

ENGLISH: THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST

Changez is gradually revealed to be an unreliable narrator. Discuss. (VCAA 2012)

The complex and captivating extended monologue in Mohsin Hamid's 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' utilises the subjective nature of the narrative to enthrall the audience, both revealing and omitting specific aspects of Changez's character in order to prompt the audience to question Changez's authenticity. In several elements of the framed narrative Hamid deliberately limits Changez's description of events in order to create a sense of ambiguity, prompting readers to make their own evaluation of events based on the limited provision of evidence, and find deeper meaning in the text, overlooking basic stereotyping and everyday bias. Furthermore, as Changez himself acknowledges, each story is susceptible to the biases and cognitive limitations of Changez, and is therefore equally vulnerable to distortion. As the storyline progresses and the American tourist begins to openly distrust Changez, the audience unconsciously absorbs a similar hesitance towards Changez, and as such question his reliability as a narrator. In writing the story from the narrow perspective of Changez alone, Hamid encourages readers to search for the other side to the story, hence reminding readers that in any situation it is wise to listen to the whole story before making any judgement or comment.

In an attempt to persuade readers to analytically evaluate and distinguish fact from fiction in the novel, Hamid deliberately portrays the relationship between Changez and the American to be of predatory nature, yet remains ambiguous as to which man assumes each role. The identity of the American is purposefully left unknown in order to provide no evidence to support Changez's claims that he has the "look of a seasoned army officer", who appears to be "on a mission". Furthermore, Changez appears to have some knowledge of the American's intentions, proclaiming the meeting to be "a night of some significance". Similarly, Changez makes several allusions to the "glint of metal" in the American's jacket which could be interpreted as both a gun and a business card holder, and the anticipatory nature of the encounter leaving readers desperate for a resolution. Yet when the resolution never ensues and remaining lacking in any substantial evidence, the reader remains uncertain as to the nature of their relationship and consequently must consistently re-evaluate their ideas in order to distinguish the facts from the allegations. Through the ambiguity of the narrative, Hamid purposefully leaves Changez open to doubt and therefore induces the readers to objectively critique Changez's entire story.

Hamid attempts to remind the readers that every story is subjective and open to the biases and misinterpretation of the storyteller, and Changez's assurance that whilst he may be lacking in some detail on occasion, it is "the thrust of one's story which counts" does little to reassure readers of his integrity. Being in extended monologue form with a single narrator, the novel provides a very limited scope on the issues which Hamid outlines, and consequently the reader is forced to reflect their own beliefs and opinions into the novel which acts as a 'mirror'. Changez's is infatuated with both Erica and America, and as such is blind to their flaws. Despite his "blinders coming off" and his growing awareness of their fundamentalist and nostalgic tendencies, Changez remains not entirely free of bias, and subsequently cannot provide wholly accurate information. He is consistently limited by the preconceived ideas he holds, even whence returning to Pakistan he leaves his jacket in the airport for Erica, "not as one leaves flowers for a funeral, but rather as one twirls money around the living for luck". Changez's relationship as "a lover of America" who has been betrayed and spurned undoubtedly means that Changez cannot be an entirely reliable narrator, due to his proven inability to remain detached from his feelings. Through the intangible nature of the first person narrative, Hamid provides a commentary that no story can ever be one hundred percent accurate.

The American can be allegorically seen to be representative of the reader's values and beliefs, and subsequently as the American tourist becomes increasingly suspicious of Changez, so too does the reader. In the external narrative, Hamid utilises the evident distrust the American holds in Changez to further impress upon readers the dire need to be vigilant in distinguishing between truths and lies.

Changez emphasises that “not all of us are terrorists, just like not all Americans are undercover assassins”, and reflects Hamid’s rejection of stereotyping and prejudice. The calm and controlled manner which Changez maintains is a stark contrast with the tense and agitated atmosphere encompassing the American tourist, on several occasions the American startling due to the harmless “misfiring of a rickshaw”. The purpose with which Changez conducts himself and the obvious lack of composure in the American causes the readers to reflect the tourist’s fear of Changez, yet when the conclusion of the novel brings no resolution to the tension, Hamid forces readers to consider that the fear and tension may have been based on superstition and paranoia alone and is ultimately unfounded.

Throughout ‘The Reluctant Fundamentalist’, Hamid deliberately creates an air of suspicion around Changez’s character, prompting a nervousness in readers and a tendency to question Changez’s authenticity as a narrator. As the atmosphere of the narrative becomes more ominous, the reader gradually begins to lose faith in Changez, paralleled by the developing agitation in the American tourist. The limited perspective the readers gain into Changez’s world due to the one sided narrative leaves unanswered questions in the minds of the readers, allowing Hamid to induce a deep sense of reflection about beliefs and values, and emphasise that any story is only as reliable as its narrator.