



Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

## ***The Reluctant Fundamentalist*** **by Mohsin Hamid**

**Year 10 -12**

### **Background**

Changez is a young Pakistani man who happens upon an American in Lahore, invites him to tea and recounts to him the story of his life in the months preceding and then following the September 11 attacks. The novel is a monologue, a long and detailed account of Changez's life. Fresh out of Princeton, he was living in New York City and working as a financial analyst when the terrorist attacks occurred. Whilst he has embraced the US, the attacks please him in an unsettling way. Changez also details his infatuation with the unattainable Erica, a relationship emblematic of his life in the US. Changez pours out his tale to the American at the table, bringing us slowly into his world, whilst all the time the tension surrounding the interaction between the two protagonists mounts. What are their motives? Why are they both there?

This is an extraordinary, cleverly constructed tale of infatuation and disenchantment with America, told with great skill; it reflects our own insecurities about the modern world.

Hamid describes what he was doing in the text in an interview at the time of his Booker short listing:

Q: The *Reluctant Fundamentalist* cleverly taps into the reader's own prejudices about the word 'fundamentalist'. Were you trying to demonstrate how engrained these prejudices are today?

A: The novel is just a conversation between two men, one of whom we never hear, and yet many people have said it feels like a thriller. The reason for that is we are already afraid. We have been led to believe that we live in a world where terrorism is as likely to kill us as cancer or cholesterol, where the ability to engage in dispassionate, impersonal, politically-motivated homicide is not an aberration but rather natural. We have been encouraged to lose a sense of perspective. And so the fear provoked by the novel is within us. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a dramatic monologue, in other words a half-conversation, a half-story. The reader is asked to provide the other half of the novel's meaning. And in so doing, by co-creating the novel, readers have an experience of themselves. Or at least that is my hope, to contain within the fascination and seduction of a fast-paced and emotionally powerful

story the fascination and seduction of a strange-shaped and oddly reflective mirror. (Booker Prize Foundation interview with Mohsin Hamid on tapping into the reader's imagination, September, 2007)

**Focus:** The Idea of Fundamentalism

*Literature and context: Students learn how ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters that are expressed by authors in texts are drawn from and shaped by different historical, social and cultural contexts. (ACARA, 2010, The Australian Curriculum: English)*

*'I spent that night considering what I had become. There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day Janissary, 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....I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those...whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain.'* (Hamid, page 173)

'It seems that Hamid would have us understand the novel's title ironically. We are prodded to question whether every critic of America in a Muslim country should be labelled a fundamentalist, or whether the term more accurately describes the capitalists of the American upper class. Yet these queries seem blunter and less interesting than the novel itself, in which the fundamentalist, and potential assassin, may be sitting on either side of the table.'

(From 'I Pledge Allegiance' By Karen Olsson, *The New York Times*, April 22, 2007)

**Discuss:**

Hamid poses a very complex view of fundamentalism.

- Consider how Changez responds to the attack on the Twin Towers.
- What is the significance of the change to Changez's physical appearance and the growing of a beard?
- In the last few chapters of the novel, our perceptions of who is a fundamentalist and what characterises fundamentalist behaviour is challenged. Share your interpretations of what happens after the end of the book.

- Consider the quote above (page 173) from the book. What is Hamid suggesting about the concept of Empire and the relationship between this and fundamentalism both historically and in the contemporary world?

### **Focus:** Ways of Telling

*Examining literature: Students learn how to explain and analyse the ways in which stories, characters, settings and experiences are reflected in particular literary genres, and how to discuss the appeal of these genres. They learn how to compare and appraise the ways authors use language and literary techniques and devices to influence readers. They also learn to understand, interpret, discuss and evaluate how certain stylistic choices can create multiple layers of interpretation and effect.*

*(ACARA, 2010, The Australian Curriculum: English)*

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### **Assessment**

*Creating literature: Students learn how to use personal knowledge and literary texts as starting points to create imaginative writing in different forms and genres and for particular audiences. Using print, digital and online media, students develop skills that allow them to convey meaning, address significant issues and heighten engagement and impact. (ACARA, 2010, The Australian Curriculum: English)*

Throughout the novel we only get Changez’s perspective of the views of his American guest – his motives and feelings. Is this a limitation or strength of the novel?

Using what you can discover from the text about both the American and the waiter in the story, write a profile of one of these characters. You might choose to interpret their responses, actions and motives differently to how Changez represents them in the text.

### **Related Reading**

*Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid

*Netherland* by Joseph O’Neill

*In the Name of the Father* (1993) (film)

*Brooklyn* by Colm Toibin

*The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini

*Paradise Now* (2005) (film)

*Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (graphic novel and film (2007))