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Contemporary Literature  
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Prompt: What role does ethnocentricity play in the spectrum of selfishness to selflessness throughout the novel?

### The Center of the World

America is stereotypically called the land of opportunity and individuals such as my parents immigrate to make a better life here. Due to wanting more opportunities, many people from all over the world immigrate to America. This leads to a convergence of ethnicities and compels immigrants to put others' feelings first so they can fit in. Despite the efforts of immigrants to assimilate, the American citizens still carry prejudiced views and highlight the differences between the immigrant's cultural background and physical traits. This causes the immigrants to feel as if they are outsiders. Is it possible to learn from these prejudices and think of others feelings before one's own? In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, when Changez immigrates to America he initially neglects his ethnic background to fit in leading him to act selflessly, but as he learns from his experiences in America he grows to become ethnocentric and focuses on his own self interest. Erica tries to be selfless, however, her caucasian ethnocentric view of the world and privileged upbringing in America inherently cause her to end up acting selfishly. Both characters, one immigrant and one native who has little cultural perspective, oppose the experiences of one another. Though their stories are different, they show how ultimately identifying with one ethnic background leads to ethnocentricity which causes both characters to act selfishly.

Similar to many immigrants, Changez's lack of stable ethnic identity causes him to act selflessly towards the Americans who can provide him with opportunity and what he deems

success, such as his boss and love interest, even if he does not agree with his actions. Once Changez gets a job at Underwood Samson, his boss, Jim, continually misjudges Changez's travails. Jim speaks to Changez as if he can relate to him regarding his background. Changez questions whether he should "reject it and slight the confessor," but he decides to stay quiet and carefully avoid the topic in hopes that he does not embarrass or discredit Jim's experiences (Hamid 20). Though Changez internally grapples with the idea of possibly correcting Jim, he selflessly chooses to stay silent, relate, and even sometimes empathize with Jim. Similarly, Changez suppresses his true emotions about 9/11 when consoling his love interest, Erica. After the destruction of the World Trade Center, Erica is reminded of the death of her previous boyfriend. Due to the large affect this event had on many Americans, Changez attempts to console and empathize with those grieving. Changez identifies how this event "churned up old thoughts"(83). Though Changez is struggling with his ethnic identity surrounding the aftermath of 9/11, he still compassionately reaches out and provides care for Erica as she mourns. He takes on the role of a savior in hopes to help her, and does not attend to his own problems. Changez feels the need to act selflessly in hopes to assimilate to and understand the world around him.

As Changez lives longer in America and experiences the true selfishness and ethnocentricity those around him carry, he turns to his true identity, his Pakistani heritage, and becomes more invested in his self- interest. After he recognizes his dissatisfaction with working for America, a country that has not been supportive of his cultural identity and home country of Pakistan, he decides to quit his job and move back home. He loses all his opportunities but is ultimately making decisions for himself rather than for others. In the process of quitting, he disregards the possible negative ways it would affect the reputation of the American company he

works for, named Underwood Samson, as he decides that “his days of focusing on the fundamentals were done” (153). He makes this conscious decision due to his newfound true identity as a Pakistani. He realizes how Underwood Samson acts on self-interest just as America was doing within its foreign affairs, and he loses hope in the American system. After quitting his job, he also strives to better the country he identifies with, and he works to advocate his beliefs against America without regarding those he was once close to when he worked there. By “participating in demonstrations for greater independence in Pakistan’s domestic and international affairs,” Changez shows how he has taken action to finally think about his own background identity and focus on his own personal beliefs (179). As he realizes all that he has learned from his years surrounded by others who are driven by self-interest, Changez finally finds a voice to assert his hopes to only benefit himself and his home country. Changez realizes how much relief he feels when he can truly identify with his ethnicity without worrying about being different to those around him. He finally uses his efforts to speak his mind rather than play into the wishes of the Americans surrounding him. He also learns how selfishness can advance the superiority of his country, Pakistan, similar to what he witnessed in America.

Erica attempts to look past her limited cultural knowledge to sympathize with Changez’s struggles as an immigrant, causing her to seem like she is truly selfless and is thinking about the struggles Changez has to deal with. When she first meets him, she begins to try to understand his background and identity. She continually questions him, asking about his culture and past life. When Erica asks “what does your writing look like?” she portrays her attempt to selflessly connect and see from Changez’s vantage point (27). She paints herself as a curious person who truly cares about his heritage without initially inserting her ethnocentric views. Erica also helps

Changez integrate into New York City by inviting him to her house and taking him out with her. She shows her consideration to him feeling like an outsider and works to make him feel like he belongs trying to prove to herself that she is putting his needs before her own. Saying “wow” while reaching out to touch his kurta, Erica tries to portray her disregard for her ignorant and U.S.-centric viewpoint by acknowledging the beauty of his South Asian outfit (50). She puts in an effort to look past her limited view of the world and admire other cultures by accepting Changez’s identity as a Pakistani. Erica also acknowledges her own family’s racist remarks towards Changez. When she says “I hope you’re not upset about what my dad said,” Erica shows how she is selflessly working to acknowledge how Changez feels about the crude comments her father made (55). Though she does not truly understand how Changez feels when he is racially profiled, she works to expand her global perception in hopes to connect with Changez and make him feel like he belongs. Erica continually endeavors to act altruistically even though she continually wears rose-colored glasses and sees through the perspective of a privileged American.

Erica tries to care about others, however, her developed perspective as a white American leads her to act selfishly by continually making all her problems the center of discussion and causing Changez to constantly questioning their relationship and her wellbeing. She initially brings up her past relationship with Chris as passing information with Changez. But over time she shows her true narcissistic side by making all her conversations with Changez revolve around her past relationship, which is something her parents and the American culture have perpetuated. Erica and Chris’s relationship parallels America’s relationship with the past before 9/11. Just as America longed for a world like the one before the tragedy, “Erica longed for her

adolescence with Chris” (113). After the attack on the World Trade Center, Erica herself feels like she is going through loss again and selfishly focuses on her dilemmas after the event and never acknowledges the effects of the event on him. She garners this perspective from her ethnocentric perspective of the global issues occurring at the time. America focuses on the pain and destruction of 9/11 and disregards the conflicts occurring around the world such as those in Southeast Asia specifically regarding Pakistan. Erica also feels like she deserves Changez even if she does not reciprocate his care. She “finally call[s]” Changez after six weeks and brings him back into her life (131). Erica draws him back in to meet her at the rehabilitation center where she is staying. She causes him to focus on her problems after isolating herself without any regard for how he is feeling regarding the lack of communication she has had with him. She feels entitled to his support because of her privileged upbringing as a white, upper-class American. Through her struggles, Erica has never been alone or had to disregard her feelings, so she feels like her relationship with Changez follows those same guidelines. Erica’s ethnic and economic advantage causes her to act with self-interest to feel an innate sense of authority.

Human nature is to want to belong and not only survive but thrive. This innate mentality is seen in you, the immigrant, who moved to make a better life for yourself. Each background has an established superiority, as historically set up by society, and that advantage causes the wealthy, white, American born citizens to not only act more self-centered but also convince themselves that they are doing good for others. Though they may try to sympathize with the struggles of the immigrants, they never fully comprehend and instead downplay the internal tug of war each identity plays within an assimilating immigrant. Comfort comes from knowing

where you belong, and no matter what the ethnic background, that feeling tends to lead to narcissistic tendencies. How do we break this pattern?

Having completed this work by reading the book, writing the essay, and editing with Freya, I pledge on my honor that this work is my honest and responsible effort unique to this assignment and my own work.

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