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## The Characterisation of Erica from 'the Reluctant Fundamentalist' by Mohsin Hamid

Published in 2007, the novel 'the Reluctant Fundamentalist', written by acclaimed Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, is a coming of age story set in America during the 9/11 attacks. It follows the fictitious journey of protagonist Changez, a young Pakistani Princeton graduate who attempts, yet ultimately fails, to assimilate into American society. The narrative takes place during a single evening at a café, in Lahore, Pakistan, where Changez recounts to an American stranger, the story of his life whilst in America. The book makes use of a dramatic monologue structure, where Changez is the only perspective we hear. The American is silenced. Who is he? A secret agent sent to assassinate Changez or merely a tourist searching for a cup of tea?

It can be argued that the way in which characters are developed throughout novels is crucial in reflecting underlying ideas the author wishes to address. This concept is highly apparent in Hamid's novel, specifically the character of Erica. A popular and beautiful Princeton graduate, Erica is Changez's love interest. As we will soon find out, after 9/11, she falls into depression and some form of mental illness, focused around an obsessive nostalgia for her dead boyfriend, consequently dashing any possibility of a relationship with Changez.

Hamid utilises the characterisation of Erica in his novel to highlight America's decline and eventual collapse as a global superpower.

Following World War II and the Cold War, the United States established its dominance as a global superpower, leading contemporary society in terms of the economy, military, technology and other various accomplishments. However, the coordinated terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, saw the destruction of the World Trade Centre and with it, one could argue, a symbolic collapse of America's authority and supremacy. We see in the wake of these attacks, the nation becoming increasingly obsessed with its 'glory days', characterised by its refusal to deal with the present situation. It became nostalgic - defined as a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past. Paraphernalia of American symbols and flags, televisions with military announcements, newspapers with words such as 'duty' and 'honour' enveloped the country. Is this seemingly harmless patriotism really a dangerous nostalgia? Following these attacks, America undertook the so-called 'War on Terror', yet it was fueled by a dark undercurrent of prejudice and racism. Indeed, it was the events of 9/11 that began the collapse of America's sovereignty. It seemed unable to find the distinction between murderous terrorists and harmless citizens.

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It is no coincidence that 'Erica' is contained in the word 'America'. She symbolically represents the nation and her development as a character throughout the novel is deliberately paralleled with that of America. Like America's unquestioned dominance after World War II, Erica is shown in the early chapters of the book as flawless, an embodiment of the perfect female. She is intelligent, studying and graduating from Princeton University and an avid writer, currently in the process of publishing her first novel. She is also wealthy, living in a 'prestigious' apartment in New York, regularly attending parties and going on holidays in The Hamptons. When Changez first meets her on a Princeton graduation Greek holiday, he describes her in chapter 2 as 'stunningly regal' and makes many observations about her during this time. Perhaps one of the most insightful comments about Erica and gives us a true discernment of her character was again in chapter 2 where Changez says 'she had told me that she hated to be alone, and I came to notice that she rarely was. She attracted people to her; she had presence, an uncommon magnetism.' Then he compares her to a lioness – 'strong, sleek and invariably surrounded by pride.' These four characteristics that Erica embodies early in the novel – beauty, intelligence, wealth and popularity – is akin to America prior to the 9/11 attacks.

Upon returning to America as star-crossed lovers and enjoying time together, Changez also learns of Erica's now dead-boyfriend Chris, who died a year ago from lung cancer. Despite this, Erica had moved on, ready for a new relationship, which was apparent with Changez during the novel's early stages. However following 9/11, the situation changed drastically for both Erica and Changez. Erica, for a reason currently unbeknownst to Changez, becomes increasingly obsessed with Chris, talking more and more about their past experiences together: Their childhood, their first kiss, their dates together. As Changez described her in chapter 6: 'like so many others after the attack, she appeared deeply anxious. The destruction of the World Trade Centre had, as she had said, churned up old thoughts that had settled to sediment to the bottom of a pond; now the waters of her mind were murky with what previously had been ignored.' Eventually, it gets to a point where Changez becomes aware of the danger of embarking upon a serious relationship with Erica, and felt in 'the strength of her ongoing attachment to Chris' a rival and feels he can 'never compete' against it, albeit a 'dead one.'

Whilst Erica and Changez still went out together, their experience had changed. He notices she often seems 'utterly detached, lost in a world of her own.' Her eyes were constantly turned inward and any remarks made by her friends registered only indirectly on her face. She was struggling against a current that pulled her within herself.

It was in chapter 7, however, that we begin to see the repercussions of such obsession with the past. After returning from a night out together, Changez attempts to achieve intimacy with Erica. He fails, Erica's body denying his own, as a direct result of her addiction to Chris. Then, Changez whispers to her 'then pretend, pretend I am Chris'. He recounts to the American 'it was if though we were under a spell, transported to a world where I was Chris and she was with

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Chris, and we made love with a physical intimacy that Erica and I had never enjoyed.' Changez pretending to be Chris in order for love to be made is a clever metaphor for the way that Changez must pretend to be someone he isn't in order to escape America's racism following 9/11. This is also synonymous with the Muslim population of America. Their culture was under attack and had to masquerade their religion to avoid the prejudice.

Soon after, Changez's relationship with Erica rapidly declines and she is admitted into a mental clinic to help with her illness. All attempts made by Changez to communicate with Erica were unavailing and at this point in the novel, he does not know what is happening with Erica, but understands that she needs someone that he, even by consenting to play the part of a man not himself, is unable to give her. As Changez explained it 'she was disappearing into a powerful nostalgia, one from which only she could choose whether or not to return' from. She found happiness in solitude, of the past, something which the present cannot give her.

As already discussed, much like Erica, America also fell into a dangerous patriotism succeeding 9/11 and Changez, during this turbulent stage of his relationship with Erica, found this out for himself. He describes in chapter 8, there was something 'undeniably retro' about the country's flags and uniforms. He had always thought of America as a nation that looks forward, but for the first time, he was 'struck back' by its determination to look back, clearing longing for a time of unquestioned dominance, safety and moral certainty. Even Changez compared living in New York to like living in a film about the Second World War. He often found himself staring at a movie set that ought to be viewed in grainy black and white, as opposed to high definition colour. It becomes apparent that they were scrambling to don the costumes of another era, no doubt from more than 50 years ago.

After abstaining contact with Erica for several months, he decides to visit her at the clinic. However upon arriving, the nurse sadly informs him that Erica had disappeared two weeks ago. She is presumed dead by suicide, a tragic end.

Erica's last act is again paralleled with what was happening with America at the time. Unlike before in the novel, when America was consumed with pride and patriotism, at this point, this patriotism had turned violent, the start of America's disillusionment from reality. Changez, his beard once invisible to Americans, is now subject to verbal abuse by complete strangers. Even he describes himself in chapter 9 'It is remarkable, given its physical insignificance - it is only a hairstyle, after all - the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on your fellow countrymen.'

He is detained and questioned at an airport by a bigoted customs official, whilst his white work colleagues simply leave. He is called an Arab and harassed on the street, even though he is Pakistani. Even at his company, Underwood Samson, where he was once a promising

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employee, became overnight the subject of whispers and stares. In New York, the situation seemed chaotic. Pakistani cab drivers were being beaten to within an 'inch of their lives', the FBI was raiding mosques, shops and houses. Muslim men were disappearing in fear. In Changez's case, this formally hidden racism ultimately drives him from America back to Pakistan to be with his family. This racism and prejudice stemming from the fear of fundamentalism leads Changez, once a lover of America, to become critical of the nation, and although it is unclear, possibly a terrorist.

Indeed, in chapter 11, we see a brutally honest account from Changez regarding America and how its racist-fueled war on fundamentalism has profoundly affected the world – 'As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums.'

Although America is still one of the great superpowers of contemporary society, Hamid shows us through the characterisation of Erica, that its decline had already begun, foreshadowing its eventual collapse. Following 9/11, the United States decided to unfairly attack those of Muslim disposition, ultimately spoiling their relationship with multiple countries. Even today, the consequences of this time in American history are prevalent. Perhaps it is one of Changez's last comments that he makes in the book towards the American that shows how deeply rooted prejudice is in today's society's – 'It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistani's are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins.'

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