

‘AS I HAVE ALREADY TOLD YOU, I DID NOT
GROW UP IN POVERTY. BUT I DID GROW UP
WITH A POOR BOY’S SENSE OF LONGING’

– On The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Girard, and
the relationship between desire and violence

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Abstract This book review of Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* attempts to present an alternative perspective on human violence by applying Girard's literary theory of mimetic desire to the main turning point in the novel: the sudden realization by the protagonist, a Westernized Pakistani called Changez, that he desires to see the United States harmed. The review hypothesizes that this is the case not because Changez despises America and its values, but rather because he mirrors them so closely. Broadening its perspective, the review then moves from the literary to the real world, discussing the added value of applying this concept to the relationship between the US and Al-Qa'ida. Lastly, the review points out (possibly problematic) implications of this interpretation of violence.

I 'Why did part of me desire to see America harmed?'

In 2010, freshmen entering the Washington University in St. Louis (United States) were required to read a 2007 novel by a largely unknown Pakistani author ('First Year Reading Program', 2010). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid seemed to have hit a nerve, provoking an immense response in the West as well as his home country. Set in the post-9/11 world, Changez, a Pakistani university lecturer, tells a mysterious American stranger his story over tea in a street cafe. Written in monologue style, the focus shifts between the situation in the Lahore cafe on the one hand and Changez' life history on the other.

Changez' narrative is characterized by his references to cultural differences between the US and Pakistan. He stresses his attempts to become like an American in order to restore his lost family status, which forms a source of shame. Every now and then, the reader is reminded of the setting and the possible danger that lingers in the Lahore café - never really sure if this will come from Changez himself, the unknown American or perhaps even the Pakistani waiter. Having graduated *summa cum laude* from Princeton, Changez starts working at Underwood Samson, a prestigious valuation firm in the U.S. where employees should 'focus on the fundamentals' (p.112).¹ Subsequently, he falls in love with Erica, whose longtime boyfriend has just passed away. Changez' story takes a crucial turn on 9/11, when he watches the Twin Towers fall from his luxurious business hotel room. From that moment onwards, American society and Changez' opinion on his own place therein seem

¹ Page-numbers without names all refer to passages in Hamid's novel.

to change. Eventually, he decides to return to Pakistan forever and aligns himself with a fundamentalist anti-American camp in the country. The monologue-style of the books adds to the suspicion the strange encounter with the unknown American provokes. Moreover, it allows the reader to follow Changez' transformation, which is not so subtly announced by the author via the character's name.

Many critics have tried to divine Hamid's intentions: does the book tell us that the West should learn to empathize with post-9/11 radicalization in the Muslim world? Did the US create its own enemies and is thus fully responsible for 9/11 (Anthony, 2012)? Is the story an example of the destructive forces of ethnic profiling and cultural misunderstanding (Kirkus Review, 2007)? The novel touches upon many of these relevant issues in today's terrorism-debate. Nevertheless, one of its most fascinating aspects - although minimally elaborated upon by critics - is the contentment that violence can bring us, or, as our protagonist describes it: 'I stared as one - and then the other - of the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased' (p.83). This passage forms the very crux of the novel (Olsson, 2007), impelling Changez to ask himself the crucial question: 'Why did part of me desire to see America harmed?' (p.84). This paper tries to find an answer to this question by employing René Girard's theory of mimetic desire. First, the theory is introduced, after which it is applied to Changez' transformation and Al-Qa'ida's attack on the United States. Finally, the review touches upon some important and problematic implications of this use of Girard's theory.

2 Imitation and desire – Girard's theory

The idea of mimetic desire, as elaborated by French literary theorist and anthropologist René Girard, gives us a clue as to where Changez' sentiment might originate. According to Girard (1990), conflict is natural to human interaction. Human interaction leads to desire: first, the desire to imitate another human being, a model. As a result of this mirroring, one adopts the objects of desire of this model. Next, a derived desire to take possession of the objects of desire of the model, called metaphysical or acquisitive desire, takes place (Gallese, 2009; Imitatio.org, 2015a). As a consequence, the model one tries to imitate inevitably becomes the rival (Chow, 2006). This mimetic rivalry, put simply, suggests that people fight not because they are different, but because they want the same things (Adams & Girard, 1993, p.23). They do not necessarily need those things: rather, they want to provoke others' envy (Imitatio.org, 2015d). As a result of this process of imitation, rivals become increasingly similar, up to the point that they

are 'monstrous doubles' (Girard as cited in Chow, p.143).

The only way to break the consequential vicious cycle of reciprocal violence is to sacrifice a surrogate victim: a scapegoat. According to Girard, 'the sacrifice that is collectively ordained and practiced' is mimetic desire 'ritualized' (Chow, 2006, p. 143). Hence, victimhood is a matter of social necessity and bears a 'systemic', if not purifying, function (Chow, 2006, p. 145). Ritual violence, expressed in cultural practices such as art, is creative and protective in nature, whereas reciprocal violence is wholly destructive. The process of sacrificing a scapegoat is crucial, because it alleviates the violent tensions. The scapegoat ought to be the girl or boy-next-door: they must be a clearly identifiable member of the community in order for the other members to accept the sacrifice. Their expulsion is substituted for the preservation of the group as a whole.

'Who is the victim?', one of the major questions The Reluctant Fundamentalist raises, changes meaning in this context. Are both the United States and Al-Qa'ida participating in a destructive cycle of violence that produces only tragedy, or should 9/11 be perceived as a ritual sacrifice that helps to set the balance straight? And what about our protagonist's satisfaction after the attack? In the following, Girard's theory will serve to explain where Changez' contentment stems from. Moreover, in an attempt to discover the theory's usefulness outside of the literary realm, the concept of mimetic desire will be applied to Al-Qaida's real-world violence.

3 Changez' desire and sacrifice

The desire to imitate a model is one of the most outspoken themes in Hamid's novel. Changez works hard to be able to identify as American, with all the status that comes with it and that his Pakistani family lost throughout the years. When assigned a prestigious business project in the Philippines, he remarks to feel on top of the world, being 'a young New Yorker [emphasis added] with the city at my feet' (p.51). Once in the Philippines, for example, Changez attempts 'to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an American [emphasis added]' (p.74).

Changez' desire is not solely aimed at being like the average successful American, however, but is focused on one specific person: Chris(tian)², Erica's late boyfriend. Changez wants what Chris used to want: Erica.³ This desire is

² Representing the Christian aspect of American society.

³ Whose name might be seen, if we follow the earlier logic, as a reference to '(Am)erica'.

only fulfilled when Changez asks Erica to pretend he is Chris, after which they make love. Changez remarks: 'I felt at once both satiated and ashamed. (...). Perhaps, by taking on the persona of another, I had diminished myself in my own eyes' (p.121). This ambiguity, exemplified by the novel's title, is another recurrent theme: whilst admiring them for their confidence, Changez also despises his American coworkers for their arrogance. Whilst feeling proud to identify as an American in the Philippines, he feels shame when realizing his background is more like that of the average Philippine street worker. Changez has a prestigious job, lives in a spacious New York apartment and dates a WASP⁴ girl: this is the moment where the subject and object of desire start to resemble each other to the extent that they become barely distinguishable. Changez himself experiences this as a problem, which he describes as follows: 'I did not know where I stood on so many issues of consequence; I lacked a stable core' (p.168).

According to Girard, there are two ways for such a literary conflict to be solved through sacrifice: the sacrifice of a tangible scapegoat or the sacrifice of a character's ego, as it were. The latter implies a 'return of the subject upon himself' and is characterized by genuine self-criticism on one's former beliefs and actions (Girard, 1990, p.214). The character follows a path of death-by sacrifice and resurrection comparable to that of Christ (Girard, 1990). Hamid uses this century-old pattern, describing Changez' realization of the betrayal of his true self⁵ as a result of his Americanization. When visiting his family back in Pakistan, for instance, Changez draws the crucial conclusion: 'It occurred to me that the house had not changed in my absence. I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner- and not just any foreigner- but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American [emphasis added] that had so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country's elite' (p.141). When he decides to move back to Pakistan for good, he thus sacrifices all that had defined the American Changez: his hard-fought status, work, respect and love. In this death-and-resurrection pattern, it is not surprising that Changez admits to feeling 'waves of mourning' washing over himself at times (p.195).

Occasionally, it feels as if Hamid speaks directly to the reader, announcing the yet to happen transformation. For instance, in the first half of the novel, he

⁴ Popular term utilized in the United States which refers to an historically influential ethnic group: "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant".

⁵ At one point, Changez describes himself as a 'modern-day janissary', referring to the Christian boys that were recruited and indoctrinated by the Ottoman Empire to fight as soldiers against the culture they had been born in (p.173).

makes Changez remark how 'perhaps it is in our nature to recognize subconsciously the link between mortality and procreation [emphasis added] - that is, between the finite and the infinite - and we are in fact driven by reminders of the one to seek out the other' (p.89). By putting to death all that he has built up, Changez solves his inner conflict and is able to create a new 'stable core' which allows him to live sincerely. This also explains why, even years after the event, Changez does not feel particularly sorrowful about 9/11: the attack allowed for the sacrifice of his former self and the creation of a new self that is no longer facing an inner conflict. Taking a step back from the novel, the application of Girard's theory to Changez' case raises an interesting follow-up question: did Al-Qa'ida achieve a comparable resolution of inner conflict on a larger scale?

4 Al-Qa'ida's desire and sacrifice

This is where literature and real life part. Whereas Changez' sacrifice is a non-material, intangible one (except for the beard he grows, maybe, to end his business-look), Al-Qa'ida opted for real-world violence. Following Girard's theory, this might mean two things: either, the 9/11 attacks were a form of ritual violence, or they were purely one act in a vicious cycle of destructive, reciprocal violence. First of all, however, it has to be evaluated whether the US and Al-Qai'da are actually engaged in a process of imitation.

Remarkably, many observers have emphasized the similarities between the US' strategies and those of Al-Qa'ida, suggesting that a process of mirroring is taking place. Whereas Gray (2003) draws attention to the modern way of thinking that Al-Qa'ida employs, Agathangelou and Ling (2004) go as far as to say that 'America's War on Terror and Al-Qa'ida's jihad reflect mirror strategies of imperial politics' (p.517). They argue that there are important similarities between the US' and Al-Qa'ida's politics, which are based upon a belief in human agency and progress, employ violent tactics that violate state sovereignty and include mutual negative framing of the other party in media. What's more, both parties transnationalize violence and insecurity to protect or restore the national or communal security (Agathangelou & Ling, 2004).⁶ Hence, there might be what Girard calls 'a sacrificial crisis': a state of chaos caused by the absence of distinction between two actors (Chow,

⁶ Following this line of reasoning, it is perhaps less surprising that many highly placed Al-Qa'ida members, including Bin Laden, were either educated in or sponsored by the West, or both (Agathangelou & Ling, 2004).

2006, p.143). Abovementioned similarities might be the result of the process of mimetic desire, with Al-Qa'ida desiring to be as powerful, respected and feared as the US and both aspiring to international power, resulting in animosity. Following this line of thought, the suicide attackers of 9/11 play the part of sacrificial scapegoats in Girard's model: as Girard points out, the Latin 'sacer' means both 'sacred' and 'accursed', which leaves space for the sacrificed to achieve the almost holy status of martyrdom, a process that is not uncommon amongst Al-Qa'ida's followers (Chow, 2006).

The crucial question remains, however, if this sacrifice has truly ended the cycle of violence: 9/11 was surely not the last Al-Qa'ida attack aimed at hurting the U.S. in specific or 'the West' in general and thus does not seem to have led to a resolution of any kind. Thus, Al-Qa'ida's pattern of a suicide killer who takes the live of his enemies as well as his own can hardly be interpreted as ritualized violence: it resembles more closely the destructive instead of the procreative, harmless and tension-relieving kind that Girard proposes as the only peaceful solution to mimetic conflict. However, it is not at all impossible that Changez (and others with him) felt as if 9/11 was of this latter kind: after all, the attack and its aftermath finally allowed him to resolve his inner struggle, resulting in overwhelming satisfaction rather than a sense of fright and terror.

5 An alternative view on violence

Girard's theory offers us an alternative approach to violence in general and 9/11 specifically. Contrary to the much-heard narrative about a 'Clash of Civilizations', which positions a supposed incompatibility of Occidental and Oriental (religious) thought at the root of violence, Girard holds that beliefs and ideas do not form the basis for conflict (Adams & Girard, 1993; Huntington, 1993). That is not to say they are not influential. Rather, they deceive us into believing that they are the core actors, while they are really concealing what is mimetic desire (Adams & Girard, 1993). Hence, it is not the ideology (religious, economic, etc.) we should focus on when trying to explain (Islamic) terrorism: rather, it is the desire that hides beyond this ideology.

This view on violence as being inevitable to human interaction is interestingly different from the narratives we are used to hearing. Whereas postcolonial (Ghandi, 1998) and feminist (Sullivan, 2003) theorists generally argue that it is the disparity between those with power and those without it that produces (physical) violence, Girard's theory argues the opposite: it is the equalizing effect produced by the reciprocity of violence, the century-old notion of 'an

eye for an eye', that is the source of our greatest terror (Chow, 2006). Practically speaking, closing the gaps in economic, cultural and political power between the non-Western world and the West would not resolve the vicious cycle of violence that is harming both sides of the equation. Rather, the (perhaps naive) solution lies in finding a non-violent way to release the pressure that is produced by the growing interaction and similarity between cultures as a result of globalization. This peaceful 'substitute violence' is found in cultural practices such as literature and other forms of art (Chow, 2006, p.143).

It is important to point out that mimetic desire can have both positive and negative outcomes. Although Girard focuses on violence, he also holds that mimetic desire is the basis for love, viewed as the imitation of a positive model (Gallese, 2009). Mimetic desire, after all, is the opening up of oneself to others, or, as Changez phrases it: 'Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us' (p.197). Tensions only arise when the desirable is not shareable and rivalry becomes inevitable ('Mimesis en begeerte', 2015).

As seen in the case of Al-Qa'ida, applying Girard's logic to units larger than individuals might fail to provide us with satisfying solutions to large-scale, real-world violence. However, the logic of mimetic desire can very well be relevant on a level higher than the individual. As an example, Girard mentions the Western reaction on its own ethnocentrism, 'scapegoating our [entire] own culture in the process' by classifying everything Christian or Western as hypocrite and shallow (Adams & Girard, 1993, p.27). Without rejecting a critical stance towards Western values and practices, Girard does point us towards the problem of rash scapegoating, even if that is aimed at one's own culture: it keeps us caught in the cycle of racism and violence which is supposedly being repudiated by the very act of scapegoating (Adams & Girard, 1993).

6 In Nietzsche's and Freud's footsteps?

One could argue that Girard's take on violence is a highly nihilistic one. If followed to its extreme, his logic might imply that the willful extermination that takes place during genocides and other monstrosities should be understood as a sacrificial ritual, 'a cultural process whose purpose is to forestall a worse form of disaster' (Chow, 2006, p. 146). In this light, the theory of mimetic desire seems to rationalize extreme violence and the victimhood that it produces, reducing it to a mere social necessity. As such, it mitigates the moral aspects of violence and problematizes questions of responsibility and individual agency, simply understanding violence as a way to restore or preserve a social equilibrium (Chow,

2006). While this nihilism might be a problematic implication of Girard's theory, one should not overlook the importance of mimetic desire as the source of love and ethics: the imitation of a positive model, an imitation equally driven by mimetic desire, has peaceful rather than violent results. A clear example of this is that of a child imitating his parents, (hopefully) learning how to behave ethically and responsibly in the process. Desire on behalf of the other, then, can be regarded as the basis for ethics (Adams & Girard, 1993).

Another important implication of Girard's theory is that it seems to suggest that freedom of will is an illusion (Adams & Girard, 1993). The individual is an essentially relative, relational being, formed by his social interactions with others. Since the self is always defined antagonistically to others and formed by the mirroring of actions to those of others, one's life path seems to be determined by the models one follows (Chow, 2006; Imitatio.org, 2015a). Girard rejects this criticism, but does not give a clear explanation as to whether it is possible for individuals to resist the natural human inclination towards mimetic desire or to alter its outcomes (Adams & Girard, 1993). Following Freud's ideas on the unconscious mind, Girard argues that the process of desire happens largely on a subconscious level (Imitatio.org, 2015a; Juergensmeyer, 2003). This leaves one to wonder whether we can be fully autonomous beings, responsible for our desires and the actions that flow from these. Changez finds it difficult, even after his 'resurrection', to view himself independently of the model he has now alienated himself from. He remarks: '(...) it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be' (p.197).

7 Concluding remarks

Girard argues that violence today is not any different from violence in Biblical times. Rather, it is a natural consequence of human interaction, which produces mimetic desire. The destructive forces of this desire can only be alleviated by a ritual sacrifice, which takes a destructive or a creative form. This approach to violence sheds a different light on The Reluctant Fundamentalist as a whole Changez' reaction to 9/11 in specific: he does not simply hate the US because it forms a cultural antagonist of Pakistan. Instead, his contentment stems from the resolution of internal violence that had plagued him since he moved to US and started to mirror himself to the American model. His transformation after 9/11 can be explained as a typical literary

self-sacrifice, where the character realizes his 'betrayal' and feels the need for self-purification. Applying the theory of mimetic desire to Al-Qa'ida, however, is more problematic. After all, it remains hard to imagine Al-Qa'ida or the US state willing (and able) to implement Girard's ideas of a peaceful ritualization of violence in order to halt their vicious cycle of destruction. Nevertheless, the idea of mimetic desire offers a new perspective on the relationship between so-called enemies and the meaning of victimhood. Ultimately, animosity does not stem from ideological, religious or economic differences. Rather, it is the result of human interaction and similtudes, which have increased as a result of globalization. This view of violence has an equalizing effect because it applies to all (interacting) humans at all times and in all places. As a result, victimhood becomes a matter of social and structural necessity more than anything else. This implication is also the most important criticism to Girard's theory: it has the risk of reducing our views on (human) life as nothing more than a function in a larger system, which makes it difficult to believe in autonomous actions as well as ethical responsibility for these actions. In Girard's defense, however, it must be stressed that mimetic desire also forms the basis for peaceful behavior and ethics. In sum, mimetic desire gives us an often-overlooked perspective on conflict on both the individual as well as the international level. It provides us with new insights as to why people act the way they do, which is very likely exactly what both Girard and Hamid hoped for when writing their works.

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