The janissaries of the Ottoman empire were captured Christian boys trained to fight against their own people, which they did with singular ferocity. This interesting class of warrior is described during a business lunch to Changez, the young hero of Mohsin Hamid's second novel, at a moment of crisis over his own identity. Born in Pakistan, educated at Princeton and currently the hottest new employee at a New York firm specialising in ruthless appraisals of ailing companies being targeted for takeover, Changez recognises himself in the description. "I was a modern-day janissary," he observes, "a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine ..."

The recognition completes a process of inward transformation that began when he realised he was half-gladdened by the World Trade Center attacks, and it now prompts him to sabotage his own high-flying career, to give up his pursuit of the beautiful, troubled Wasp princess Erica and go back to Lahore. There, bearded and generally reacculturated, he meets an American in a restaurant in the Old Anarkali district, and buttonholes him with his life story. The novel is his monologue: a quietly told, cleverly constructed fable of infatuation and disenchantment with America, set on the treacherous faultlines of current east/west relations, and finely tuned to the ironies of mutual - but especially American - prejudice and misrepresentation.

The richest instance of the latter is in the way it plays with the idea of fundamentalism itself. From the title, and from the increasingly tense atmosphere arising between Changez and his American listener, the expectation is that Changez is moving towards the revelation that he has gone, however "reluctantly", all the way over to the dark side of Islamic fundamentalism, and is possibly, even as he speaks, orchestrating some Daniel Pearl-like execution of his perhaps literally captive audience. But in a neat - arguably too neat - reversal, it transpires that the real fundamentalism at issue here is that of US capitalism, specifically that practised by Changez's former employer, Underwood Samson, whose motto, as they do their pitiless bit for globalisation, is "Focus on the fundamentals". The subverted expectation very efficiently forces one to reconsider one's preconceptions about such words and their meanings, and a point is duly scored for relativism.

This precise, rather classical orchestration of symmetries and reciprocities is both a strength and a weakness in the book. It fosters the kind of concentratedly astute cultural observation at which Hamid excels. At frequent intervals the narrative executes a nice flourish in the form of some densely emblematic image or epigrammatic remark. Changez pithily summarises, for instance, the experience of every happy Manhattan transplant when he declares: "I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker." And his figure for that city in its ominously flag-bedecked state following the 9/11 attacks - "I wondered what manner of host would sally forth from so grand a castle" - is perfect both as a visual image and as a deepening of the book's running theme of sic transit gloria mundi in which the triumphalist militarism of the US is repeatedly mapped over the ruined glory of the old Mughal empire.

But at the same time, this aphoristic tendency gives the story a slightly abstracted, thin-blooded quality. You notice this especially in the relationship between Changez and Erica. This privileged, patrician girl has a tragedy in her past: a childhood sweetheart named Chris, who died in his teens. Her growing intimacy with Changez, while interestingly free of the racial tensions that traditionally afflict such couples in literature, is nevertheless thwarted by her inability to forget Chris or allow Changez to take his place. In the turbulence following September 11, this preoccupation with her own past becomes a crippling obsession - "she was disappearing into a powerful nostalgia" - resulting in a breakdown, hospitalisation and probable suicide. It all feels a little sketchy, psychologically: simultaneously over the top and undersubstantiated. But after a while you realise you're not in the realm of psychology at all, but of allegory (and if you don't, a nudge or two from the narrator - "it seemed to me that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia" - soon sets you straight). It dawns on you that Erica is America (Am-Erica) and that Chris's name has been chosen to represent the nation's fraught relationship with its moment of European discovery and conquest, while the narrator himself stands for the country's consequent inability to accept, uh, changez.

To be fair, the allegory isn't as glibly intrusive as that makes it sound, but it has a stiffening effect on the narrative, shifting it from the dramatic to the essayistic. It's no great surprise to hear Changez drop his sinuously self-deprecating manner towards the end, in favour of something more finger-waggingly polemical: "I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan ..."

The nature of fiction is to make one distrustful of any character who lectures and castigates. By what higher personal virtue does Changez presume to judge? The question opens the book to the charge of a more serious flaw: one expects Changez's opposition to America's conduct to be founded on some morally superior alternative set of values. But aside from his discovery of his own patriotism, his repudiation of America in the wake of the September 11 attacks is a curiously frictionless, voluntary event, leaving one with an odd sense that his decision to quit is ultimately just the superior opportunism of a well-trained appraiser of ailing companies, who knows which way the wind is blowing. A potentially fascinating character, but not, I think, what his creator intended.

There's undoubtedly a great novel waiting to be written out of the anguished material of these kinds of east/west encounters. This book may not be it, but its author (who won a Betty Trask award for his first novel, Moth Smoke) certainly has the potential to write it. My criticisms of The Reluctant Fundamentalist are a testament to its genuinely provocative nature, and it remains, at the very least, an intelligent, highly engaging piece of work.

**I**t is a truism bordering on a tautology to note that first-person novels are all about voice, but seldom can that observation have been more apposite than in the case of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Right from his solicitous first sentence, "Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance?", the narrator, Changez, establishes a beguiling and yet troubling hold on the reader as he confides his life story to an American stranger in a Lahore cafe.

We learn that Changez is a highly educated Pakistani who worked as a financial analyst for a prestigious firm in New York. But after a disastrous love affair and the September 11 attacks, his western life collapses and he returns disillusioned and alienated to Pakistan.

All of this Changez reveals in an almost archly formal, and epically one-sided, conversation with the mysterious stranger that rolls back and forth over his developing concern with issues of cultural identity, American power and the victimisation of Pakistan.

The stranger is fidgety and anxious, and at first Changez's elaborate self-justifications for his contentious sentiments begin to suggest that perhaps he is a more sinister figure than he allows. Gradually, however, we are brought to wonder whether the person in jeopardy is not the stranger, but Changez himself.

One of the novel's notable achievements is the seamless manner in which ideology and emotion, politics and the personal are brought together into a vivid picture of an individual's globalised revolt. But more intriguing, and arguably more impressive, is the fact that Changez is a sympathetic figure in spite of some objectionable opinions – he admits, for example, to being "remarkably pleased" by 9/11.

In a sense, he is the embodiment of the argument that says that America has created its own enemies. Although that outlook may be fashionable on some US campuses, it has become practically universal in Pakistan, a country blighted by fundamentalists who display no hint of reluctance at all.

Indeed some argue that the social and political crisis into which Pakistan appears to be sinking ever deeper is at least partly the result of its political class refusing to challenge these unreluctant fundamentalists, preferring instead to take refuge in crowd-pleasing anti-Americanism.

*The Reluctant Fundamenalist* is in no way a critique of Pakistan's intellectual denial. If anything it could be described as an example of it. But if that were the case, it would do nothing to undermine its strength as a novel. It's not Hamid's job to right the problems of his country of birth. His job as a novelist is to capture a particular reality and give authentic voice to the characters therein. And in this he has succeeded with a sureness that is quite mesmerising.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid has imagined a layered account of love and loss, ambition and nostalgia, that sets his Pakistani protagonist’s romantic and professional quests in the US alongside the purposes of two ally-nations who function at times almost as enemies. Hamid’s “present passion”—a painful ambivalence about both his native Pakistani and adopted American cultures—helps us think about old and not-so-old facts of history in new ways.

Much as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*introduced readers in 1952 to a disaffected yet sympathetic black American while also providing a powerful critique of US culture, Hamid’s novel invites us to consider life here in the twenty-first century from a Pakistani perspective.

Reviewers haven’t commented, however, on the more interesting linking of “Erica” with America. Even when presented with a considerate, highly capable, and attractive new potential partner, Erica keeps looking longingly back in time for her dead love. That he was named “Chris” seems no coincidence either. America, the novel hints, clings in isolation to its own cultural shreds, Christianity among them, instead of entering into genuine cultural, political, and economic exchange.

Changez’s awakening to his own complicity in American egocentrism comes through an encounter with Juan-Bautista, a Chilean publisher whose business Changez’s high-powered company evaluates for acquisition by another client firm. Having obediently heeded his employers’ directives to “focus on the fundamentals, ...a single-minded attention to financial detail” (98), Changez comes to question those fundamentals after he arrives in Valparaiso:

The novel’s title is thus ambiguous in multiple ways. According to the religious meaning of fundamentalist and in relation to Changez, it is ironic in terms of the novel as a whole. Changez is reluctant to be seen as a religious fundamentalist because he is not one, although he is perceived as such by ignorant Westerners who judge him according to his appearance (his skin colour, and, later, his beard), and to the Orientalist or Islamophobic assumptions they make about Pakistanis or Muslims more generally. However, according to the financial meaning of fundamentalist and the OED meaning 2.a. of reluctant as “unwilling” (“Reluctant” ), the title is ironic in relation to the early parts of the novel, because Changez is the opposite of reluctant in his adoption of the role of fundamentalist financial analyst—indeed he identifies himself at one point as an “Underwood Samson trainee” (Hamid, Fundamentalist 38) rather than as a Muslim, a Pakistani, or even a New Yorker. Of course, this irony disappears later because, as Changez says after he resigns from Underwood Samson and rejects the whole ethos of the company and the country, his “days of focusing on fundamentals were done” (175).

Changez’s subjectivity changes in the course of the novel: he is transformed from a financial fundamentalist into an anti-American analyst and activist. As the analysis of the Bildungsroman element of the novel above shows, Changez moves from being at least a partial believer in a system which serves global capitalism—Underwood Samson’s meritocracy and its belief in financial fundamentals—to believing in values which run counter to it. It is in pursuit of these values that Changez uses the skills he learned at Underwood Samson to enable his university students to understand this economy, to advocate an end to US-American interventions in Pakistan, and to demonstrate against them (Hamid, Fundamentalist 203). Yet there is no suggestion that these actions will have any impact on global capitalism. This is perhaps partly because of the relative impossibility of any individual’s beliefs and actions to challenge global capitalism’s disciplinary power. But The Reluctant Fundamentalist also suggests several other reasons, due to aspects of Changez’s beliefs that do not change in the course of the novel: his tendency to resort to Orientalist stereotyping despite his criticism of it, his traditional deference to his elders, and his failure to protest against the effects of the obvious class and wealth differences in Pakistani society, all discussed above. Changez never answers Erica’s father’s criticism of the situation in Pakistan—“‘Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princes while everyone else suffers’” (Hamid, Fundamentalist 62-63)—merely stating, “‘my family is there, and I can assure you it is not as bad as that’” (63). This inability to envisage change might suggest that Changez himself cannot escape from Oriental(ist) immobility: he simply fails to register the need for change in his own society in terms of the inequalities, injustices, and exploitation deriving from the disparities in class and wealth. Like imperialism before it, global capitalism thrives on such unawareness: thus Changez’s new counter-capitalist doctrine will pose no threat to capitalism’s continued disciplinary power.