

**Of Utopia and Heterotopia: The Question of Place in Mohsin
Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

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Abstract

Background: Given the disciplinary background, it is unsurprising to state that the fictional portrayals incorporate real or invented settings for the characters in order to characterize a theme at hand. It can be argued that all or any reading of literature encompasses spatial dimension in the form of setting. And, literary places can have the shaping influences on the characters in texts. Although seemingly irrational, characters' attachments to places invite us to rethink about the tyranny and/or privilege of places.

Methods: Informed by Foucauldian notion of utopias, heterotopias, and geo-criticism, this study analyzes the discursive spaces that create the dichotomies of places. Alongside, the analysis of the cases of the primary texts has yielded the analytic need of the research article. The method of within-case analysis has offered the twofold analytical framework: America and Anarkali as problems and privileges and the desire to harm America as it is considered the source of conflicts and standoffs.

Results: A character projects varied faces of America after he is educated there and comes back to the place of his birth. Although in abstract manner, the character demonstrates topophilia without adequate reasoning while loathes America for its vices and loves it for its virtues. Primarily, the study of places has offered an interpretation that a character from

Pakistan in [Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*](#) characterizes America in case by case approaches whilst his birthplace is admired almost unconditionally.

Conclusion: Places have associations and those associations offer meanings. Changez in Mohsin Hamid vehemently discusses brighter and darker sides of his American experiences. Not surprisingly, he analyzes his experiences from the perspective of vice and virtue. Contrarily, his birthplace Anarkali and its tea are not comparable to the experience of Princetonian education because they are far more superior. This inference leads to the reconfirmation of the old adage: Birthplace is dear to us despite its severe limitations.

Novelty: This study ushers in the renewed emphasis on the association between places and thematic concerns. More particularly, this study contributes to the existing body of narratives by pushing the boundaries of interpretation through the sustained consideration of places and people in literary accounts.

Keywords: topophilia, spatial reading, city of birth, harm America, utopia and heterotopia

Introduction

Exploring the spatial reading of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) entails the comparative framework of West versus East. Although not completely novel attempt as the notion of Orientalism has been a powerful framework to analyze, this study attempts to see how the geographical axes and their portrayals indicate the thematic nuances of the author's perusal. The unnamed narration, in fact, the interlocutor to an American tourist to Pakistan recounts his experiences in America and hurls his present perspectives about America. Whilst he continues his interlocution, he discusses the places and their associations. This article has argued for spatial reading of Mohsin Hamid's fiction with a particular focus on the dichotomic perceptions of Anarkali and North America along with the conceptual and theoretical tools offered by Michel Foucault such as utopias and heterotopias. Utopias are ideal places and heterotopias are the contested space: Anarkali and North American spaces in the context of Hamid.

Literary topography documents as [A. Goodbody \(2014\)](#) views it, "experiences of places" by even "interrogating it" through a "process that includes exploring their cultural meanings" (p.68). In that attempt, a person's varied perceptions are packaged and deciphered in order for coming to a rounded off claim. [N. Schroder \(2006\)](#) observes the authority of an artistic creation and maintains, "representations of space, at the author's impositions on the world and their means of shaping it" (p.12) lead to the central claim that is intended through characters and other juxtapositions. This paper employs the term topophilia coined by the geographer [Y.F. Tuan \(1974\)](#) and he defined it as "the affective bond between people and place or setting" (p.4). The narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has developed the bond with his birth place and is an example of topophilia.

The paper incorporates the extant literature around the novella particularly the study of places. Second, the paper discusses the methodological thoughts followed by the analysis of the text

from the perspective of places. In so doing, the paper has attempted to establish an assertion that Anarkali is dearer to the narrator than the sophisticated American cities.

Literature Review

The literature around the novel basically deals with themes such as space for Muslims, nation as inclusive space, permeable borders, perspectives of risk and space, America 's transcendence of racial difference, problematized identity.

[K.Tayeb & A. Ahmed-Sami \(2021\)](#) find that the novel contains a “ young Changez and his sense of belonging in his hometown” (p.997-98). [M. Naziat & M.K.A. Mohammad Kaosar Ahmed \(2022\)](#) examine id in Changez. In that effort, they have considered the inner desire of Changez to study in America and his love affair with Erica, the American girl (p.25). [S. Tabur \(2023\)](#) examines novel from “the critical perspectives of risk and space” (p.486). [S.F.S.Shah, M.I. Khokhar & W.U. Haq \(2024\)](#) discuss that Changez has turned into a liminal space, “ he alternates between the home and the host identities, living contentedly in neither” (p.14). [B. Rao and Z. Batool \(2025\)](#) make an intensive study of the narrator of the novel Changez, and not of the American interlocutor. They claim that Changez is the “ implicated subject” who initially joined his hands with the West to control Muslims, it was only afterwards that Changez left his subjectivity of being implicated” (p.1).

[N. Aldalala'a \(2012\)](#) discusses that the novel attempts to “ create a space” for the Muslim and “ illustrates the process of disillusionment” (p.1). The central character Changez stayed in America, was educated there. Nonetheless, he realized that American way of living did not allow the space for the Muslims. [Q. Shirazi](#) finds an endeavor to “ conduct a reconfiguration of nation as a more inclusive space” (p. 15). America has to be open to incorporate other people's identity. It should not be a closed sphere that hinders the growth of Muslims and other minorities.

[M. White](#) reads the novel to “ explore the ways that permeable borders engender paranoia” (p.2). [A. Hartnell \(2010\)](#) argues that “ the novel invests in the possibility that America might represent the transcendence of racial differences” (p.336). [A. Ghosh \(2013\)](#) demonstrates the “ feeling of problematized identity” (p.49). Hence, the research gap is paved. Since no research has specifically discussed and considered the topophilia in the character of this novel, this article sets out to do so.

Methods and Materials

[M. Lange \(2013\)](#) emphasizes, “ within-cases methods are able to analyze the potential causal impact of inter-case relationships” (p. 84). [B. L. Paterson \(2009\)](#) states that “ Within-case analysis enables researchers to be thoroughly immersed in the data within a single case” (p. 971) and the “ Data reduction in within-case analysis helps researchers focus on the data within the case that is most salient to the research question and theoretical or analytical framework” (p.972), alongside, “ it can reveal elements that may be otherwise overlooked because identifying common themes across cases in cross-case analysis may dilute the findings of individual cases” (p.972). This paper has sorted out the relevant evidences from the corpus and treated them from the point of view of topophilia.

[Michel Foucault's \(1974\)](#) notions of utopia and heterotopia have been the central theoretical and conceptual tools for the analysis. Utopias are “the society” “in a perfected form” (Foucault, p.3). If utopias are “fundamentally unreal places” heterotopias are “real places” that are “represented, contested, and inverted” (p.3).

Results and Discussion

This section offers an analysis of the select cases that form the evidences pertaining to utopia and heterotopia. Particularly, the tophophilia of the central character is argued and the utopian stance of Anarkali, a place in Pakistan is established whilst North American spaces are questioned as they are taken as the crisis heterotopia or the forbidden place.

America and Anarkali: Problems and Privileges

The narrator of the novel sways from the discussion of America to Pakistan and attempts to relocate himself with the affinity for Anarkali. It is not very easy, at times, he is articulate about American involvements in conflicts and wars, to comprehend why he has developed anti-American stance despite his success through the American University's education system. As he went to America and enrolled himself in Princeton, he learnt about what it meant to be a man of success: “Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible” (p.3). Had he not been to Princeton or any other universities of America, he would not have been able to be “the star” of his “life” that was “a film”. When he achieved this capability of being a star of his own life only because of his education from American universities, the novel, in this sense, is not entirely an acknowledgement to American investments, nor is it the tribute; it comes rather as a payback. Presumably, he had abstract expectations that Princeton should have done to him. Obviously, it was Princeton that converted him to the star of his own life. However, Changez, the narrator could not enjoy and appreciate America altogether. His divided self, the ambivalent appreciation of America puts the readers in a difficult terrain. When he utters the statements like these, “Princeton made everything possible for me. But it did not, *could* not, make me forget such things as how much I enjoy tea in this, the city of my birth” (p.15), we are torn between perspectives. The narrator is, at least, recounting his limitations set by American education. He is enumerating the American university's downsides. He seems to assert that they cannot lead to a certain sense of oblivion of one's birthplace. Even though Changez does not detail the ingredients of tea that he cannot forget from his Anarkali, his unflinching affinity to tea from his birthplace leads to his sturdy confidence. He seems to have forgotten the stardom conferred on him by Princeton University. When he were to choose between the stardom and tea, in this instance, his inclination to tea and the birthplace drives scholars and critics to a new path of thoughts and conclusions. He has the comparative advantage. He has already attained what America has to offer. He reminisces his workplace experience in Underwood Samson after his graduation from Princeton. He is very much overwhelmed and baffled by the company's involvements, “The company is simple. It has only one service line: instantaneous travel. You step into its terminal in New York, and you immediately reappear in its terminal in London. Like a transporter on Star Trek. Get it? Good. Let's go” (p.12). His unbridled

appreciation of Princeton and Underwood Samson may not balance the weight of his affinity of his birthplace and tea. The fascinating descriptions of American places and their contributions to his personality and capabilities lead us to rethink while he is describing. One has to ponder his descriptions and the paths he is paving ahead. After his return to Pakistan, particularly Anarkali, he does not forget America, its contribution to him and his Erica, they are always with him. He has not been as pure as he was. He is in Anarkali, but his memories of America are with him, “I had returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased. I remained emotionally entwined with Erica, and I brought something of her with me to Lahore-or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to relocate in the city of my birth. (p.172)”. The narrator discusses the aftereffects of his return and his inability to focus on his present involvement as the memories from America haunt him. Presumably, the novel is the result of the failed oblivion. Neither he is not able to forget, nor he wishes to remember. One might consider that Changez is ethnocentric, his love of tea from Anarkali is further fueled by other facets of Pakistan such as the Pakistani disregard to nakedness and state of undress of women, “It is remarkable, I must say, how being in Pakistan heightens one’s sensitivity to the sight of woman’s body” (p.26).

Harm America: The Source of Conflicts and Standoffs

Despite the narrator’s partial acknowledgement of American contribution to his fascinating comprehension of his inner capability, he is all set to go against America. This is a payback not because America taught him to be an able minded individual but American involvements and promotions of the conflicts in and around the globe.

Initially, Changez in America was much happier, however, the terminal days were not so. The novel, in fact, is the meditation on Changez’s inversion from happiness to rage. He states: “I would like to claim that my final days in New York passed in a state of enlightened calm, nothing could be further from the truth. I was an incoherent and emotional madman, flying off into rages and sinking into depressions (p.168)”. The perennial question about his disillusionment about America is portrayed here. His final days in America were much troubled ever since he came to realize the double standards of American involvements in the affairs between and among the nations particularly the Asian nations. At times, comprehending the changed stance is enigmatic because Changez himself presents his bewildered state: “But you are at war, you say? Yes, you have a point. I was not at war with America. Far from it: I was the product of an American university, I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?” (p.73) As the novel unfolds his success taught by Princeton university, Changez himself is yet to explore the answer to this riddle. The university taught him through the mental gymnasium and he was taught to be the tall figure of his realm. He learnt that Princeton had brought a lot of success to him. Not only that, he had learnt many skills there. That said, Changez portrays the darker sides of American involvements. He asks with himself, possibly with the American

guest to whom he is talking to. However, he continues to present the reasons for his anti-American ethos:

What left me shaken, however, occurred when I turned on the television myself. I had reached home from New Jersey after midnight and was flipping through the Channels, looking for a soothing sitcom, when I chanced upon a newscast with ghostly night vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan for what was described as a daring raid on Taliban command post. My reaction caught me by surprise. Afghanistan was Pakistan's neighbour, our friend...
(p.99-100)

Changez clearly mentions why he has to go against America, he is not enigmatic in this concern, as America had attacked Afghanistan, the neighboring country of Afghanistan, the birth place of Changez. His perception of America is not always negative, "I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward, for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back. Living in New York was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War... (p.115). He was affirmative when it came to the view about America, various events and incidents changed his perceptions such as this. Not only that, the narrator reconfirms, " Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role. (p.156). These reasons and evidences confirm and reconfirm that America is not what he thought it to be.

To pinpoint Changez's position as the ambivalent would be too quick an attempt. He acknowledges the positive impacts of America on him. On the other hand, he loathes American involvement in the triggering of the conflicts in the Asian nations. When he is precisely particular, his aim to harm America should not be misconstrued. His positions need to be construed case by case. When Princeton University had offered unparalleled opportunity to refine one's skills and knowledge, he is overwhelmingly grateful to America, when America intends to grow the seeds of conflicts among the nations, he is entirely against it. He commits to harm America's particular policy. In that line of inferences, Changez is very critical and is not the position to accept everything blindly that America intends to do. This interpretation, although seems ideological, is based on the attachment of place. To substantiate, Changez's love of tea from Anarkali, Pakistan and his hatred to America only because America attacked his neighboring country (not his country, though) can be understood as the place attachment.

Conclusion

The study initiated with the objective of analyzing the cases of affinity between people and places comes with the claim that Hamid's novel makes a case of utopia and heterotopia. The central character's Anarkali is a utopia and American spaces are the questionable and contested spaces as they are the crisis heterotopias. This categorization is peculiar and this is what happens with the sense of topophilia. If one loves a place, it may have no concrete reasons for such a love. Changez has been the example of this case. He loves the tea of Anarkali so much

that he does not know the reasons of his love. Thus, this study concludes with the assertion that utopias and heterotopias are formed because of one's affinities with a place.

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