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Urban Dystopia and Spatial Alienation: A Lefebvrian Reading of the Production of Space in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) has been extensively examined through the frameworks of identity, post-9/11 geopolitics, globalisation, and postcolonial, cultural, and political studies. Little attention has been paid to the role of urban space in shaping the protagonist Changez's ideological transformation. Space is not merely the setting in the novel but an active force in constructing, transforming, and contesting Changez's identity and political consciousness. The present study argues that the novel represents Lahore and New York not merely as geographical space but as socially produced spaces that actively construct subjectivity, belonging, and political consciousness. According to Henri Lefebvre space is not merely a geographical setting but a social product shaped by social relations, power, and ideology. The study investigates how Mohsin Hamid represents New York and Lahore as socially produced urban spaces. The study employs Lefebvre's spatial triad spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space) to investigate the production and experience of urban space in the novel. The corporate landscape of New York constructs a capitalist vision of success while simultaneously producing exclusion and alienation in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In contrast, Lahore emerges as a lived and contested urban space where Changez renegotiates belonging, memory, and resistance, transforming the city into a site of resistance against dominant global narratives. The study also examines how the September 11 attacks transformed the meanings attached to urban spaces and Changez's changing relationship with both New York and Lahore. Changez reorients his political consciousness and political ideology. In the process, the study contributes to urban literary studies by extending Lefebvre's spatial theory to Mohsin Hamid's fiction and offers a spatial reading of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) that foregrounds the centrality of urban space.

Keywords: Henri Lefebvre, Mohsin Hamid, urban space, Lahore, New York, spatial production, globalization.

Introduction

Urban dystopia in literature refers to the representation of the city as a space marked by alienation, inequality, surveillance, insecurity, exclusion, environmental degradation, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. It explores how modern cities can be extremely unequal social world. In literary studies, the dystopian city is not merely a dark or unpleasant physical setting; it often reflects the social, economic, political, and ideological structures that shape urban life. Spatial alienation refers not merely to geographical displacement but also to a psychological and social condition in which individuals experience a sense of disconnection, exclusion, or estrangement from the spaces they inhabit. Urban dystopia and spatial alienation in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is produced not simply through the physical conditions of the city but through the unequal social, economic, political, and ideological relations embedded within urban space.

The Perceived Space

Changez's experience of New York initially demonstrates Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice, particularly through his everyday movement within the corporate spaces of global capitalism. His position at Underwood Samson's office on the forty-first floor of a Manhattan skyscraper is significant not merely as an indication of professional success but also as a spatial representation of his temporary incorporation into New York's corporate elite. The verticality of the office places Changez physically above the city and symbolically within a privileged social and economic position. His daily routines—travelling to the office, working on financial valuations, moving through Manhattan, and participating in the city's consumer spaces—allow him to participate in the rhythms of corporate New York. These practices initially give him a sense of belonging and mobility. Read through Lefebvre, however, such mobility is not simply individual freedom; it is produced through the social and economic structures of the city. Changez's ability to move confidently through New York depends upon his usefulness within the corporate system. The significance of this spatial incorporation becomes clearer after September 11, when his previously unrestricted mobility is interrupted by racial profiling, interrogation, and

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surveillance. The transformation of Changez's movement through the city therefore reveals that urban space is not neutral: the same spaces that previously facilitated his professional mobility can become mechanisms of exclusion when his racial and national identity is reinterpreted.

Lefebvre believes that spatial practices are not neutral. They are controlled and modified by those in power to maintain social order. The state changes the physical rules of how certain bodies can move through space. It is evident after the 9/11 attack; when Changez is pulled out of regular lines and subjected to invasive strip-searches and interrogations at the New York airport based on racial identity. The restriction on Changez's physical space, his mobility and daily routines are violently disrupted. As a Princeton graduate, he enjoyed free movement. His spatial practice is now controlled, monitored, and restricted. The state considers him as a treat based on race. The airport ceases to be a place of transition and becomes a boundary checkpoint where the state physically reminds him that he is an outsider. He realises his belonging was an illusion tied to his utility to capitalism. The shift demonstrates that space is not mere backdrop but socially produced in which power and control is exercised. Changez's new experiences of urban spaces in New York illustrates that the city accepts him only as long as he remains an economically valuable subject. Once his identity becomes associated with the perceived enemy, these same spaces are transformed into mechanisms of surveillance, exclusion, and containment and dystopia.

Conceived Space

Henri Lefebvre defines representations of space, or conceived space, as the realm of planners, corporate minds, technocrats, architects, and institutions that organise society through abstract systems of knowledge. It is a space designed through maps, abstract data, and ideologies to control how society functions. It values logic, statistics, and efficiency over human emotions. Conceived space privileges rationality, calculation, efficiency, and control over lived human experience. Rather than understanding places through their social relationships, histories, or cultural meanings, it reduces them to measurable and manageable objects. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, (2007) Underwood Samson exemplifies this mode of spatial production. As a multinational valuation firm, Underwood Samson operates through the logic of global capitalism. The company views cities, corporations, and even the nation not as complex social spaces but as economic assets whose value can be calculated, compared, and maximized. Its famous principle of focusing on the fundamentals reflects this abstract mode of thinking. Changez is trained to disregard emotions, cultural attachments, and historical contexts in favour of financial efficiency and profitability. Through this process, space is transformed into an economic map where only market value matters. This abstraction is particularly evident during Changez's assignment in Philippines. Rather than engaging with the local community or recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Manila, his work requires him to evaluate a publishing company solely in terms of its financial performance. Human lives, local traditions, and social consequences become secondary to profitability. It flattens the real world into a map of profit margins. The city exists primarily as a site for investment and corporate restructuring. Underwood Samson's corporate ideology also erases history by encouraging employees to detach themselves from the places they evaluate. The firm's emphasis on fundamentals strips away the historical, political, and emotional dimensions of space, reducing diverse urban environments to standardized financial categories and financial data on a spreadsheet. In Lefebvre's terms, this is the operation of conceived space: a dominant representation imposed by institutions that organize reality according to the interests of capital.

For Changez, initially embracing this worldview provides access to the privileged spaces of New York's corporate elite. However, following the events of September 11, he begins to recognize the limitations and violence of this abstract spatial logic. He realizes that beneath the appearance of neutrality and objectivity, Underwood Samson's conception of space serves the interests of global capitalism by commodifying places and subordinating human experience to economic calculation. His growing awareness marks the beginning of his rejection of capitalist spatial order and his search for an alternative understanding of identity, place, and belonging. Initially, Changez loves this space because it promises a pure, blind meritocracy. He believes that if he follows the abstract rules of the firm, his identity as a Pakistani man will not matter. Underwood Samson creates a sterile environment where money is the only language spoken, masking the messy realities of geopolitics.

Conceived space is also how the state asserts its political power. When a crisis occurs, institutional powers physically alter the environment to enforce a specific political narrative. Following the September 11 attacks, New York's physical landscape is flooded with American flags. They appear on corporate skyscrapers, taxi cabs, subways, and residential doorsteps. It is an example of rewriting the Urban Map creating a binary. Visual transformation is not just spontaneous patriotism; it is an institutional rewriting of the city's space. The state and the media project a rigid, binary narrative onto the urban environment: "you are either with America, or you are the enemy" (Hamid 143.) The city is "re-conceived" as a fortress of American imperialism. For Changez, this landscape becomes deeply aggressive. The ubiquitous flags act as a constant visual warning that the space he inhabits has been weaponised against his part of the world. The abstract welcoming meritocracy of New York is replaced by a hostile nationalist ideology. Lefebvre's "conceived space" explains how New York dominates the individual firstly by finance secondly by nationalism. The abstract data, economic efficiency, spreadsheets blind him to global inequalities by treating human lives as numbers. Nationalistic symbols, ideology make him realize that American space requires total political submission. Changez eventually realizes that both the corporate spreadsheet and the American flag are tools of the same imperial power, designed to exploit his labour while rejecting his humanity.

Lived Space

Representational space or lived space is the most complex layer of Lefebvre's triad. It is a space as humans actually experience it, not through maps or routines, but through emotions, memories, symbols, and imagination. It is where private, psychological realities overwrite physical boundaries. On paper, Erica's apartment is just an upscale Manhattan residence. However, as a "lived" space, it is a tomb dedicated to her dead lover, Chris. It is suffocatingly saturated with her grief, nostalgia, and psychological trauma. To physically and emotionally inhabit this space with Erica, Changez cannot just be himself. He has to undergo a bizarre psychological transformation to accept the spatial condition. He must close his eyes and pretend to be Chris so Erica can engage with him

intimately. This lived space is a shrine to the past; a space of forced identity erasure. This apartment symbolizes the wider "lived" reality of Changez's American experience. It proves that to be accepted into America's most intimate, elite spaces, Changez must completely erase his own identity and role-play as a ghost of the Western past. It becomes a space of profound emotional frustration and identity violation. Changez feels alienated and encounters hostile in subway. Urban transit systems like subways are built to be neutral, functional spaces for moving bodies. However, a single emotional or traumatic event can instantly transform a routine physical space into a deeply hostile "lived" space. While riding the subway post-9/11, Changez is verbally assaulted by a stranger who views him as a threat. He realizes he is physically unsafe and culturally excluded from the city, a site of public hostility, profiling, and vulnerability. In an instant, the subway stops being a mundane backdrop for his daily commute (Perceived Space).

This leads Changez shift psychologically. The physical train, car suddenly shrinks into an arena of intense alienation, fear, and exposure. The looks of the other passengers and the heavy silence in the car turn the subway into a symbolic trap. This encounter shatters Changez's illusion of being a cosmopolitan New Yorker. The "lived" reality of that subway car forces him to realize that no matter how expensive his suit is or how well he speaks English, the public space of the city now reads his body as a foreign invader. Space itself becomes an active source of psychological trauma. Lefebvre's "lived space" reveals that Changez's downfall in New York is entirely emotional and psychological. He can perform the routines (perceived space) and understand the rules (conceived space), but his lived space becomes so fractured by racism, grief, and alienation that living in America becomes psychologically unsustainable.

Lahore as Lived and Contested Space

Changez's relationship with urban space takes significant transformation with his return to Lahore. Lefebvre's concept of representational space is highly pertinent because lived space is not just merely physical space or geographical space; it is constructed through memories, symbols, emotions, culture, belonging, social experiences and political identity. Changez's experiences in the United States transferred Lahore as a lived and contested Space. The family home is vital within lived geography to derive memory, history, and kinship. Thus its meaning cannot be reduced to economic value and asset. Lahore becomes a repository of memory, a social and cultural world that precedes his professional identity in New York. Lahore demonstrates Lefebvre's understanding of space as produced through everyday social relations. Lahore's streets, public spaces resist the abstraction characteristic of the corporate spaces that previously structured Changez's experience of the world. Urban environment transformed into spaces of collective expression and contested space through its political demonstration in Lahore. The demonstrations provide Changez with an alternative understanding of political participation. Public space becomes a medium through which opposition and political consciousness can be collectively expressed. Urban space is not politically neutral; its meaning depends upon the social relations and power structures operating within it. Changez's view geopolitical conflict from Lahore becomes concrete and no more abstract. American political and military power becomes connected to the realities of the society to which Changez has returned. He begins to view that global capitalist order from Lahore, a postcolonial urban space situated differently within global relations of power. His movement between the two different cities therefore produces a movement between competing and opposite spatial perspectives. His notion with American corporate culture is increasingly replaced by an awareness of the historical and political conditions underlying that culture. Changez reconsiders and reinterprets the attractions of American modernity and mobility as Lahore becomes a space of resistance. Thus Changez's political transformation and reorientation cannot be separated from his changing relationship with the city. Changez questions the dominant narratives of American exceptionalism, global capitalism, and post-9/11 geopolitics.

The cafe setting in Lahore where Changez narrates the entire story to the unnamed American acts as a frame narrative. The cafe itself is a micro-lived space where the spatial power dynamics between Pakistan and the US is actively negotiated. Both the cities, New York and Lahore present complex, heterogeneous, and contested spaces. New York provides Changez with professional opportunity, represents the promise of global capitalist inclusion and cosmopolitan mobility yet it exposes him as an outsider and racialisation. On the other hand, Lahore provides cultural belonging and political community, a lived and contested space while simultaneously remaining a space marked by social and political tensions. Lefebvre's spatial triad therefore allows the novel to be understood as a narrative in which urban space and subjectivity continually produce one another. Changez's journey from Lahore to New York and back to Lahore can be viewed as departure, assimilation, alienation, return, and resistance. Both cities are interconnected but produce different spatial imaginaries. Identity is produced not from outside space but through the social, political, and emotional experience of space. New York and Lahore are both socially produced and contested spaces, but Changez experiences them differently as his political consciousness changes.

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