

The Transgressions of Belonging in Mohsin Hamid's: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Ayesha Ahmed – UCL

Abstract:

Belonging is depicted as ethically transgressive in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which deconstructs belonging (as in a state of ownership) to the self's longing (*be longing*) for what is eternally elusive or other about itself. Hamid's novel demonstrates that this longing implicates the self in sacrificial violence against others. The collusive link between longing and violence in the novel is discussed in this paper with reference to Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, which argues that responsibility to the other is contingent on the sacrificial violence of love.

Keywords:

Belonging, Longing, Responsibility, Sacrificial violence, Other

DOI:

10.14324/111.2057-2212.069

Introduction

Belonging emerges as ethically problematic in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which deconstructs belonging, as in a state of ownership, to an insatiable, unscrupulous state of longing (*be longing*) for an inaccessible other. The novel's Pakistani narrator and protagonist, Changez, is depicted as hungering after a lost self that is consigned to history and which he attempts to find his way back to via others that he infiltrates geographically, ideologically, financially and sexually. In its poignant foregrounding of the sacrificial underpinnings of belonging, the novel is thematically similar to *The Gift of Death*, in which Jacques Derrida scrutinises Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac, for the sake of God to lay bare the sacrificial violence intrinsic to responsibility: 'Absolute duty demands that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery and betrayal), while still recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming the very thing one sacrifices, namely the order of human ethics and responsibility' (GD 67). Like *The Gift of Death*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* unflinchingly articulates the violence intrinsic to self-sacrifice, which is depicted in relation to wounding the other. Hamid's depiction of the self as an inaccessible other that is pursued at the expense of countless others renders it challenging for the reader to demarcate treachery from responsibility. In this respect, the novel could be said to faithfully represent *The Gift of Death*, in which responsibility is spoken of as a possibility on the basis of the breach that exists within the self,

the interiority of the self that is wholly other and forever unknowable: '[A]s soon as I have within me... a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself... then there is what I call God... what I call God in me' (108). Besides demonstrating that the possibility of a conscience or being subject to an invisible gaze starts with a transgressive other, *The Gift of Death* pursues Abraham's act of responsibility to its very limits, revealing it to be an instance of perjury (for Abraham pre-emptively asks God's forgiveness for obeying him) in response to a divine command that goes back on itself (126). As a parallel to Derrida's stress on perjurious responsibility, the accent in Hamid's novel is on the perpetual straying of belonging, which, marked as it is by a hunger that preys on others, simultaneously acts as an opening onto an other that cannot be subsumed by the self. This paper is an attempt to posit a link between the innately wounding nature of longing in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the violence that constitutes responsibility to the other in *The Gift of Death*.

The setting for *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* consists of Changez sitting in a run-down café in Lahore, narrating the 'four and a half years' he 'spent' in America to a White American stranger, whom Changez suspects of being an undercover assassin sent to kill him, a possible terrorist (3). Although the assassin versus terrorist premise of the encounter is neither confirmed nor refuted at the end, Changez uses the threat of mutual violence as an opportunity for intimate confessions, in which he unravels the unethical dimensions of belonging. The nexus between intimacy and antagonism, played out between Changez and the American stranger, takes a radically different form in Changez's key confessions to do with his romantic liaison with Erica, an American woman he falls in love with while studying at Princeton. His confessional narrative pivots on two significant instances of sexual intimacy, both of which are represented as tinged with violence. The second instance of sexual intimacy between Changez and Erica is relevant because it foregrounds the violence of his unrequited longing for Erica, whose sense of belonging is fractured on account of her having suffered the death of Chris, a lover she describes in the following terms: '[M]y home was a guy with long, skinny fingers' (32). What makes matters more complicated is that though she is drawn to Changez because he 'give[s] off this strong sense of home' (22), her memories of Chris render it impossible for her to respond to Changez's love-making. In trying to get Erica to respond to him sexually, Changez persuades her to 'pretend' that he is Chris (119) and what follows is a coming together of the conflicting dimensions of intimacy, violence, self-sacrifice, betrayal and responsibility:

I cannot of course claim that I was possessed, but at the same time I did not seem to be myself. It was as though we were under a spell, transported to a world where I was Chris and she was with Chris, and we made love with a physical intimacy that Erica and I had never enjoyed. Her body denied mine no longer; I watched her shut eyes, and her shut eyes watched him... The entrance between her legs... reminded me – unwillingly – of a wound, giving our sex a violent undertone despite the gentleness with which I attempted to move [...] I felt at once satiated and ashamed. (120 – 21)

Changez's claim of feeling satiated is not borne out, however, by what follows his conquest of Erica: 'I ate only bread and drank only water, a tasteless meal, but I kept at it until my belly was full, and when I returned to bed it was as though I had a tight drum strapped to my front' (121-22). The curious juxtaposition of 'only bread' and 'water' and 'a tight drum' of a 'belly' suggests a strange mixture of asceticism, the notion of doing penance - prisoners subsist on bread and

water (Dalrymple 721) - , and a display of military triumph. Perhaps Changez realizes that his desire to come between Erica and Chris ended up facilitating their union. His awareness of a hunger that cannot be appeased in the manner of an appetite appears to hinder the sense of satisfaction he desperately desires to feel and indeed, celebrate in relation to his victory over his dead rival, Chris. His gorging himself could also be a way of recovering a body that he had not calculated on sacrificing to Erica's passion for Chris. With regard to hunger, it is a word that crops up in *The Gift of Death* in relation to the aporia of responsibility, its "[c]haos, which refers precisely to the abyss or open mouth, that which speaks as well as that which signifies hunger"(84).

Speaking of passion, the mention of bread and water also evokes the Christ-like connotations of the name Chris, whose being Changez usurps, as well as sacrifices himself to, in order to gain entry to a world that he was previously barred from. The name Chris, an abbreviation of Christopher, also brings to mind Saint Christopher, the 'Christ-bearer' who carried Christ, in the form of a child, across a river (Stefanovic 510). Changez, in a manner of speaking, assumes or bears the body of Chris, yet, in doing so, he could be said to give up his physicality to Chris, who carries Changez over to the other side (Erica). In relation to Christopher, particularly in a postcolonial context, one cannot help but think of Christopher Columbus, whose claim of being a 'Christ-bearer' (Smylie 144) assumes a degree of irony when viewed in relation to the rumours surrounding his Jewish origins. On juxtaposing a Christopher Columbus, who is rumoured to have been 'Marrano1 in lineage' (Charnes 64), with a Pakistani Muslim facing hostility in America during the War on Terror, the notion of invasion, be it in the context of discovering the New World or in the case of invasive lovemaking, illustrates – like *The Gift of Death* - the ambivalent connotations of faith, intimacy, sacrifice and violence.

The death-like note on which the love-making ends also points to a number of possible interpretations: 'She shuddered towards the end - grievously, almost mortally; her shuddering called forth my own' (120-21). Given that Changez describes Erica's bonding with Chris as 'a commingling of identities' (104), the death-like shuddering could have something to do with her physically sensing the violence dealt to Chris by Changez's appropriation of his identity. The fact that Erica makes her way back to Chris, her home, by being unfaithful to him is also significant. Yet her complicity in the violence perpetrated against Chris can just as easily be read as an instance of her sacrificing her body to a pining that transgresses bodily limitations.

Erica's leaning towards an ascetic appearance is something that Changez remarks on in the latter part of his narrative, and the context of his remark has considerable bearing on the subject of belonging: 'I thought she looked like someone who was about to complete the month of fasting and had been too consumed by prayer and reading of the holy book to give sufficient thought to the nightly meal' (152). Changez's reference to Erica in the context of Islam, a tradition he supposedly belongs to, gains even more significance in relation to what he concedes regarding Erica's impenetrable connection with Chris: 'I did not know whether I believed in the truth of their love; it was, after all, a religion that would not accept me as a convert' (129). Changez here strays very close to *The Gift of Death*, which deconstructs religion from an institution into an instance of singular, secret and inscrutable love for the other. Moreover, the notion of conversion, which Changez arguably refers to in the context of a rite of passage to a secret,

privileged world, is discussed in *The Gift of Death* in relation to a ‘reversal’ or ‘about-face’ (9), something that Changez knows a thing or two about.

When it comes to his longing for Erica, Changez appears to be no less vigilant than Derrida in spotting the possibility of contamination, for he appears to well aware of what his intimacy with Erica brings him closer to, namely, his hunger to belong to a world that his forefathers were a part of:

Erica took to inviting me out with pleasing regularity... I became, in effect, her official escort at the events of New York society... Erica vouched for my worthiness [...] Looking back now, I see there was a certain symmetry to the situation: I felt I was entering in New York the very same social class that my family was falling out of in Lahore. Perhaps this accounted for a good part of the comfort and satisfaction I found in my new environment. But an even greater part of my happiness in those days was due to being in the regular company of Erica. (97)

Changez’s retrospective look at significant others appears to be acutely sensitive to the fact that what contaminates his relationships with others is also what facilitates them. There are moments, such as the one above, in which what could be read as an unflattering connection is in fact stated in a more or less matter of fact way by Changez. Perhaps one possible reason for his being alert to, as well as feeling at home with, transgression has to do with the fact that he and his family pass for others in Lahore’s elitist circles:

[T]hose of us who once had substantial family estates have seen them divided and subdivide by each-larger-subsequent generation. So my grandfather could not afford what his father could and my father could not afford what his father could, and when the time came to send me to college, the money simply was not there. But status, as in any traditional, class-conscious society, declines more slowly than wealth. So we retain our Punjab Club membership. We continue to be invited to the functions and weddings and parties of the city’s elite. (11)

What Derrida says on the subject of transgression in *Positions*, ‘One never settles down in a transgression, one never lives elsewhere’ (qtd. in Brink 11), effectively sums up the position that Changez takes up in his narrative. At the very heart of this position of transgression is Changez’s commitment to closing the gap between his social posturing and financial reality, or, in his words, ‘to restore things to what they were’ (12). In order to do that, he plays the ‘young prince, generous and carefree’ at Princeton, while simultaneously and secretly ‘h[o]ld[ing] down three on-campus jobs’ (12).

It is the ease with which Changez combines play-acting and performing responsibility that impresses Jim, the managing director of the corporate firm, Underwood Samson. On encountering Changez for the first time, Jim sees through his ‘public persona’: ‘You’re polished, well-dressed. You have this sophisticated accent. Most people probably assume you’re rich where you come from’ (9). What sounds like a putdown turns out to be a compliment from Jim, who spots a soul-mate in Changez: ‘I went to Princeton, too... I worked a night shift in Trenton to pay my way, far enough from campus that people wouldn’t find out. So I get where you’re

coming from, Changez. You're hungry, and that's a good thing in my book' (9-10). Jim's use of hunger here dislocates the question of belonging from its geographical and cultural hinges, posing it instead as an ethical dilemma. The hunger that Jim refers to is again one that cannot be appeased or satisfied, for, as Anna Hartnell points out, 'Jim, like Jay Gatz, is chasing the status that only "old money" – the one thing that cannot be bought or invented – can bring' (342).

Divining that an affinity with transgression can be used to forge a bond, Jim addresses confidential statements to Changez that, though implicating, give evidence of Jim's capacity to confront his own demons and unconditionally accept those of the other: 'I like you...Not in a bullshit, say-something-nice-to-raise-the-kid's-morale way. You're a shark. And that's a compliment, coming from me. It's what they called me when I first joined...And I was a cool customer. I never let on that I felt like I didn't belong to this world. Just like you' (80). Like Abraham, who has the capacity to recognize God in His monstrous command, Jim gives evidence of having faith in a Changez who, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, decides to sport a beard to challenge the mounting paranoia in America: '[S]ome people around here think you're looking kind of shabby. The beard and all. Quite frankly, I don't give a shit. Your performance is what counts...and you're the best analyst in your class by a long way. Besides, I know it must be tough for you with what's going on in Pakistan' (156).

It is interesting that although verbally Jim lays a great deal of stress on perpetual straying – '[p]ower comes from becoming change' (110) –, his undying support of Changez, who abandons the project entrusted to him, proves Jim's capacity to be loyal to those who transgress his orders: 'You really screwed us, kid...I'm not a big believer in compassion in the workplace...I didn't think twice when it came to firing you [...] But...I like you, Changez. I can see you're going through a crisis. If you ever need to get something off your chest and you want someone to talk to, call and I'll buy you a beer' (181).

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to clarify that this paper broadly outlines some of the potential overlap(s) between belonging in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and responsibility in *The Gift of Death*. For the possibility of parallels between the two texts - more than I can account for in this limited space - is something that I aim to look into in my doctoral thesis. However, my claim that belonging implicates one in sacrificial violence is arguably borne out by a single physical gesture on Jim's part, a gesture that effectively and vividly sums up the gist of this discussion:

"I remember my first Underwood Samson party," a voice said behind me. I turned, it was Jim. He continued, "It was a gorgeous evening, like this one. Barbecue going, music playing. Reminded me of Princeton for some reason, of how I felt when I got there. I figured, I wouldn't mind having a place out in the Hamptons myself some day." I smiled; Jim made one feel he could hear one's thoughts. "I know what you mean," I said. Jim let his gaze wander out over the water, and for a time we stood together in silence. Then he said, "You hungry?" "Yes," I replied. "Good," he said approvingly, and with that he tapped me on either shoulder blade with the blade of his hand – an odd, deliberate gesture – and led me back inside. (My emphasis 49 – 50)

Works Cited

- Brink, Andre. 'Transgressions: A Quantum Approach to Literary Deconstruction.' *Journal of Literary Studies* 1.3 (1985):10-26.
- Charnes, Gloria. *History Mystery*, Baltimore Jewish Times, Baltimore, 1991.
- Dalrymple, Theodore. 'Between the Lines: Inside Stories.' *BMJ* 338.7696 (2009): 721
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death: Literature in Secret*. Translated by David Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Penguin Books, 2013.
- Hartnell, Anna. 'Moving Through America: Race, Place and Resistance in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46:3-4 (2010): 336-348.
- Smylie, James H. 'A New Heaven and New Earth.' *Interpretation* 53.2 (1999): 143-157.
- Stefanovic, Danijela. 'The "Christianisation" of Hermanubis.' *Historia : Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte*, vol. 62, no. 4, (2013): 506-514.

Biography

Ayesha Ahmed is a first-year PhD student in the Comparative Literature Department at UCL. She is currently working on her PhD project, which involves investigating unfathomable violence in fiction as a possibility of Derridean responsibility.

© 2017, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Endnote

¹ Marrano refers to 'Jews who under duress converted to Christianity but secretly practiced Judaism' (Charnes 64).