Bachelor Thesis

Literature for the Intercultural Classroom
Discussing Ethnocentric Issues using *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid

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Abstract
This essay takes as its starting point that the Swedish classroom often is an intercultural environment and that it is therefore important to address issues connected to ethnocentrism in it. In this essay I examine how the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid can be used in schools to raise such ethnocentric issues. The novel’s didactic potential becomes clear by capturing some of the views held by the book’s protagonist as an alternative to Western ethnocentric concepts. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the novel allows for students to reflect on the identification processes that produce ethnocentrism. The power of nostalgia is also discussed in this essay, and with it nostalgia’s possibly alluring, yet counterproductive qualities. Together, these topics and themes from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* combine to illuminate a use of literature within the context of intercultural education.

**Keywords:** Intercultural education, Ethnocentrism, Calvinism, Islam, Capitalism.
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1 Introduction

Globalisation and multiculturalism are two current developments that have highlighted a need for re-examining the curricula and ethics of the contemporary Western classroom. In Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Cultural Struggles (2002), Paula Moya examines what she perceives to be a growing need for the viewpoints and concerns of non-dominant groups to be heard in American classrooms: “The curriculum should be structured to give greater emphasis to the cultures and views of non-dominant groups” (Moya, 169).

It can be argued that dominant and non-dominant culture exists also in the Nordic countries. In Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities (2012), Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen examine how the Nordic region also consists of dominant and non-dominant groups. They argue that Nordic nations such as Sweden “stress the role played by the images of ‘others’ (transnational and indigenous peoples) within the Nordic countries as sources of counter-identification, and how domestic contestations over what constitutes acceptable identities within the nation have played out” (8). Similarly, the Swedish curriculum assumes that Sweden is indeed a culturally divided nation: “[t]he internationalisation of Swedish society and increasing cross-border mobility place high demands on the ability of people to live with and appreciate the values inherent in cultural diversity” (Skolverket [a], 4). In other words, cultural diversity is not always appreciated or accepted by a dominant Swedish tradition that exists outside as well as inside the Swedish Schools.

In the curriculum, the subject of English is accredited with playing a vital role in a pupil’s, or even a nation’s development. The curriculum goes on to state that a main objective of the subject is that students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of: “Living conditions, attitudes, values and traditions, as well as social,
political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket [b], 3).

The importance of English teachers to familiarise students with global culture provides them with the opportunity to raise multicultural issues. Lundahl (2009), author of Engelsk språkidaktik. Texter, kommunikation, språkutveckling, lists five separate components that are vital to multicultural education.¹ From the perspective of the aims of the Swedish curriculum and the views of current research on the relationship between literature and education, this essay assumes that Sweden is a culturally divided nation and that literature can be used as a starting point for understanding intercultural issues. As argued by Olof Åslund and Oskar Nordström Skans (2010), ethnic diversity in Sweden has increased since the mid-1980s.

In the past, non-dominant cultures were often expected to assimilate into the dominant culture as quickly and completely as possible. Looking at the US situation, Moya states that: “Socialization into a dominant ideology has always been a central function of free public education” (138). This course of conduct was of course not exclusive to the United States. In her dissertation: Reading Cultural Encounter. Literary Text and Intercultural Pedagogy, Anna Greek (2008), discusses how this “top-down” pattern has been prevalent in Swedish schools as well: “attempts at ‘integration’ have frequently become top-down one-way projects that strive towards assimilating ‘immigrant culture’ into ‘Swedish culture’, where both of these concepts are erroneously and patronizingly taken to refer to homogenous categories” (2).

Furthermore, Elmeroth, author of Etnisk maktordning i skola och samhälle (2008) confers that “the postcolonial structure affects the entire Western World, and therefore positions even Sweden within the postcolonial tradition.” (14, my translation).

¹ These are: ”Content Integration” (content from a variety of cultures), ”The Knowledge Construction Process” (awareness of how cultural assumptions and biases influence the way knowledge is constructed) ”Prejudice Reduction” (how racial attitudes can be modified by teaching methods and materials), ”An Empowering School Culture and Social Structure” and ”An Equity Pedagogy”.
The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid (2007) is interesting in this context because it questions postcolonial, ethnocentric views of East/West relations. It is the story of a young Pakistani man living the American dream and giving it all up in order to return to his roots and native Pakistan in a post 9/11 state of disenchantment. The events are experienced and narrated through a Muslim protagonist who reflects on cross-cultural issues. Sweden’s close association with “the ideological and political order in which the West has granted itself the right to place its own ideological traditions at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of power”, as argued by Elmeroth (14, my translation), makes it relevant to discuss the issues presented by this novel also in the Swedish classroom.

2 Thesis Statement
This thesis observes that The Reluctant Fundamentalist presents an alternative view of Western lifestyle and values, seen from the perspective of a highly educated Muslim and Pakistani citizen. This is, I argue in the essay, a useful vantage point from which to discuss ethnocentrism. Since ethnocentrism is an issue in Swedish schools, the novel can thus be used to discuss the nature and origins of ethnocentrism in the Swedish intercultural society.

2.1 Research Questions

1. According to Moya, a problem faced by educators is that many school administrators and pupils lack the perspective to perceive that elements of their own Western society may very well rest on a form of fundamentalism. From this perspective, it is useful to explore precisely what fundamentalism refers to in the
novel. Is fundamentalism simply Islamic religious fanaticism, or does it also refer to Western ideas and assumptions?

2. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* depicts obsessive nostalgia and clinging to the past as potentially harmful and counter-productive. How can *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* be used as a means of addressing issues that are important to the Swedish classroom concerning nostalgia’s influence on societal issues?

3. The ending of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was designed to allow for interpretive ambiguity. How could a teacher-led review of the book’s narrative—in combination with an open discussion concerning pupils’ interpretations of the ambiguous ending—produce discussions that concern ideas discussed by Moya?

3 Plot Summary

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the protagonist, Changez, relates the story of his personal journey down a road paved for success and being well on his way to living the American dream to an unidentified American listener. Of utmost importance to the plot, is the line of work that Changez becomes employed with. Changez has, against tremendous odds, won a scholarship at Princeton despite applying from his native Pakistan. After graduating from Princeton at the top of his class, Changez gains employment with a valuation firm, Underwood Samson (U.S.). As an employee of Underwood Samson, Changez is assigned the responsibility of indirectly determining the future of businesses and their employees, in the name of maximum profit.

After apparently becoming disillusioned with his path to success and the compromising of personal integrity that it entailed, particularly amidst the patriotic fervour of post 9/11 New York, Changez squares off with his inner self in terms of priorities in life and personal principles. In spite of himself, Changez begins to relate to
the animosity directed toward him that he senses from people in the Philippines where he has gone on behalf of his work to evaluate business operations. They seem to view him only as an agent of American interests, come to profit at their expense. He develops an increasing feeling of kinship with people struggling to heal from the colonial legacy. His inner struggle between his professional and personal obligations reaches its culmination when on assignment in Chile. There, Changez becomes enamoured by the father-figure Juan Bautista, a man whose book business is about to be downsized by the valuation firm that Changez represents. It is Bautista who causes Changez to realise that he has perhaps been indoctrinated into becoming a turncoat or a “janissary”, and has strayed from a truer and more meaningful calling. The disenchanted Changez then returns to his native Pakistan from where the narrative and increasingly tense encounter with the American takes place. The reason for this rendezvous, and the American’s true identity remain concealed to the reader. However, the text is laced with insinuations that the American could be a dangerous foe, although this is never made certain. Changez’ failure to fulfill the relationship that he yearned for with the American girl whom he had loved is also an integral part of the plot and its message.

4 Theory and Method
Moya has primarily modeled her views on teaching in a culturally inclusive manner on a paradigm that has simply been dubbed Multicultural education. “The primary goal of this approach is to promote equal opportunity and human diversity by analyzing the links between race, language, culture, gender, handicap, and social class as institutionalized structures of inequality” (Moya, 145). Such structures of inequality exist also in Swedish schools. As argued by Elmeroth:

By constructing the image of “the other”, the “non-Swedish”, as different, the foundation has been constructed for the prejudices which in
combination with power lead to racism and discrimination. Warped power relations between various ethnic groups are created and in turn recreated through daily encounters, thereby reproducing racism on a structural as well as on an individual level. (11 my translation).

The theoretical field to which these categories belong is the postcolonial and Elmeroth uses postcolonial theory to describe current Swedish society: “During colonialism nations in the West took the liberty to conquer and exploit, but also impose its own civilisation, religion, languages, etc. in colonies around the world. Concepts and ideas from colonialism endure, and we can be said to live in a postcolonial society” (13 my translation). Postcolonial studies focus, of course, on how European colonialism, before and after decolonisation, have affected society and individuals both in the colonised nations and in the nations of the colonisers. A point discussed by postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba (1998) is that it may be “more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (16). The point here is that the multicultural society that is found in the US and that Moya writes about, as well as in Sweden as described by Elmeroth, is in many ways a legacy of colonialism.

According to postcolonial theory the West has often been characterised by a simplified, ethnocentric and essentialist view of the world and “our”, Western role in it. Ethnocentrism here is essentially the situation where a “group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exists in its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders” (Sumner quoted by Kinder and Kam, 2), as defined in 1906 by William Sumner. It is therefore important to broaden the horizons of the Western learning environment and in her book, Moya uses what she terms a: “theory of identity that goes
beyond essentialism by disclosing how identities are grounded in the social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality, without being determined by them.” (Moya, 17).

Considering the theoretical positioning of this essay, literature such as The Reluctant Fundamentalist may constitute an opportunity to discuss precisely how identity is grounded in the categories Moya mentions. It may be argued that literature that captures points of view that differ from the Western norms can be used as a means of addressing ethical and cultural diversity. Moya makes the following point:

Because of the possibility that “they” may have something to teach “us,” and because our own cultural practices may be unreasonable or counter to human flourishing, our cultural assumptions, as well as theirs, must be subject to scrutiny. If we are serious about intellectual and moral growth, we must be willing to question our own theoretical frameworks in the face of contradictory beliefs or evidence (168).

Should any initial scepticism arise pertaining to the importance of a culturally inclusive classroom, Moya presents us with the following counter: “Only by remaining open to the habits of interaction and ways of relating to the world that other cultures offer can any of us fairly evaluate ‘our’ way of being as one worth preserving and perpetuating” (Moya, 174). In other words, Moya argues that familiar “ways” should not be held to be perfect, especially before other “ways” have been considered as options. This message lies at the heart of Moyas’s advocacy of “Multicultural education” in the sense that it stresses the inherent value of learning about other cultures.

The method with which this study will be conducted is largely of a hermeneutic nature, defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms as: “The theory of interpretation, concerned with general problems of understanding the meaning of texts” (Balick 2008, 151). I will compare my interpretation with interpretations found in
“peer reviewed” articles, both in regard to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and consider how the themes of the novel may be useful in a Swedish classroom.

5 Analysis
In the following subsections I will provide answers to the research questions following the same order in which they were posed. I will begin the first subsection by examining how segments of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be used to raise the question that the fundamentalist of the title may be a reference to what Changez had to become and had been trained to do in the United States. The point that I make in the second subsection is that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be used to raise the question how a meeting with various global cultures shape identity. I also observe that nostalgia can be a positive emotion, but could just as easily be misconstrued to become destructive if it causes the individual to resist and fear cultural diversity. In the third subsection, I will discuss how the novel can stimulate discussions of intercultural issues in the Swedish classroom.

5.1 A Non-ethnocentric, Alternative View of Fundamentalism
Echoing Sumner’s definition above, Elmeroth (2008) describes ethnocentrism as the conviction that one’s own culture functions as central and “a norm” from which other cultures can be judged. “This frame of mind often entails a condescending attitude toward other cultures and the view that one’s own culture is superior” (31 my translation). As per this definition, Hamid addresses an ethnocentric point of view in his novel. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid proffers up the quintessential feelings of duality that any “foreigner” may experience when taking up residence in a new country with a new set of morals and “fundamentals”. Hamid also addresses the commonly held notion that fundamentalism is a phenomenon unique to Islamic cultures.
To help students think about ethnocentrism and to exemplify it, Hamid’s novel can therefore be useful. It can be used to illustrate how the politically charged word fundamentalist can imply something inherent to Western, Christian culture, and not necessarily Eastern and Islamic.

Hamid pursues this notion by raising questions pertaining to widely accepted norms within Western culture, such as the principles of capitalism and elements therein which could be perceived as yet another version of fundamentalism. Further on in this subsection, I will discuss how capitalism shares a common link with Christianity, particularly Protestantism. This is of interest because if a history of religion that promotes the principles of capitalism can be established, the principles of capitalism may seem justifiable, perhaps unquestionably so in the minds of many religious practitioners or even secular people raised within the same cultural context.

In the opening paragraph of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez, reassures the anonymous American whom he has encountered in Lahore, Pakistan, of his lack of malevolence while recounting the events that sum up his American experience and his decision to return to his native Pakistan with the words “I am a lover of America” (1). Whether spoken with sincerity or not, these are hardly the words of an anti-American fundamentalist. Yet the title implies the partaking in fundamentalist activities, or at least views. The first-person narrative follows a biographical journey which leads to associating the protagonist with the title. Although there are qualities that may deem a reader to declare the narrative characterized as unreliable, such as being told from memory or the need to manipulate a potential enemy (if that is indeed what the anonymous American represents), there is much evidence that Changez is anything but a fundamentalist. Upon returning to Pakistan, Changez gains employment as a university lecturer and becomes involved in encouraging students to demonstrate for “greater independence in Pakistan’s domestic and international affairs” (179). However,
the demonstrators constitute a diverse group, not unlike student protesters in the West. “There were thousands of us, of all possible affiliations—communists, capitalists, feminists, religious literalists—and things began to get out of hand” (179). Many Americans have themselves protested against American involvement in other countries, perhaps also being dubbed anti-American but unlikely as fundamentalists. In fact, it is easier here to detect a description of a common bond with the West rather than fundamentalist activity. Thus, the fundamentalist of the title appears not to refer to Islamic extremism, but to something else.

Max Weber famously connected Western capitalism with Christianity, in particular with the teachings stemming from Calvinist Protestantism. A History of World Societies by McKay et al. discusses the effect that Calvin’s teachings of the concept of predestination had on 16th century Europe. According to Calvin, nothing people did in life could change their fate, which was predestined by God; “men and women could not actively work to achieve salvation; rather, God decided at the beginning of time who would be saved and who damned” (449). As dismal and defeatist as this may sound, the effect that this came to have on people in the 16th century was more complex. People commonly interpreted Calvin’s decree to mean that one could prove ones worth concerning salvation, by one’s professional success on Earth. “Any occupation or profession could be a God-given calling, and work should be done with diligence and dedication” (449). According to Weber in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, somehow success in life came to be equated with eternal salvation, ultimately prompting people to work harder at achieving financial success in order to convince themselves and perhaps even God that they were chosen for salvation. Thus capitalism and religion share a common link with the past. Moya confers that American schools historically portrayed civilisation as synonymous with “the capitalist values of
American Protestantism” (138). In other words, capitalism can be described as a form of fundamentalist faith.

These “capitalist values” and the off handed way in which they are taken for granted in Changez’ line of work, are made translucent in Hamid’s novel, to the point where they are implied to be a form of American fundamentalism. In the article “Tracing the Fundamentalist in Moshin Hamid’s Moth Smoke and The Reluctant Fundamentalist” by Claudia Perner, Perner notes that Changez through his work in the U.S. is expected to “focus on the fundamentals” (as Perner points out is professed on page 98 of The Reluctant Fundamentalist), “namely the pursuit of maximum profit” (Perner, 28). In focusing on the fundamentals of capitalism as trained to do through his American, Ivy League education, Changez embarks on a journey that, judging by the narrative, becomes increasingly counterintuitive to him. Thereby the reluctant fundamentalist of the title may refer to Changez as a mercenary of capitalism. This sentiment is in fact expressed by Changez who notes of himself and his colleagues at Underwood Samson; “shorn of hair and dressed in battle fatigues, we would have been virtually indistinguishable.” (38). Changez and his fellow new recruits at Underwood Samson all come from a small group of elite universities, were top students, and were drafted and trained by an organisation that demanded militant commitment and drive in regard to its agenda. In time, Changez comes to liken himself to a janissary. The janissaries were an elite squad of soldiers and lifeguards, as well as indoctrinated religious and cultural converts. Changez now seems to see himself as a modern-day janissary, with a “reverse” twist: A Muslim residing in, and becoming indoctrinated by the West and the fundamentalism of capitalism.

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2 At the height of the Ottoman Empire the Ottoman sultan would purchase boys from their Christian families in the Balkans and Hungary, have them convert to Islam and become elite civil servants or soldiers known as janissaries. According to tradition, the janissaries were fiercely loyal to the sultan and completely indoctrinated (McKay et al. 592).
Hamid’s turning of the tables pertaining to the concept of fundamentalism has not been lost on the vast majority of reviewers. Peter Morey’s article “‘The rules of the game have changed’: Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and post-9/11 fiction”, refers to “*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as an example of a sort of deterritorialization of literature which forces readers to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories of East and West, ‘Them and Us’ and so on” (138). Thus, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an interesting tool in lending a critical eye to the way “we” in the West may view fundamentalism and “others” as well as how “our” way of being may be viewed as less fallible and flawed than deserved. Elmeroth reminds us of the hierarchical and ethnocentric legacy from colonialism and how it has not yet been vanquished from the postcolonial world of today. “We”, signifies “the West”, and “they” or “the others” signifies “the Rest”, Elmeroth argues. This means that “‘We’ were attributed positive qualities such as rationality, civilisation, while ‘they’ were attributed opposite qualities, irrationality, and lack of civilisation” (13, my translation).

To turn to the actual classroom situation, it would be possible to have students read *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and then be given the opportunity to orally express their initial interpretations. The concept of Changez viewing capitalism as a form of fundamentalism may be opened for discussion by the teacher as per the points made in this section. This could be followed by learning more about the janissaries, and discussing the significance of this reference in the novel. These discussions can be linked to the meaning of the book’s title and function as a starting point for reflections on ethnocentrism.

5.2 The Concept of Misguided Nostalgia as a Topic for the Classroom

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Changez becomes subject to two separate incidents that weigh him down with a feeling of rejection. One of course, is the aftermath of the
9/11 attacks, resulting in Changez going from feeling like a fully accepted New Yorker to being treated as an undesirable intruder in America, simply due to his ethnic heritage and appearance. The other incident relates to the love of his life, the American girl named Erica. Although deeply fond of Changez, she cannot fully accept him in her heart due to her inability to let go of a lover lost. The rejection he endures in the wake of 9/11 is considerably more sinister in its nature. The attacks on the twin towers release racist sentiments from his fellow New Yorkers that appeared to be resting just below the surface all along.

Both of these tribulations are made visible by a sort of misguided nostalgia, the effects of which can also be valuable to address in the classroom. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Erica is the young woman who represents the unreturned love that the self-proclaimed “lover of America”, Changez, yearns for. Although immensely fond of Changez, Erica cannot find it in her heart to accept him as her lover. Erica, it turns out, is still in love with her deceased ex-lover and childhood friend, Chris. Morey states that; “a symbolic correlative of her country—Am/Erica so to speak—is forced upon the reader’s attention … and the Chris(t) with whom Erica becomes increasingly fixated is, for Changez, ‘a religion that would not accept me as a convert’” (140). When Changez first learns of Chris in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Erica describes him as having “an *Old World* appeal” (27), and in reference to their mutual childhood Erica speaks of “a collection of European comic books with which they were obsessed” (28). As Erica deteriorates psychologically, obsessing over Chris whom had died of cancer, Changez notes that “she was disappearing into a powerful *nostalgia*, one from which only she could choose whether or not to return” (113).

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a symbolic book and the names of characters represent concepts, places, and religion. The most intimate Erica and Changez become is when she closes her eyes and pretends he is Chris. (Am)Erica yearns for Chris(t), but
he is dead and only Change(z) is available. From the narrative it is clear that Erica is attracted to and deeply fond of Changez, and it is tragic that she at some subconscious level cannot accept him for who he is. It can even be argued that her inability to accept change results in her self-destruction.

I want to suggest that (Am)Erica is a personification of the American territory, with all its people and complexities, and with as many admirable and endearing qualities as flaws. Underwood Samson (U.S.) represents the nation state, and its strict, inflexible policies. This constitutes an example of the importance not to associate people with the actions and policies of a nation.

As Changez feels his inconspicuousness on the streets of New York waning in the wake of 9/11, and tension mounting, it gives him cause to reflect:

It seemed to me that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time. There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as duty and honor. I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back (114, 115).

The type of nostalgia described in the narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* may be considered as harmful or counterproductive. In particular if nostalgia is allowed to fester and replace all desire to continue looking forward and being open-minded in terms of those who may be new or culturally different in one’s own environment. As mentioned earlier, nostalgia is not necessarily a negative emotion, and everybody experiences it. In the classroom, the book can be used to raise the possibility that nostalgia can be a deceptive emotion, often glorifying the past through selective memory. Whether nostalgia can be used as a rallying point by homogenous or
nationalist interest groups that are averse to intercultural concepts may also merit reflection.

The real way of gaining, growing, and learning from each other is by not only accepting cultural diversity, but by including it in your life. Jerry Rosenqvist addressed this issue in the article “Landvinningar på väg mot en skola för alla”, where he quotes The Salamencan statement and framework for action, held by UNESCO in Paris, 1994: “Inclusion is not assimilation, it speaks to the value and contribution to the patterns within the social mosaic” (116). From this perspective, the book can be used as a starting point for discussions of how uniformity concerning ethnicity and cultural background can become factors of decreasing relevance in society and in school. Nostalgia on the other hand, may contribute to cultural stagnation, by focusing on the past rather than looking forward.

5.3 Interpretive Ambiguity and Self-Reflection

In the dissertation Ambiguity and Estrangement: Peer-Led Deliberative Dialogues on Literature in the EFL Classroom by Anna Thyberg, the author concludes from her research: “The ambiguity of literature offers readers multiple identification possibilities and can shed new light on previously habitual values” (Thyberg, 303). This sentiment is made visible in this subsection which looks at how the novel can be used to encourage students to compare interpretations and discuss reader identification processes. In fact, The Reluctant Fundamentalist is highly ambiguous and may lead to several possible interpretive conclusions. Addressing this ambiguity, and the novel’s open ending in particular, provides an opportunity to precisely “shed light on previously habitual values” as Thyberg puts it.

In The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Changez expresses that he believes the U.S. assigns assassins to kill persons who interfere with American interests. This is an act he
thinks would be best described as “the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing the uniforms of soldiers” (178). Changez’ questions and opinions make his American listener uneasy on several occasions, for instance when Changez points out that he detects the shape of something concealed under the American’s suit, reminiscent of “an armpit holster for their [undercover agents] sidearm” (139). As Changez informs the American that he will walk him to his hotel while finishing recanting his story, it is away from the throngs of people and through the darkened midnight streets. The American appears uneasy about the presence of several Pakistanis, including the waiter from their dinner engagement, following them from some distance. The story ends with the waiter hurriedly closing in and signalling Changez to detain the American, while the American reaches inside his jacket and Changez notices “a glint of metal” (184).

The first person narrative is, as mentioned, directed at an anonymous American who is not trusted by the narrator. In the article Moving through America: Race, place and resistance in Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Anna Hartnell states: “The suggestion that the American might himself be armed and hostile while the ostensibly peaceable narrator may have turned to jihadi violence informs an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and impending violence, an atmosphere that challenges and implicates the reader’s own processes of identification” (Hartnell, 337). There are many leads (although after careful analysis there is much to be argued for them being false leads) that the protagonist Changez has turned into an enemy of America. This could affect the way readers interpret the ambiguous plot. Hartnell brings attention to why Changez is a unique character in terms of 9/11 fiction. Changez confesses through the narrative to his American addressee that he caught himself smiling at the realisation that the World Trade Center had been attacked so successfully. Hartnell points out that 9/11 fiction has primarily focused on “domestic trauma” and “a narrative of American
innocence” and that “empathizing with the hijackers” has previously been dubbed “the taboo of September 11” (Hartnell, 345). Breaking this taboo could easily overshadow the explanation and context offered by the earnest protagonist, where in hindsight he indicates that the tragedy and injustice toward the victims was not lost upon him, but that he was “caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (Hamid, 73). The anger that has been building up in the protagonist is further exemplified by his reaction to the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. Changez becomes disgruntled with the media coverage and its cheering on of what he perceives as a “mismatch between American bombers with their twenty-first-century weaponry and the ill-equipped Afghan tribesmen below” (99). Furthermore, the protagonist likens these events to “the film Terminator, but with the roles reversed so that the machines were cast as heroes” (99). The mounting tension between Changez and the American as Changez expresses these sentiments appears to increase right up to the ambiguous ending, encouraging readers to speculate on the possibility of the eruption of violence, and if so, who might perpetrate it.

Further ahead in the plot, a student from the university at which Changez is employed is arrested and charged for his supposed involvement in an alleged conspiracy to assassinate a high ranking official. The student is linked to Changez through his participation in the demonstrations for greater Pakistani independence that Changez has promoted. Changez has become a spokesperson for the university in a televised response to the arrest and this may have sealed his fate concerning him becoming labeled as a threat by the U.S. He has responded to the incident in part by criticising American armed intervention and foreign politics. Changez himself could not believe the student (whom he had met) was guilty. The interview with Changez made the “war-on-terror montage” (182). “Such was its impact that I was warned by my comrades that America might react to my admittedly intemperate remarks by sending an emissary to
intimidate me or worse” (182, 183). This provides the background for the insinuations embedded in the narrative that the American may be an assassin, in effect a terrorist, assigned with killing Changez, and providing further sustenance for ambiguity pertaining to both the characters and the plot.

In the multicultural classroom of today, there may be a distinguishable difference in the way students interpret The Reluctant Fundamentalist depending on their own ethnicity-related experiences. Carjuzaa and Ruff (2010), authors of the article “When Western epistemology and an indigenous worldview meet: Culturally responsive assessment in practice”, declare that “Students crave to have their cultural identities acknowledged and reflected in the school environment” (68). It is therefore important in classes that are already ethnically diverse to include exercises that represent non-dominant cultural perspectives. Carjuzaa and Ruff go on to advocate dialogue that enables the perspectives of ethnic students to be heard and count. “This means that educators at all levels must go beyond modifying instructional strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners and providing a representative view of multiple cultures” (69). In this light, any discussions that contain non-normative faith, culture and/or background, and place these in relation to views held by the dominant culture is a useful starting point for discussion. As has been argued by Moya: “We need to remember that our own preferred ways of living in the world are not necessarily ‘the best’ ways to be” (Moya, 166).³

Moya states that “as ethnocentric beings, humans need to be seriously challenged in order for growth to occur: The task of educators is to learn to work through, but not manage or suppress, conflict” (171-2). Furthermore, Moya contends that another important aspect for teachers to consider, is to “develop an awareness of the

³ In “Peeling Away the Western Veneer”, Kishore Mahbubani echoes a sentiment expressed by the protagonist in The Reluctant Fundamentalist; concern over the lack of respect toward ones’ elders in the West. Mahbubani refers to a harmonious respect for elders in Hindu culture, where a marriage with Western culture has leavened the oppressive elements of old therein.
consequences of their own social locations” amongst students in terms of racist and sexist influences: “They will have to help their students become aware of how they themselves fit into those relations, and invite them to imagine how they can alter their own practices” (170). It would be wrong to assume Swedish students will automatically identify with the Western prejudice expressed in the novel. However, Moya’s observations are still important to keep in mind when opening up the novel to discussion. The ending of The Reluctant Fundamentalist encourages the individual reader to examine his or her personal interpretations regarding the fundamentalism mentioned in the title. Thus it provides an opportunity for educators to open the classroom to a discussion of the issues Moya raises.

As a teacher, using The Reluctant Fundamentalist to practise literary analysis and to consider the intercultural growth and development as described in the introduction is useful. The protagonist Changez’ decision to return to Pakistan and teach could be seen as more complex than an outright rejection of the U.S., such as an opportunity to bring home some positive experience from the West and contribute to his original culture, much like Moya advocates should be done in reverse. When Changez demonstrates with “communists, capitalists, feminists” (179) for greater independence from American involvement, he is exercising a right much like Americans themselves do and did, in particular during the Vietnam War. Though being labeled as anti-American by some (as were Vietnam War protesters in the U.S.), this does not equate to being a fundamentalist or terrorist.

When using The Reluctant Fundamentalist in the classroom, students could be required to discuss their own conclusions concerning the novel’s open ending, followed by a teacher led review. This would provide students the opportunity to consider the level of ethnocentric influence described by the novel. A class-wide dialogue should broaden perspectives concerning previously discussed concepts, such as
fundamentalism, prejudice, and ethnocentric points of view. The combination of the protagonist’s perspective, which arguably challenges Western ethnocentrism, and the cleverly designed ambiguous narrative, may help teachers address how ethnocentric influence functions.

6 Conclusion
Moya (2002) reminds her readers that in some instances the American identity may be based on overconfidence: “One of our most important tasks as multicultural educators, then, would be to resist the human tendency to view the world ethnocentrically” (166). Again, Sweden is not the U.S. and teachers should not assume that Swedish students are automatically ethnocentric. Still, Swedish educators should also be aware of this ethnocentric tendency. Overconfidence related to ethnocentric pride is not exclusively an American phenomenon.

As to the question of what fundamentalism refers to in the novel, the analysis suggests the following conclusion: The fundamentalism of the title appears to refer to something else, such as capitalist business pursuits. The protagonist of The Reluctant Fundamentalist takes pride in his heritage and culture, yet he is fully prepared to embrace Western culture as well. However, Changez’ subsequent growing unease and eventual abandonment of his corporate duties illustrate the reluctance mentioned in the title. Established theory, by the German sociologist Max Weber, has previously linked Christianity with capitalism. However, capitalism may of course also be viewed as a secular concept, with any ties to religion being too obscure to be taken seriously. This provides sustenance for how fundamentalism may exist with or without religious ties, and in any religion. There is no indication that the fundamentalist of the title is simply a result of Changez’ religion or nationality. This makes it possible to use the novel to discuss how ethnocentrism functions and how deceptive it can be.
As to how the novel could be used to illuminate issues concerning nostalgia and fear of change: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* may also be used as a debate instigator concerning issues such as the potentially negative effects of nostalgia. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the aftermath of 9/11 renders the protagonist on the defensive against racially motivated persecution. Patriotic outrage evokes in New Yorkers a type of regressive nostalgia, and with it the urge to unite against a common enemy, real or imagined. Despite being peaceable, courteous and well adjusted, Changez as well as scores of other Muslims living in the West were harassed for the actions of a few individuals with whom they had absolutely no connection. “It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (Hamid, 83). The other instance of nostalgia in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is more symbolic. An essentially good person (Erica), although devoid of prejudice, allows herself to self-destruct rather than dare to let go of the past and embrace change, represented by the persona of Changez. The futility of longing for a glorified, non-existent past could be held against thriving in the present, with everything it has to offer and together with anyone in it. The novel could therefore be used to promote classroom discussions concerning the potential benefits of inclusive multiculturalism.

In regard to teacher-led discussions concerning the ambiguity of the novel, particularly the ending, there is potential gain to be had from introspective reflection. I propose that students could be given the task of discussing their interpretation of the ending to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This will be followed up by a teacher led summary of the book and its ending according to the points discussed in this essay. In other words, this section discusses how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be used to explore multicultural perspectives. Discussing their interpretations of the book with
each other and the teacher, will help students develop their understanding of intercultural perspectives and to reflect on their own cultural positioning.
Works Cited


