
Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: Quest and Struggle for Identity

What Your Reflection Shows

The struggle to determine one's identity permeates American and international cultures alike. From childhood, the idea of a great quest to discover who we are is planted into our susceptible minds. Every great story has an identity crisis of some kind; from the simple Ugly Duckling to Luke Skywalker's discovery of his lineage to the unseen narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. All mankind contains this seed, and gravitates to stories which we feel help to uncover the mysterious process of self-discovery. In his resounding novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid uses his character Changez's desperate quest for identity to demonstrate that what truly makes us who we are, are the things that we are passionate about.

Hamid's novel begins with Changez's identity focused on that of an international student, but quickly begins to shift as he becomes passionate about America's offerings. Changez explains that the international students attending Princeton are screened through numerous tests, so that the best of them can "contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining" (4). Changez is a passionate student (one of two from Pakistan), progressing all the way through the end of junior year at Princeton without a single B. His grades show his dedication, and as his identity develops into that of an American, he remarks that he is "happy to do so" in joining society (4). This quest for identity makes a significant step during the interview for Underwood Samson, a firm that "gave one a robust set of skills and an exalted brand name" (5). Changez is so set on this position that he is uncharacteristically nervous for the interview. Only once he displays his passion for perseverance to the interviewer, is he identified as a fit for the firm. When Changez finishes his first project with Underwood Samson in first place, he admits to feeling "happy in that moment" (45). The shift from student to a valued employee has almost completed Changez's transformation into an American, and is completed as he describes his experience on the subway. He says "in those days I felt completely comfortable on the subway in this attire", referencing his white kurta and jeans, highly identifiable cultural markers (48). Despite the differences that he has often considered as obstacles, Changez now feels like a piece sliding into the American jig-saw.

As an American, Changez incorporates new passions to further cement his new identity. His infatuation with Erica continues to grow, pulling him further into the culture of both a New Yorker and American. After dining with Erica's parents in their luxurious apartment, Changez finds himself not greeting the Pakistani taxi driver, simply stating "normally I would have said hello, but on that particular night I did not" (55). Their destination was their first date and a typical New York scene. Erica has a friend who is exhibiting her artwork in an unassuming building. This is a first for Changez, and he recalls that he quickly "realized I was being ushered into an insider's world—the chic heart of this city—to which I would otherwise have had no access" (56). A few weeks later, upon assignment to Manila in the Philippines, Changez finds himself faced with a culture that was poorer than America, and yet quickly growing to the point of being superior to his own. "I did something in Manila I had never done before: I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an American" (65). Again it is clear that the two biggest components of his life, Erica and Underwood Samson, are powering this newly claimed

identity. Changez seems to be content with his new role in American society and has embraced it whole-heartedly.

Surprisingly, Changez's reaction to the events of September 11th indicates that perhaps he is not as comfortable as an American as he believed. Upon hearing the news, Changez relates that "despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (72). Changez quickly explains that he is not sure why he felt so negatively towards a country that had, for all intents and purposes, taken him in. He attempts to put on a guarded expression and proceeds to interact with his colleagues, at which time his "thoughts turned to Erica, and [he] no longer needed to pretend" (74). When remembering something he is passionate for (Erica), he becomes grounded back in the identity which she occupies a major part of. While he is returned, he seems unable to shake the lingering confusion at his inappropriate joy.

After September 11th, Changez travels home to spend some time with his family, which begins anew his quest for identity. When he returns to America, he elects to keep the beard that has begun to dominate his face. He reasons that this is very common in his country, but begins to experience drawbacks while stateside. He recalls that "more than once, travelling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers" (130). Perhaps he would have considered shaving it had Erica not intervened. When he visits her for the last time, she says "you look cute" (134). Simple and direct, and yet in this way she affirms the process which has begun to redefine his identity once more. Before, she represented America and required a lover who was similar to Chris (her deceased lover) in every way. By complimenting his beard in a time period where this would be literally unsafe for him to grow, she has demonstrated that she is no longer pressuring him to become the American businessman he is. Suddenly, Changez begins to reevaluate his entire life, eventually resulting in him leaving his job while on project in Chile. He reasons that he needs to leave because he has become "a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war" (153). He returns to New York and seeks out Erica, only to learn that she has disappeared, most likely through suicide. In disbelief, Changez meets with her mother, who relates to him that Erica mentioned multiple times that she "found [Changez] rather dashing in [his] new beard" (164). This was the final catalyst to develop his new and final identity, that of the love-struck Pakistani.

Upon returning to Pakistan Changez embraces his Pakistani heritage and begins to make a stand for what is right. He teaches at a university in Lahore, and due to his youth, quickly becomes very popular among the students. He finds that his "office hours were soon overrun by politically minded youth" (179). His culture is now a major part of his identity, and he becomes passionately outspoken as to America's trespasses. However, that is not to say he has forgotten the one thing he still loves about America: Erica. He has adopted her habit of living inside her mind, and says that when he wakes up in the morning it is as if "Erica and I would have lived an entire day together" (172). When asked about his thoughts on the conflict of his country by a news station, Changez says "no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America" (182). While he truly believes this and is greatly saddened by his people's fear, it is interesting to also note that he did this for Erica. After all this time, his love for her has not waned. He knew that his statement would be picked up by major international news stations, and hoped that "she might have seen me and been moved to correspond" (182). His identity is still composed of Erica, with the new addition of his cultural heritage.

Being the most powerful agent of driving Changez's quest to become American, Erica again influences Changez's identity when he returns and they repeat their attempt at a physical relationship. This time, Changez suggests that Erica pretends that he is Chris. Repeatedly, Changez says "pretend I am him" until she accepts and they are able to make love (105). At first, this may seem counterproductive to Changez developing his own identity. Yet if one looks deeper, he is essentially taking the name of an American boy, to be with an American girl in all the ways that he never will be able to himself (ethnicity, accent, etc.). While it was ill-advised, this was perhaps Changez's most desperate attempt to engender an identity which was compatible with his new life.

Changez's quest for identity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, demonstrates that our passions are the foundation on which we are built. The need to find ourselves is rooted deep in our core. While we desperately search for who we truly are, it seems that often it is something out of our control. What we love—what we are passionate about—is rarely chosen. One minute we are comfortably going through our lives like the young businessman Changez, and the next a beautiful girl derails our entire life into an adventure that will hurt, certainly bring us to tears, and definitely teach us to smile.

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