

Cosmopolitan No More?

By Atle Hetland

How the “war on terror” has the opposite effect of what America and the West attempt to achieve: Even moderates feel humiliated and entertain thoughts of ‘reluctant fundamentalists’, as Mohsin Hamid discusses brilliantly in his renowned novel about Changez and the post-9/11 era we live in...

“**The Reluctant Fundamentalist**” by *Mohsin Hamid*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2007, is a unique book, or, “a brilliant book”, as Kiran Desai, the author of “The Inheritance of Loss”, writes on the cover page. We read the book in translation into Norwegian, entitled “Den motvillige fundamentalist”, published by Cappelen, Oslo, 2007, after the book had been highly acclaimed at the London Book Mess in 2006. The author’s first book, “Moth Smoke”, had already been a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and it had been the *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

Mohsin Hamid’s second book is no disappointment. It is a short, condensed book, beautifully written and superbly constructed. The whole book is simply made up of the main character narrating his young life’s story to a stranger. Changez is a Pakistani immigrant, or at least he was a student at prestigious Princeton University in America until he landed a job as a management and financial consultant in New York, evaluating companies ready for bankruptcy or sale, before he finds his way back home in the wake of the 9/11 tragic events and America’s new world outlook.

At a café table in Lahore, after Changez has returned to his native land, he meets and befriends, at least for some hours, an American, who is probably a secret service agent, but the book only tells us indirectly. This American, whom Changez at the same time feels closeness with, becomes the listener to Changez’s unique story from his young, intense and reflective life.

Changez has left quite a bit of his soul and heart in America, and at the same time he found himself “remarkably pleased” when the Twin Towers collapsed (and people everywhere mourned) - a confusing feeling for Changez, who loves the American way of life and the cosmopolitan atmosphere of New York. Yet, in spite of all this – and perhaps more, his liberal, cultured, multi-cultural and tolerant upbringing in Pakistan, including his success in both worlds, in Pakistan, well, mainly as a top student, and in the new world of America, under the surface, almost in a semiconscious way – he also despises much of what is American or Western. Instead of belonging to both worlds, Changez seems to belong to neither.

Perhaps that is a main lesson the author wants to teach us. Globalization, migration, global TV stations, mobile phones, and so on lead to a form of multiculturalism and international communication, diversity and tolerance. Yet, our understanding of another culture, or several other cultures, may be very superficial, almost just at the level of a TV show. The new world, the global village, can in addition make us lose the foot grip of our home culture, with its values, ethics, morals, and all that comes with it.

We should remember that at the same time as the world is becoming more global, the world, and we with it, must at the same time become more ethnic, more local, and more rooted in own values. Otherwise we can easily become freewheeling and untrustworthy.

But perhaps Changez and other young people who are “surfing on the world’s broadways” forget that people’s foundations are in the local and ethnic values. Even when we move within a country, our childhood values are always with us, or rather, they must always be with us, otherwise we may become stunted and superficial.

Yet, new ideas do also make us more tolerant and open-minded, and they can encompass important correctional aspects, for example, as regards gender equality and human rights issues, and numerous other issues. Interestingly enough, though, we often think that the West has reached furthest in women’s emancipation and gender equality, which is also in general probably true. However, we found Mohsin Hamid to have reached greater gender equality, or sensitivity, than any other male Western writer we could think of at the moment, and very few Western men could probably have written a book of this kind.

Before and after 9/11

The whole book’s story is told during a few hours at dusk, into the night, at a Lahore café, but the real story spans over the young Pakistani’s several happy years in America, with glimpses from his childhood, as a successful student at home and in America, and then he gets the opportunity of entering a promising career in New York, selected as one of two in his year cohort of some five hundred. His unique relationship with the young and beautiful Erica, a New Yorker who has recently lost her fiancé and cannot get over it, is tenderly told. Changez, the kind and understanding Easterner, falls in love with the equally kind Erica, but she is sick, it shall become evident later. Changez is much appreciated by Erica and her mother. They, too, belong to a liberal and open-minded family, like the Changezes in Lahore.

Unlike many others who find Changez’s appearance with a full beard ‘suspicious’ in the months after 9/11, Erica and her mother find that the beard suits Changez, making him become even better looking. On the other hand, why had he decided to grow beard at that particular time, which is not smart for someone at the threshold of climbing the ladder in the world of the successful and powerful in the “wounded superpower”? It is a reluctant demonstration, subconscious but also deliberate. It was not only America that was wounded, it was also “the others”, all those who were told by the American President, in his unfortunate formulation, that “if you are not with us you are against us”.

Pleasant youthful and modern life

“The Reluctant Fundamentalist” is a pleasant book to read, at least to the extent that you don’t quite notice the serious and intriguing topic below the top layer. You could almost read the book simply as a story about a young Pakistani, a liberal, modern and cultured Lahorean man, studying at a top East-Coast University in America, being recruited into a promising job, meeting his special girlfriend, and so on.

There seems to be no cultural barriers or human differences between Changez, or rather, Mohsin Hamid does not describe any such differences, and anybody else – at least not for a long time, and until then, the book could simply be read as any other novel about a young foreigner living the American dream. Well, with some sad aspects, too, on the human level, but the reader will have to find out those from the book itself, since we should not tell it all in this article.

Autobiographical elements?

The intensity and measured shortness in the story probably comes from many aspects of the story being autobiographical. Or if they aren’t, they could have been! The author, too, like his main character, Changez, studied and worked on America’s East Coast and in New York City. Perhaps that is why the story becomes so real, and also why it often is measured, as if the author holds back details and nuances, not wishing to tell everything about himself – as he also does not want to tell everything about Changez, his character, leaving openings for the reader “to complete aspects of the story”.

Mohsin Hamid knows that these are key aspects in writing great literature: building on real life stories, making them into fiction, which then becomes more real than life itself. Yet, with aspects and

issues left untold, giving the readers the opportunity to continue the book and speculate about how it will all end.

The technical construction of the novel, the restraint and the measured use of words, the softness in tone, the sympathetic understanding the storyteller, Changez, has for everyone around him, make the book not only personal and yet also general, but it makes it “a brilliant book”. Kiran Desai, writing on the cover page, states that, and he also underlines not only the social and human aspects of the book, but also its political aspects, as he sees it as “...the most recent episode of distrust between East and West ...”.

The story behind the story

The book is a beautiful story about some young people, coming from worlds apart. Yet they could have grown up in the same neighborhood, considering their likeness in so many ways. The book is readable at that level, as we already pointed out. However, what makes the book great literature is “the other story”, “the story behind the story”, intertwined in the everyday story about some young people, on top of the world.

However, these young people live in a surreal and dishonest world, a heavy-handed world, where people make a living out of “valuation” of companies ripe for acquisition. Read: companies ripe for bankruptcy, or forced sale at a low price, and the major profits land in the pockets of the consultants and lawyers. This could furthermore be taken as symbolic for how the whole world is run by a powerful elite, and the rest is not given a fair share, or is outright exploited.

Looking behind the veil

When Changez is sent to South America on a trusted “valuation mission”, a while after 9/11, he has recently come back from a visit home to Pakistan. He has begun, initially subconsciously, to realize that he is actually “a puppet on the string”. He too is dishonest. He too plays the role of the powerful against the defenseless and powerless. He too, possibly even like his boss in the company he works for, is trapped in a web of dishonesty, often not deliberately or out of bad will, but because that is how the world is, how the powerful have made it to be, so that it all can benefit their own interests.

Changez, who has idealism and fairness in his inbuilt value system, goes through a crisis during his mission to South America. Instead of contributing to changing the world for the better, albeit in a small way through his work, Changez discovers that he simply supports *status quo*, or even perpetuates the unjust structures in an unjust world.

He discovers this reluctantly as he tries to do his job as a consultant in accordance with the contract his company has with its client. He realizes that the conclusion has already been drawn: the consultants shall recommend that the old, prestigious literary branch of the publishing house in Latin America be closed down, because it does not make a profit any longer, and the company is to be sold only with its lucrative educational and professional books departments, because then it will fetch a much better price, and the consultancy firm will get a much better cut. Shrewd and clear-cut capitalism! However, the soul of the company, and the interest of the man who has managed it for decades, but who is not the owner, lies in the unprofitable literary publishing, which in its time probably also gave the company credibility and success. Now, the literary branch and the soul of the publishing house can be closed down by a few sentences by a couple of foreign consultants, who just touch a few keys on their laptops and the fate is sealed.

Changez, whose grandfather had been a quite famous poet in Punjab, finds himself in an impossible dilemma, and he notices that he has sympathy for more than the financial side of the company. He discovers that he probably has more sympathy for the literary side, for the substantive side of the business, notably publishing, than his senior colleague, who considers the job as a matter of profit and loss, simple and easy. But he has not understood that publishing is that kind of business, which can be described as a combination of *stock exchange and cathedral*.

How come, he asks himself, do I have to make a living out of “disturbing other people’s lives”? We leave our principles behind simply because we as consultants, as business consultants, suck up to

our clients, who want to make money quite irrespective of any principles. It is not because we base our “valuation” on ethical principles of high standard taught at Princeton University or other hailed schools.

On the other hand, as seen from a financial point of view, expansion of the moneymaking sections of the publishing house, those sections making professional books, would increase the profit, but it would at the same time kill a lifetime’s work and commitment of the manager, an elderly gentleman by the name of Juan-Bautista. It would berry the corner stone of what had made the publishing house great and what Juan-Bautista had given his life and many, many working hours to. The consultants, who only read “bottom lines” of accounts reports, are not expected to see such “details”. Besides, the conclusion had been given in their mandate: pack the company in such a way that it can be offered for sale and gain the highest possible profits to the client and the consultants.

Changez is confused and he hesitates to do the job he is supposed to do as per his employer’s expectations, who has been kind enough to show him special trust in sending him on this particular mission at such a young age. He also knows that he has not been of much help to his senior colleague, who relies on Changez’s work input to complete the consultancy report on time, with all modern data analyses and annexes, legitimizing the report’s conclusions, deceiving and outsmarting Juan-Bautista and other professionals who would agree with him.

Changez has made his discoveries, he has pulled back some of the veil, and he can only draw one conclusion if he wants to maintain his self-respect. He must return to New York without having done the job. This happens almost without Changez wanting to know what he sees, or do what he does. He is *no longer at ease*, to borrow a phrase, or rather a book title from another great writer, a couple of generations ago on another continent, Chinua Achebe in West Africa. That time it was bribery and corruption with scholarship money just after Independence. That time, the main character could not withstand the temptation: he became corrupt. Yet, the price was loss of his self-respect because he threw overboard the ethical standards that he had been taught at home and at school, and which he still believed in.

Changez, the easy going, young, liberal, multicultural, successful, etc., reluctantly discovers that he must go back to the principles and foundations he was taught in his home environment in Lahore. He knows he will lose his job in New York. He knows it will probably also mean the end of his relationship with Erica, because he will be without a job and income, and his visa will soon expire and he will have to leave America.

He also reminds himself of Erica’s and her mother’s decent principles, and concludes that decency has no borders, as indecency, too, can be found everywhere. Things like heavy-handedness, selfishness, and economic, cultural and religious ethnocentrism, can be found anywhere, although it is probably more “scrupulously refined” in America and many other countries, which see themselves as the world’s leading powers. They don’t feel any need for justifying actions. They feel they are right at the outset, and they think they have all the right answers. In addition, the economic and political elites in the South often side with the elites in the North, and the corrupt or naïve intellectual elite, too, who defines and legitimizes the superstructure.

The American President’s unlucky phrase, “if you are not with us you are against us”, has come to have the opposite meaning and effect of what it was intended to have. The phrase has come to insult and humiliate, often unnoticeably and unwittingly, and at other times very directly and brutally. Changez has come to realize the insult, and he thanks Juan-Bautista, the South American publisher of literature for having helped him to open his eyes, or as Changez formulates it himself, “for helping me to push back the veil behind which this had been concealed”.

Changez feels that “even if I am with you, you still have a suspicion that I might be against you”. It is like a creeping feeling of totalitarianism, not universalism, and certainly not diversity, liberalism and multiculturalism. Not even decency in business practice. There seems to be no clear ethics at the foundation of such an economic system, wherever it is practiced, which also means that the foundation of the society is unstable.

Reluctant separation from America

In other words, in the wake of 9/11, people from outside the powerful American rulers, and sections of the rest of the Western rulers forced a change upon everyone else, living anywhere, not least people from and in the Muslim world. Ironically, most Muslims, as well as non-Muslims, love (or loved) America, the American way of life, and the Western liberalism. Yet, at the same time, Muslims, as other people, also love their home countries, with centuries and millenniums of unique cultures, which belong to them. Muslims, like all of us love both cultures, or rather many cultures, in a multicultural world, in the global village. But all of a sudden, after 9/11, and the way that the tragedy was handled, new differences have come to develop between people and cultures.

Before, many people never really thought too seriously about East or West, or about what religions friends or foes, lovers or colleagues, belonged to, or what opinions we might have about everyday or philosophical issues. But then, all of sudden these things changed. Not because of something tangible, except for the Twin Tower and Pentagon tragedies, but because of something indescribable, mostly below the surface, and the way the superpower and other powerful countries handled the tragedy. There was much lesser reaction after the American Embassy bomb blasts in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. True, they were not as damaging and the tragedies were abroad. Legally, though, they were also on American soil since embassies are considered being on land belonging to the home country. The number of affected people was about 5,000 in Kenya, of whom over 250 died. You can only imagine how difficult lives the injured Africans have had to live, with limited compensation given and hardly any medical insurance or social insurance for families. Those people are as important as people affected by tragedy anywhere. Let it be underscored, we are advocating help to people affected, not revenge. Even those who commit, or think of committing such horrendous crimes should be given help and advice. That is the approach that is worthy of civilized nations in our time.

A creeping feeling has developed among many people in the world: we are not good enough, we will always be outsiders, we may have had something to do with 9/11, not directly, of course, not even indirectly, but still, we might have wished we had something to do with it, and we might assist or be part of future incidents and even attacks.

This was the way that the Jews, or was it the early-Christians, used to describe those who lived on the hills and in the valleys outside their cities, outside the territories of the rulers: they were called "Heathens or "Pagans". They should not be counted as members of the good and cultured society. They might be security risks, they might have different interpretations of political, economic or religious issues, or have different religions all together.

"The Reluctant Fundamentalist" is a sad book in the sense that it is about "the loss of innocence". It is the end of that youthful and optimistic life of happiness and care-freeness. We are, or we try to become equal, we look more or less for the same things in life, having the same, or similar thoughts, dreams, and wishes, for a better tomorrow\w for ourselves and humankind.

Much of this is gone now after 9/11, with terrible military actions in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Middle-East, and other actions under the label of "war on terror", a term which the new British Prime Minister Gordon Brown does not want to use. Maybe there is hope after all? Let us hope that we come to our senses soon, that we will come out of this crisis before it is too late to mend the damages.

Uncertainty - yet also certainty

Mohsin Hamid's main character, Changez, is not certain of many things any more. What he has become more certain of is the importance of his own culture, although he doesn't yet define it in any great detail. He seems to have more questions, and also a hidden anger, a feeling of betrayal by America, by the West, by the people and countries, whose values, liberalism and multiculturalism, he used to look up to. Now he also feels *humiliation*. He feels that they say that he can somehow not to be trusted.

Humiliation is perhaps the most dangerous of all feelings between individuals, groups, peoples, countries and civilizations. The unresolved feeling of having been belittled and humiliated will stay in

the minds of the humiliated and their descendents, sometimes for so long that nobody quite remembers the reasons for the conflict, despise, lack of respect and lack of cooperation. The oppressors, the humiliators, will also become victims. The German-Norwegian Professor *Evelin Lindner* is a specialist on “humiliation studies”, and she has with other experts established a small center working on such issues, related to the current world problems, and also related to the tragedies in Rwanda, Somalia, and elsewhere. It is her opinion that the humiliation concept should be key in all international relations, in diplomatic, military and peace studies. She also underscores that we should refrain from using words like “war on terror”; we should use positive language and concepts instead, which might actually be more correct.

As Changez hopes, we too hope that the outcome of the current humiliation will end soon, and dialogue and cooperation take deeper root. But still, the West, led by the world’s only superpower, although on decline, continues to humiliate those who are not with them, or who may not be entirely with them. We have to begin mending this divide sooner rather than later if we don’t want it to cause further and deeper damage and new conflicts.

Changez is no fundamentalist

Changez is certainly not a “fundamentalist”. He is not even “a reluctant fundamentalist”. He is only disillusioned, disappointed, yes, humiliated. He was probably even humiliated before 9/11, without quite knowing it, because why would he otherwise find himself smiling at the Twin Tower tragedy when almost everyone in the whole world was saddened and in mourning.

Changez is a kind man, and he has a solid, cultured upbringing with ethical and moral principles and structures. He is not that sort of person who wishes anything bad to happen to others, neither in the form of direct, indirect or structural violence. He is simply an “average human being”. How come then that he also has shocking feelings – shocking to himself as well as others, if they know?

The only explanation we can logically find is the heavy-handedness with which the West has ruled the world for centuries, always setting the rules and standards and evaluating everyone else. America has in the major part of last century and now in the new millennium come to be seen as the leader of the West, of the world – which was purposefully also stated at the end of the Second World War, when, for example, the role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazism was deliberately diminished. America also won the Cold War, we are told.

But there are many other wars, which America and the West have lost, and there are many conflicts, which have ended in divided countries and peoples, in unresolved situations with limited long-term prospects for prosperity and peace in those countries and regions. Are Afghanistan, Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, Israel and Palestine examples of such countries and areas, which suffer unduly? If they are, then America and the rich Western military and economic alliances, and the former colonial powers, have a heavy burden to carry. How come that the concept “structural violence” is hardly used in our language today? And we still talk about “just wars”; are wars ever just? How often can peace really be reached through war?

How come that we could not design development aid programmes and projects so that they could work better for the world’s poor people? How come development aid is still so miniscule relative to the needs and the wealth of the rich countries, remembering too that much of the wealth of the North was reached by it being carried on the shoulders of the South?

The German-American moral philosopher Professor *Thomas Pogge* has compared the lack of action to reduce, or rid the world of abject poverty with the crimes that were committed against humanity by the Nazis during the Second World War. The shadows from the rich world are long...

Time for fair play, peace and development

In this article, thanks to Mohsin Hamid, we have been able to touch upon some of the most serious questions in our time. Mohsin Hamid has presented the issues brilliantly in his novel, “The Reluctant Fundamentalist”, and we have humbly tried to pull out some of the key issues.

We would like to underline that peaceful coexistence comes through mutual respect and equality, not inequality, dominance, humiliation, control, etc. As little as it gives the intended result to beat a naughty child in order to make him or her to be kind, as contradictory is it to use power and wars to make others “toe the line” – a line which may not even be right for everyone.

The only way forward for all of us, since we assume we want everyone to live a life in peace and prosperity, is to work tirelessly for greater equality within and between nations, continents and groups. If we do that, which is what Mohsin Hamid and his main character Changez want, then *there will not be any terrorists any more*.

If we all live and let live, share and play faire, pray and let pray, etc., then our only globe can finally move some inches closer to paradise. We have a good distance to go, so let us get on with it!

Important is that contributions must be honest and without hidden agendas. Tangible results must be achieved in fair trade worldwide, more and better development aid to poorer countries, reduced differences within and between countries, better management of the environment and natural resources, and greater respect for other cultures, religions, and ways of organizing daily lives.

Mohsin Hamid has found his niche, notably writing brilliant and thoughtful novels. Let us hope for another novel, or perhaps a collection of short stories from his pen (read: laptop) soon. And in modesty, and sometimes in boldness, let each of us do what we can, because it will make a difference to our generation and tomorrow’s generation. Our children will become part of a better world, a world where the shadows from the past have had to give way for some more sunshine for everyone. If we fail, and the shadows become longer, it is not only the fault of the superpower, the world’s major powers, and other countries, it is also the fault of the people in all countries. The responsibility rests with all of us.

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This article has been posted on the Website of *Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (Human DHS)*, anchored at Columbia University Conflict Resolution Network, New York, U.S.A., by its founder and manager, *Prof. Evelin Lindner*, M.D., PhD (Dr.Med. & Dr .Psychol.), affiliated to University of Oslo and University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway, and Maison de l’Homme, Paris, France. e.g.lindner@psykologi.uio.no
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