

Book Review

Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, UK: Harcourt, 2007.
pp. 192. ISBN-10: 0151013047.

Reluctant Fundamentalist is perhaps the best account in fiction, so far, that attempts to portray the complex and confused relationship between the West and Islam after the tragic events of 9/11. Nothing more wonderful, nothing more accurate, perhaps nothing more fine in fiction has ever been written on the topic so far. The narration is almost like a monologue but pretty much different from the stream of consciousness technique adopted by the modernist writers of the early twentieth century. Despite the visible difference in narrative techniques, one cannot help but detect traces of Faulkner and Fitzgerald. Here, Mohsin much like them attempts to depict the disillusionment of a society going through turbulent and complex age. What sets the novel apart is its fascinating narrator who converses with an indifferent and suspicious American at a cafe table in Lahore. The American throughout the novel remains a passive listener but gives his powerful feedback through his uneasy body language.

Changez, a youth educated at Princeton, begins his horrible tale of suffering in the US. The start of his education at Princeton marks the beginning of his American dream. Things look wonderful; everything looks in place but all the things change with the horrific events of 9/11. Suddenly, hate and abhorrence starts to come aplenty. 9/11 brings to life a dormant volcano, which explodes with such a powerful eruption that no place is safe from its volcanic bombs and searing lava. In this deteriorating situation, Changez finds himself alone in the middle of nowhere with bombs falling on his uncovered head.

Even years before 9/11, Changez could smell the winds that precede a storm and he is rather forced to wear a mask. That is when he discovers that he is a civilizational other. His mask attempts to erase that consciousness of being an alien.

With the passage of time, Changez finds it difficult to blend in with the western culture. His trips to the colourful beaches and all his efforts to blend himself just fade away into insignificance when compared with the new wave of hatred that comes from 9/11. His assignment at the Underwood Samson temporarily promises him a firm and strong position in an otherwise hostile society.

His beloved Erica, despite all her efforts fails to free her mind from the ghost of Christ, a former boyfriend, now dead. Her relationship with Changez remains troubled by Chris. Although Chris is dead, he remains an integral part of Erica's consciousness. Chris is almost a symbol of American spirit that always stands in the way of Erica and Changez. His ghost denies them a fruitful bond. All the efforts on part of Changez fail to win her, so much so that when a moment of physical consummation comes, he feels blood. Instead of Erica's body he smells blood. With time, Erica loses her health and with this she loses her sanity as well. Later she disappears.

But that is not the end of Changez's misery. 9/11 comes as a frightening point in his life. It comes as a monster that hurls his life into a horrible hurricane. This is the point where his relationship with Erica starts to deteriorate. People around him start to doubt him. Slowly, he begins to realize that all Muslims especially Pakistanis are being seen as potential terrorists. He loses his interest in work and rather begins to search for his identity. Around that time he is sent on an assignment to Chile, where he converses with a publisher who equates Changez with a Janissary¹ (Christian youth conscripted by the Ottomans forced to fight their very own civilization). Neruda, the publisher compares Changez to a Janissary which comes as shock and a revelation. That is where Changez realizes the futility of his infatuation with the American dream, his longing for the western life, his appreciation of all that was American. He realizes that he was not even a cog in the machine but much more inferior to that.

While Changez is narrating this story to the unnamed American, there is an air of hostility that prevails between the narrator and the listener. Changez's constant efforts to take the American into confidence fails. The unidentified American seems pretty much an undercover assassin on a mission to kill Changez. Perhaps, Changez's elevated level of awareness from his American experience is allowing him to instil that consciousness into the minds of Pakistanis at large, something the American is very suspicious about. Changez who is now a Frankenstein monster has become an anathema for the Americans. So despite repeated assurances, the American remains uneasy and continues to doubt him as he listens to his story.

Meanwhile, Changez is being seen as a potential terrorist back in America. People tend to look him with scorn. The moment comes when bystanders cast unfamiliar glances at Changez. That is the moment when one of them approaches Changez in an attempt to beat him. However the collision is averted nevertheless Changez picks up a shaft and at the moment feels "fully capable of wielding it with sufficient violence to shatter the bones of his skull". In the meanwhile, he hears of Erica's fate. The nurse at the institution informs Changez of Erica's strange disappearance. Perhaps, she committed suicide. With all this, Changez feels a severe longing for home. But that too is shattered by the horrific events revolving around Indo-Pak increasing hostilities.

As Changez's story comes to its end, he accompanies the American to the Pearl Continental hotel. Despite Changez's repeated efforts to assure the American that he is not a terrorist, that he is a peace loving citizen; the American thinks of him to be a potential terrorist. Changez entertains him with all delicious meals but fails to earn any applause. Somewhere around midnight, as the American is about to enter the hotel, and as the darkness of the night increases his paranoia, he reaches into his pocket perhaps for the handgun, perhaps for something else. Hamid leaves that for the reader to decide.

Janisar Ahmed

¹ The Janissaries (derives from Ottoman Turkish: (*yeniçeri*) meaning "new soldier") comprised infantry units that formed the Ottoman sultan's household troops and bodyguard. The force originated in the 14th century; it was abolished by Sultan Mahmud II in 1826.---- (Note by the editor)