

## THE ESSENCE OF EXISTENTIALISM IN MOHSIN HAMID NOVEL THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST

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### **Abstract**

*This research analysis explores such issues and problems people encounter in present-day lives, especially in the eyes of Changez in Mohsin Hamid's novel "The Reluctant Fundamentalist." How a whole world can go against his beliefs because of one terrorist attack on September 11, Changez simply cannot understand. Changez began to lead a good and comfortable life in America, but later he decides to leave everything and move back to Pakistan. Transformation is not only about changing location but also about the inner turmoil Changez goes through to find out who he is and where he belongs. In this story, we learn how people's identities are influenced by their cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and interactions with others. As Changez begins his journey, he gets pulled against the strong values and beliefs. He still stays caught between his new adopted western worldview and his eastern heritage and roots. This creates a tension that rings in problems many people of today's globalized world face as a result of conflicts of various cultures and ideologies. Changez's experiences indicate how difficult it is to maintain one's own identity and sense of belonging against such challenges. This research will help understand what lies beneath the reasons for Changez's change. It will critically examine how far his personal struggles reflect broader social issues, such as pursuing authenticity, globalization, and the complexity of human existence in general. This makes it easy to deeply understand the human condition of the 21st century through the exploration of Changez's journey. This novel is different because the storytelling is told from a first-person narrative through the direct voice of Changez, sharing his thoughts as we get to experience him introspectively. Thus, his existential thought becomes very contemplative in urging the reader to reflect upon his existence in the world.*

### **Introduction**

Mohsin Hamid's much-acclaimed novel, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," from 2007, revolves around the issues of identity, alienation, and disconnection in a world changed forever because of the 9/11 attacks. This thought-provoking book qualifies for the story of Changez, a young Pakistani man chasing his American dreams. Changez's journey is an effective example of the difficulties many immigrants face in another country. British-Pakistani author and journalist Mohsin Hamid masterfully weaves together a plethora of issues to create a rich and overwhelming story. He explains deeply about politics, economics, social dynamics, religious tensions, and cultural differences to relate life after as well as before 9/11 in which was the attack on the World Trade Center in New York. Though there are many aspects of the concern incident we are supposed to be limited to this novel and most importantly to our topic which is, The essence of existentialism in

Mohsin Hamid's novel *Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Through Changez's story, Hamid brings into focus the sense of disillusion and disorientation felt by many immigrants in the wake of the attacks. Increasing hate and hostility toward Muslims smash and agitate Changez's feeling of belonging in America. Erica, an American woman whom he falls in love with, makes his complex relationship tough since she is grieving her dead boyfriend who symbolized Christianity. The differences they had in experiences and feelings signify the increasing gap in the cultures that eventually broke them apart into a painful separation. Hamid's novel tells the story about America, its focus on itself and its prejudices toward immigrants as well as unveiling the impact of intolerance. Changez, the protagonist, overcomes a personal crisis after 9/11 by changing Muslims' perception towards the US. The author develops the theme by introducing Changez, whose encounters change his perspective and give him critical observation about America, struggling with identity, culture, and humanity. Based on that, this study examines Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, from an existentialist viewpoint, which insists on personal freedom, personal responsibility, and seeking one's identity. In contrast, existentialism is very much concerned with the element of personal choice and bringing meaning to an apparently unclear and disjointed world. The paper looks at the characterization by Changez, Erica, and the anonymous American stranger in terms of alienation, frustration, despair, and emptiness. The novel "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" dramatically portrays the Muslim's difficulty in finding his place within the universe determined by violence and trauma. The paper discusses how these experiences uncover the complexity of identity, culture, and humanity with existentialism. Hamid's novel adds much to existentialist literature on the human condition in the 21st century. Simply put, this study discusses deeply the hurdles and complexities of human existence, identity formation, and cultural interactions in a globalized world. We learn of the struggle to go through highly transformed and fluctuating topographies of cultures as well as the strength of the human spirit in this transformative journey of Changez.

### **Research Problem**

The novel of Mohsin Hamid, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," has been given interpretations mainly on issues concerning colonialism and its effects in societies. On the contrary, this work brings an entirely new approach to taking a look at Hamid's work. A study does not focus on issues about colonialism but takes off into knowing how the very novel approaches one existentialism thought. Existentialism is philosophy that puts in focus individual freedoms, responsibility toward oneself, as well as the quest in life for understanding. This study illustrates that "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" is not only a novel of colonialism but also about human struggle in search of meaning. The novel deals with intricate human emotions and experiences shared by everyone regardless of their culture. Analyzing the novel with an existentialist perspective helps this research study uncover a deeper understanding of the works of Hamid. These are general human struggles, such as being lost and finding one's identity or uncertainty, which resonate deeply, for instance. This outlook is more perceptive for "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" and builds on the debate surrounding how existentialism relates to the literature of concern in regards to colonialism and its impact.

### Research Objectives

1. To analyze, and interpret the themes of existentialism & its influence the lives of the protagonist, Changez, and his lover, Erica in the novel Mohsin Hamid, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist."
2. To ascertain Changez's struggle within existentialism informs the development of his identity, cultural displacement, and search for meaning and Erica acts out in alignment with the existentialist conceptions of emotional withdrawal, ambiguity, and action avoidance of responsibility.
3. To Describe how the nature of Changez and Erica's relationship illustrates the intricacies and effort involved in human relationships and analyze how the novel's existentialist features contribute to Changez' change but Erica's emotional immobility.
4. Evaluate the relevance of the novel's existentialist elements to identity, culture, and humanness around the world in a globalized world.

### Research Questions

1. What are the existentialist elements of Mohsin Hamid's "The Reluctant Fundamentalist"?
2. In what ways are these existentialist themes depicted in the lives of Changez and Erica in the novel "The Reluctant Fundamentalist"?
3. What are the nature of Changez and Erica's relationship illustrates the intricacies and effort involved in human relationships and analyze how the novel's existentialist features contribute to Changez' change but Erica's emotional immobility?
4. What are the relevance of the novel's existentialist elements to identity, culture, and humanness around the world in a globalized world?

### Significance of the Study

Mohsin Hamid's magnificent novel, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," explores universal human experiences--alienation and the desire to find meaning--in extremely powerful ways in today's interconnected yet more isolated world than ever before. Dispositions of disconnection and mental disorientation in modern life severely lead to debilitating mental diseases. Technological advancement, an ostensibly uniting force, has served instead to further insulate people from each other. Lo and behold, lost souls shift under the waves of misty uncertainty. It is in this light that the lives of Changez and Erica are investigated with the philosophical understanding of existentialism in order to be able to understand issues of modern society. Freedom, responsibility, and search for meaning are crucial aspects of human life, and discussing individuals through these existential tenets would lend a lot more vigor to the discourse. Changez and Erica suffering from crises related to identity, purpose, and belonging made the tragedy stand out as a sense of an utterly poignant reminder of the kind of challenges individuals face at times of cultural, social, and personal change. The study has relevance because it has the ability to throw light upon intricate details of human existence. It would help one to understand the depth in the formation of identity, cultural dislocation, and meaning-making. It helps people to know the different ways of handling mental problems, cultural understanding, and developing empathy. This creates involvement among readers with the human condition, studying themselves as a level of compassion and tolerance towards individuals going through an existential crisis. It then points to the importance of extending exploration about human existence, especially in the world today. It will, therefore, reflect on a need to face an absurd kind of human

experience, be open to ambiguity. Through this, there is then a better discussion on what really makes up identity, purpose, and belonging-from what is found in human complexity. More so, the study presents a profound deep understanding of the human experience to scholars, policymakers, and even individuals trying to understand and address present-day challenges. Its relevance runs beyond academic circles because it could ring well in the interest of anyone exploring complex humaneness and living in an empathetic world.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research project is absolutely focused to carry out an all-around and in-depth study. We are going to look at only one novel. That is the book titled "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" by Mohsin Hamid published in the year 2007. Our main concern is that we want to analyze in what way this novel reflects ideas of existentialism. Which aspects of these themes such as:

- Existentialism: individual freedom, choice and search for meaning and purpose
- Identity building and discovery
- To do this, we have established some boundaries:
- We are only discussing "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" and not any other novel or work by Hamid or by any other author.
- We are only discussing existentialist themes and not any other literary or philosophical ideas.

In doing so, we can concentrate on the following:

- Get a better understanding of what Hamid is trying to say and how it can be applied to our life
- Analyze the complex and subtle nature of the novel
- Make meaningful conclusions regarding existentialism in contemporary literature

This thesis is in no way an attempt:

- To compare Hamid's work with other authors or literary movements.
- To project a historical or cultural background beyond the story of the novel.
- To develop an all-encompassing theory of existentialism.
- In doing so, we line ourselves up for an assiduous and focused investigation that contributes to the already-existing discussion on existentialism and literature. The clear delimitation thus allows us to give a systematic and insightful analysis of "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" and its existentialist themes.

### **Literature Review**

Existentialism is a ride, ups and downs, struggle through self-discovery, losing and gaining parts of one's self. Self-discovery is the human process of developing the mind through experience, gaining wisdom, learning about oneself, and ultimately discovering one's identity.

There are three stages to this process, which are aesthetic, religious, and ethical. This first stage of aesthetic involves an outdoor enjoyment-seeking process. Religious refers to connecting with a higher power as one searches for self-improvement in a spiritual journey. Ethical involves life's challenges and the resolution thereof.

So it sets forth what constitutes independent choices and being free from influence. We form ourselves through the action and choice we take and then bear responsibility for what the consequence would be. Men and women are born free; free to make way in life with all

the rigors it brings, as well as its issues. The world will not 'stagnate' nor controlled if we were not free.

Most religions agree to the fact that humans are born free. Existentialism unites the philosophers in this pursuit of human freedom. Humans tend to be attracted to the world around them, seeking recognition and influence. It is this freedom that allows us to choose our values and how we want to live.

This human freedom and possibility to mold one's own life are best depicted by having diverse religions, ideologies, cultures, and languages around the world. Diasporic literature's expression of existentialism shows what an individual has faced and survived while trying to find himself, his place, or meaning in a new foreign culture.

Through existentialism, we understand that people are not formed by social or environmental factors but by the choices and actions a human makes. This now empowers people to give their lives meaning and purpose through freedom and self-discovery.

Diaspora literature is best brought out in the existentialism of humans as immigrants and non-native people show how resilient and adaptable they can be, and one can see why existentialism acknowledges that there are complexities to the idea of cultural identity and social integration into this human existence.

As we face the complexities of modern life, existentialism reminds us to value individual freedom, self-discovery, and responsibility. By embracing these principles, we will be able to create a more inclusive and compassionate society, celebrating human diversity and understanding.

Indeed, existence as told in diaspora literature is in such a powerful reminder of our common humanity, strife, and aspirations. We should then reflect on our very own existence, values, and choices; in so doing, there could be much empathy and connection with others.

The post-World War II and 9/11 periods have been marred by racial and religious prejudice, which has led to economic breakdown and hatred towards other groups. The fall of the Soviet Union made America a superpower and initiated a "New World Order" under American leadership. However, the 9/11 attacks brought the American dream of peace and prosperity to a shattering halt, mobilizing the "War on Terror."

The skewed reporting of Islam through Western media has given the world an atmosphere of fear and distrust, thus creating a state of unease and insecurity among Muslims on the globe. This atmosphere has led to hatred crimes, violence, harassment, and discrimination against Muslims.

As an immigrant himself to America, Mohsin Hamid was largely motivated by his personal experiences as he wrote. After he left America, Hamid found himself pondering on identity and purpose, just like many other immigrants. *Changez* also is a character that presents the plight of many Muslims who have felt lost and misplaced in this post-9/11 world.

The novel points out the fact that violence breeds only violence, and exclusion will lead a person to get radicalized. *Changez's* metamorphosis from an enthusiastic immigrant to an alienated outsider highlights the fallouts of discriminatory treatment.

The insight literature has to bring forth some aspects of human life, even if it is about sophistication and complexities, is something of great value. Here comes the very example of how real-life struggles are transferred into literary considerations, and that is with the help of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In the complex works of Hamid, existentialism, an



identity crisis, and all the attached implications of human existence in the post-9/11 world can be found.

The problems Changez and millions of other Muslims in this world face is a testimonial to empathy and understanding and inclusion. Through the exploration of the complexities of identity, culture, and belonging, we can ensure that such society emerges more compassionate and accepting.

More criticism and bias weighed the Muslim after 9/11. The biased media portrayals of Islam fueled and initiated an atmosphere of fear and distrust. In this light, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* probes into how discriminative treatment can make an individual identify the source of identity crises and existential struggle. Scrutinizing the complexities of human life will thus create more meaningful understanding and empathy with others.

The novel reaches diverse audiences with existentialism and identity crisis. Changez's story or the whole novel, in fact is a great reminder of the human condition through self-reflection and empathy.

With this regard, human life has more layers to it, not as simple as what is live. *A Reluctant Fundamentalist* presents an intensely elaborate discussion on existentialism, identity crisis, and the human condition in the post-9/11 world. With the help of literature, we can learn more about human experience and, as such, develop empathy, understanding, and compassion. Delving into issues like identity, culture, and belonging makes the world a better, more inclusive place to live. Perhaps now is more of a time for empathizing than ever. To survive this globalized world of ours, we must engage in self-reflection and social change, for which literature is a mighty ally. Literature takes us to the study of the human condition, motivating one to create a more friendly and just society where all people enjoy equal rights.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Approach**

Researchers use two main research approaches. These include qualitative and quantitative methods. Each approach varies but may be used both together in a study at times. Quantitative research applies numerical data and statistical analysis. This is normally used in scientific and mathematical fields. Researchers formulate hypotheses and test them using statistics.

#### **Data Collection**

In the research process, this includes collecting data from other sources. The two sources are primary and secondary

##### **Primary Data**

For this research study, primary data is sourced directly from Mohsin Hamid's book, *"The Reluctant Fundamentalist"* published by Penguin Books.

##### **Secondary Data**

Secondary data is that which has already been gathered by other sources. The internet is also a great source of gathering secondary data.

##### **Method of Analysis**

The researcher shall adopt qualitative analysis in making an analysis of the data gathered during the research study. This shall be:- Close reading of the novel to try and identify relevant existentialist themes Coding and categorizing data to analyze patterns in a perspective with existentialist philosophy .

### **Close Reading**

A close reading is the process of the methodical examination of elements in existentialism through Mohsin Hamid's "The Reluctant Fundamentalist." Deep understanding can be achieved by the close reading which critiques the text to let out hidden ideas. Contrary to the casual reading, close reading pays much attention to a careful examination of language usage in meaning distillation.

The close reading process has three stages. The first stage would be "First Read: Identifying Key Ideas and Details," in which readers read the text for an initial time to understand central ideas and details. As researchers approach this stage of reading without a lot of prior knowledge, they hear or read aloud to understand key ideas, main themes, significant events, or character developments.

At this stage, the researchers focus on "Second Read: Looking at Craft and Structure". At this point, specific passages are picked for a closer look. This will include rereading of complex ideas, analysis of structure and vocabulary, a look at the author's craft and organizational choices, and discussion with others in order to have a more profound understanding.

The third stage goes by the name "Third Read: Integrating Ideas and Knowledge," which digs more into the text by bringing the researcher to analyze findings, synthesize them if possible, address specific research questions set, write or record what interpretations mean, and generally bridge knowledge gaps. Close reading allows researchers to get the underlying theme and meaning about the theme of existentialism in "The Reluctant Fundamentalist."

### **First Read: Determining Key Ideas and Details**

Close reading is important to identify key ideas, the main themes, important events, and character development while noting the plot structure, character relationships, symbols, and themes..

### **Second Read: Checking Craft and Structure**

A second read is to be done with a careful examination of the text. This stage enables the researcher to know the techniques of the author and how he creates the narrative. The study of craft and structure allows the researcher to find subtle symbolism, identify recurring motifs, and analyze character development.

### **Third Read: Integrating Ideas and Knowledge**

The third read stage involves integrating ideas and knowledge. This stage is the demonstration by researchers of mastery in close reading, and they begin to uncover subtle insights from the text of "The Reluctant Fundamentalist."

### **Data Collection**

It is a process of data collection in a research procedure. It refers to getting information from a source. Primary data will provide firsthand information, so the researchers can collect particular data related to their research question, variables, and minimizing bias. Secondary data helps expand the sample size and scope by giving a deep understanding of the research topic.

In this research, primary data was received from the novel written by Mohsin Hamid and secondary data were obtained from other academic sources such as Google Scholar, Wikipedia, ResearchGate, and other academic journals.

### Method of Analysis

The researcher uses a qualitative analysis method in analyzing primary and secondary data. This includes close reading of the novel, coding and categorizing data, and interpreting data in the context of existentialist philosophy. This chapter is aimed at solving the research problem on examining the characters in the novel, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" by Mohsin Hamid, using the existential lens. It focuses on the central character, Changez, who is the narrator of the story, taking a look at his speeches, thoughts, feelings, and situations surrounding him.

"The Reluctant Fundamentalist" is, perhaps, the most profound thought-provoking novel that concerns the ideology shock resulting from the 9/11 attacks. Changez, the protagonist, was a young Pakistani friend following his idea of America in all this complicated relationship with Erica-the American woman against this moving political and ideological landscape.

A bright young man, Changez lands the job of a lifetime: a high-paying position with a prestigious firm in New York City. However, things start falling apart for him when he is exposed to racial discrimination and prejudice that he never anticipated would await him in this new, post-9/11 world. Changez cannot even hold onto his new job and ends up being tossed out, which further fails to prepare him for the worst realities of this post-9/11 world. Erica, the love interest of Changez, is trapped in nostalgia for her deceased boyfriend, Chris. The tragedy of 9/11 increased her emotional vulnerability; therefore she suffered psychological trauma. Changez's effort to reach out to her finally made him see her dead body after his permanent return to Pakistan. The most arresting reaction of Changez at Erica's death is apparent indifference to her death where he does not even appear in her funeral. Through this response, so many questions arise regarding the changes in Changez's mentality and whether he is liable to express sympathy. From the narrative of Changez, Hamid evolves with a complex identity, culture, and belonging. He tells how he transformed from an avid follower of the American dreamer to an anti-American speaker in Pakistan, which are among the most powerful statements for human nature.

The themes of existentialism reflect the absurdity and uncertainty in the novel. The experiences of Changez show how individual freedom and societal expectations are interwoven. As Changez traverses the difficult landscape of post-9/11 America, he ponders such existential questions as Who am I? Where do I belong? What's my purpose? The novel asks pertinent questions about identity, culture, and belonging. Changez's internal battles are then a metaphor for the much larger ideological struggle that goes on in the aftermath of 9/11. The masterful story of Hamid turns complexities into the human problems of existential crises, bringing the reader into the moment of self-consideration regarding his own values and assumptions. The fragile nature of the relationships that humans share comes forth in the character that we find in Changez and how devastating unchecked feelings and emotions can be; through the Reluctant Fundamentalist, we catch the glimpse of the brightest parts of human existence shed out from the darkest corners of our lives.

### Discussion / Analysis

In research, an explicit framework is usually designed to arrange ideas and explain data. Such a structure in a research is referred to as a theoretical framework. The main idea of such a structure is to explain critical ideas and facilitate the reader to think on the research.



We, in this research, used 19th-century literary theory known as existentialism, that describes Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This theory originated from France in the mid-20th century. Individual freedom, choice, and responsibility are emphasized on in existentialism that meant human existence. According to this philosophy, man has the freedom of his choices; he builds his own destiny. Human existence, as per it, is not structured by innate traits or essential nature. On the contrary, truth is relative and personal; the authentic people take responsibility for the choices and actions taken by them. Mohsin Hamid's novel is a fine representation of existentialism in literature. The protagonist, Changez, is a manifestation of existentialist principles while going through identity, cultural heritage, and relationships. Changez's journey shows how the individual creates his identity through choices and experiences. The decisions of the protagonist reflect existentialism in the emphasis on individual freedom as well as responsibility. The novel throws into relief and highlights tensions between Eastern and Western cultures, mirroring existentialism's focus on subjective experience. Thus, using existentialism will provide deeper insight into the novel's digression about identity, culture, and human existence. Using existential concepts and literary analyses, this study will examine character development, themes, and sometimes the narrative structure in the direction of an existentialistic perspective. Such an approach will be conducive to rich interpretations of the complexities of the novel. There are many benefits from using existentialism as a framework. It provides an elaborative character study, in-depth thematic discussion, and nuanced comprehension of human life. At the same time, it has some weaknesses too, like personalistic approach and oversimplification in certain cases. Existentialism makes us realize the shift in Changez from the hopeful immigrant to a disillusioned outsider. His experiences depict the misery of many individuals seeking an identity and belonging in unacquainted cultures. Through the novel, the extent of violence breeds violence has been depicted and exclusion sometimes leads to radicalization. An example of the book that best describes the way literature presents real-life struggle is *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. By applying existentialism, one gets valuable insights about the human condition. This paper depicts the significance of sympathy, understanding, and inclusion in our globalized world.

**Conclusion** In a nutshell, existentialism forms an excellent thematic basis for the analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Applying existentialism gives a comprehensive understanding of how the novel explores issues of identity, culture, and human existence. Existentialism forces us to question our assumptions regarding identity, culture, and belonging. It makes us reconsider our values and choices because we are free beings. We learn from literature the complexities of human existence.

### **Existentialism**

According to existentialist principles, human existence complexity forms the subject matter of Mohsin Hamid's novel, "*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*." In order to understand what the core nature of existentialism is, we will outline specific concepts and thinkers. Existentialists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, create an identity through ideas about individual freedom and responsibility. Well, the journey of changez in this concept very well explains how he tried to reconcile Pakistani heritage with American aspirations. His identity is a process of self-formation, reflecting the existentialist notion. The alienation concept of Albert Camus resonates well with Changez's experience in America. Changez's feeling of being estranged from his surroundings during cultural

differences exemplifies the idea that humans are isolated in themselves. This alienation provokes Changez's introspection, through which he questions his presence in the world. The novel deals with the absurdity of life, thus aligning with Camus's philosophy. Here, Changez's transformation from an optimistic immigrant to a disillusioned outsider embodies the absurdity of seeking meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, making him reevaluate his values and choices. It can be drawn from Jean-Paul Sartre's emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility, Martin Heidegger's exploration of "Being-in-the-world," and Albert Camus's ideas on alienation and absurdity, through which some existentialist ideas could bring light into Changez's inner turmoil regarding his identity and alienation as well as the absurdity of life. Such an analysis leads to the examination of identity formation, effects of alienation, and finding meaning in the absurd world that the novel paints. Focusing on this will bring insight into how existence occurs and the depth in existentialism of "The Reluctant Fundamentalist.". This reflects our assumptions about identity, culture, and belonging. It makes us review our value scales and options realizing that we are part of a world in which freedom has come to be a virtual characteristic of human beings.

### **Identity and Authenticity:**

Jean-Paul Sartre: The works of Jean-Paul Sartre help understand the crisis of Changez in "The Reluctant Fundamentalist." Changez attempts to keep a balance between his Pakistani heritage and American life experience; however, an acceptable balance is not easy to be found.

Sartre calls it the "bad faith." Changez is torn between his two identities. He cannot fully accept one of them. This inbuilt conflict is how difficult it is to know who we actually are. Sartre again emphasizes personal freedom and personal responsibility. Changez's choices and choices represent a way of life in which one has chosen to live. According to Sartre, it is the choices that make a person and not external events.

This view lets us know the emotional turmoil of Changez and the result of his choices. We know how identity, culture, and belonging affect us through Changez's story with a perspective of Sartre.

Sartre's thought inspires us to be authentic. Changez's journey is such a knotty and tough journey.

We can understand Changez's character, as well as the human battles we all face, from a Sartreian perspective.

Søren Kierkegaard: Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical thoughts fuel the protagonist of "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" in searching for a way to self-discovery.

His notion of "authenticity" has something to do with the yearning of Changez to find himself. Authenticity refers to being in keeping with oneself and not in keeping with any outer influence or pretences. Changez's journey is about his ceaseless search to make amends with his Pakistani past and the American experiences that he was going through. Kierkegaard would describe Changez's quest for authenticity as an integral human search. Kierkegaard's stages of life-aesthetic, ethical, and religious-prove to be really helpful in understanding Changez's development. Changez is deeply intrigued with American culture at the aesthetic stage, where there is interest in mere pleasure and superficialism. During relationships and career changes, he reaches the ethical stage where he confronts all his moral responsibilities and commitments. Ideas of Kierkegaard suggest that Changez can

grow if he accepts authenticity beyond mere superficialism. This forms the foundation of the very core in Kierkegaard that stresses authentic self-consciousness and moral accountability. The transformation of Changez represents the human pursuit of authenticity and a meaningful existence. Letting a person study the ideas of Kierkegaard makes him or her better understand the deeper struggles that Changez had to undergo along with the universal pursuit for authenticity.

### **Alienation and Existential Angst:**

Albert Camus: Philosophically, Albert Camus speaks to the experiences of the protagonist in "The Reluctant Fundamentalist." The concept of "the absurd" by Camus refers to Changez's experience of a world seemingly devoid of meaning. "Absurdity" is described as an unbridgeable gap between what humans want to do to ensure meaning and the fact that the universe does not appear to care. It presents an absurdity wherein Changez ends up in America incapable of placing himself despite the high educational and professional success that follows his stay in America. It brings out that Camus's "existential angst" unfolds Changez's alienation and hopelessness. As this anxiety of existence is referred to as a state of anguish formed due to the realization by man that life has no purpose on its own, making life incoherent and in that disorientation and uncertainty it suffers. Existential angst dominates Changez during his stay in America- his cultural displacement and then his relationship problems along with all that followed professionally. His sense of estrangement is deepened as he wrestles with the futility of his situation.

The thoughts of Camus reflect that the plight of Changez is general and an embodiment of the quest for meaning which the human shares. Having acknowledged the absurdity and the existential angst, Changez begins to confront the fact of his own existence.

It is under Camus's gaze that Changez's emotional turbulence and quest for authenticity become understandable. This is an epitome of the human condition, full of absurdity, uncertainty, and search for meaning, all embodied in the person of Changez. In this context, Camus's ideas challenge one to face the absurd and give his own meaning to his life. Changez's journey serves as a very strong reminder of the need to find purpose and belonging in life.

Karl Jaspers: Some of the interesting things presented by Karl Jaspers philosophical ideas are an alternative contrasting perspective to Changez sense of alienation, seen in "The Reluctant Fundamentalist." Here transcendence posits going above the concrete circumstances finding their meaning and belonging in there. Transcendence involves going above the mundanity to touch something more infinite. That is touch or have a feeling or touch unity and purpose. Changez's conflict with his Pakistani background and his American experiences can be transcended when there is a recognition of some common human experiences that may connect him to others.

According to Jaspers, a "limit-situation" explains Changez's transformative experiences. Limit situations are moments of crisis forcing an individual to face the limits of his existence by making him introspect in the process of developing.

The cultural dislocation, relation conflict, and professional disappointment with Changez's life create a limitation situation. The incidents take him to a situation that he has to understand about himself and his existence and get back to questioning what value he wants for himself in life. In essence, Jaspers' view holds that Changez's transitions are moments

for transcendence. By being made to admit to and embrace his limitation situations, Changez finds the purpose and belonging to avoid being alienated in himself.

Through Jaspers, we can see Changez's life as a universal human desire for transcendence. His story is a good example of the human ability for self-discovery, endurance, and growth. The concepts of Jaspers tell us to seek meaning from life's struggles. The transformation of Changez has become a strong reminder of the transcendence and human connection potential.

### **The Absurd and the Quest for Meaning:**

Franz Kafka: The works of Franz Kafka are another parallel to the journey of Changez in "The Reluctant Fundamentalist." His characters often find themselves facing an absurd, alienating world, just like Changez in America.

Metamorphosis is one of the concepts by Kafka, and it is quite similar to Changez's transformation from a hopeful Pakistani student to a disillusioned outsider. This is metamorphosis, representing deep changes that individuals undergo as they face the harsh realities of existence.

Experiences are Changez's change from cultural displacement, to difficulties in relationships, to being disillusioned professionally. All this transforms into the complete disappointment and isolation when things change for him; therefore, he realizes Kafka's idea that people are also changeable by their environment.

Alienation and Absurdity by Kafka in the form of very beneficial understanding of Changez's experience through the following points, and which has been related with experiences with the characters in the works of Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and "Trial".

Analyzing the themes by Kafka enables understanding change of Changez, but what he experienced throughout in 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' exists behind them. This conceptual lens, therefore, deepens a perspective of understanding through an intricate process concerning experience and choice made, but understood by Changez on earth.

This can thus branch out to exploring aspects relating to the study based on existential ideas from Kafka: primarily based on the principles related to Absurdity as Alienation, and finally relating metamorphosis towards changes within individuals.

Identity formation and deconstruction. This complex model presents a very rich reading of Changez's life in the context of bringing the depth of his existential crises before our eyes. Upon learning about Kafka's views, we can find general human experience under Changez's experiences. If we adopt Kafka's view, it is possible to identify a transformation in Changez with the image of human life. Changez's woe is a great reminder that human existence is complex and poses many challenges.

### **The Aesthetic Stage**

As discussed above, the aesthetic stage consists of people who seek pleasure and dislike commitment. Changez, in his childhood, depicts this stage because he gratifies even if it calls for the loss of his cultural identity. He is satisfied with everything that he was experiencing before 9/11. He indulges in all the things that would give him pleasure and joy. This aesthetic phase is well represented by Changez's Princeton experience. He loves his academic pursuit, is excited about the place he is studying in, and is eager to learn from the great minds that are teaching him. His Princeton admission testifies to his ambition, energy, and drive to succeed. Changez describes himself as a "philosopher king in the making" as he goes on to describe his life in a dreamy manner. At this stage, Changez loves

soccer, travel, hiking, and sports. He enjoyed going out with his friends to discover new places, their different cultures, and new things about life. The connection with Erica is another part of this stage. From emotional intimacy to physical closeness, Erica and Changez end up in unconscious separation. Erica's beauty obsessed Changez: the beauty of her fair skin, her hair, and the sight of her nude body when swimming. He objectifies her, making her a body rather than a person. This is the aesthetic stage where people give importance to pleasure rather than meaningful relationships.

Erica being nostalgic gives more importance to Changez's body than any kind of relationship. Their relationship becomes a momentary pleasure, and Changez confesses that he feels like a different person during their sexual intercourse. In doing so, Changez highlights his own morality and lack of concern for it in gratifying personal indulgence. Changez, like Erica, enjoys the hedonism by neglecting the feelings and psychosocial outcome of such activities. For example, he takes the character of a dead Chris to satisfy his lust as an escapade from real life into an imaginary one.

This is an escape that features in the aesthetic stage wherein people run from the moment and transform their life again. Changez never fails to discover new adventures, excitement, and delights; for such pleasures usually come at the expense of the cultural and personal ideals of someone.

This aesthetic stage finds a microcosm in the relationship that he has with Erica. Their relationship is not much of a relationship that had emotional intimacy; that's because his interest for Erica is more of an interest in terms of aesthetics or visual attraction, and their desires make the relationship that hollow.

As the novel progresses, it becomes evident that Changez's aesthetic stage gradually merges into a much deeper point of dealing with identity, culture, and belonging. After 9/11, the experiences push him face to face with his existence and turned him upside down to provide a transformation of values, giving importance to his cultural background and personal ethics rather than the transitory delight. However, in this early stage, Changez is still quite entrenched in his pursuit of pleasure and gratification. His narrative serves as a commentary on the human condition, bringing out the tension between personal desires and moral responsibilities.

Through the character of Changez, Mohsin Hamid masterfully goes through the aesthetic stage, illustrating its characteristics and consequences. The Reluctant Fundamentalist becomes a powerful exploration of identity, culture, and the human experience.

Through Changez, the theme learned is how hedonism can lead to ruin with pleasure overwhelming meaningful relations and values. His metamorphosis, though bitter and painful, leads him toward self-discovery and profoundness with regard to his standing within the world.

## 2.1 The Moral Phase

Changez begins by strongly trying to merge into the American society by following the rules and laws of America. He purposefully modifies his clothes, language, and actions in accordance with native speakers. His eagerness to become an American shows up. Despite his strongest efforts, Changez is never fully accepted into the American society. He never becomes a "true" American and continues living in a limbo state. This partial acceptance is due to deep-rooted prejudices and biases, which constantly question his identity and belonging.



Ironically, Changez identifies himself as a New Yorker rather than a foreigner or Pakistani. He feels a deep sense of belonging within the new social structure, adopting its values, norms, culture, and traditions. This adoption is reflected in his eagerness for American customs, language, and lifestyle.

However, Changez also violates the ethics and moral values that eventually land him in trouble. The best example is the violation of the institution of marriage. He does not have a committed relationship but only has a sexual relationship with Erica, for personal gratification and not for emotional bonding.

Social norms tend to change for the betterment of society. For instance, after 9/11, in America, beards started becoming a symbol of terrorism. Changez breaks this new norm created by returning to America with a beard grown on his face, thus violating the social norm intentionally.

Opposition comes in various forms by American society: verbal jeers, social boycott and even problems in doing basic day-to-day work. Bearded Changez is, in a way, introducing cultural sign of his identity along with conflict between his original Pakistani identity and his integration within America.

Changez's life experience is an excellent example of the subtleties of cultural integration and the multiplicity of identities. The plot highlights the tension between becoming one of them and staying different. Masterfully through Changez, Mohsin Hamid delves into human life to clarify the vagaries of belonging, identity, and being accepted into another culture. Changez's transformation also becomes a commentary on what happens as a result of societal demands and pressures. His tale raises haunting questions about what it is to be who you are, how culture is acquired, and about the human experience.

Through Changez, we are able to realize the fragility of social acceptance and the strength of individual identity. His is a story that can be testified to by how hard human relationships can be, and how resilient and potent cultural heritage is.

Reluctant Fundamentalist will be a great commentary on identity, culture, and belonging, making readers think about their own values and assumptions.

Changez's story reflects the mirror toward society and brings out the concept of sympathy, comprehension, and acceptance. His own story speaks to the need to acknowledge diversity and question societal conformity.

To sum it all up, Changez's journey embodies a universal struggle for identity, acceptance, and belonging. His own experiences make him very relatable to his readers, inviting them to think about human existence complexities.

### **The Religious Stage**

This chapter further expands upon the religious stage, detailing how misconstrued religious thought placed Changez and Erica in the situation of discontentment and estrangement. The irony, of course, is that each was profoundly enamored of his religion but acted exactly against the very foundations upon which the religions are predicated, thereby establishing religiosity in its weak manifestation.

A self-proclaimed Muslim, Changez also commits acts directly contradictory to Islam. He drinks alcohol, which is a no-no in Islam. On the other hand, Erica appears to be Christian but undergoes premarital relations. In fact, several forms of Christianity disapprove of it. Both Islam and Christianity have their common roots along with overlapped teachings. They have seriously condemned suicide besides making strict emphasis on the sacredness

of marriage before even making intimate relations. However, both Changez and Erica could not follow these basic principles of life. Physical relations remained a priority in place of commitment for Changez while Erica, who still cannot forget her boyfriend even when he had died, suffers a fatal end.

Islam teaches peace, compassion, and charity. Changez shows a remarkable lack of sympathy for the victims of 9/11. He also declines to join Erica in her fundraising efforts, which further illustrates his superficial religiosity.

For Changez, growing a beard after returning to America is a defiant act against the West and not any religious practice. The beard in Islam symbolizes respect for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and Changez grew his beard out of rebellion.

The impact of their warped religious ideology is severe. Changez and Erica suffer from anxiety, depression, and a general sense of hollowness. Their lives are such that the weight of striking pain results in them brooding about actual faith.

To the extent, this is valid, philosopher Søren Kierkegaard believed most people merely existed religiously without a real purpose to life. From his reasoning, true purpose emanates solely from faith in God, and stories, such as Changez or Erica's, are stark examples of his theory.

Their stories focus on the dangers of 'cherry-picking', taking only those religious sayings that one wants to hold. Such selective faith builds spiritual dissonance; thus, feelings of estrangement and discontent are deepened.

Mohsin Hamid, through Changez and Erica's struggles, illustrates the intricacies of religion in the context of a person's identity. Their struggle brings to the fore some key questions regarding faith, heritage, and personal values.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, therefore, becomes a meaningful commentary on the human condition, a call for self-introspection from the angle of each person's spiritual journey.

The lives of Changez and Erica are thus cautionary tales about what occurs in a world in which religiosity is very shallow. Their stories tell how important it is to cultivate authentic faith and compassion towards others along with strict adherence to religion's essential teachings. In short, their stories encourage one to think about the empowering aspect of true spirituality as there is a call to revisit deeper faith and cultural identities. Through Changez and Erica, we see the powerful effects of false beliefs of religion on individuals. Their struggles are testaments to the enduring power of authentic faith in living lives. Alienation Modern reality appears to be some mystical labyrinth, where true is easy to confuse with the untrue, good with evil and that which is genuine, it gets confused with what's artificially created. Trust-when now the backbone of interpersonal relationships between people considered the closest friends, becomes non-existent even for others not considered close.

Unprecedented technological breakthroughs carry with them unprecedented psychological trauma. For foreign societies' residents, living apart from their cultures, societal mores, new political, religious, and economic stress, alienation often hovers at the horizon.

This masterful novel of Mohsin Hamid explains alienation that an American "stranger" undergoes post his actions and inner turmoil. Even being an American, he finds himself a stranger in Pakistan because of his nationality but mainly because of obsessions with stereotypes prevalent in people regarding Muslims.

The alienation of the Stranger is that he had internalized the negative presentation of Muslims by Western media. He has a reduced view of Muslims as simple, damaging stereotypes and equates them with beards and terrorism. This warped view is evident when he reacts to Changez's beard in shock (p. 1).

After the War on Terror, the beard took on a symbolic meaning in the West as a representation of terrorism and the threat, because of the appearance of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden. Changez returns from America, adopting more traditional Muslim looks, so that he inadvertently activates a set of deep-seated fears in the Stranger's mind. Hamid skillfully underscores the alienation of the Stranger from the very opening of the novel, which speaks to deep impacts of internalized prejudices on human relationships. So, the wariness by the Stranger at the beginning when he first meets Changez is a microcosm of the larger societal tension between East and West.

The novel uses the character of the Stranger to explain the destructive nature of stereotypes and the need to break one's internalized biases. The novel forces the reader to confront his or her preconceptions and to look beyond the simple categorizations made of human experience.

The narrative of *Reluctant Fundamentalist* is thus an excellent exploration of identity, culture, and belonging, as it portrays a complex interplay between individual and societal norms.

Changez's transformation, seen in his increasing beard, turns out to be a powerful metaphor of reclaiming his cultural identity. But the same metaphor fills the Stranger with fear and mistrust as it symbolizes the chasm between their two worlds.

Finally, Hamid's novel is a commentary on the human condition, challenging the reader to navigate the complex landscape of cultural understanding and empathy.

### **Absurdity**

A young Pakistani man, Changez, ideal about America as it is full of affluence, but he experiences unfavourable things and ends up back in his country. Changez then discovers that nothing good happens to him even there. Having spent years doing the most heinous type of work just to make himself a dignified man after much effort, it becomes utterly meaningless when the 9/11 attacks happen. He feels nationalist and cannot tolerate his Westernized response; the values in both worlds have disintegrated. His life becomes absurd because of this. He desperately looks for meaning but cannot find any answers. He is pained by the chaotic condition of society, affecting both his personal and social life. He undergoes this transformation in a flash, ending him up just like before: in hardships.

The novel begins with the declaration by Changez: "I loved America", to the "Stranger" (p. 1). But ironically, as time progresses in the novel, so does this declaration. Changez is now caught between these two identities: Pakistani-ness and the American Dream he had once so naively pursued. "I was immediately a New Yorker" (p. 37), he states-that is how he feels from the beginning.

He finds it easy to identify with himself as an American in his early years of success. His success begins with being admitted to Princeton, one significant step toward success and honoring the family name. He has described the moment as "a dream come true" (p. 3). His family used to have wealth and status during his time; these advantages disappeared with the advent of Pakistan. Even the women in his family had to join the workforce. He admits his family lost status, "I am not poor, far from it. we were a family of great wealth" (p. 11).

He realizes that he has to regain his family's former status. America is seen as a land of opportunity.

America is the land of opportunity, and Changez comes with an aspiration for a better life. Early in his American career, he is doing fine. His success is not without effort, but meritocracy appears to rule. He thinks about his educational records, saying, "I myself had among the top results in Pakistan" (p. 4). He likes the campus beauty of Princeton and also learns from great professors. He believes in putting hard work towards his future. He himself says, "I entered my senior year without ever having earned a single B" (p. 4). The first years of America represent the fruits of his labor. He aced both academics and life as he got accustomed to this new world.

But life is seldom smooth. The last year at Princeton was a decisive one. While he fulfills his goal in college, he lands the most prestigious job at Underwood Samson and makes friends with Erica with whom he falls in love. Alas. Both these things eventually end up as a contributory factor in his disillusion with the American dream. His self-concept of pride regarding this job develops a notion among him that Princeton has empowered him to climb great heights, (p. 16). He very easily blends into American life and, at least in this part of the novel, is soon dressing and comporting himself exactly like his peers. He portrays Erica at first in such a way that seems to be full of admiration for her. But, in this case, he does not understand the depth of her emotional burdens she holds: not letting go of her dead boyfriend, Chris.

Changez and Erica eventually lead each other into a broken, passionless romantic affair with one another. They can hardly love each other; the consequences of their failure are loneliness and isolation. These un-favorable conditions keep them from making rational choices. They fail in trying to conquer these problems. Changez tries hard to efface Erica's previous life memories of Chris and present himself as her love. Erica keeps on recalling Chris at every step and indicates her failure to forget Chris. Their relationship before 9/11 is a fragile compromise, maintained by shared activities such as dates, emails, and phone calls. Erica remains emotionally detached, existing in a state of constant nostalgia. Her occasional crying spells suggest a desire for normalcy, but the memories of Chris continue to haunt her, preventing her from fully engaging with Changez. Her exterior calmness is just a disguise for an internal unrest that is growing and is soon to become psychological illness and physical debility. Changez devotes his skill and talent to Underwood Samson's meritocracy, which is always at the summit of the performance graph, and becomes a very prized employee of the firm (p. 108).

Before 9/11, Changez feels safe and accommodated in American society financially, socially, and culturally. However, what happens later breaks this illusion of security. He begins to feel a sense of injustice and alienation. After the attacks, Changez is brought back from Manila escorted by armed guards to a separate room at the airport (p. 85). This incident serves as a stark reminder that his adopted American identity is no longer readily accepted. It marks the beginning of his disillusionment with the American dream. Even his friends keep him at a distance once he reaches New York City. Changez is further alienated by an unforgiving policeman (p. 86). These events reveal the erosion of his social and cultural acceptance gradually, which brings him emotional pain. He sees people around him turn suspicious and reclusive. He sees her withdrawal and narcissism (p. 117), but, despite the investment of his relationship with Erica, it is now repetitive for her. With these

facts and with social bias against him coupled with the failing relationship, Changez feels emotionally wounded, prisoner to a war of personal and emotional turmoil in which challenges increasingly face not only himself but also the increasingly disturbed Erica. His attempts to love her on a deeper plane, even by pretending to be Chris (p. 193), are fruitless and turn out to be simply a physical relationship. Erica's mother disapproving the continued contact also dissolves this relationship. The relationship also does not end with even a hint of closure and resolution as both are left carrying emotional scars. Erica's chronic nostalgia finally ends in her suicide (p. 184) though she does try to regain herself with a specialized clinic (p. 150). For Changez, the entire lifetime of a better future and the American dream crashes down on him. There is always something coming in the way – slashed car tire, racial slurs, hostile stares, and on top of it, the ongoing war in Pakistan adds up to his feelings of alienation. The final point to absolute absurdity comes when he returns to America sporting a beard. American culture hates this outside manifestation of his religion. People in the street abuse him verbally; socially ostracize him, and gossip about him.

### Findings

America is the land of opportunity, and Changez comes with an aspiration for a better life. Early in his American career, he is doing fine. His success is not without effort, but meritocracy appears to rule. He thinks about his educational records, saying, "I myself had among the top results in Pakistan" (p. 4). He likes the campus beauty of Princeton and also learns from great professors. He believes in putting hard work towards his future. He himself says, "I entered my senior year without ever having earned a single B" (p. 4). The first years of America represent the fruits of his labor. He aced both academics and life as he got accustomed to this new world.

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### **Conclusion**

Politics and love are weaved into Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, against the backdrop of the fermenting ideologies after the fall of 9/11. Changez and Erica are in their political turmoil of three existential crises.

His crisis is well captured by Changez, who evolves from a proud American assimilator to an incensed anti-American lecturer. The change in his behavior is such that he shifts from the aggressive pursuit of an American dream that had found him to becoming alienated and rejected. Erica faces existential crises; thus, she experiences inner crises with nostalgia.

The novel opens up areas for understanding human condition with negotiations of cultural identity, faith, and belonging. Tension between the East and West in Changez's and Erica's experiences brings out a depth of the complexities that define global politics as much as personal relationships.

Hamid skillfully uses their stories to interlace a tale of existential crisis, alienation, and search for meaning through their story. Therefore, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an intellectual commentary on identity, culture, and politics that invites readers to introspect critically about themselves, their biases, and their assumptions.

### Recommendations

1. Change for himself and culture, however is marked by the change in identity. However, when Changez reached the "ethical stage" of his life, he adopted the culture as well as the values. This transformation raises very essential questions about identity, culture, and morality. In the light of the narrative of Changez, Mohsin Hamid skillfully invokes human condition through the problems of cultural identity, faith, and belonging. The journey of Changez is an immense commentary about the consequences of compromise in values and the importance of staying true to oneself.

2. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the author deals with the complex matter of religious faith regarding personal identity. The work shows faith as both being potentially transformative yet misconstrued and distorted. The stories of Changez and Erica elegantly depict this theme.

Both characters' false, religious beliefs feed only their feelings of alienation and discontent. Neither's seemingly superficial aspect of Islamic observance from Changez nor nominal Christianity from Erica provided a solid refuge or meaning for either. Their warped faith instead inflames their emotional suffering.

3. The unnamed American stranger, referred to as "Stranger," represents alienation in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. He is obsessed with negative stereotypes of Muslims, such as linking beards to terrorism and so on, which presents the depth of his disconnect. Being born in America, the Stranger is always an outsider in Pakistan just because his cultural background turns him strange and uncomfortable to the people around him. Finally, the novel calls readers into a more nuanced look at themselves and society and be culturally sensitive, realizing the disastrous effects of unchecked biases and stereotypes.

4. *Reluctant Fundamentalist* uses the thoughts of Albert Camus, Absurdism concept, in which he introduces Changez as his example for the journey into the absurd. It starts with an idealization of America, a free and prosperous land of opportunity—a place to be. However, his experiences in America pull him back into Pakistan, disenchanted and disillusioned. The reversal focuses on tension between expectation and reality.

Speaking for the human circumstances and varieties embedded in cultural identity, faith, and belonging from the novelist, it masterly brings them about; nevertheless, *Reluctant Fundamentalist* does make such essential questions concerning the realities of life, human self, and quest for man's meaning in his own existence. Even in speaking through Camus' notion of Absurdism, human desire for meaning and purpose is contradictory to the meaningless nature of the universe. This aspect is very well depicted in the experiences Changez had with societal expectations and cultural norms that brought absurdities he faced.

This novel pushes reader into themselves against their absurd assumptions and prejudices and hence grows greater cultural awareness and empathy. It is at the discovery of complexity within human life that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* introduces into the scene this absurd nuance that undergirds modern life. Ultimately, the story behind Changez says much on the tension between identity and the dictates of the society. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* lies an honest reflection of absurdity that one finds.

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