

**NOSTALGIA, MOURNING, AND THE COLLAPSE OF  
IDENTITY: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF ERICA IN *THE  
RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST***



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degree of BS in English to the Department of English and Applied Linguistics,  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* through a psychoanalytic lens to explore how nostalgia and unresolved grief lead to identity collapse in the character of Erica. Drawing upon the theories of Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida, the study argues that Erica's excessive attachment to her deceased boyfriend, Chris, transforms normal mourning into pathological melancholia. By applying Freud's foundation on the inability to detach from a lost object, Kristeva's ideas on the collapse of meaning and language, and Derrida's concept of "impossible mourning," the research illustrates how loss becomes permanently embedded within her subjectivity, preventing her from engaging with the present.

Through close textual analysis, the study reveals three central findings regarding Erica's trajectory. First, her nostalgia functions as an active psychological fortress that enforces severe emotional withdrawal, repelling present reality to preserve the past. Second, aligned with Freudian melancholia, Erica's ego entirely identifies with the lost object; she internalizes Chris's death rather than processing it, resulting in a psychic paralysis that makes genuine intimacy with Changez impossible. Finally, this unresolved grief specifically dismantles her identity as an adult woman, triggering a psychological regression and a bodily rejection of the present that culminates in her institutionalization and eventual disappearance. The study concludes that this unchecked melancholia transforms emotional attachment into psychological paralysis and self-fragmentation, demonstrating that Erica's social and gendered identity cannot survive the weight of an impossible, internalized loss.



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## DECLARATION

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to myself for the quiet strength and perseverance that carried me through every difficult moment of this journey. While these pages explore the heavy weight of loss and the fractures of identity, this space stands as proof of my own rebuilding. I dedicate this to my own mind and spirit, for holding steady when exhaustion set in, for fighting to find a voice when the words felt entirely out of reach, and for gently but firmly carrying me across the finish line.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia and grief are powerful emotional forces that shape human identity, often determining how individuals respond to loss and trauma. While nostalgia can sometimes offer comfort by preserving meaningful memories, it can also become a source of psychological entrapment when individuals remain unable to detach from the past. In such cases, grief transforms into a more complex and destructive condition, affecting not only emotional well-being but also one's sense of self. The inability to reconcile with loss can lead to withdrawal, fragmentation of identity, and a diminished engagement with reality, making the process of mourning deeply significant in understanding human psychology. From a psychoanalytic perspective, unresolved grief does not remain confined to emotional suffering alone; rather, it gradually begins to reshape the subject's relationship with memory, identity, and reality itself. When individuals become excessively attached to what has been lost, memory starts functioning as a substitute for life in the present, creating emotional stagnation and psychological instability.

These themes are explored in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*<sup>1</sup> (2008), a novel that examines identity, trauma, and the complexities of personal and political transformation in a post-9/11 context. Written by Mohsin Hamid, the narrative unfolds through the perspective of Changez, whose interactions reveal not only his own evolving identity but also the psychological struggles of those around him. Much of the existing criticism on the novel focuses primarily on Changez's identity crisis, cultural displacement, and post-9/11 alienation. However, among the novel's characters, Erica stands out as a deeply symbolic and psychologically complex figure whose emotional condition offers significant insight into grief, trauma, and identity fragmentation.

While political and post-colonial interpretations of Changez's dislocation remain vital to scholarship, this study shifts its focus toward Erica, whose psychological condition represents another crucial, yet understudied, dimension of the novel. Erica's prolonged grief for Chris, her deceased childhood sweetheart and former lover, gradually consumes her sense of self and prevents her from emotionally participating in the present. Chris occupies a permanent space in Erica's memory, to the extent that his absence becomes more psychologically powerful than the reality around her. Her persistent return to memory, coupled with emotional withdrawal and psychological decline, reflects a condition that extends beyond ordinary grief. Rather than healing over time, her loss intensifies and becomes internalized, shaping her identity in increasingly destructive ways and ultimately leading to its disintegration. Furthermore, her inability to form meaningful emotional connections with Changez demonstrates how nostalgia can imprison an individual within memory, making emotional recovery almost impossible and leaving female identity highly vulnerable to collapse.

### **Research Question**

How does Erica's nostalgia and prolonged mourning lead to the breakdown of her identity as a woman in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine Erica's nostalgia for Chris and its role in shaping her emotional withdrawal and detachment from present reality.
2. To analyze Erica's prolonged mourning through Freud's psychoanalytic concepts of Mourning and Melancholia.
3. To explore the role of unresolved grief and melancholic attachment to the past in the gradual fragmentation and collapse of Erica's identity in the novel.

To investigate the depth of Erica's psychological decline, this study employs a qualitative textual analysis. Qualitative textual analysis is uniquely suited for literary research because it allows for a detailed, nuanced interpretation of language, characterization, symbolism, and psychological depth within literary texts. Rather than relying on numerical or statistical data, this method prioritizes close reading, contextual interpretation, and the thematic examination of textual evidence.

The study closely analyzes key scenes, dialogues, and narrative descriptions related to Erica's grief, emotional instability, nostalgia, and attachment to Chris. Particular attention is given to passages that demonstrate her psychological withdrawal, fixation on memory, inability to engage with present reality, and gradual loss of identity. Through this close reading, the research identifies recurring thematic patterns connected to nostalgia, trauma, mourning, melancholia, emotional silence, and female identity.

This textual analysis is conducted primarily through a psychoanalytic lens, synthesizing the theories of Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida to move beyond a purely clinical understanding of grief. Freud's concepts from "Mourning and Melancholia" provide the foundation for understanding Erica's prolonged attachment to loss, explaining how she internalizes the memory of Chris rather than accepting his absence. Julia Kristeva's theory of melancholia is integrated to examine Erica's silence, emotional withdrawal, and the eventual breakdown of her language and meaning-making processes. Finally, Jacques Derrida's ideas regarding the "impossibility of complete mourning" deepen the analysis by illustrating how grief remains permanently embedded within identity as an ongoing structure of subjectivity rather than a temporary emotional stage.

Alongside the primary text, this research engages various secondary sources, including psychoanalytic criticism, trauma theory, postcolonial scholarship, and journal articles related to

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. These secondary materials support and strengthen the interpretation by providing critical perspectives on grief, identity, nostalgia, and trauma within literary studies. Scholarly discussions regarding Erica's symbolic significance, post-9/11 trauma, and psychological deterioration are incorporated to create a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding of her character.

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<sup>1</sup> Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Penguin Books, 2008. All the subsequent references in the text are from this edition indicated by page numbers.

## CHAPTER 2

### LOSS, ABSENCE, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COLLAPSE IN *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has generated significant scholarly attention for its exploration of trauma, identity, nostalgia, grief, and psychological fragmentation in the aftermath of 9/11. Critics have particularly focused on the ways in which the novel portrays the emotional consequences of cultural displacement and personal loss within a post-9/11 socio-political environment. Existing scholarship approaches the novel through psychoanalytic, postcolonial, political, and trauma-based frameworks. While many studies emphasize Changez's crisis of identity and ideological transformation, comparatively less attention has been given to Erica's melancholic condition and the gendered dimensions of grief. The present study situates itself within these discussions by examining grief, melancholia, and nostalgia through Erica's psychological decline while also considering how loss operates relationally between Erica and Changez.

A major contribution to the psychoanalytic reading of the novel is provided by Sigmund Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia*. Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholia by explaining that mourning is a temporary and natural process of grieving in which the subject gradually detaches from the lost object and reconnects with reality. Melancholia, however, occurs when the individual unconsciously internalizes the lost object into the ego, resulting in self-criticism, emotional withdrawal, depression, and psychic instability (Freud 243-245). Freud's theory becomes highly relevant to Erica's character, whose inability to recover from Chris's death demonstrates the symptoms of melancholia rather than ordinary mourning. Erica

remains psychologically attached to Chris and increasingly withdraws from social interaction and reality itself. Her gradual emotional disintegration reflects Freud's argument that unresolved attachment transforms grief into self-destructive psychic suffering.

Building upon psychoanalytic foundations, Naziat Mustari examines the novel through Freudian concepts of the id, ego, and superego. Mustari argues that Changez initially operates under the influence of the id, driven by ambition, desire, and the pursuit of success within American capitalist society. However, after the 9/11 attacks, repressed feelings of alienation and insecurity begin to emerge, creating a severe identity crisis. Through this psychological conflict, Changez gradually develops greater ego awareness and starts questioning the illusion of the "American dream" (Mustari 1–6). While Mustari successfully explains Changez's psychological transformation, her analysis remains largely centered on masculine subjectivity and political identity formation. Erica's grief, psychological fragmentation, and melancholic attachment receive little attention. Therefore, the present study extends psychoanalytic inquiry toward female subjectivity by exploring how unresolved mourning and nostalgia shape Erica's emotional collapse.

The concept of mourning becomes further complicated through the philosophical insights of Jacques Derrida as explained by Michael Naas in "When It Comes to Mourning." Derrida challenges Freud's notion that mourning can ever truly be completed. According to Derrida, mourning is an ongoing condition because absence and survival are already embedded within human existence. Every memory, word, or trace contains the possibility of loss, meaning that grief can never fully end (Naas 113-116). This understanding of "impossible mourning" is particularly useful in interpreting Erica's psychological state. Erica cannot separate herself from Chris because her identity itself becomes structured around his absence. Rather than moving

forward, she continues living within memories of the past, demonstrating how mourning becomes inseparable from selfhood. Derrida's theory therefore deepens the understanding of Erica's condition by suggesting that grief is not simply emotional suffering but an endless negotiation between memory, identity, and absence.

Similarly, Kelsie Donnelly examines grief in the novel through contemporary theories of precarity and ethical vulnerability. Drawing on Judith Butler and Isabell Lorey, Donnelly argues that grief in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* should not be viewed merely as a personal psychological experience but as a political and ethical condition shaped by shared human vulnerability. Erica becomes trapped in melancholic attachment to Chris and withdraws into an idealized past, refusing relational forms of identity. In contrast, Changez's experiences of grief and alienation after 9/11 eventually lead him toward political awareness and recognition of global interconnectedness (Donnelly 3-15). Donnelly's reading is important because it shifts grief from an individual emotional state to a broader ethical and political framework. The study also highlights how Hamid critiques rigid nationalist identities and instead foregrounds human fragility and interdependence. However, while Donnelly effectively addresses grief as an ethical condition, Erica's melancholia still functions primarily as a symbolic representation rather than a deeply gendered psychological experience.

Questions of identity and cultural alienation are explored extensively by Mohammad Ayub Jajja in "The Reluctant Fundamentalist: A Quest for Identity." Jajja argues that Changez initially embraces American culture through mimicry and assimilation, believing that educational and professional success will allow him to achieve belonging. Despite his accomplishments, however, he continues to be treated as the racial and cultural "Other." Following 9/11, experiences of discrimination and humiliation intensify his alienation and ultimately push him



toward rejection of American ideology (Jajja 81-82). Jajja further interprets Erica as a symbolic representation of America because she remains emotionally attached to her past and cannot fully accept Changez. Although the article offers a strong postcolonial reading of identity formation and neo-colonial power structures, Erica is primarily reduced to a metaphorical figure rather than being analyzed as an individual experiencing psychological trauma and melancholia (Jajja 91-94).

Trauma and nostalgia are further explored by Muhammad Haris, Abdullah Hassan, and Sajeel Ahmed in their comparative study of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Falling Man*. The authors argue that the trauma of 9/11 creates severe psychological instability and identity fragmentation in both novels. Changez develops nostalgia for Lahore and becomes increasingly alienated within American society, while Erica remains trapped in memories of Chris, causing emotional and physical deterioration that eventually results in her disappearance and implied suicide (Haris, Hassan, and Ahmed 451–456). The article importantly demonstrates how trauma links personal suffering with broader political tensions after 9/11. However, its comparative nature limits deeper exploration of Erica's melancholia as a specifically gendered and relational condition.

An especially significant contribution to the understanding of nostalgia is offered by Ishtiaq Ahmad, Abdus Samad, and Muhammad Shakil ur Rehman. Their study approaches nostalgia not merely as an individual emotional state but as a reciprocal psychological structure that entangles both Erica and Changez. Erica's nostalgia for Chris shapes her relationship with Changez by turning him into an emotional substitute she can never fully accept. Simultaneously, Changez's nostalgia for Pakistan becomes intensified through his emotional involvement with Erica. As a result, both characters deepen each other's inability to engage with the present

(Ahmad, Samad, and Rehman 110–111 and 113–117). This interpretation is particularly important because it reconceptualizes nostalgia as a dynamic process of failed emotional transfer rather than a passive longing for the past. The article therefore opens a more relational understanding of grief, identity, and emotional substitution within the novel.

To fully comprehend the psychological fragmentation of Erica in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it is essential to also ground her trajectory in contemporary theoretical debates regarding how the human mind structures grief. A vital foundational text for this analysis is Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr.'s essay, "Loss and Figuration: Paradigms of Constructive and Deconstructive Mourning." Alcorn examines how survivors use memories, language, and mental images—which he terms "figurations" to bridge the painful gap left by a lost object (505). He argues that mourning is not a uniform experience but is divided into two contrasting paths: constructive and deconstructive mourning. In constructive mourning, a person utilizes symbols and fond memories to slowly rebuild their life, eventually recovering an independent sense of self. Conversely, deconstructive mourning represents a psychological misfire where the mind's coping mechanisms trap the subject. Instead of healing the ego, these internal representations turn inward and aggressively dismantle it, leaving the survivor paralyzed by a destructive fixation on the dead (Alcorn 505).

Alcorn's paradigm of deconstructive mourning provides a precise critical vocabulary for diagnosing Erica's rapid mental regression following the death of her childhood sweetheart, Chris. When viewed through this lens, Erica's behavior shifts from a state of conventional, healthy grief into a pathological state driven by a fundamentally deconstructive psychic mechanism. This aligns seamlessly with Sigmund Freud's foundational distinction in "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud posits that while standard mourning eventually allows the individual to

detach their emotional energy from the lost object and re-engage with reality, the melancholic ego completely refuses this detachment (244). Instead, through a process of painful internalization, the melancholic pulls the phantom of the deceased *inside* the boundaries of their own self. This is precisely the trajectory Erica follows in Hamid's novel. Her memories of Chris cease to be healthy acts of remembrance; instead, her ego absorbs his absence, allowing his ghost to completely populate her internal world and substitute a hollow psychic fantasy for the material present (Freud 245-46).

Furthermore, analyzing the novel through this synthesized framework of Alcorn and Freud exposes the profound temporal stasis and isolation that defines Erica's narrative arc. Alcorn emphasizes that deconstructive mourning actively resists the forward march of chronological time, freezing the traumatized subject in the exact moment of rupture (510). Because Erica brings the dead object inside her own ego, her psychic timeline fractures. She becomes fundamentally incapable of moving forward into a shared, tangible future with Changez because her energies are entirely spent maintaining her internal link to Chris. Her present reality is completely hollowed out by the memory of her dead lover, transforming her life into a site of profound psychic stagnation. Just as Alcorn warns that deconstructive figuration replaces real-world interactions with a static fixation on loss, Erica's entire relational capacity is neutralized by her allegiance to a ghost.

Finally, this matrix of deconstructive mourning and Freudian melancholia explains the tragic inevitability of Erica's physical downfall. Alcorn notes that when internal figurations fail to constructively process a loss, the psychological trauma cannot remain contained within the thoughts; it inevitably expands outward, breaking down the structural boundaries of the subject. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Erica's unresolved, deconstructive mourning refuses to stay

confined to her interior world. Her psychological fragmentation manifests somatically as a physical wasting away, a literal hollowing out of her fleshly presence that culminates in her total disappearance from the clinic. By combining Alcorn's insights into the dangers of deconstructive figuration with Freud's architecture of melancholia, this literature review demonstrates that Erica's ultimate erasure is not an arbitrary plot device. Rather, it is the logical and tragic culmination of a subjective identity that has been completely unmade by its own internal inability to let go of the past.

To build a further deeper understanding of Erica's psychological decline in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, we must examine contemporary psychoanalytic debates regarding what it actually means to heal from loss. A crucial text for this discussion is Eckhard Frick's essay, "Freud on Death: Does the Work of Mourning Entail the Breaking or Maintaining of Attachment?" Frick explores a central question in modern psychology: does healthy grieving require a person to completely break their emotional ties with the dead, or can they find a way to maintain a healthy connection to them? While traditional interpretations of Sigmund Freud suggest that a survivor must fully detach from the lost object to move on, Frick argues that the human psyche naturally seeks to keep a place for the deceased within its ongoing life (1222). The danger arises when this attachment becomes rigid, preventing the person from participating in the living world.

Frick's focus on the boundary between healthy attachment and destructive fixation provides an excellent tool for analyzing Erica's behavior after Chris dies. When viewed through this lens, Erica's grief shifts from a natural desire to remember her childhood sweetheart into a severe, pathological manifestation of Freudian melancholia. As established previously, Freud argued that healthy mourning eventually allows a person to re-engage with reality, whereas

melancholia causes the ego to internalize the loss, trapping the person inside their own thoughts (244). By applying Frick's work, we can see that Erica fails to build a healthy, adaptive way of keeping Chris in her memory. Instead, her attachment completely takes over her mind. Her memories cease to be a comforting link to her past; rather, her internal world becomes entirely swallowed up by Chris's ghost, replacing her real-life existence with a hollow fantasy (Freud 245-46).

Furthermore, incorporating Frick's theories into this section highlights the profound isolation and lack of forward progress that defines Erica's story. Frick points out that when a survivor cannot find a healthy way to balance their memories of the dead with the demands of the present, their psychological development stops (1225). This is precisely what happens to Erica. After Chris's death, her timeline fractures, and she becomes completely unable to build a future with Changez. Because her emotional energy is entirely spent maintaining her rigid, unchanging attachment to Chris, she cannot invest herself in any new relationships. Her present reality is hollowed out by her dead lover, turning her life into a site of permanent psychological stagnation. Just as Frick warns that an inability to transform one's attachment turns the memory of the dead into a prison, Erica's entire capacity to love is neutralized by her unyielding loyalty to a ghost.

Finally, this tension between breaking or maintaining attachment explains the tragic inevitability of Erica's physical downfall. Frick notes that when the mind cannot successfully negotiate the trauma of death, the unexpressed psychic pain frequently breaks through psychological boundaries and impacts the physical body (1228). In the novel, Erica's unresolved melancholia refuses to remain hidden safely within her thoughts. Her mental fragmentation manifests physically as a gradual wasting away, a literal hollowing out of her body that

eventually leads to her total disappearance from the clinic. By combining Frick's insights into the complexities of attachment with Freud's baseline theory of melancholia, this literature review demonstrates that Erica's ultimate erasure is the logical and tragic result of an identity that has been completely destroyed by its inability to transform its bond with the dead.

Taken together, these scholarly works demonstrate that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is deeply concerned with trauma, identity, nostalgia, and psychological fragmentation in the post-9/11 world. Psychoanalytic critics such as Freud and Mustari emphasize melancholia and identity crisis, while theorists like Derrida and Naas complicate the possibility of overcoming grief altogether. Donnelly broadens grief into an ethical and political condition, whereas Jajja, Haris, and others foreground postcolonial identity and trauma. Ahmad and his co-authors contribute a particularly valuable relational understanding of nostalgia. However, despite these important contributions, there remains limited attention to Erica as an independent site of psychological inquiry. Most criticism either prioritizes Changez's ideological transformation or treats Erica symbolically as a representation of America. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining Erica's melancholia, deep nostalgia, and unresolved grief through a psychoanalytic lens while also exploring how emotional loss functions relationally between Erica and Changez.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE COMMINGLING OF SELVES AND THE SEEDS OF MELANCHOLIA

To trace the disintegration of Erica's identity, it is essential to first map her foundational psychic baseline, which is defined by an absolute enmeshment with her deceased childhood sweetheart, Chris. In the early stages of her interactions with Changez, Erica explicitly communicates the unconventional nature of her attachment, fundamentally redefining her sense of spatial and existential security. When reflecting on her deep-seated pining, she remarks to Changez: "So I kind of miss home, too... Except my home was a guy with long, skinny fingers" (Hamid 32).

By mapping the spatial concept of "home" onto a specific physical body, Erica anchors her psychic stability entirely within Chris's corporeal existence. Consequently, Chris's passing does not simply function as the external loss of a romantic partner; it precipitates an instantaneous erasure of her psychological geography. This profound boundary confusion between the self and the other is not merely a temporary state of grief, but a permanent structural condition of her psyche. Changez later confirms the dangerous depth of this attachment when reflecting on the history of their relationship, noting: "...theirs had been an unusual love, with such a degree of commingling of identities that when Chris died, Erica felt she had lost herself; even now, she said, she did not know if she could be found" (Hamid 104).

When examined through a Freudian framework, this extreme "commingling" reveals a classic trajectory of pathologically structuralized melancholia rather than normal mourning. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud posits that while the healthy mourning subject

undergoes a gradual process of detaching their libido/emotional energy from the lost object, the melancholic subject is entirely unable to let go. (243-244). Instead, the object-cathexis is withdrawn directly into the ego, leading to an unconscious psychic introjection. Because Erica's baseline identity was so completely intertwined with Chris's living self, his death inflicts a catastrophic narcissistic wound upon her ego. She cannot mourn Chris without simultaneously mourning and fundamentally destroying herself (249-250). The dead object is entirely absorbed by the ego, ensuring that any attempt to confront the loss results in an internal amputation that paralyzes her capacity to maintain a stable, independent presence in reality. Freud explains this phenomenon through the idea that "the shadow of the object falls upon the ego," (249) meaning that the subject begins to identify with the lost object rather than externalizing it.

### **The Ego and Psychological Fragmentation**

The latent melancholia established by this loss remains submerged until external cataclysms violently breach Erica's defense mechanisms, triggering a rapid fragmentation of her identity. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, the macro-level trauma of the city unearths the micro-level trauma of Erica's personal history. Over a dinner conversation with Changez, Erica describes her immediate psychological regression: "The attacks churned up old thoughts in my head... I keep thinking about Chris... It's kind of like I've been thrown back a year... I mean, I'm eating fine. I haven't lost it. But I feel haunted, you know?" (Hamid 91-92) .

Changez immediately registers the broader symbolic and psychic mechanisms at play during this shift, noting the distinct way external violence mirrors her internal collapse. Observing her behavior to the silent American listener, Changez observes: "The destruction of the World Trade Center had, as she had said, churned up old thoughts that had settled in the



manner of sediment to the bottom of a pond; now the waters of her mind were murky with what previously had been ignored" (Hamid 94).

This psychic upheaval is perfectly illuminated by Naas explains Derrida's concept of survival (*survie*), where a relationship is always structured by the spectral reality that one person will survive the other(114-115). For Derrida, the specter is a figure that is neither fully present nor fully absent, permanently disrupting the linear progression of time. Chris acts as this exact spectral force within Erica's psyche. The geopolitical catastrophe of 9/11 does not create a novel form of grief; rather, it acts as a traumatic catalyst that violently agitates the repressed "sediment" of her un-mourned past. The external collapse of the towers breaks down her remaining psychological defenses, dragging her into an anachronistic temporal loop where she is "thrown back" into the past. The spectral reality of Chris effectively overwrites her present experience, making the past far more vivid and authoritative than her current surroundings.

This severe temporal disruption rapidly transitions from psychological haunting into a total somatic collapse, demonstrating the progressive breakdown of her identity as a functioning woman. Reflecting on her historical vulnerability and her worsening state during a trip to Central Park, Erica details the severe measures required to manage her condition: "I stopped... a bunch of things. For a while I stopped talking to people. I stopped eating. I had to go to the hospital. They told me not to think about it so much and put me on medication. My mom had to take three months off work because I couldn't be by myself" (Hamid 68).

As time progresses, this fragmentation manifests even more sharply in her physical appearance and daily cognitive functions. When Changez encounters her later in the novel, he is deeply alarmed by her physically diminished state: "At the counter was a diminished Erica, not the vivid, confident woman I knew but a pale, nervous creature who could almost have been a

stranger... she seemed too brittle to be touched. 'What happens is,' she went on, 'my mind starts to go in circles, thinking and thinking, and then I can't sleep... You can't eat. You start to cry. It just feeds on itself'" (Hamid 116-117).

This somatic degradation represents a literal shrinking of her personhood, shifting her from a confident woman into a "brittle" stranger to both Changez and herself. Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories on depression and melancholia in *Black Sun* provide a vital framework for understanding this stage of her collapse. Kristeva argues that severe melancholia induces a radical breakdown of meaning and a systematic rejection of the "symbolic order"—the structured realm of language, time, and societal reality (3-4). Erica's mind going "in circles" and her inability to eat or sleep signify the absolute failure of this symbolic order to contain or process her grief. Her language begins to collapse into cyclical, self-feeding loops of dark thoughts, driving her into a state of physical and mental paralysis where her internal void entirely overwrites external reality (6).

### **Emotional Withdrawal, Desublimation, and the Collapse of Identity**

The final movement of Erica's psychic trajectory is characterized by a deliberate, total withdrawal from the social world, the collapse of her creative outputs, and her complete disappearance into the past. This emotional alienation manifests long before her formal institutionalization, appearing in her everyday social interactions as an active retreat from interpersonal connection. When first forming an attachment to Changez, she admits her preference for isolation, stating: "You give people their space. I really like that. It's unusual" (Hamid 28).

Changez gradually recognizes that this desire for "space" is actually a symptom of a deeper, systematic recession from life. He notices how she strategically utilizes the presence of

others as an opportunistic shield to slip away unnoticed, observing: "At these moments... she frequently became introspective; it was as though their presence allowed her to withdraw, to recede a half-step inside herself" (Hamid 66).

This internal drift soon accelerates into a violent, inescapable psychological undertow. Changez describes her growing detachment from her immediate environment to the American listener, warning of the danger lurking within her mind: "...she was struggling against a current that pulled her within herself, and her smile contained the fear that she might slip into her own depths, where she would be trapped, unable to breathe" (Hamid 98).

This profound withdrawal represents the final stage of Freudian and Kristevian melancholia, where the ego is entirely consumed by the internalized dead object. Erica finds solace in Changez's "space" precisely because it imposes no emotional demands on her depleted ego, allowing her to protect her interior fixation on Chris. In broader social settings, she uses the background noise of crowds as a camouflage to slide inward. Changez's vivid metaphors of the "current" and the suffocating "depths" accurately illustrate her losing battle against her own psyche. Kristeva describes this state as being entirely fixed to a pre-verbal abyss—a psychological space that precedes language and identity (3). Erica's smile betrays her underlying terror because she consciously recognizes that her individual identity is being systematically dissolved into the dead, empty void left behind by Chris.

This complete collapse of her psychological defenses is finalized when her primary mechanism of coping her writing fails her entirely. Speaking about her ongoing struggle to finish her novella, she admits that art can no longer provide a therapeutic release: "I can't seem to work on it... It doesn't help anymore... I used to turn to it, my writing, when I needed to get something

out that was stuck inside. But I can't get it out now. It pulls me in, you know? I dwell on it instead of writing it" (Hamid 127).

In psychoanalytic terms, creative expression is traditionally understood as an act of *sublimation* the healthy process of converting internal psychic trauma and pain into external, socially constructive art. For Erica, this sublimatory channel breaks down completely. When Erica can no longer write, it signifies that her symbolic defenses have utterly collapsed. The trauma can no longer be externalized or mediated through the safety of fiction; instead, the writing itself becomes a dangerous vortex that "pulls her in," forcing her to dwell directly within the melancholic abyss.

Ultimately, this inability to sublimate her grief culminates in her total disappearance from the physical world, representing the complete victory of the dead object over her living identity. Once admitted to a mental health institution, her focus shifts from living in the present to existing purely within her memories. Changez notes the absolute reorientation of her reality after speaking with her medical staff: "for Erica he was alive enough, and that was the problem: it was difficult for Erica to be out in the world... when in her mind she was experiencing things that were stronger and more meaningful than the things she could experience with the rest of us. So Erica felt better in a place like this, separated from the rest of us, where people could live in their minds without feeling bad about it" (Hamid 151).

In their final poignant interaction, Erica explicitly frames her total isolation as an act of tragic necessity to prevent her pathology from harming those around her: "I'm sorry I've been hiding... It's just that I could see I was pulling you in, and I didn't want you to get hurt... It hurts when you care about someone and they go away." When Changez asks where she is going, "She shrugged and did not answer" (Hamid 152-153).

In this institutional setting, Erica's psychological transformation and subsequent erasure are finalized. The deceased Chris possesses far more psychic reality, authority, and emotional weight than the entire living world combined. She chooses to consciously isolate herself from Changez, recognizing that her melancholia has become a destructive vortex capable of pulling others into its non-being. Her final, silent shrug when questioned about her trajectory confirms the total and irrevocable erasure of her identity. Erica willingly surrenders her physical reality, her role as an author, and her identity as a woman, choosing instead to be completely buried alive within the landscape of memory.

In *essence*, Erica's character illustrates nostalgia not as a comforting memory, but as a form of psychological entrapment that disrupts emotional and cognitive growth. By redefining her "home" as an embodied memory of her late partner, Chris, her identity becomes entirely anchored in the past. This obsessive repetition creates a parallel emotional world that actively competes with her lived reality. Following the September 11 attacks, this nostalgia functions as a repetitive loop rather than a progression, effectively trapping her in temporal cycles of loss and reactivating her emotional wounds instead of allowing her to heal.

This psychological stagnation transitions into melancholia, a state of pathological mourning best understood through the lenses of Freud and Kristeva. Because Erica cannot detach from Chris, her grief is internalized rather than resolved, leading to a complete breakdown of emotional regulation and a total withdrawal from the external world. This condition manifests as an embodied collapse where she ceases eating and speaking to others, requiring hospitalization. From an existential standpoint, her internal world becomes dominated by an unprocessed emotional void, causing a collapse of meaning where life loses its symbolic coherence and her grief becomes entirely self-consuming.

Furthermore, Erica's melancholia manifests as a profound emotional withdrawal and increasing silence, creating an impenetrable psychological boundary between herself and others, including Changez. This inability to translate emotional pain into language ultimately leads to a complete collapse of identity. Because her past relationship involved a deep commingling of identities, Chris's death leaves her ego fragmented and structurally defined by his absence. She does not merely grieve him; her autonomous selfhood completely dissolves, leaving her to exist primarily through absence.

Beyond her individual psychology, Erica serves as a powerful allegorical symbol for national trauma within the United States post-September 11. Her emotional stagnation and inability to move past Chris mirror a broader cultural condition where a society becomes trapped in its own cycles of memory and loss. Just as Erica remains fixed in her nostalgia, the nation remains stubbornly anchored to a pre-trauma identity, resisting necessary transformation. Through this lens, her character bridges individual psychological suffering with collective, national emotional states.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This study examined the psychological and emotional trajectory of Erica in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* through a psychoanalytic framework, focusing on the interconnected themes of nostalgia, melancholia, emotional withdrawal, and identity collapse. By applying the theories of Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida, the research has demonstrated how unresolved grief can extend beyond emotional suffering and become a destabilizing force that reshapes identity, perception, and subjectivity itself.

The analysis shows that Erica's character is defined by her inability to detach from the memory of her deceased lover, Chris. Rather than progressing through a natural and socially expected process of mourning, she becomes trapped in a state of melancholia, where loss is internalized and continuously reactivated within her psyche. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia helps explain this condition, revealing how Erica's grief transforms into psychological stagnation, emotional paralysis, and gradual self-erasure. In this sense, loss does not remain an external event but becomes part of her inner structure of identity.

Similarly, Kristeva's theory of melancholia highlights Erica's increasing silence, emotional withdrawal, and inability to express her internal suffering through language or communication. Her emotional world becomes increasingly inaccessible, not only to others but also to herself, reinforcing her isolation from social and psychological reality. This breakdown of expression suggests that her suffering is not only emotional but also linguistic and symbolic in nature, where grief cannot be processed or articulated.

Furthermore, Derrida's concept of the "impossibility of mourning" (115) deepens this understanding by suggesting that loss is never fully resolved but remains as a trace within the self, continuously shaping identity from within. From this perspective, Erica's persistent attachment to Chris is not simply a failure to move on but reflects a structural condition of subjectivity in which the past remains permanently inscribed within the present. This prevents her from forming new emotional connections and keeps her locked within a continuous cycle of memory, absence, and return.

The study also explored how Erica's psychological condition leads to a gradual and almost imperceptible collapse of identity. Her sense of self becomes increasingly dependent on her past relationship to the extent that she is no longer able to function as an autonomous individual. Her withdrawal from social interaction, emotional instability, and obsessive fixation on memory collectively illustrate how melancholia can erode the boundaries of the self and replace individuality with absence-centered existence.

In addition, the research highlighted Erica's symbolic significance within the novel. While many critics interpret her as an allegorical representation of America's post-9/11 condition, this study extends that reading by emphasizing the underlying psychological mechanisms that produce such symbolism. Her condition reflects not only national trauma but also the deeply personal consequences of unresolved grief, suggesting a parallel between individual psychological breakdown and collective cultural memory. In this way, Erica functions simultaneously as a psychological subject and a cultural metaphor.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that Erica's character embodies the destructive potential of unresolved mourning, where nostalgia transforms into psychological entrapment and melancholia leads to the fragmentation and eventual dissolution of identity. Her narrative



illustrates how excessive attachment to the past does not merely delay healing but actively disrupts the formation of a stable self. The study therefore contributes to psychoanalytic readings of literature by demonstrating how grief, when unprocessed, can become a structure of identity collapse rather than a transitional emotional phase.

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