Changez's relationship with erica

Mohsin Hamid’s ‘ The Reluctant Fundamentalist’ is an intriguing story of questionable identities and betrayal. The protagonist, Changez, finds himself in a teahouse in Lahore, Pakistan, where he engages in an extended monologue describing his life journey, in the company of an American stranger. Readers are presented with the thrilling and fascinating life of the young Pakistani man, but are also positioned to observe the way Changez’s actions and choices are, to some extent, influenced by the protagonist’s relationship with Erica.

In the initial part of the story, Changez is seen as a very successful individual, graduating ‘ summa cum laude’ from the prestigious Princeton University, and being employed as an analyst at Underwood Samson, one of the best valuation firms in New York. Additionally, during his holiday in Greece, he meets Erica, a ‘ stunningly regal’ girl who comes from an ‘ affluent’ family and seems to impose a ‘ magnetism’ upon Changez. At this early stage of the novel, Hamid positions the readers to envisage Changez’s apparent achievement of the American Dream, while also drawing on the positive impact that the ‘ lioness’ exerts on the protagonist, as his social life strongly develops, as a result of Erica’s continuous invitations to various events, while his performance at work is better than ever, Changez being ranked first among all starting analysts at the firm. However, the protagonist soon discovers that despite Erica’s magnetism and ‘ charming’ personality, ‘ something in her eyes (is) broken’. At this point in time, readers can sense that Changez starts to become concerned with Erica’s situation. Nevertheless, his concern is yet to have a negative impact upon his life, and despite her being ‘ lost in a world of her own’, the two still manage to sustain

their relationship. Except for Changez feeling ‘ ashamed’, not even the fact that the protagonist has to pretend being Chris to satisfy Erica shakes their relationship, and does not strongly affect the two lovers. However, the unquantifiable tragedy of 9/11 takes both lovers by surprise and plays the role of the catalyst for the decline of both Changez and Erica.

The collapse of the World Trade Center is seen by the readers as one of the main turning points in Changez’s life, as he suddenly finds himself in a new, unknown environment. He is the subject of racial discrimination on the airports in Manila and New York and is verbally cursed on the train and in the parking area of the New Jersey company. Moreover, Hamid positions the readers to observe the mental breakdown of Erica, which seems to be caused mainly by the theme of death present in New York at that time. Her collapse is obvious for the readers, as she is very fragile and brittle, and nostalgia seems to have taken over her life. Consequently, her relationship with Changez slowly deteriorates, and contributes to the protagonist’s frustration and self-denial, and perhaps adds to the list of countless reasons why he decides to take a trip to Lahore. When he returns, though, he finds Erica living at a clinic, being on the verge of psychological collapse, and Hamid outlines, through Changez’s words, that it ‘ pains him’ to see her so ‘ detached’ from the real world. At this point, readers sense that Changez is strongly affected by his broken relationship with Erica, as he feels that he has lost her. With these thoughts in mind, he travels to Valparaiso with the purpose of a work assignment, but when he returns, and subsequently loses his job at Underwood Samson, he is told that ‘ Erica is gone’. These three words clearly contribute to Changez’s internal suffering, as besides seeing

his American Dream collapse, the girl he loves is ‘ vanished’. While it’s not the main reason for his permanent departure from America, Erica’s disappearance might have played a role in the protagonist’s decision to return to Lahore. Some readers might think that Juan-Bautista’s story of the janissaries and the fact that Changez has to leave the country due to legal constraints are the only two reasons behind his choice of leaving America, but some might argue that the emotional pain that Changez suffers from throughout the later sequence of his American journey, which is mainly caused by Erica’s collapse and the two lovers’ separation, also plays an important role and affects him to a great extent.

In the final part of Hamid’s novel, readers are positioned to envisage that Changez becomes nostalgic and ‘ detached’, thinking of Erica in just the same way that she was thinking of Chris. This gives readers the impression that Erica’s relationship with Changez has affected and still affects the protagonist’s life and decisions to a great extent, as he himself admits that ‘(he) remained emotionally entwined with Erica’ and that during some nights, instead of sleeping he imagines spending a day in her company. Hamid successfully presents readers with the melancholy that surrounds Changez’s life as a result of his now artificial relationship with Erica, and positions them to empathise with the protagonist, who seems to have developed some very dangerous ’emotional scars’ and appeals to become overwhelmingly similar to Erica. Indeed, their relationship affects him to such an extent, that he seems unable to find his place of belonging anymore. Through the use of an inconclusive ending, Hamid leaves space for the readers’ imagination, but most might state that Changez’s situation is very

critical, as he himself might become the victim of the ‘ illness of the spirit’ from which Erica so profoundly suffered. This thought best illustrates the extent to which Changez’s relationship with Erica affects him, and also alters his choices, as his identity is strongly shaken by her disappearance.

Throughout his American journey, Changez’s relationship with Erica affects him emotionally to a great extent, as her detachment and fragility pain the protagonist. Moreover, their relationship also alters his decisions, as many of the crucial choices that Changez makes throughout the novel are caused, in part or in full, by Erica’s influence. In addition, despite her disappearance, Changez is also strongly affected by their relationship when he returns to Lahore, as he seems to fall in the same nostalgic and melancholic state of spirit as Erica was in the past, a state that can only negatively impact on the protagonist.