

Heterotopias and Changez's Fractured Self in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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Abstract

What happens to one's identity when moving between contrasting cultures? Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explores this tension through Changez - a Pakistani migrant seeking his fortune in New York who gets caught in seismic personal and political ruptures post-9/11. As Changez's world fractures between walls of wealth and violence, so too does his sense of self. The Foucauldian lens of "heterotopia" has been applied in this paper to investigate the junctions in the novel where Changez enters fluid in-between zones that break rules and reorder norms. Whether the shifting terrain of immigrant work, elite social bubbly parties, or his own yearning hallucinations about a vanished lover, Changez continually reinvents and loses himself between competing worlds. Textual analysis has been employed as the research method in this paper to explore the various perspectives. Just as the story resists singular interpretation, protagonist Changez drifts between models of selfhood - now fundamentalist, now fully assimilated, now financier, now revolutionary. His very name a paradox, Changez's mutable identity proves as reluctant, contradictory, and complex as the fractures of history and consciousness his journey unveils.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Postmodern identity, post-9/11 literature, Displacement, Space, Time

1. Introduction

Identity formation has become increasingly complex in today's globalized world marked by high mobility, cultural collisions, and socio-political upheavals. Migration brings contact with diverse spaces that can profoundly shape and destabilize one's sense of self. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 further amplified identity conflicts for Muslim immigrants like the protagonist of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. As Pakistani immigrant Changez struggles to navigate between his homeland and his adopted country of America, his identity transforms within charged cultural spaces that mirror the fractures of a post-9/11 world. This crisis of belonging reveals the precarious nature of identity in an era of flux. Literary scholars highlight how Changez's identity splits between competing national allegiances, underscoring his cultural hybridity. However, the spaces he inhabits that influence his fragmented identity require deeper exploration. Spatial theory provides a compelling lens for examining this issue. Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia illuminates the alternative counter-sites that shatter Changez's coherence of self throughout the novel. As real places operating under unique rules and logics, heterotopias generate identity crises upon entry or exit. By mapping key heterotopias in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and analyzing Changez's identity destabilization within them, we can enrich understanding of both the protagonist's postmodern subjectivity and the spatial dimensions of contemporary identity dilemmas. This paper applies Foucault's framework of heterotopia to reveal how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* dramatizes identity fragmentation through charged spaces. First providing an overview of heterotopia, the analysis will map prominent heterotopias in the novel, from immigrant environments to elite social scenes. Close reading of Changez's identity transformations and disorientation across these countercultural spaces elucidates the postmodern fluidity of selfhood amidst spatial and cultural upheaval. Examining the synergistic relationship between

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setting, identity, and ethical dilemmas in Hamid's novel illuminates' deeper complexities of belonging in today's world marked by migration and globalization.

2. Theoretical Framework

In his seminal 1967 lecture titled "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopias, which are tangible spaces that both represent and subvert elements of the broader societal order and environment. (Foucault, 1984) Heterotopia can be a real or imaginary place, such as a garden, a museum, a cemetery, a prison, a ship, etc. Heterotopia has its own rules, functions, and meanings that can mirror, invert, or contest the surrounding space. Foucault delineates several principles that symbolize heterotopias across diverse cultures. These spaces disrupt conventional temporal frameworks through ruptures and accumulations of temporality. They juxtapose multiple, disjointed spaces that would typically be incompatible within a unified spatial context. Access to heterotopias is circumscribed and ritualized, involving acts of purification and initiation that demarcate them from the broader public sphere. (Foucault, 1984) As a result, the subject within the heterotopia experiences a change of perspective or a distortion of reality when entering or exiting it, as if looking at a mirror that reflects or alters the image.

2.1. Applying Foucault's Concept of Heterotopia to Literary Analysis

While Michel Foucault initially developed the concept of heterotopia in the context of social and cultural spaces, its application to literary analysis offers a rich and innovative framework for interpreting narrative spaces and their impact on character development. Literature, by its very nature, creates alternative worlds and spaces that often mirror, invert, or challenge societal norms—a fundamental characteristic of heterotopias. By employing this concept in literary criticism, scholars can uncover deeper layers of meaning within texts, particularly in how fictional spaces reflect, distort, or contest reality. Heterotopia provides a valuable lens through which to examine the complex interplay between characters and their environments, especially in narratives dealing with themes of displacement, cultural hybridity, and identity formation. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how literary spaces function as sites of transformation, crisis, or deviation, mirroring the heterotopic spaces Foucault described in real-world contexts. Moreover, in an era where postmodern and postcolonial literatures frequently grapple with issues of spatial and temporal discontinuity, the heterotopic framework offers a particularly apt tool for analyzing these complexities. As demonstrated by Palladino and Miller (2015) in their work *The Globalization of Space: Foucault and Heterotopia*, the application of heterotopia to literary texts can reveal how narratives construct and manipulate spaces to reflect broader cultural and social phenomena. By bridging the gap between spatial theory and literary analysis, the application of heterotopia enriches our understanding of how narrative spaces shape character experiences and contribute to the overall thematic depth of literary works.

3. Migration, Space, and Identity in Literary Analysis

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly concerned with the relationship between space and identity, particularly in the context of migration. This focus stems from the recognition that migration—the movement of people across national borders for various economic, social, political, environmental, or personal reasons—profoundly impacts individuals' sense of self. Migrants often experience a sense of disarray as their space of belonging shifts, challenging, changing, or reinforcing their identity based on their interactions with the host society and connections to their country of origin.

The intricate interplay between space and identity has become a central theme in literary studies, especially in works dealing with migration and cultural hybridity. Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been a focal point for such investigations, with scholars

examining the protagonist Changez's shifting cultural identity and ambivalence between Pakistan and America.

Moazzam Ali Malik's (2021) analysis provides a notable contribution to this field, highlighting the anguished self-reflexivity Changez exhibits amid competing national allegiances. Malik's work underscores Changez's hybridity, offering valuable insights into the character's cultural fragmentation. However, while Malik's postcolonial perspective is illuminating, it does not fully address the alternative spaces presented in the novel that influence Changez's mutable identity.

This gap can be bridged with the application of Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" to literary analysis. Heterotopias, as real spaces governed by alternative logics, provide a compelling lens for examining countercultural spaces that rupture identity in texts.

As seen in, Nick Bentley's (2018) application of heterotopia to Monica Ali's novel "Brick Lane" demonstrates the potential of this analytical approach. Bentley argues that various spaces in the novel—including the protagonist Nazneen's council flat, the housing estate, the city, the village, and even the physical and cultural site of the body—function as heterotopias renegotiating gender identity. This analytical framework could be productively extended to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, offering new insights into the novel's fractured spaces and postmodern identity issues.

4. Overview of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

The Reluctant Fundamentalist follows Changez, a Pakistani migrant who gets a prestigious job at an elite valuation firm in New York City. Moving forward, he has an intense but volatile relationship with an enigmatic novelist Erica haunted by past trauma. The 9/11 attacks mark a rupture, coinciding with a difficult personal turn for Changez as Erica disappears into a mental health facility. Changez becomes disillusioned with neoliberal capital systems and U.S. foreign policy, returning to Pakistan and becoming a progressive firebrand academic. Back "home", Changez remains conflicted, telling his story to a wary American stranger while waiting for implied danger. These events, people and spaces can be seen as different worlds that challenge Changez's assumptions and loyalties. These different worlds or heterotopias illuminate how his identity fractures and reconfigures when crossing between worlds with distinct rules and meanings.

5. Heterotopic Spaces in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

The heterotopic approach illuminates how various spaces in the narrative—from New York's corporate environments to Lahore's streets—function as "other spaces" that both reflect and subvert societal norms, profoundly impacting the protagonist's sense of self. Mapping these heterotopic spaces gives deeper insights into Changez's fragmented identity and the broader themes of cultural hybridity and postcolonial experience. The lens of heterotopia helps elucidate the novel's exploration of post-9/11 geopolitical tensions, highlighting how spaces can become sites of conflict, transformation, and resistance. Also, reveals the layers of complexity in its treatment of identity, belonging, and the immigrant experience in a globalized world.

5.1. Elite Social Spaces and Mental Health Institution

The concept of Heterotopia discerns the interrogation and disturbance of spaces, cultures, and the protagonist Changez's fluctuating identity. With the help of Erica, Changez gains access to elite art parties and gatherings of the wealthy that overturn typical class propriety and rules regarding appearance, status and behavior – carnivalesque spaces requiring the appropriate performative class rituals and credentials to enter. Changez uses codified hand signals, clothing and manners to enter his prestigious workplace. Later to see Erica at the mental health institution, the nurse acts as an initiating guide, allowing entrance across the boundary from outside to the secluded interior rehabilitative world with its distinct logic. Each space requires figurative ritual

“purification” – whether status cues, financial perks or medical legitimacy - to cross the threshold into worlds operating by distinct rules.

5.2. Cultural and Domestic Landscapes

The Reluctant Fundamentalist intricately explores the destabilization of protagonist Changez's sense of identity within diverse spatial contexts. Foucault's conceptualization of heterotopic counter-spaces, necessitating acts of purification for detachment from broader societal contexts (Foucault, 1984), is exemplified in Changez's recurrent disruptions between the cultural landscapes of New York and Lahore. Upon his return to his homeland, Changez perceives his residence with an estranged perspective, lamenting its dilapidated state and feeling a profound sense of shame: "I was struck at first by how shabby our house appeared, with cracks running through its ceilings and dry bubbles of paint flaking off...I was saddened to find it in such a state—no, more than saddened, I was shamed. This was where I came from, this was my provenance, and it smacked of lowness" (Hamid, 2008). This domestic setting undergoes a heterotopic transformation, emerging as a counter-space challenging the opulent environments of American privilege he previously inhabited.

5.3. The Heterotopic Mirror: Post-9/11 America

Subsequently, when Changez, having resigned from his New York job, returns from Chile, he encounters another spatial shock and observes himself through the "warped mirror" of heterotopia, where his Pakistani heritage is distorted in reflection (Saldanha, 2008, p. 2080-2096): "I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers...It seemed to me then—and to be honest, sir, seems to me still—that America was engaged only in posturing" (Hamid, 2008). This stranger's hostile glare ruptures Changez's identity, casting him suddenly as a vilified outsider. This crystallizes the identity fragmentation Changez experiences crossing cultural thresholds. In America, he enjoyed wealth and status as a Princeton alum and elite consultant. But the backlash after 9/11 fractures his insider status. As Genocchio (1995) notes, passing through heterotopic boundaries can estrange identity. Verbally assaulted for his ethnicity, Changez is exiled from his adopted homeland. America's reactionary "posturing" further estranges Changez. He sees flag-waving nationalism supplanting rational discourse, demonizing people like himself. What was once familiar is rendered uncanny space. Transit across this charged boundary elicits identity crisis. Within these disorienting heterotopic spaces bridging the U.S. and Pakistan, Changez grapples with a fluid and unfixed identity, embodying a "fragmentation or multiplicity" reflective of postmodern theorizations (Johnson, 2013, p. 790-803). The oscillations across cultural landscapes induce successive waves of disorientation, prompting introspection and challenging the notion of a unified self. Consequently, each cultural milieu acts as a heterotopic mirror to the other, contributing to the destabilization of postmodern constructs of coherent identity.

5.4. Psychological Heterotopia: Changez's Connection with Erica

Within the narrative, Changez's conceptualized connection with the absent Erica functions as a heterotopia, intricately blurring the delineations between the realms of fantasy and reality. Despite Erica's vanishing act within the confines of a mental health clinic, Changez persistently clings to their emotional bond through intricately envisioned scenarios. As articulated by Changez himself: "During the preceding hours, Erica and I would have lived an entire day together... I can still recall her muscularity, made more pronounced by her gauntness, and the near-inanimate smoothness and coolness of her flesh as she leaned back and exposed to my touch her breasts" (Hamid, 2008). This psychological heterotopia operates as an "effectively enacted utopia," emblematic of both manifesting and challenging Changez's unresolved sentiments and lack of closure regarding Erica's absence, as posited by Foucault (1984). This spatial construct facilitates

the unrestrained expression of fantasies and desires. Genocchio's (1995) assertion that heterotopias provide a "space for an alternative ordering of things" holds true in this context, delineating an alternative chronological, relational, and amorous structure surrounding the absent beloved. Changez employs psychological projection to construct fantasies about Erica, coupled with the narrative's unfolding as an oral tale projected to an American audience, epitomizes additional facets of heterotopia. Heterotopias heavily rely on projective spaces capable of "juxtaposing several spaces...in a single real space". (Foucault, 1984) The novel's narrative technique and Changez's subjective projections seamlessly interweave actual and imagined realms. Memories, sensations, and emotions linked to Erica are projected by Changez into fictitious alternate realities and engagements with her, thereby entangling the authentic and the illusory. Furthermore, Changez directly projects a narrative space to his interlocutor during their Lahore Cafe dialogue, inviting the reader into his experiential realm. Storytelling emerges as a vehicle for both fantasy and spatial projection. As underscored by Saldanha (2008), authoritative notions of fixed space are "undercut" within realms of projection and fantasy. Projection, as a postmodern strategy, disrupts fixity, establishing fluid and heterotopic spaces that resonate throughout both the novel's overarching structure and Changez's internal landscape.

5.5. Neruda's House in Chile

Changez projects his ideas of familiarity with his home in Lahore in the depiction of Neruda's unconventional dwelling in Chile. He felt a sense of nostalgia and belonging in his visit to Neruda's house. A space within another space: "The house itself was compact and beautiful, reminiscent of a boat jutting out over the bay; a garden cascaded below it, and behind the bar was a convex mirror, which Neruda had employed to convince his guests that they were drunk." (Hamid, 2008). The surreal and imaginative nature of the residence amalgamates disparate spaces in a heterotopic manner. Neruda's abode encapsulates Foucault's conceptualization of the boat as an archetypal heterotopia: "a floating piece of space, a place without a place... that is given over to the infinity of the sea" (p. 27). The amalgamation of the boat and house protrudes into unfamiliar space, unfolding into both the sea and a realm of dreams. Neruda's peculiar mirror, distorting perceptions of intoxication, further mirrors the concept of heterotopias as spaces deliberately distorting cultural norms and logics. (Saldanha, 2008, p. 2080-2096).

5.6. New York Parties and Social Gatherings

The parties Changez attended with Erica, where rich and powerful people in New York meet, presents a distorted version of traditional cultural norms. These parties are like a carnival where people can act differently and serve as temporary countersites to typical class boundaries and power dynamics. As Foucault asserts, heterotopias are locations "suspended in time," often characterized by ritualistic or purifying gestures for entry (26). The exclusive realm of these gatherings demands specific credentials and initiation rites for entry. Notably, at one art gallery party, Changez observes the space accommodating "fashion models, old men with tans, artists in outrageous outfits" (Hamid, 2008). The convergence of high and low culture and the blending of disparate social groups create a carnivalesque space where social norms are temporarily displaced by the heterotopia of the party. As noted by Genocchio (1995), within heterotopias, "different social practices are enabled". Class-based norms of attire and decorum cease to apply momentarily. Through Erica, Changez gains entry to exclusive spaces that his ethnicity and social class might typically preclude him from. However, within the carnivalesque ambiance, his positionality becomes unsettled. These liminal, ritualistic spaces offer tantalizing glimpses of alternative social orders and hierarchies, deviating from the norm before reverting with the conclusion of the revelry.

6. Temporal Aspects of Heterotopia and Erica's Disappearance

Foucault emphasizes how heterotopias distort conventional timelines through instances of discontinuity and trauma. Changez's relationship with Erica embodies this heterochronic rupture. Her sudden disappearance haunts him, disrupting the anticipated progression from past love to future closure. Changez is stuck in the traumatic present, endlessly reconsidering his fragile attachment to Erica in light of her baffling vanishing. He reflects, "I thought of Erica. It occurred to me that my attempts to communicate with her might have failed in part because I did not know where I stood on so many issues of consequence...Probably this was why I had been willing to try to take on the persona of Chris, because my own identity was so fragile" (Hamid, 2008). Here Changez acknowledges his uncertain "where I stood" identity prevented genuine connection before she left. Her disappearance creates an unresolved rupture in time, denying closure. He remains haunted across time and space, imagining her in memory and fantasy. This abrupt discontinuity and persisting sense of spectral traces epitomize Foucault's concept of "heterochrony," where traumatic events warp conventional temporality (Foucault, 1984). As Genocchio (1995) notes, heterotopia creates narrative gaps that defy linear expectations. For Changez, Erica's disappearance generates a heterotopic rupture, disrupting linear time. Her enigmatic absence initiates a cycle of endless reconsideration and imagined unreality. Unable to achieve closure, he revisits their relationship through memory, fantasy, and speculative projections. Just as her vanishing resists tidy narrative resolution, Changez experiences time not as linear progression but oscillating recoil. The heterotopic space of his psyche becomes characterized by discontinuity, haunted by imaginative traces of Erica spanning time. Persistent trauma distorts reality and convolutes time within the fantasy space she left behind. Foucault's heterotopias elucidate the timeline-warping effects of rupture and discontinuity in Changez's subjectivity. Erica's disappearance heterochronically fractures linear temporality, trapping Changez in a loop of traumatic reconsideration and yearning projection as he tries to reconcile his fragile past attachment. But the enigmatic vacuum of her absence foils all conventional expectations of narrative closure.

7. Postmodern Identity and Heterotopia

The spatial disruptions experienced by Changez and his dynamic self-perception, encompassing notions of self, other, and rootlessness, align with postmodern ideologies regarding the fluid nature of identity. Changez navigates the interstices of diverse cultures without complete assimilation, epitomizing what Klages terms a postcolonial fracturing of unified self" (p. 170). "I remained, for the most part, confused. I was clearly on the threshold of great change; only the final catalyst was now required" (Hamid, 2008). Changez feels caught in-between worlds, suddenly expelled from the elite track he was pursuing as a Princeton-educated analyst. Yet back in Pakistan, he doesn't feel fully at home anymore either after years abroad. He knows a seismic shift is imminent - "the threshold of great change." But what that change will be or where he belongs is unclear to him. It's a profoundly destabilizing, confusing passage for Changez – his past assumptions ruptured, needing a "final catalyst" for his next transformation in this postcolonial, postmodern in-between space. Changez embodies the fragmentation and multiplicity characteristic of postmodern, post-structural concepts of self (Hall, 1996, p. 1-17).

7.1. Narrative Technique and Postmodern Qualities

A convergence of diverse cultural forces disrupts the unity of selfhood, and identity performance continually oscillates between various environments and moments of rupture, creating opportunities for redefinition. The text, marked by its ambiguous framing and oral

retelling, encapsulates fundamental postmodern qualities of fluidity, multiplicity, and destabilized narration (Klages, 2006). The narrative is intentionally destabilized. Changez's perspective is subjective, and readers must navigate conflicting viewpoints and uncertainties. Identity spaces reveal themselves to be as elusive as the narration and the liminal cultural spheres within which Changez navigates. Changez moves between cultures, never fully belonging to any. The café becomes a liminal space—a meeting point for different worlds.

8. Conclusion

Through a heterotopic lens, this paper has illuminated how various counter-spaces in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shatter Changez's coherence of identity. The analysis reveals how Changez continually reinvents himself when entering new spaces with alternative logics that distort his sense of self. Whether traversing the shifting terrain of immigrant work environments, elite social scenes, or even his own psychological landscapes, Changez is repeatedly dispossessed of a unified identity. As evidenced across the examined heterotopias, Changez's subjectivity fractures into conflicting personas - now fundamentalist, now fully assimilated, now financier, now revolutionary. Just as the ambiguous framing of the narrative resist's singular interpretation, Changez's identity remains irreducibly complex. He dwells in a perpetual state of flux, situated on thresholds between cultures whose juxtaposition governs his fragmentary self-conception. Ultimately, this spatial reading elucidates the complexities of identity negotiation against the broader forces of globalization, migration, and ideological collision. The destabilizing effect of heterotopic spaces underscores the difficulty of coherence and belonging in postmodern, postcolonial contexts marked by multiplicity and discontinuity. As with Changez, one's identity may informationally criss-cross borders, ideologies, and cultures without stable resolution. This analysis thereby enriches the understanding of liminality of immigrant experiences and postmodern subjectivities shaped by the spaces between worlds.

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