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Theorizing the Cityscapes in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is a post 9/11 novel structured as two narratives, the frame narrative – which takes the form of a conversation between the Pakistani protagonist, Changez, and an unnamed American Stranger at a café in Lahore –and the flashback narrative, narrated by Changez and revealing his time in America, before, during and after the events surrounding 9/11. Narrated in the form of a dramatic monologue as a first person point of view, it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2007. The literary action in the book spans four cities across different continents and covers a time frame of a few years. It almost reads like a travelogue and captures the cityscapes of Princeton, Greece, New York, Manila, Chile and Lahore. Changez's stay in each city marks an important milestone in his life. This paper seeks to highlight the prevailing atmosphere of distrust following 9/11, amid the theories of Hyperreality, Simulacra and Simulation as propounded by Jean Baudrillard. Michael Foucault's theory of Panopticism and Heterotopia is also referred to while describing a divided world

filled with mistrust in the aftermath of the tragedy. It also seeks to expose the barriers that are erected between people owing to deep-rooted cultural, racial and social differences.

The novel opens with Changez accosting an unnamed American Stranger in the Old Anarkali Market of Lahore with the words, 'EXCUSE ME, SIR, but may I be of assistance? (1)'. It remains unclear till the very end whether the American is simply a business traveller or a CIA agent who has been sent to kill Changez, who mentions at various points in the novel that the American appears to be on a 'mission.' Right from the beginning, reality is blurred and nothing is as it seems on the surface. Even the place where they are seated, the quiet Old Anarkali Market, turns into a phantasmagoria by night with its play on lights and shadows. When he first introduces himself to the American, Changez says that he is a lover of America but his actions soon prove otherwise.

Changez leads the American to a quaint open-to-the-sky roadside cafe, where the latter chooses a corner seat with his back against the wall and refuses to remove his jacket. Commenting on the fact that the American seems to be on his guard, Changez begins telling him his story. Over the course of a long evening comprising tea, snacks and a meal, all dominated by Changez, he describes his life in America, interspersing his narrative with sketches of present life in Lahore. He talks about the four and a half years that he had spent in America where he had studied at Princeton University in New Jersey as a Summa cum Laude scholar and then worked in New York as an executive with Underwood Samson and Company, a niche valuation firm. According to Changez, 'This is a dream come true' (3). 'Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible' (3). While at first, he is impressed with Princeton's bright students and its old-fashioned architecture, Changez soon realizes that his college is less impressive than it seems. The Gothic buildings of the campus had inspired him and he had been awed by the knowledge that they were younger than many of the mosques in the city, but had been made to look older through acid treatment

and ingenious stone masonry. This statement is the first hint in the text about the idea of America being a 'Hyperreality'. According to the *Modern Sociological Theory*, hyperreality is 'the inability of the consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality' (199), especially in technologically advanced postmodern societies. It is seen as a condition in which the real and fiction are seamlessly blended together so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins. In such cases the individuals find themselves more attuned with the hyperreal world and less with the physical real world. According to Jean Baudrillard in the *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, 'Hyperreality is a representation, a sign, without an original referent' (183). Changez's reference to the pre-historic Indus Valley Civilization and comparison with present day US is a case in the point.

> Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed. (34)

This is an ideologically construed notion of the homeland by Changez. It further links to Italian author Umberto Eco's notion of hyperreality by suggesting that, 'The action of hyperreality is to desire reality and in the attempt to achieve that desire, to fabricate a false reality that is to be consumed as real' (43). As a young Pakistani scholar in America, Changez is initially awed by all that he sees. It is only in hindsight that he realises 'the power of that system, pragmatic and effective, like so much else in America' (4). Simulation is characterized by a blending of 'reality' and 'representation', where there is no clear indication of where the former stops and the latter begins. The simulacrum is often defined as a copy with no original. Baudrillard argues that, 'a simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but becomes a truth in its own right – the hyperreal' (63). New

York is Changez's hyperreality. A dream that later crumbles under the weight of reality. It is a hyperreality that cannot be sustained after the two World Towers come crumbling down in New York. The two airplanes symbolise two needles that puncture the very fabric of his dream.

> I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapses. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased. I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees. (72)

In the cafe in Lahore, when a waiter approaches their table, the American becomes anxious and reaches under his jacket. When the waiter brings the tea to their table, the American looks at it suspiciously, refusing to add sugar to his tea, or drink it until Changez switches cups with him. The underlying atmosphere of suspicion and distrust owes itself to the widening gap between the East and the West post 9/11 and more particularly after America's 'War on Terror'.

The Old Anarkali Market and the Café in particular bring out the idea of the 'Panopticon', which was brought out by Michael Foucault in his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, as a metaphor for modern 'disciplinary societies and their pervasive inclination to observe and normalize' (216). The Panopticon was a structure designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century which allowed all inmates of a prison to be observed by a single warden without the inmates knowing when they were being watched. Although it was physically impossible for the single watchman to observe all the cells at the same time, the fact that the inmates did not know when they are being watched encouraged paranoia and made them act as though they are being watched at all times. The Panopticon is thus an ideal architectural figure of modern disciplinary power. Surveillance in public spaces is an example of the panopticon at work and it can be used to keep a watch over anyone who needs to be kept under observation.

Returning to his story, Changez tells the American how he met an American girl, Erica, during the summer vacation in Greece after they had both graduated from Princeton. She came from a wealthy family and regarded Changez an interesting and 'exotic' friend. In the cafe, Changez notes that the American's mobile phone is ringing and encourages him to answer it. The American sends a text message instead; perhaps still suspicious of Changez, he tries to keep his communication private. Distrust pervades the atmosphere and the American is aware that he is being observed and watched.

Changez tells the American that he looks a little uncomfortable, and compares his behaviour to that of an animal unsure whether it is the predator or the prey. He requests the American to overlook the sense of being watched and instead observe Old Anarkali Market in the afternoon. The gates at either end of the market are locked and no vehicles can enter or exit the area. This description of the market seems very alarming and going by Changez's animal analogy the American seems trapped in a cage. Changez then goes on to describe the newer and more urban districts of Lahore with a vista of public parks and wide boulevards. When the American begins to compare Old Anarkali to Manhattan, Changez starts telling him about his early days in New York. He compares his move to New York to that of a home coming. Urdu was spoken by taxi drivers, Samosa and Channa was sold near his home from a Pak-Punjab Deli and he could hear the song that he had danced to on his cousin's wedding in Pakistan while crossing the Fifth Avenue during a parade. The city becomes truly global, and for Changez, his spatial identity is constructed from the external territory where the larger dominant culture readjusts itself to accommodate the presence of the other. Thus also shows the presence of absence and the absence of presence in spaces. 'I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker' (33).

On his first day at Underwood Samson, Changez feels overwhelmed by the view from its lobby, located high in a skyscraper on the 42nd floor. 'Nothing had prepared me for the drama, the power of the view from their lobby' (34). To him,

Underwood Samson with its strict meritocracy, combined with efficiency and spirit, personified the professionalism that had made America successful. His boss and mentor, Jim, advises Changez to nurture these qualities and includes him in the team travelling to Manila to be part of a new project in the Philippines.

Back in Lahore, Changez asks the American to notice how quickly the streets have transformed into a market, and observes that, if they had just arrived at the cafe, they would have thought that Old Anarkali had always looked that way. The cafe take on the image of Foucault's 'Heteretopia' – a kind of neutral zone beyond the dominion of conventional social structures of power and power relations – in other words, a space that lies between the Real, Social and Utopian space. It is only in such a Hetereotopia that the American and Changez can meet and interact. The shopkeepers selling their products in the outdoor market turn on colourful electric lights, making Changez remember the colours of the Empire State Building during night time. 'It is remarkable how theatrical manmade light can be once sunlight has begun to fade, how it can affect us emotionally, even now, at the start of the twenty-first century, in cities as large and bright as this one' (47–48). New York, before 9–11, had always been a welcoming place for Changez and he had never felt out of place in his traditional clothing.

> It was a testament to the open-mindedness and... cosmopolitan nature of New York in those days that I felt completely comfortable on the subway in that attire. The area – with its charming bistros, exclusive shops, and attractive women in short skirts walking tiny dogs – felt surprising familiar, although I had never been there before; I realized later that I owed my sense of familiarity to the many films that had used it as a setting (48–49).

Baudrillard's claim that our current society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is a simulation of reality rings true to form in this instance.

Changez was surprised to find that Manila was a modern metropolis with skyscrapers and was immediately jealous of the

progress made by the Philippines, an Asian country, which had outperformed Pakistan both economically and technologically. 'Manila's glittering sky-line and walled enclaves for the ultra-rich were unlike anything I had seen in Pakistan' (64). It was in Manila, that Changez saw the two World Trade Centers in New York come crumbling down on TV, and smiled. 'I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees' (73). After 9/11, other people's attitude toward Changez changed overnight. When he had left the US for the Philippines, his 'foreignness' was interesting to people. When he returned to the United States, he was isolated at the airport from his peers and made to strip in a secure room where he realised that his adopted country had now become hostile to him. 'I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion' (74).

Changez noticed a surge in American patriotism. Although in the past, New York City had had its own unique culture, he now saw it being replaced by an antagonistic and harsh American culture.

> New York was in mourning after the destruction of the World Trade Center, and floral motifs figured prominently in the shrines to the dead and the missing that had sprung up in my absence. I would often glance at them as I walked by: photos, bouquets, words of condolence – nestled into street corners and between shops and along the railings of public squares. (79)

He realized that this new-found patriotism was a threat to him; it was as if America was eager for revenge after 9/11. All the American flags showing up on the streets seemed to proclaim, 'We are America' (79). As America began its obsession of looking back to its glorious past, Erica became a mirror of the society and began to sink into depression and loneliness. Changez tried to put off the rumours of violent attacks on Muslims and Pakistani men that he had heard about in the city, but he slowly started to resent America for attacking Pakistan's ally and neighbour, Afghanistan. He also began to see that the American media was distorting the truth in order to encourage nationalism. America's

War on Terror began to alienate Changez from Underwood Samson and Erica too seemed be slipping from him owing to her declining health and her own obsession with her past with her ex-boyfriend, Chris. He wondered if America's past was ever real, and if there now any place for him in it.

Changez notices that the American feels uneasy whenever the waiter is around and mentions how one day he was harassed in America by two strangers who called him a 'fucking Arab'. The rift in the American social cityscape is exposed when Changez mentions how, 'Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people's houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse' (94). He worried that he could lose his job at Underwood Samson because he was a Pakistani. Constantly engaged in finding out about the dangers his country and his family were facing in Pakistan, he started to become lax at work. Flying home to Lahore during Christmas, he initially decided to stay there. Later, on his return to Underwood Samson, he noticed that his colleagues were uneasy and watchful around him as he had not shaved off his beard on his return.

> More than once travelling on the subway – where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in – I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete Americans and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares. (130)

From Underwood Samson, Changez was sent to Chile on an assignment, and once there, his estrangement from America became clear to him. In Chile, he visited Valparaiso, 'where the ruins proclaim the building was beautiful' (144), and also visited the home of Pablo Neruda, where he felt closest to his home in Lahore despite the sheer geographical miles separating the two places. Changez was too involved with the proceedings going on in Pakistan to pay attention to his work in Chile. 'I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged' (152). He returned to America and when his plane landed, he noticed that the airport looked like a military camp, with armed guards everywhere.

Detained at the airport for being of a 'suspect race', Changez spent his final days in New York in an angry and emotional state and resolved to become a janissary (young Christian men whose identity was erased when they were forced to be soldiers in a Muslim army). Fired from Underwood Samson, he returned to Pakistan. 'Living in New York was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War; I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in Technicolor but in grainy black and white' (115). Prior to his return, he decided to visit Erica one last time and was told that she had disappeared from the institution where she had been confined and was now presumed dead.

Changez observes that the American is apprehensive about the waiter walking behind them as they walk to the American's hotel. He suggests that, 'There are adjustments one must make if one comes here from America; a different way of observing is required' (124). He also urges the American to concentrate on the architecture of Lahore, pointing out the family-owned businesses as they walk and criticizing the recent buildings, comparing the walk that he and the American are taking to Ichabod Crane's in the sinister story of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. On realising that the American is angry and dislikes this comparison and its resultant connotation, he changes the subject. When a loud firecracker-like sound it heard, Changez assures him that it is not a gunshot, but merely a motor backfiring. When the American points out that there are more people apart from the waiter following them, Changez acknowledges the same but denies that he is signalling to them.

On his return to Lahore from America, Changez had got a job lecturing at a university, where his training at Princeton and Underwood Samson made him an extremely popular teacher. He began to lead protests against America which got him thrown into jail. His arrests throw him into the limelight and he devotes most of his time and energy towards mentoring like-minded students. In this he is so successful that he is warned to expect retaliation from America on his person. Since then, he says, 'I have felt rather like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe. I have

endeavored to live normally, as though nothing has changed, but I have been plagued by paranoia, by an intermittent sense that I am being observed' (183). The circle is complete. Whether in America or in Pakistan, Changez feels he is living in a Panopticon and his endeavour to make the American realize the same feeling of being hunted is successful. He tells the American that he should not assume that all Pakistani people are terrorists, just as he should not assume that all Americans are spies.

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