

Literary Genre **The Reluctant Fundamentalist**

Special note on the narrative technique:

The novel is narrated during the course of a single evening in a café in the Old Anarkali district of Lahore. There a bearded Pakistani man called Changez, the **NARRATOR** and **PROTAGONIST**, tells a cautious American stranger the story of his enchantment and subsequent disillusionment with America. That main story, in flashback, seems to be framed within an interview, although we only hear one voice from that interview.

The narrator's account of his time in America, the Philippines, Chile and Europe constitutes an **INNER NARRATIVE**.

The outer story appears to centre on the narrator's polite encounter, to sinister undertones, with an American visitor to Pakistan, a man who appears to be on a '**mission**' to interrogate the narrator and exterminate him.

The two men become bound by a '**certain shared intimacy**' (p209) that augurs the narrator's doom after the novel ends.

Or is it the American who is about to be eliminated?

It is an ambiguous novel with the reader being cast as an eavesdropper to a conversation presented as a monologue.

The narrator is the **PROTAGONIST** and he engages an **ANTAGONIST** whose voice he hides in the monologue. This antagonist is a patient but paranoid under-cover CIA operative on a '**mission**', (P1). He is a man whose nationality is recognisable because of his sense of authority, his '**bearing**' (p2), which conveys the arrogant sense that he is by definition entitled to rule the globe.

Yet the novel abounds in hints that narrator has drawn the American to his lair to have him exterminated instead. Though the narrator is in control, and pretends to the American that in fact it is he who is in control, he cannot help but drop these knowing hints throughout.

The apparent battle of wits between the narrator and the American maintains the underlying **TENSION** in the novel.

A further remarkable feature is the mirroring of American situations in Pakistan, for instance the way Changez' widowed aunt resembles Erica in point of constant grieving.

SETTING: does it heighten atmosphere and help the narration of the story?

- The dual settings of New York and Lahore create relationships of mutual suspicion—first after 9/11 between the main character and his American hosts in New York, and then between the main character and the American whom he hosts in the Lahore restaurant.
- The main **TENSION** in the story stems from the identity of Changez as a native of Lahore who narrates his story there about his time in America to an American listener who feels alien and suspicious in his encounter with his Pakistani host: '**for you sir continue to appear ill at ease**'.
- The central character, Changez, is poised between Western and Islamic values, between America and Pakistan, between the social philosophies of Capitalism, '**hyped-up bullshit**' (p14), and what appears to be a traditional Pakistani notion of Interdependence.
- Initially enchanted by the American setting, a champion in its new religion of meritocracy, a believer in the American Dream, Changez becomes a saboteur of his own dream within that system. The atmosphere becomes tense as the narrator traces the downfall of his belief in American values.
- Changez is a heroic product of Princeton, but an increasingly self doubting exile from Lahore. Doubts are reinforced by his visits to other settings: Manila and Chile.
- He is a winner in the American rat race but as a Pakistani in that setting he turns into a renegade disillusioned by the inhumanity of the American ideal of the best rising to the top.
- At first Changez is seduced by the rewards offered to him in this setting and describes

his rise in positive terms. But the atmosphere becomes tense due to his growing awareness of America's hypocrisy as he comes to view it. He exists in a world where distrust between America and Asia undermines his commitments, his chosen life path and his existence.

- New York pre and post 9/11 impacts in an antithetical way on the narrator. Selected to join its successful elite in the confident economic era pre 9/11, he feels excluded by the way the city succumbs to nostalgia for an isolationist America post 9/11. He falls victim to the abandonment of internationalism and the advent of xenophobia there.

- **STUDENT TASK: Select one key scene of your choice to provide a developed illustration of the influence of setting on the struggle of Changez and his development, a scene that intensifies the audience's engagement with the story.**

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How do LANGUAGE, DIALOGUE AND IMAGERY help to make the story more exciting and interesting?

- Some of the most effective dialogue occurs between the narrator and his American guest. The American's parts are unvoiced, but echoed by the narrator. The reader is an eavesdropper, taking Changez' point of view too on the nervous, polite, watchful, intimidated, intimidating and ultimately menacing American. Changez' comment, '**Do not be frightened by my beard; I am a lover of America**', sets up the story in an amusing, ironical manner. It captures the naivety and prejudice of the American and shows the narrator's endearing nature.

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- Changez uses an amusing image of Princeton showing '**some skin**' to corporate recruiters p3. This implies a link between the proud university and a prostitute, an ironical comparison. Thus in a disarming manner, Changez, Urdu for Genghis, engages the reader in an assault on what America stands for.

- Because of his strong sense of etiquette which is clearly illustrated in the episode with the doorman P56, the narrator uses formal polite language, illustrated by the phrase '**gay gentleman**' p55. Changez language is colonial in nature, a formal and polite discourse which is a vestige of the old British Empire—'**tea and cucumber sandwiches**' p67. But he manages his discourse with an under-current of humour, displayed by his impudent connection of the word penthouse with both '**luxury**' and '**pornography**' p56. This duality in language awareness mirrors the duality of the overall narrative, the appearance versus reality dilemma faced by the reader. It reveals too, that for all his formal politeness and insinuation of his innocence, he has become corrupted by the vices of the West.

- The narrator reveals his insightful reading of human personality in a number of different images; a good example is the image of a cracked diamond for Erica's brokenness P59.

- The language can be pithy as in the reference to the '**lawless limbo**' to which a boy protestor was taken by American forces from Pakistan. Here the narrator shows his rage at rendition, maintaining a highly polemical attitude to America's global activities.

- The image of a courtesan immured in Old Anarkali acts as a MOTIF for Erica who is immured in a relationship with a dead boyfriend and America which retreats into isolation and global paranoia post 9/11.

- Another frequent motif is the hand in the jacket routine by the American, all the time suggestive of reaching for a gun p 69/158, but comically masked by the politeness of the narrator as if he is in denial of the threatening reality, yet in a knowing manner that suggests Changez is in control.

- The nature of the main encounter requires a delicacy of language, a lot of euphemistic speech. There are numerous illustrations of this, such as the masking of sinister motive in the following quote from p88: '**your demeanour all but precludes the possibility that you are**

a tourist wandering aimlessly through this part of the world’.

- The description of Lahore cooking on p115 is a good illustration of the ambiguous use of language, performing dual functions. While praising local cuisine with fierce pride, it also, like music in a cinema score, deepens the atmosphere of global confrontation and menace, foreshadowing the expected climax—‘**predatory delicacies**’. Of course, quite unexpectedly, the novel ends before the anticipated denouement, leaving the reader to infer the outcome from such hints as are included in the sub-text of this cuisine description and other similar descriptions with a subtext.

DRAMATIC DEVICES employed; Among the devices used are –**ALLEGORY, PUN, ANALOGY, MONOLOGUE, IRONY, REVERSAL, CLIMAX, COINCIDENCE, The letter, catalyst character.**

[Find a key moment that enables developed discussion]

- It is possible to read this novel as an ALLEGORY or parable of the Prodigal Exile, with the suggestion of a dark twist. This reading of the novel implies a set of PUNS, where the main names are SYMBOLS of identity and religion. Changez, literally changes from being pro American to a born again Pakistani, all the while pursuing a failed relationship with an inward looking Wasp princess, [AM] Erica, who cannot abandon her love for her dead fiancé, Chris [Christopher Columbus, who founded America, and Christ the sacrificed son of God, founder of a global religion opposed as the Infidel creed by Muslims]. On p 173 the narrator sees himself in ANALOGY to the Janissaries of the Ottoman Empire, captured Christians who fought the crusaders: ‘**I was a modern-day janissary,**’ he observes, ‘**a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine**’. Born in the city of Lahore Pakistan, a top graduate at Princeton and the number one new employee at a New York firm specialising in economic makeovers of ailing companies being targeted for takeover, Changez questions his role in advancing the world’s superpower while it fails to intervene in India’s military bullying of his nation.

- The title and MOTIF of ‘**fundamentalist**’ is a clever word play that creates SUSPENSE and ambiguously hovers between Islamic fundamentalism and the economic fundamentals of his American firm, Underwood and Sampson. Changez literally exchanges faith in both of these systems of belief. IRONICALLY, Changez chooses to carry his struggle by using his Princeton education rather than the normal weapon of choice favoured by such fundamentalists, becoming a human bomb. Instead he becomes a university lecturer and advocates for change in America’s global behaviour—see p 177. But the title leads the reader to believe that Changez will eventually confess to involvement in terrorism. However, in the interpretation of fundamentalism as the inhuman economic fundamentals adhered to by Changez’ firm, Underwood Samson, the plot is built on a REVERSAL. American Capitalism is the fundamentalism that the novel satirises. IRONICALLY and UNEXPECTEDLY, globalisation is the fundamentalism that in its paranoid fashion instigates the suggested demise of the central character.

How do Memorable Characters bring the story to life?

- As shown above in SETTING, the central character is transformed by dilemmas of identity, loyalty and morality from a confident, successful participant in the world’s most powerful economy to an alienated dropout and eventually becomes an academic rebel against the system that he had conquered through his studies. The main events of this transformation are intriguing for the reader and involve use of tension as well as frequent use of the unexpected. Changez found himself in the dilemma of being a focused and highly successful consultant but suddenly half glad at the destruction of the World Trade Centre.

- A Christmas visit to Lahore completed a process of restoring Changez’ original cultural identity, dormant since he accepted the accolades of success in being admitted to

Princeton. He gradually changes loyalties due to his perception of how Americans see him and react to him and to the country of his birth in its global relations. This switch of loyalties creates the AMBIGUOUS impression that he may have turned terrorist, leading to an intriguing narrative that offers deceptive suggestions as it gradually unfolds the facts. The apologetic account of the possible rope burn associated with training in a terrorist camp on page 53 evokes this ambiguity very humorously. The explanation of the scar on p54 is farfetched and leaves open the possibility that the narrator is hiding his true self.

- As there is constant evidence that he is trying to appease the American, '**I will do my utmost to avoid eavesdropping on your [phone] conversation**', the growing **TENSION**, adds to the reader's interest. This tension is given extra edge by the developing doubts as to what the reality of the meeting is. Who is the prey and who is the predator?

- The unspeaking American is an unusual character, evoked only by the conversational interventions of the narrator. He exudes unease, with a '**foreigner's sense of being watched**'. He gradually becomes a more menacing presence, hovering between '**predator or prey**' (p35), only gradually defining himself—see p175/7. He is said to be in communication by a special mobile phone, and acts very much like an undercover agent on a mission.