

The Process of Enlightenment

A quest is a pursuit to find something that is either externally or internally beneficial. Throughout time there have been explorers that have embarked on quests for land, riches or fountains of youth and glory. Similarly, each actor within society participates in his own personal journey, each striving to obtain some sort of reward for the struggles and efforts that comprise their expedition. However, the most beneficial rewards are not those that are initially expected. The importance of a journey is not its final destination, but the process of the journey which reveals something of greater value than any material prize. Journeys reveal aspects about society that were once outside the scope of recognition. Both Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* feature characters that undergo their own journeys. Their experiences reveal certain elements of their environments that were once disguised by popular opinion and an abundance of lies.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow retells his story of serving as a riverboat captain on the Congo River. While Marlow's initial purpose for his service was to quench his thirst for exploration, his encounters yield more than just personal satisfaction. He becomes aware of the exploitation of Africa for goods such as ivory, and his personal realization that those who are considered "civilized" are just as capable of being savage as the natives is embodied by the atrocities he witnesses his own countrymen commit. Likewise, Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explains his journey from Pakistan to the United States. The initial goal of his mission was to attend Princeton University and obtain a respectable, well paying job in the United States. Changez succeeds and falls in love with America until the September 11th attacks on the United States. The aftermath of the attacks make Changez the subject of harassment and mistreatment and demotes him to an outsider looking in through a window that was once open. He inevitably comes to view the United States as a nation that longs to obtain peace through

force and disregard for those who stand in the way. Both Marlow and Changez, embark on personal journeys for initial reasons that were established by preconceived notions of success or personal satisfaction. Neither of the two realized that the process of their journey would change their outlooks on the respected societies in which they lived. The impact of the process of their journeys is evident through both Marlow and Changez's retelling of their stories to an audience and the remarkable encounters they choose to put significant emphasis on when reminiscing on their respected odysseys.

In order to exemplify the impact of his journey, Marlow begins his story by describing what initially drew him to the Congo. Marlow recalls his immediate fascination with the Congo and the mysteries it presented after seeing it on a map. He portrays the Congo River as "a mighty big river... resembling a snake uncoiled with its head in the sea" (11). Marlow uses an analogy to describe his fascination with the river, claiming it "fascinated [him] as a snake would a bird-a silly little bird" (11). The snake had indeed charmed Marlow. Conrad uses this analogy to depict Marlow's fascination with the Congo River and to introduce greed as a fundamental flaw in human nature. The snake charming Marlow alludes to the original sin committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden from the Book of Genesis. While they lived in paradise they were inevitably driven by greed and curiosity to eat the forbidden fruit after being tempted to do so by a serpent. Likewise, Marlow has been tempted not only by his childhood longing for exploration, but his environment during the imperial age, which has encouraged him to partake in the exploration of Africa. In this portion of *The Heart of Darkness*, Marlow identifies his original purpose for going to the Africa. He describes the journey to result in personal satisfaction for himself as a means to quench his thirst for exploration. This overall presents the importance of the process of the journey, because Marlow discovers more than just self-satisfaction on his

expedition. Instead it reveals the darkness within Marlow's own countrymen, as they commit atrocities against the Congolese natives in order to obtain precious goods in the name of "civilization."

Moreover, the society in which Marlow lived actively produced a lie that encouraged his thirst for exploration and instigated the exploitation of Africa. This becomes evident when Marlow describes his arrival at his employer's headquarters in Belgium. He describes the building and its personnel stating, "[The building] was the biggest thing in the town and everybody [he] met was full of it. They were going to run an over-sea empire, and make no end of coin by trade" (13-14). This illustrates the investments people put into the concept of the exploration of Africa. They tell themselves that the people of Africa are "savages" and their involvement and trade with them is not only "civilizing the uncivilized" but producing wealth, which no one could argue against. This ongoing lie encouraged Marlow to hold similar sentiments toward Belgium's involvement in Africa and inspired him to explore the continent himself. However, through the process of his journey, as he travelled deep into the heart of darkness, he was able to realize the harsh reality behind the lies and identify that the reasoning behind colonialism was not the "civilizing" of the "savage" but the savage exploitation of the natives by those who were considered the "civilized." Marlow's enlightenment was a product of the process of his quest.

Similarly, Changez begins the retelling of his journey by starting at the very beginning and identifying what originally caused him to leave Pakistan and go to the United States. This once again represents the importance of the process of the journey instead of the final destination of the journey. By explaining the initial reasoning behind his quest, Changez is able to emphasis

what he really discovered on his journey and how it was different from what he initially expected to uncover or for this matter accomplish through his trip to the United States.

Initially, Chnagez traveled to the United States to receive a quality education at Princeton University and to eventually obtain a respected, well-paying job. Changez describes his initial impression of Princeton stating, “[it] was a dream come true. Princeton inspired in [him] a feeling that [his] life was a film in which [he] was the star and everything was possible” (3). Changez describes Princeton with this feeling because it pertains to the very foundation of America and the belief in the American dream. The notions of this dream have infected Changez upon his first moments in New Jersey. It presents the establishment of his initial love affair with America, the possibilities it holds and the greatness he can aspire to accomplish. After he gets a coveted job at Underwood Samson & Company, a valuation firm, he credits Princeton with his ability to succeed in such a fashion, stating: “Princeton made everything possible for me” (15). However, it wasn’t physically Princeton that made the dream of success a reality. It was what Princeton stood for that allowed Changez to believe in the American dream and the possibility of achieving greatness solely based on the fact that this was America and things were different here- possibilities flourished and men fulfilled their wildest dreams and aspirations.

After his success at Princeton and obtaining a job at Underwood Samson and Company, it would appear that Changez had completed his journey and reached the goals he had set for this specific quest. Although he was a Pakistani man, no one paid much attention to that aspect of his character. His success in the United States allowed him to transcend the fact that he was Pakistani—Changez states, “[he] was the only non-American in [his] group, but suspected [his] Pakistaniness was invisible, cloaked by [his] suit, by [his] expense account, and—most of all—by [his] companions” (71). This demonstrates the original fundamentals that Changez was

introduced to when he came to the United States. He believed that his nationality didn't matter because his education, success and money allowed him to blend in with his American colleagues. This remained true throughout Changez's journey until the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States, when Changez's nationality would become an issue of concern.

Indeed the September 11th terrorist attacks provoked different emotions from the American public as well as Changez. He describes his initial reaction to the attacks was different than the reaction of his colleagues. Changez "stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers collapsed. And then [he] smiled" (72). Changez realized that this feeling could be considered despicable but rationalizes it with his American audience claiming that "surely you cannot be completely innocent of such feelings. Do you feel no joy at the video clips of American munitions laying waste the structures of your enemies?" (73). The new feelings adopted by Changez towards America were developed through the vehicle of hate and discrimination the American public presented to those of middle eastern decent following the attacks. While Changez once boasted fine accomplishments to which he accredited the American dream, he was now the subject of hate and persecution. He recalls hearing stories of "Pakistani cabdrivers being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI raiding mosques, shops, and even people's houses; Muslim men disappearing into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse" (94). It became clear; through Changez's recollection of his time in the United States following the attacks, that it was not a period that exemplified the "dream come true" that had originally greeted him upon his arrival. Instead he was now living in fear and the subject of constant suspicion. At this point Chnagez realizes the objectives of the United States were to strengthen their homeland security by any means necessary. Changez elaborates on his new attitude saying, "[he] had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first

time [he] was struck by its determination to look back” (115). Changez was accosted in public for being from the Middle East and treated like a complete outsider despite his education and success. This is what ultimately caused him to leave his job and the United States behind and return to Lahore, Pakistan.

Furthermore, Mohsin Hamid’s structure of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* contributes drastically to the suspicion of foreigners that Changez experienced during his quest. The novella is a monologue given by Changez and its content features the retelling of the story of his love affair and eventual abandonment of America. His only audience is a man who is never identified to be anyone other than an American, but could have very well been a secret agent searching for terror suspects. Throughout the monologue, Changez has to encourage the American stranger that he is safe and has nothing to worry about. The stranger’s constant weariness of his surroundings in Lahore, Pakistan suggests that he is the quintessential American that caused Changez to fall out of love with the United States and realize the nature behind its power.

Finally, both *The Heart of Darkness* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* contain characters that have undergone quests for specific reasons and discovered something they did not expect to find along the way. Indeed Marlow was able to quench his thirst for exploration and Changez was able to achieve success in the United States via the American dream. But both also uncovered truths that they were not adamantly searching to discover. Marlow became enlightened of the “savage” nature that encompassed what was considered the most “civilized” of people and the lie that prevented others from attaining similar enlightenment. Moreover, Changez discovered that while he once considered himself a product of America, the backward looking nature of the United States following an incident like the September 11th attacks rendered him helpless as a Middle Eastern man. Whether it was the reality behind the lie, or the

harsh realization of a nation looking backward, both characters embarked on a journey and set out to achieve their respected goals. While the goals they set may have been achieved, the process of the journey revealed a different outlook on the societies in which they lived and had come to know. Both discovered aspects of their worlds that were once outside of the scope of recognition via the process of their quest.