

## Movie discussion resource

## The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2013)

*Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.*

**Genre:** Drama/thriller

**Rating:** M (violence, adult themes)

**Length:** 126 minutes

**Starring:** Riz Ahmed, Kate Hudson, Kiefer Sutherland, Live Schreiber

**Director:** Indian filmmaker Mira Nair (*Salaam Bombay*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *Vanity Fair*)

**Screenplay:** William Wheeler (*2007 Booker short listed novel by Mohsin Hamid*)



### Brief synopsis

The film begins in a café in Lahore in 2011 where a Pakistani man Changez (Riz Ahmed) tells Bobby (Live Schreiber), an American journalist, about his experiences in America. Roll back ten years, and we find a younger Changez fresh from Princeton, seeking fortune and glory on Wall Street with the prestigious financial consultancy Underwood Samson with his mentor Jim Scott (Kiefer Sutherland). The American Dream seems well within his grasp. He has a girlfriend Erica (Kate Hudson). But after 9/11, the American dream soon begins to slip into nightmare: profiled, wrongfully arrested, strip-searched and interrogated, he is transformed from a well-educated, upwardly mobile businessman to a scapegoat and perceived enemy. He is conflicted between his American Dream and the enduring call of his family's homeland. (c) IFC Films

### Questions for discussion

*There is so much to discuss in this movie! Some general questions might provide enough framework to get started:*

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

### The film maker

Nair was educated in Delhi and at Harvard. She is a Hindu, married to a Muslim and his family comes from Uganda. It has become another home for Nair where she has set up a film-making school. She says, "The beauty of living in two or three places (and moving between worlds) is your world view is forced to expand. When you live only here (America), it's a one-sided conversation with the rest of the world. I really believe that in spite of what George W. Bush once said: "You're either with us or against us"—which is part of what propelled me to be a bridge-maker—there is a middle ground, not just in America but in the whole world. Many people are tired of the state of affairs now." How might the filmmaker's background impact upon the movie's central theme? In what way might her filmmaking serve as a bridge-builder in a polarized world? Discuss.

### Corporate greed

Jim Scott (Kiefer Sutherland) is the corporate killer, cold, clinical, determined – a Gordon Gekko for the 21st century. He is the mentor for a group of ambitious young business graduates in a Wall Street valuation firm. Changez adapts quickly to the cut-throat practice of making people redundant. The workers are the pawns in the process. In the Philippines, many are engaged in poorly paid manual labour and menial blue-collar jobs due to their lack of education or opportunity. In the time period depicted in the movie, the manufacturing industry sank to an historic low and investor confidence hit rock-bottom. Nearly 3 million Filipinos were unemployed and the unemployment rate in Metro Manila reached 17.8 percent. The impact of Wall Street professionals laying off workers in the interests of profit could not be more devastating. Discuss.

### **Under the microscope**

The movie provides good reason for Changez to be disillusioned with his adopted country, the crumbling of the American dream linked to the crumbling of the Twin Towers on 9/11. The harassment and denigration of people of Muslim appearance is well portrayed (mild in comparison to what many Muslim Americans and migrants were and are subjected to). Yet Changez fails to critique his homeland, Pakistan, with the same level of scrutiny. He is 'at home', holding a privileged position as a university lecturer in Lahore. Yet the religious fundamentalism, the systemic problems and double standards in ethics and moral values in Pakistan seem to lie unexamined in the background while Changez applies a different lens for his critique on America. Discuss.

### **What's in a name**

Is it too simplistic, or are we meant to read much into the names assigned to characters? Changez – changes. Khan – a name designed to evoke that of Genghis Khan? Erica – AMERICA. Bobby LINCOLN – American journalist. How do these names assist the plot?

### **Shaping of identity**

Fundamentalism – in capitalism and in religion – is explored and presented as evil twins whose destructive consequences are inevitable. The 'reluctant' fundamentalist is shaped not so much by religion but by the experience and assessment of America. The part that is still valued and makes him a 'lover of America' is what makes him a 'reluctant' fundamentalist. What role does circumstance play in shaping identity – values, principles and prejudices, and views about religious and political life? In what ways does the film deal with the complex issues of nationality, ethnicity, religion and belonging?

### **One tribe for another**

In response to 9/11, America became even more patriotic - flags everywhere, defining who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Changez swaps one 'tribe' for another 'tribe' where he feels he belongs. In a multicultural world, is tribalism the default position when there is threat? Are there examples where this is not the response in words and action? Discuss.

### **Hospitality – sharing a meal together**

"Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines." (Henri J.M. Nouwen. *Reaching Out*).

Liev Schreiber (who plays Bobby, the journalist) says, "Having met many Muslim people during the course of my life, one of the things that I liked about Moshin's writing was that he set the whole book essentially over a meal. One of the aspects of Muslim culture that I have always admired is that the guest is God. So that no matter who you are, or what your politics are, or what your past is, or what your history with that person is, when you are in their home you are treated with a tremendous amount of respect and made to feel very special. It was a great context for a conversation because it allowed the opportunity for simple humanity to trump rhetoric. For instance, the notion in the book, which hopefully still is evocative in the film, is 'I understand you are upset and I understand how you must feel about all this, but please, before we go any further, you have to taste these sweets because they are the best in my province'.

Discuss the role of hospitality in a culturally complex world.

Thanks to Palace Nova Cinemas for supporting the Movie Discussion Resource project.  
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