing his job and soon he has to leave America following the expiration of his visa. But he did not seem to care for that for he was no longer charmed by the Underwood Samson or his career prospect and money. On his return he immediately resigned from his job and then went to see Erica at her home; when her mother told him about her condition for she was admitted to a rehabilitation center. He meet her in hospital, for her condition was that “ she was disappearing into a powerful nostalgia, one from which only she could choose whether or not to return.” The nurse explained to Changez that for Erica it was difficult to be in out in the world, for she in her mind experiencing things that were stronger and more meaningful than the things she could experience with the rest of us. Changez was in predicament, “ to choose whether to continue to try to win her over or to accept her wishes and leave.” Maybe...it was a test and I failed”

Soon he discovered that Erica disappeared from the clinic where she was being treated, presumed to have committed suicide for she was saying goodbye to everyone in the hospital. He knows in the end that she had died and there is no hope of seeing her again, but still disbelieves. Despite of his inner turmoil's, his resentment for America; his love for Erica remained essentially unchanged. Losing all hopes of seeing Erica again, he returns to Pakistan. Changez join a university as a lecturer in Lahore, and soon become

popular among his students for his criticism of America as an activist defying America's role in the world and its policies of war.