

Insight Text Guide

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**The Reluctant
Fundamentalist**
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Mohsin Hamid
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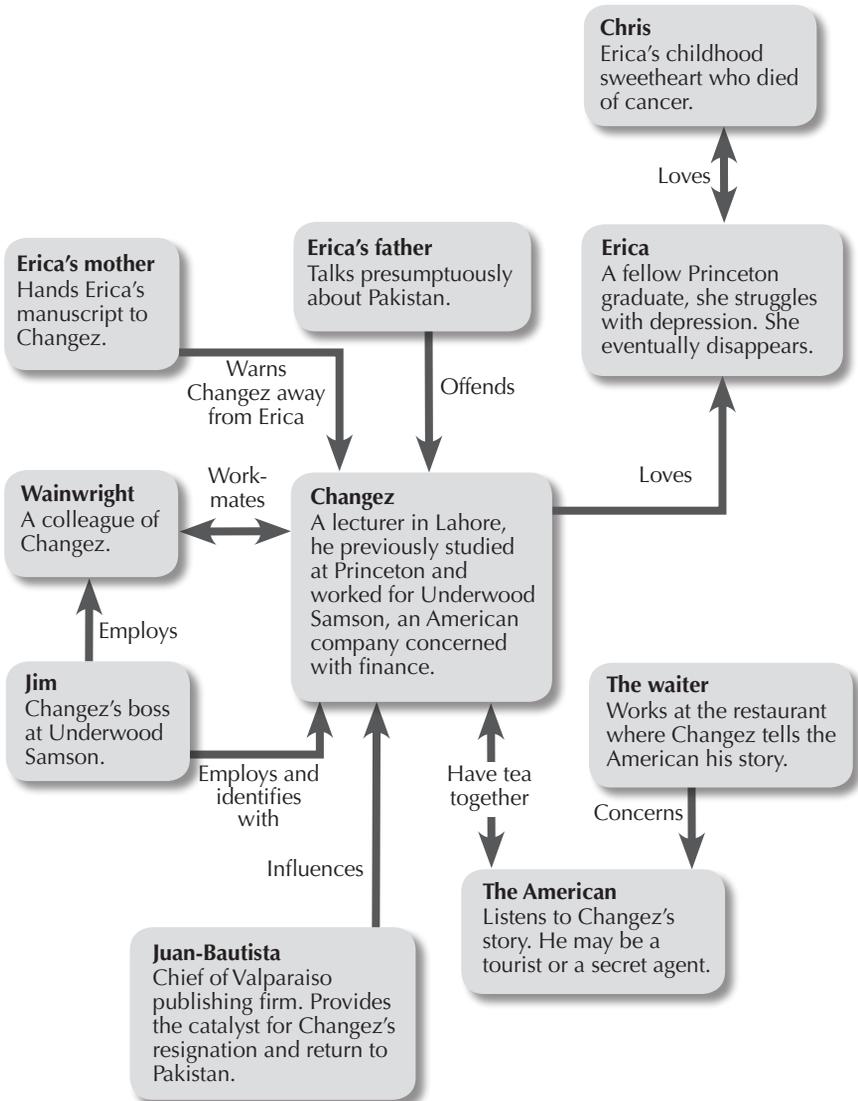


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CHARACTER MAP



OVERVIEW

About the author

Born in 1971 to an upper-class family in Lahore, Pakistan, Mohsin Hamid moved to California at age three when his father undertook a PhD program at Stanford University. At age nine, he returned to Pakistan and completed his secondary education at the Lahore American School. At 18, he returned to the United States to attend Princeton University in New Jersey, where he studied Creative Writing under award-winning novelists Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison. After graduating with the equivalent of First Class Honours in 1993, Hamid returned to Pakistan to work on his first novel. Shortly after, he returned to America again, this time to attend Harvard Law School. After graduating in 1997, he began working at a management consulting firm and, like his narrator Changez, enjoyed a financially prosperous career in New York.

Shortly after his 30th birthday in 2001, Hamid decided to leave the United States for London. On September 11 of that same year, he watched with shock as terrorists targeted his former home across the Atlantic. He has since written that:

[L]ike many Bush-era self-exiles from the United States, I found that London combined much of what first attracted me to New York with a freedom America seemed to have lost in the paranoid years after 9/11 (Hamid 2009).

In London Hamid met his wife. They and their daughter returned to Pakistan to live in 2009.

As well as his novels, Hamid has also written much political and social commentary for publications, including *The New York Times*, the *Paris Review* and *The Washington Post*. Many relate to experiences of immigration, citizenship or migrant identity.

Synopsis

The Reluctant Fundamentalist unfolds over the period of a day as Changez, a returned Pakistani migrant, accosts an unnamed American

man in the streets of Lahore. It is unclear whether the American is a mere 'tourist' or an intelligence agent sent to assassinate Changez. At Changez's insistence, the two men share tea and a meal in the market place of Old Anarkali, before Changez accompanies the American to his hotel through the dark night streets.

The novel consists of a dramatic monologue in which Changez recounts in detail his experience of the United States, first as student and then in international finance. He tells how, despite his success, he experienced doubts about his role in America and about America's role in the world.

Changez moves from his respected family in Lahore to New Jersey, where he has attained a scholarship for Princeton. Graduating with honours, Changez then secures a high-paying job at a valuation firm.

Between graduating and commencing his position at Underwood Samson, Changez holidays in Greece with his fellow Princetonians. Here, he falls in love with a troubled young American woman, Erica. Back in the United States, she introduces Changez to her wealthy parents, invites him to her home, and includes him in her elite lifestyle. However, Erica is traumatised by the death of her childhood sweetheart, Chris; although she feels affection for Changez, she most likely sees him as a shadow of her former lover. Unable to commit herself to a new relationship, she becomes increasingly introverted and depressed.

Soon after beginning at Underwood Samson, Changez goes to Manila on business. On the television in his hotel room, he witnesses the Twin Towers fall on September 11, 2001; his reaction is one of unsettling pleasure. This initial reaction gives way to confusion – about his identity, about his feelings for the United States and about his involvement in Underwood Samson. In the following months, Erica's emotional and psychological deterioration, which precedes the collapse of their friendship, is mirrored in Changez's growing physical and ideological estrangement from the United States.

After returning to America from Manila, Changez visits his family in Pakistan. Once there, he can no longer ignore the fear and degradation they are experiencing as a result of foreign intervention and the threat of war from neighbouring India.

Upon returning to America, he refuses to shave off his beard: it is a symbol both of his individuality and of his Pakistani identity. He experiences discrimination in airports, in the workplace and in the streets. Meanwhile, Erica has become increasingly ill and has moved to a clinic.

Changez's disillusionment is evident to his boss at Underwood Samson. Jim still considers Changez valuable to the firm and sends him to Chile to assess an ailing publishing firm. But Changez, troubled by the political situation and preoccupied with Erica, is no longer charmed by the prestige of the company, nor passionate about his work. He neglects his task in order to follow Pakistani affairs online. Noticing his indifference, the chief of the publishing company confronts Changez and challenges the integrity of Underwood Samson as well as Changez's personal integrity. Their meeting is the catalyst for Changez's ultimate epiphany in the novel – his resentment toward the United States, which had been growing since September 11, is now solidified, made palpable: he decides to abandon the assignment, knowing he will be fired from Underwood Samson, and thereby forfeit his American visa.

As he returns to New York to pack his things, Changez discovers that Erica has disappeared from the clinic, presumed to have committed suicide. Her mother gives him a copy of Erica's manuscript before he departs.

Upon return to Pakistan, Changez joins the university in Lahore, becomes a lecturer and an activist and protests against American foreign policy. The exact nature of Changez's activism remains ambiguous. As Changez finishes his story, he accompanies the American back to his hotel room. The final scene is left open-ended: the reader cannot know whether the American is a secret agent who will assassinate Changez; whether Changez himself is the threat; or whether it was indeed a chance meeting between an innocent Pakistani and an American tourist, who after the last page closes will safely go their separate ways.

Character summaries

Changez

Changez moves from his home in Pakistan to the United States for university. After graduation, lands a job at Underwood Samson where

he earns more than \$80,000 a year and is sent on various international assignments. Falls in love with Erica. Eventually returns to Pakistan to become a lecturer.

The American

The nameless American man to whom Changez tells his story. Possibly an army officer or intelligence agent.

Erica

The beautiful, troubled woman with whom Changez falls in love. Lives with her parents in Manhattan and belongs to a wealthy elite. Still in love with her childhood sweetheart, who has recently passed away from cancer. Suffers depression and eventually disappears, possibly committing suicide.

Jim

Changez's boss and friend at Samson Underwood. Wealthy and successful with a property in the Hamptons. Grew up in a poor, lower-class family; lives alone in New York; it is insinuated that he is gay.

Wainwright

Changez's fellow 'non-white' co-worker at Underwood Samson and Changez's only other friend in the office.

The waiter

The waiter at the restaurant where Changez tells his story to the American. Later follows them to the American's hotel.

Changez's Pakistani family

Changez's brother, mother and father in Lahore. Working professionals and members of an elite class, their fortune has been lost over the last few generations due to economic hardship and family vice. Changez sends them money from America.

Chris

Erica's childhood sweetheart who died of lung cancer the year before she met Changez. Changez feels threatened by Erica's continued attachment to Chris.

Erica's father

A wealthy and successful corporate businessman. Offends Changez during a dinner with his stereotyped remarks about Pakistan.

Erica's mother

A kindly, nervous woman, who suffers from her daughter's illness. Gives Changez Erica's manuscript after her daughter disappears.

Juan-Bautista

The chief of the Chilean publishing company that Changez is sent to assess. Grandfatherly and wise, he questions Changez's loyalty to Underwood Samson and the United States, deeply affecting the narrator's attitudes toward his employer and his host country.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Political context

The 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and America's ensuing 'War on Terror' have been some of the most contentious political events of the last decade. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the text you will need to know something about the contemporary political situation in the United States, as well as a wider global historical context. The novel portrays not only the contemporary situation in the United States, but also the ancient civilisation of Pakistan and its neighbouring countries.

The United States

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001

When Changez leaves Pakistan for Princeton he becomes a guest of the most economically powerful nation on the globe. However, the security of the American lifestyle is disastrously overturned by the events of September 11, 2001, in which a series of suicide attacks targeted the United States. Two hijacked aircrafts crashed into the World Trade Centre – known as the 'Twin Towers' – in New York City, causing the towers to collapse and resulting in the death of almost 3000 victims, with many more

injured. A third hijacked airliner crashed into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, while a fourth crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania. There were no survivors from any of the aircraft.

The attacks have since been attributed to Al-Qaeda, an Islamist group which is believed to have originated in Pakistan and Afghanistan in the late 1980s.

The 'War on Terror'

The September 11 attacks led to what was coined by then-US President George W Bush as the 'War on Terror'. As a part of their project to combat the threat of terrorism, the United States invaded Afghanistan in order to remove the oppressive Taliban regime, which harboured Al-Qaeda forces. In 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq followed.

America's internal responses to September 11 saw an increase of national security, a tightening of immigration laws and greater censorship. In the immediate aftermath of the events, there was an overwhelming surge of patriotism amongst the American public. The American flag was brandished defiantly, giving symbolic impetus to the notion that citizens stood 'united'.

In the novel, Changez suffers from the hostility of his workmates and fear of attack: 'Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten ... the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people's houses' (p.107). Changez's fears might have been, as he states, mere 'rumours', but indeed in America after 2001 there was an increase in suspicion, verbal abuse and attacks against people and institutions believed to be Muslim.

Pakistan

At the beginning of Chapter 3, Changez tells the American that '[f]our thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers' (p.38); and indeed, the Indus Valley Civilisation, a sophisticated and technologically advanced culture existing during the Bronze Age (approx. 2600–1900 BCE), covered the majority of what is now the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Pakistan was created as a modern state in 1947, after independence from British rule and separation from India. In 1956, it officially gained status as an Islamic Republic.

The novel also touches upon Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and India. For Changez, Afghanistan is Pakistan's 'friend', a 'neighbour', and a 'fellow Muslim nation' (p.114). India, on the other hand, represents a cause of conflict; Changez and his family experience increasing uncertainty about their larger, more powerful neighbour, fearing the possibility of 'a full-scale invasion' (pp.144–5). Indeed, during 2001 and 2002 there was a military stand-off between India and Pakistan over the disputed region of Kashmir, bringing both countries close to war.

Pakistan's economy has suffered from decades of internal conflict, the ongoing confrontation with India, a rapidly growing population and shifting foreign investment. Hamid experienced this first-hand as a teenager when he returned from the United States to Lahore in the 1980s. Pakistan had become America's ally in the war against the Soviets (Russians) in Afghanistan, for which it was rewarded with billions of dollars in economic aid and military materials. However, once the Soviets were defeated, foreign aid dwindled and American rhetoric became increasingly hostile to Pakistan. Since September 11, the United States has again given Pakistan billions of dollars in military and economic aid.

Religion

The novel is far more concerned with the cultural, social and political aspects in Changez's relationship with the United States than with religious aspects. It shows how a Muslim individual might oppose America's actions, independently of religious difference. Changez is frustrated with the misrepresentation of Muslims as religious fanatics in the American media. The novel therefore aims to challenge negative portrayals of Islam and Islamic countries by painting a personalised, insightful portrait of a 'potential' terrorist.

Culture and social class

One of the salient features of this text is the comparison between the narrator's home culture and his experience of culture and society in the United States; he is particularly observant of the wealthy and educated people with whom he studies and works, and of 'corporate America' – the