

Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: A clash of rival “fundamentalisms”

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20 May 2013

Directed by Mira Nair, written by William Wheeler, Ami Boghani and Mohsin Hamid, based on Hamid's novel

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, the latest film from Indian-born director Mira Nair (*Salaam Bombay*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *The Namesake*), tells the story of a young Pakistani-born financial analyst and his intellectual and political odyssey in the United States and Pakistan.

The movie is based on Mohsin Hamid's best-selling 2007 novel, and Hamid helped to adapt it for the screen, although it is not a literal rendition, but rather something that the author says has been “inspired by” his book.

The story is told largely in flashback, both in the film and in the book. Starting near the end of the story, we witness an American journalist, Bobby Lincoln (Liev Schreiber) beginning an interview with Changez Khan (Riz Ahmed), a young professor at Lahore University.

An American professor at the university has been abducted, and Lincoln's meeting with Khan is bound up with an effort to free the kidnap victim. Lincoln thinks that Khan, a political opponent of US policy in the Middle East and Central Asia, is involved with the kidnapping. In order to explain to the American where he stands politically, Khan traces his life over the past few years.

Khan, whose full name is supposed to evoke that of Genghis Khan, comes from the Punjabi capital of Lahore, where his parents (Om Puri and Shabana Azmi) are middle class intellectuals, his father a renowned Punjabi poet.

A brilliant student, Khan decides to make his future by studying in the US. After graduating from Princeton, he finds rapid success as a financial analyst working for a firm named Underwood Samson. The time is the turn

of the century and the boom is going full steam.

Khan is mentored at the firm by tough-talking supervisor Jim Cross (Kiefer Sutherland), a sort of Gordon Gekko for the 21st century. These scenes, with their depiction of a group of ambitious young business graduates trained in a kind of ruling class morality in which profit is sacred, are fairly effective. The style and subject matter are similar to those in a number of other recent films, especially some, like *Margin Call* (2011), that have been made since the financial collapse of 2008.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks are a turning point for Khan. Traveling the world for his high-flying job, he is in the Philippines overseeing the reorganization of a company at the cost of thousands of jobs when he watches the planes hit the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. He comes home to an atmosphere of ethnic profiling and the demonization of Muslims and South Asians generally. He is stopped at the airport and treated as a suspect, despite the protestations of his supervisor. Later he is roughed up by the police in a case of mistaken identity after a disturbance on a Manhattan street. His colleagues at work casually make racist comments or insist that he shave his beard.

At the same time, Khan is involved romantically with a young American woman, Erica (Kate Hudson), and their relationship is also affected by the atmosphere of distrust, misunderstanding and geopolitical upheaval.

Another turning point comes on a trip to Istanbul, where Khan is tasked with closing down a venerable publishing house, one in fact that has issued his own father's poetry. Khan's experience here, including some interesting discussion with the head of the firm, is depicted as an epiphany of sorts, and he announces he is abandoning his high-paying position on the spot.

In Istanbul and elsewhere there is some impressive cinematography. At the same time, the work has also been fashioned as a “political thriller,” and the concluding scenes exhibit the deadly violence associated with Pakistan for some time, particularly in connection with US intervention and the role of the CIA.

Nair has made nearly 20 films since *Salaam Bombay*, the story of street children in the Indian metropolis, won her prominence 25 years ago. Many of her movies have treated conflicts between the US and the peoples and governments of Asia, South Asia in particular. An overarching theme of Nair’s films has been the search, usually a skeptical one, for some means of bridging the gap between the First and Third Worlds.

What is missing, however, from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as well as many of her earlier films, is any examination of the broader social context in which the various tensions play out. In this latest film, for instance, there is virtually nothing said or glimpsed of life in America beyond the towers of midtown Manhattan, with their sometimes spectacular views of Central Park. In Pakistan the angry students at Lahore University form simply a backdrop, sitting somewhat menacingly in the café while Khan speaks with Lincoln.

The cast for the most part performs admirably, particularly Ahmed, Sutherland and Schreiber. Ahmed and Hudson are less successful in their depiction of a stormy relationship. The main difficulty, however, is that the “double” world of Changez Khan—a young man who has lived in both Pakistan and the US—is presented in a largely predictable and superficial way.

Nair focuses on what might be termed “fundamentalist” capitalism and its conflict with Islamic fundamentalism. Sutherland is even shown, while warning his young charges at Samson Underwood that much will be expected of them, instructing them in the “fundamentals,” a word that has not been chosen accidentally.

This story of a Muslim who has soured on America would seem to resonate in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombings, but the likeness on that score proves very slight.

Our protagonist, Changez Khan, in the end shows that he is sincere when he says that he is “a lover of America.” He has apparently decided, however, that

America is on something of a wrong path and must learn the error of its ways. Both America and Pakistan are seen in this non-contradictory way, with the rulers and ruled as undifferentiated. The film then becomes a plea for multicultural understanding and a mutual rejection of fundamentalism and extreme nationalism.

This is pretty limited as far as an understanding of the actual conditions alluded to in the story. To some extent this reflects the background of Mohsin Hamid as well as Mira Nair. Hamid grew up both in Pakistan and the US, attended Harvard Law School and later, before turning to writing, worked for McKinsey and Company, the giant management consulting firm on which Samson Underwood is likely based, with 2010 revenues of \$7 billion. Hamid now holds both British and Pakistani citizenship, and also spends time in the US.

While there is some sincerity in Khan’s indictment, as a kind of alter-ego for the author, of US policies, the scope remains a fairly narrow one, focused on very privileged sections of the population. American policies are seen merely as mistaken, albeit mistakes that will be very difficult to correct.

Interestingly, Hamid’s latest novel, entitled *How to Become Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, apparently deals in much more detail with social conditions in his native Pakistan. The hero of the book, according to reviews, claws his way from destitution to wealth. It seems a safe bet that this story, not lending itself to the “thriller” genre, may have a harder time coming to the big screen.



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