

ENGLISH: *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*

To what extent is “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” about nostalgia?

“The Reluctant Fundamentalist” by Mohsin Hamid is a perceptive novel that reflects on many contemporary issues of the modern day. While it addresses political concerns it also explores many universal themes that connect on a more fundamental level. Nostalgia is heavily featured as a unique and inescapable aspect of the human condition. It's heavy presence is intertwined throughout Changez's subjective recount of the rise and fall of his brief romance with the American empire. As Hamid draws attention to its insidious nature and destructiveness towards both people and nations, it becomes increasingly apparent that nostalgia has an extensive role in the framed narrative as the primary evil.

Hamid primarily investigates the effects that nostalgia can have on people through the character of Erica and her sense of ‘chronic nostalgia’. Erica's sense of homelessness at the death of Chris becomes apparent in Greece, where she tells Changez that her ‘home was a guy with long skinny fingers.’ As the novel continues Erica's sense of longing for Chris develops into a nostalgic ‘disease’, as she begins to become ‘emaciated, detached, and so lacking in life’. Her ongoing withdrawal back into an imagined time with Chris inevitably separates her from reality and Changez. Erica's sense of nostalgia had strengthened and evolved so far that it had eventually caused her demise. Through Erica's inability to further develop her relationship with Changez, Hamid communicates the ability of nostalgia to hinder the mobility of progress and cause a stasis through the fixation of looking backwards.

Hamid makes good use of allegory in the novel, and the allegorical relationship that Erica and America share comes to significance as Hamid condemns them both to nostalgic pathways. By doing so Hamid is able to explore the essential features of nations as well, as they are depicted throughout Changez's dramatic monologue as being able to experience emotions much like people. Just as Erica's nostalgia is brought on by the trauma of losing Chris, ‘America was giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia’ for the past as it struggled to cope with the present trauma it experiences as a nation. Changez is surprised on his return to New York after 9/11 by its ‘determination to look back’. Hamid depicts America as having returned to a state not unlike that of World War Two, a time when the identity of the enemy was clearer, a feat in great contrast with the uncertainty that followed the 9/11 attacks and the obscure nature of the terrorist movement ‘al-Qaeda’.

One could also interpret America's withdrawal differently. Hamid develops the allegorical relationships even further, as one can see that Erica's longing for ‘Chris’ is reflected in America's pursuit of its ‘Christian’ values. The novel briefly addresses the rediscovery of religion in the aftermath of 9/11, and through this Hamid also implies that it was the unity of religion which America had longed for. Hamid is insistent upon drawing parallels between the effects of nostalgia on Erica and America, attempting to illustrate the ability of nostalgia to affect both people and nations. In both the cases of Erica and America they had ‘retreated into myths’, as Hamid shows that traumatic events can often make us incapable of coping with the overwhelming present, and so we look back at past times only to see them with a sense of well-being and security that is altogether illusory. Our ability to recall memories with imagined satisfaction is addressed in Erica's comment to Changez about her past skiing trips, in which she says the snow is ‘so gentle and it seems so soft’. Erica is unable to recollect the snow as it realistically was, cold and wet, and her misconception of the past is fueled by the illusory quality of nostalgia.

The effects of nostalgia are not only considered in the western part of the world, as Changez acknowledges to the American that his family had even been taken up by nostalgia. Hamid's investigation into nostalgia is taken to new depths as he exposes its truly wicked features through the effects it has on Changez's family. Yearning for a time when they were more wealthy, Changez confesses that ‘nostalgia was their crack cocaine’, and even blames it for causing alcoholism and suicide in the family. Changez's recurrent likening of nostalgia to a drug further clarifies Hamid's

message. Both nostalgia and drugs are used to temporarily escape from the unbearable present with dire consequences to our livelihood, while their addictiveness makes it even more disastrous. By making Changez's family as well as Erica and America susceptible to the influence of nostalgia, Hamid is also able to communicate the universal nature of nostalgia as being a quality that all people are capable of succumbing to.

Despite Changez's awareness of nostalgia playing an important role in the undoing of his relationships with Erica and America, he himself is found to carry the taint of nostalgia as well. Towards the end of the novel Changez recounts his obsession with Erica and inability to let her go even after returning to his homeland. Changez continues to purchase the 'Princeton Alumni Weekly' in search for signs of Erica, confessing that 'time did not diminish the eagerness with which I looked'. The revelation that Changez was yielding to his imagination, 'our relationship could only now thrive on in my head', is of great significance. Hamid uses irony though switching the circumstances. In her absence, Changez had developed the same sense of attachment and obsession with Erica that she had had for Chis after his death.

The role of nostalgia in the novel not only involves characters and nations but also extends to interact with other themes within the novel. As America becomes increasingly nostalgic after 9/11 Changez finds that the American society becomes increasingly intolerant towards people of a 'suspect race' such as himself. While he use to be able to 'seamlessly blend in' on the subway, he finds himself to be so alienated that he is subject to 'verbal abuse'. In this way, Hamid considers how being nostalgic for the past creates narrow-mindedness or otherwise myopic viewpoints, and in the case of the American ethos of post-9/11, it contributes to the already rising presence of xenophobia in the previously 'cosmopolitan' New York. Hamid also establishes a connection between nostalgia and fundamentalism through America's return to a simple and more 'fundamental' set of values. Hamid reveals a common element between the two themes and their ability to interact with one another. In fundamentalism there is a devotion to maintaining the core principals of a ideology, a feat not dissimilar to nostalgia's eagerness for older values, something demonstrated by America.

Nostalgia is one of the most dominant themes in the novel, as its presence is evident in some of the major characters, including the protagonist. However, Hamid's investigation of nostalgia is diverse and expansive, as he considers how the theme influences nations as well as its ability to connect with other major themes of the novel. Hamid is obviously devoted to communicating his message about how dangerous nostalgia can be. The large, villainous shadow that nostalgia casts over the dramatic monologue gives it a central role as one of the novels primary concerns.