

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
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Lecture - 40
The Reluctant Fundamentalist: Textual Analysis

Hello learners and welcome to the last lecture in this NPTEL course titled The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches. In this lecture, we will conclude our discussion of the novel titled *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid.

In the previous lecture, I had begun talking about the novel and I had focused on the opening pages of this novel in which it becomes clear that there are two people in a sort of meeting or an encounter between whom there is a conversation and through this conversation, the novel takes shape. I focused a little bit on how the narrator introduces his interlocutor and it is through the dynamic, the difference between these two individuals that the novel generates its emotional and social energy. Let's try and understand a little bit more about how the novel functions through the tension between these two people.

The novel is essentially a combination of two narratives. That is to say, the stories that make up this novel occur on two levels. The first level, which I'm going to call narrative one, is the story of the experiences that Changez has in the USA, that is the education he acquires at Princeton University, the job that he does in New York City, and finally, the experiences that he has in America. This is inaugurated by the opening sentence of the novel, which is, "May I be of assistance, sir?" The speaker of the sentence is Changez, and the first narrative that the novel provides us with is the narrative of what happens to this person "I".

Now, the second narrative that the novel provides us with is the experience that unfolds between the speaker of the sentence, "I", and the person who is referred to with the word, "sir", right? That is to say, the second narrative describes the encounter between Changez and this person that Changez meets at a market. The location of the second narrative is radically different from that of the first. As I mentioned a little bit earlier, the first narrative takes place in almost primarily in the USA. That is, Changez's education at Princeton University and his professional experience in New York City, and a brief but crucial episode in the city of Valparaiso in Chile. These are the locations where narrative one unfolds. Narrative two, by contrast, unfolds entirely in the city of Lahore in Pakistan. Even more specifically, this narrative unfolds in a historic district, a market named Anarkali

Bazaar, And even more specifically at a restaurant in this market, Changez meets an American man and they have dinner, they have a conversation and then Changez insists on walking his new friend, this friend or guest or acquaintance, this American man to his hotel, which is the Pearl Continental Hotel in Lahore. So this is the location of narrative two.

Both these narratives involve Changez. In narrative one, Changez is remembering what he did while he was in USA. In narrative two, Changez engages this man in conversation. These are the two, these are the material differences between these two narratives. Emotionally as well, these narratives are different. Narrative one has an emotional arc which describes Changez's disillusionment. It describes Changez's passage from innocence to experience. It describes the origin and the hardening of Changez's suspicion. What kind of suspicion? What kind of disillusionment? I will describe it in greater detail shortly, but essentially it regards Changez's disillusionment about the desirability and the sustainability of the American dream of comfort, well-being and a generally idyllic state of being. The second narrative, which unfolds in Lahore, specifically in the Anarkali Bazaar, also has an emotional arc. In this emotional arc, we see suspicion giving way to anger, anger giving way to action, and finally the deployment of anger in an act of violence. Another difference between the emotional arcs of these two narratives is that in the second narrative, Changez's interlocutor is a silent but active presence. We do not hear this American friend or guest speak, but we register the changes in this American friend's opinion, voice, ideas, thinking and mood through the changes in the way Changez speaks. So, Changez will very frequently respond to things that this American friend is supposedly saying, even though we may not hear these words reported quite directly.

What happens in these two narratives justifies the title of this novel, which is *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. And the beginning and the ending of the novel represent an attempt to reconcile the differences between the historical processes which have created two different kinds of human being from the same person. It is the same person; both these narratives involve Changez. But we see Changez doing very different things. Changez is playing a very different kind of role in these two narratives. And the emotional power as well as the intellectual labor that the novel imparts to us is the attempt to reconcile how the same person can act in these very different ways.

Let's try and take a very systematic approach to these two narratives and we will use the age-old distinction between Fabula and Syuzhet, which was provided by the Russian Formalists. Fabula refers to the events that are described in a story. Syuzhet refers to the order in which they are described in a particular expression of a story. Let's try and work

out first what happens and then we'll understand exactly what are the implications of those events and why they become relevant or worth our attention, worth caring for because of the particular way in which they are narrated in this novel.

So, what happens in narrative one? Narrative one describes the experiences of Changez, who is a young man from Lahore, Pakistan, who arrives to study at Princeton University in the early years of the 21st century. Changez does not come from money. That is, his family can afford to let him go and study in the USA, but they cannot afford the tuition fees that Princeton University requires. Changez needs a scholarship because of the need to to struggle and compete and secure these kinds of financial aid. Changez naturally becomes a very, very exceptional student. Changez succeeds in his American life at Princeton. He achieved the American dream or to the extent that such a thing is possible for an immigrant from a poor South Asian nation. How does he do that? He graduates with top grades and he gets a job at a very elite, very exclusive, financially very robust and very high paying consulting firm named Underwood Samson. Now, while all these things seem to present that Changez seems to have made it. He has achieved everything or the best that America can offer. The best possible life that it's possible to lead. A very high paying job in the financial capital of the world, New York City. But something goes wrong. We don't know exactly what that is, but we do get an idea of what might have triggered this tragedy. We hear of certain events. The biggest event that unfolds immediately after or a few years after Changez begins his successful professional life as a consultant in New York City is that the 9/11 attacks take place. Following this, the U.S. military invades Afghanistan, and this also leads to a change in the way Genghis is perceived in New York City. He begins to perceive a lot of controlled, but sometimes not so controlled, Islamophobic aggression in his everyday life in New York City. There's a sense in which the war becomes personal and Changez begins to feel increasingly less at home and less welcome in this on paper very comfortable life and job.

In order to understand exactly how Changez's disillusionment proceeds, we will focus on two things, both of which have the root word fundamental. Changez refers to two words. One is the fundamentals. And the second is fundamentalism. Let's read two passages which will help us understand the differences between these two words, the similarity between these two words, and how these two words come together to exert a profound pressure on Changez. The first of these words that we encounter is fundamentalism. This is a word that Changez hears when he goes for a dinner meeting at the house of his American girlfriend, that is Erica. At Erica's house, he meets Erica's parents, and they all have a very good time,

good food, good company, warm reception, etc., But then there's something in that meeting, there's one conversation that rankles Changez very deeply. And this is how Changez describes that moment.

I do, however, remember becoming annoyed at one point in the discussion. Erica's father had asked me how things were back home [that is to say in Pakistan], and I had replied that they were quite good, thank you, when he said, 'Economies falling apart though, no? Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers. Solid people, don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But the elite has raped that place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism.'

Now, in this passage, the word fundamentalism refers to a sort of religious and cultural phenomenon. It refers to a belief taken too far. It refers to a certain way of organizing one's life both personally as well as publicly and politically based on the precepts or the ideas prescribed in certain religious texts. In the context of modern or 21st century contemporary Pakistan, the word fundamentalism refers to the government as well as the cultural developments in which certain groups have taken it upon themselves to organize the public and private life of the country around the edicts or beliefs laid down in the religious texts of Islam. That is the outsider's view. That is the English-speaking, liberal, American view, which has probably been gleaned from the international media and many other intellectually sound sources. However, this very objective and not very harsh on the surface assessment of Pakistan seems to trigger something very unpleasant in Changez. And what exactly is the source or the meaning of that unpleasantness? The unpleasantness that this word triggers comes from the fact that here is an outsider who has no experience of living and understanding in Pakistan, and yet he has this very strong opinion about what is wrong with Pakistan. Not only does he have an opinion about what is wrong, but he also has a category, a name for that problem, and he calls it fundamentalism.

This for Changez signifies a well-meaning but essentially an imperialist attitude. This is an attitude that signifies the supremacy of an American ideology. A lot of Americans, without meaning personal harm or ill-will, practice this kind of benevolent imperialism in which they presume to understand and know everything about the world, even though their own experiences are very limited to a small corner of very privileged, very developed, first-world American city. Now, the second word is a little bit different from fundamentalism, but it shares the same root. And this word is fundamental. Changez uses the word fundamental several times and in a very different emotional context. The word

fundamentalism was very unpleasant. It triggered a lot of feelings of anger and annoyance when an American used this word. However, the word fundament is the very opposite. It does not trigger annoyance or irritation in Changez. Let's try and understand how this word works.

Focus on the fundamentals. This was Underwood Samson's guiding principle, drilled into us since our first day at work. It mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value. And that was precisely what I continued to do, more often than not, with both skill and enthusiasm. Because, to be perfectly honest, sir, the compassionate pangs I felt for soon-to-be redundant workers were not overwhelming in their frequency; our job required a degree of commitment that left one with rather limited time for such distractions.

The word fundamentals here refers to a sense that the world or most things about the world that matter are organized around economics, finance and numbers. This is a sort of fundamental truth or a fundamental reality about the world. This is a worldview that comes from an intellectual training in the discipline of economics, more precisely in the discipline of business, finance and accounting. The job that Changez has, it reinforces this objective view of the world. Changez gets a lot of comfort from focusing only on the numbers and not focusing on any emotional considerations. For instance, in this example, Changez goes and values a firm and tells the capitalist who owns the firm how they can increase their profits. And usually this way of increasing profits comes by way of removing or firing certain employees. Now, the emotional consideration or sympathy for workers who might lose their jobs or redundant workers. This is a consideration for which Changez doesn't have time. And Changez is grateful for the nature of the job which doesn't leave him with enough time to engage these distractions or these emotional considerations. So this is a coping mechanism that helps Changez because Changez doesn't have time to factor in or consider his own emotional considerations. Therefore, he focuses on the fundamentals. This is a sort of brutal professional ethic that the company would like its workers to follow. And in a way, this is very impersonal and designed to reduce the workers to simply profit making cogs for the company.

But despite all its problems, Changez finds a lot of value in this idea that he should focus on the fundamentals and not worry about the emotional distractions. Now it is in this way of, it is in this spirit of focusing on the fundamentals and not being distracted by emotional concerns that Changez keeps doing his job, even though after 9/11 and the attack and the

US invasion of Afghanistan and the increasing Islamophobia in America. He starts to feel the pressure. He starts to feel a lot of unpleasantness and everyday life begins to take a toll emotionally on Changez. Changez keeps suppressing these emotional problems and keeps trying to focus on the fundamentals. At this point, something happens which challenges Changez and breaks his will and leads to a transformation in which Changez finds that he cannot continue to focus on the fundamentals. What is this event? Underwood Samson, the company, gets an assignment in Chile, in the South American country, Chile. There is a small independent publisher which is being purchased or taken over by a large conglomerate publisher. The publisher who is investing a great deal of money in purchasing the small publisher wants Changez's firm to go and value this small publisher. The point of this exercise is to decide exactly how much of a liability literary fiction or publishing literary fiction is and how much of an asset literary fiction can be with regard to other branches of the publishing industry such as textbook publishing. Changez is a very valued employee of this firm and therefore is given this very important assignment. Changez goes to Chile and begins working there. However, he finds himself increasingly unable to focus on the job at hand. At one point, the editor of this small independent publisher, an aging man named Juan Bautista, takes Changez out for lunch and tells him a story. The publisher asks Changez, I have been observing you and I think it is no exaggeration to say, young man, that you seem upset.

'May I ask you a rather personal question?' 'Certainly', I said, [that is, Changez says]. 'Does it trouble you to make your living by disrupting the lives of others?' 'We just value', I replied. 'We do not decide whether to buy or to sell, or indeed what happens to a company after we have valued it.'

So, in this response, in this sentence, we just value, we see decidedly apolitical understanding of the nature of Changez's role and understanding of how his actions have consequences in the world. You see, in the statement, "we just value, we do not decide whether to buy or to sell." Indeed, what happens to a company after we have valued it? There is a desire in the speaker of the sentence to feel that their actions are disconnected from events in the real world. It is not the case, in fact, that it is true. In fact, Changez knows very well that he does not simply value. As much as he wants, he cannot remove himself from the ethical, moral and emotional implications of his act of valuation. He cannot remove himself from the consequences that some people may lose their livelihoods based on the kind of valuation that he provides of that company. And yet he wants to detach himself. So the sentence is not so much a statement of fact, but rather an expression of his

desire to be detached from the emotional and ethical consequences. Now, what Juan-Bautista will say in response to this, we just value comment, will challenge Changez to think more honestly and more openly about his profession. He asks,

'Have you heard of the Janissaries?' 'No', I said. 'They were Christian boys', he explained, 'captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at the time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to.'

Now, Changez begins to see himself as a 21st century counterpart, 21st century avatar of this kind of Janissary. And here is how Changez puts it a little bit later.

There could really 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." That is to say, he is referring to Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Of course, I was struggling! Of course, I felt 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, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain.

So you see, Changez has undergone a massive change. He has been slowly undergoing a disillusionment. And this conversation, this story about the Janissaries cements or really completes that process of disillusionment. Following this, he also has a political awakening. He is filled with guilt and he realizes that the American dream which he has been chasing and has attained in a great part is actually not sustainable. His political awakening consists of his realizing that he was complicit in the perpetration of an American ideology all over the world, but especially over the Global South. At that moment, he is in Chile, but he is also remembering and is aware of the news from South Asia, where the US has invaded Afghanistan and his own country is in greater danger of economic as well as military precarity.

As a result of this disillusionment and political awakening, Changez is filled with an urgency. He senses that he would like to do something to resist this American ideology. What does he do? This is a key question. It's fine to realize one's complicity. It's fine to be filled with anger and opinions, strong opinions. But what does one do with that opinion? In narrative one, we see Changez reacts, does things in response to and with this new knowledge. He resigns from Underwood Samson, leaves New York City, gives up his

American job and life and returns to Lahore. In the second narrative, that is to say, the narrative in which he is sitting in a restaurant in Anarkali Bazaar with an American friend, he is coming increasingly closer to his own present. The link between these two narratives is the question, what does Changez do after he realizes that he has been a servant of this American ideology? And he needs to use his intellectual and physical resources to instead resist this American ideology. If, as he has been stating repeatedly, he was so disgusted by America, how has he turned that theoretical disgust into actions that may have material consequences?

Here is what Changez does. And this is what we learn in narrative one. He tells his American friend that after he returned to Lahore, he became a university lecturer. He began teaching subjects of economics, business and finance. More importantly, or more crucially, in addition to his teaching responsibilities, he was also a counsel and mentor to many local youth students at the university in the critical ways of thinking. What were these critical ways of thinking? He taught many youth to resist the American ideology. In addition to such mentoring, he was also a public intellectual. He had recently given a TV interview to an American news channel in which he had said something quite publicly. He had said that "no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away as America." And in response to this interview, he was warned by many colleagues that there might be repercussions. And in Changez's words, "I was warned by my colleagues that America might react to my admittedly intemperate remarks by sending an emissary to intimidate me or worse. Since then, I have felt rather like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlow." So, Kurtz and Marlow, of course, connects to the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. In this novel, Kurtz was an agent of a Belgian mining company who had been sent to the Congo to extract resources, to neutralize the natives and to perform the work of imperial extraction. But instead something else had happened. He had given up the ideology and the mechanisms and the logics of profit and extraction that his European imperialist employers believed in and had actually sent him to enforce. He had given up these ideologies and he had fallen in with the locals, with the natives. He had become, he had gone rogue. Kurtz had gone rogue and Marlow was sent to convert, to neutralize, to counsel and to bring Kurtz back on track. To ensure that Kurtz came back to the imperial ways of thinking and operating. So when Changez says that he felt like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlow, he is being ironic. He's being ironic because he is not like Kurtz, because he has not gone rogue in quite the same way, but he does manage to make an ironic reference to this very classic work of English literature and also connects the politics that

one sees in the 21st century South Asia to the imperial politics of extraction that were quite rampant in the early 20th century.

Essentially, the point that Changez is making here is that he is giving his interlocutor, his narratee, an indication that he suspects what this American friend might be doing. Changez tells us a little bit about the kind of work that his students had done. One of his students had engaged in an act of violence, and we get some background about this. Changez says,

It was with immense consternation that I learned recently that one of them [that is one of his students] had been arrested for planning to assassinate a coordinator of your country's effort to deliver development assistance to our rural poor.

There is an American aid agency which was planning to provide financial support to poor people in Pakistan and Changez's students or a local youth mentored and counselled by Changez had planned to assassinate this seemingly benevolent person. What's going on here? You can see that Changez has counselled students in the American ideology. This ideology consists in providing financial aid and trapping poor developing South Asian nations by robbing them of political and ideological autonomy. If a country is in debt to a rich country like the US, they will have little freedom to take an independent ideological stand. And in fact, this is also a critique of modern Pakistan. Because that is essentially what the U.S. has done. Through its petrodollars or through millions of dollars of aid, the U.S. has made Pakistan into a neo-colonial outpost. This is also what explains the reference to Kurtz waiting for his Marlow. And this also explains the ironic difference between the reference to *Heart of Darkness* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Changez goes on,

How could I be certain, you ask, if I had no inside knowledge? I must say, sir, you have adopted a decidedly unfriendly accusatory tone. What precisely is it that you are trying to imply? I can assure you that I am a believer in nonviolence; the spilling of blood is abhorrent to me, save in self-defense. And how broadly do I define self-defense, you ask? Not broadly at all!! I am no ally of killers; I am simply a university lecturer, nothing more nor less.

We can see from the tone of the last sentence that Changez is being more than a little ironic. And we are also not sure how reliable Changez is as a purveyor and a conveyor of truth. There is not a whole lot of truth in the sentence. There is some truth for sure, but it is not the complete truth and it is not presented in the most direct manner possible. Changez's confession of innocence is a bit too insistent and a bit too straightforward to be taken seriously. So what in fact is going on here? Or what can we intelligently and logically and

factually presume and interpret to be the truth? The likely assumption we can make is that Changez had some idea of the violence that would be planned and Changez decided to very covertly not discourage that act of violence. Further, and these are the last words of the novel, this is the moment when the two narratives intertwine, come together and reach a moment of culmination as it were. In these two narratives, we have seen how Changez has described the story of his disillusionment in America. And in the second narrative, we have seen how Changez has befriended an American tourist and has coaxed and insisted and talked this person into having dinner with him at a restaurant in the Anarkali Bazaar of Lahore.

Now that the dinner is done and Changez has finished telling a story of his experiences while they ate their dinner, Changez insists on walking this friend to the gates of his hotel. And just as they are about to arrive, here is what happens.

We are about to arrive at the gates of your hotel. It is here that you and I shall at last part company. Perhaps our waiter wants to say goodbye as well, for he is rapidly closing in. Yes, he is waving at me to detain you. I know you have found some of my views offensive; I hope you will not resist my attempt to shake you by the hand. But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards.

Now, the reference to the business card holder is telling. This is the third reference in the novel in which the narrator, that is, Changez, has spied or managed to catch a glimpse of something metallic glinting from the armpit of his American friend. In earlier instances, Changez has been clear and has been honest enough to admit that this glinting sight is actually the armpit holster for a gun. And the narrator has also admitted so much in earlier moments of trust. Changez has slowly built a level of confidence and trust in which he has gotten this information out from his narrative that he is a veteran. He is a military veteran who possibly works on commission as a hired killer for an American spy agency. We begin to understand that so far the narrative of hospitality, trust, etc. was a strategic ploy that Changez devised and deployed to ascertain the true identity and purpose of his American friend. More than once, Changez has referred to the true purpose of his American friend's travel or presence in that particular location in Lahore without a satisfactory answer until this point. In this moment, with the reference to the threat of the emissary being sent from America to intimidate Changez or worse, it becomes clear that Changez has confirmed his suspicion that this friend, that this American man with whom he has just had dinner and to

whom he has narrated his experiences of disillusionment is actually a man, a killer sent to Lahore to kill Changez and Changez's plan is to kill this man before he is killed.

This is one level of interpretation, one narrative that we can infer from the last words of the novel. However, the novel is open to other interpretations as well and the words leave other interpretations open. For instance, the last sentence says, "given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards." This is a highly ironic sentence, meaning that the words convey one meaning, but the spirit or the idea that the sentence itself conveys is something completely opposite to what the words signify. The intimacy that Changez is referring to is built from sharing a meal, from literally breaking bread together at a restaurant in Lahore. In addition, however, this is not simply a kind of trust, but also a suspicion. Because the views that Changez has been sharing with this American friend have increased the American's suspicion. Because Changez, while pretending to be friendly and inhospitable, is actually quite angry. He is fired by a deep distrust and anger towards American ideology. What he calls shared intimacy might as well be a shared suspicion. Further, "the holder of your business cards." Business is often conducted with the threat of veiled and sometimes not so veiled violence. Therefore, by referring to what Changez knows as the American's gun and his business cards, Changez is also referring and producing a critique of American geopolitics as well as American globalization. How what is often called as globalization and free trade is revealed as a kind of exploitative, extractive practice of forcing people to become parts of deals and contracts which only benefit one part of the world,

one kind of people, one community of people and lead to the deterioration of people, other people elsewhere.

We have reached the end of this novel and it is time to reflect on how this novel produces a powerful critique of the forces that operate in the world through telling a very engaging and personal story of the disillusionment, the joys and tribulations of one person.

Thank you.