Cityscapes Transformed: Post 9/11 Novels

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The post–9/11 novel is pre-eminently a city novel and as such it is organized, written and to be read through the urban space. It is not only inscribed in the city but it also creates new spaces within the urban context and reallocates meanings within the city space. The analysed novels not only reflect the post–9/11 city, but they also create, produce, celebrate and write it. All of these texts classify as "historiographic metafiction" in Linda Hutcheon's terms; they are both "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages."[1]

Characters in the chosen novels are strongly attached to the cities they live in. The parameter of this emotional, social and cultural attachment becomes clear to many of them only after the fall of the twin towers. The confusion they come to experience is expressed in different ways but in most cases it is set around the individually tailored process of reclaiming the given urban space after the attacks. Some of the characters start walking excessively, with or without a plan, according to the same pattern (e.g., Chuck in Naqvi's *Home Boy*) following a differently planned route every time (Oskar in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* or Lilian in DeLillo's *Falling Man*) or getting lost in the city (Chuck in Naqvi's novel). During their city escapades, the characters come across personal memories strongly linked to the urban space (Changez in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*) or the history of the city which reveals itself to them in places they visit (Julius in Cole's *Open City*). Some of them feel excluded, "othered," discriminated against and as a consequence decide to leave the city and country (Chuck in *Home Boy*, Changez in *The Reluctant*

Fundamentalist, Chanu in Ali's *Brick Lane*: all of these characters are Muslim and feel "othered" on this very basis). The very city that seemed a haven of limitless opportunities—in sync with the spirit of a global citizenship—transforms into an alienating fearful space for many, which this paper primarily focuses on through a study of Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Naqvi's *Home Boy*.

9/11

Ken Booth and Tim Dunne ponderously examine the amplified historicity of some specific dates and specific months. 9/11 universally came to define a world historical crisis. The signposts of world affairs in the twentieth century seemed to be fixed in particular places: Sarajevo, Munich, Suez, Cuba, Vietnam and the rest. In the case of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon it is as if everyone instantly understood that the meanings of these 'events' were global, beyond locality, an out-of-geography experience. September 11 was a place everyone shared, because there was a sense that what we were witnessing, literally, was a collision of worlds. The suffocating smoke and debris from the collapse of the Twin Towers not only show the material destruction that follows when worlds collide, but also symbolize the difficulty of understanding colliding thought-worlds; characterized by different beliefs about what is reality, what constitutes reliable knowledge and how we should behave.[2]

9/11 AND THE METROPOLIS

This paper focuses on literary representations of the metropolises, New York and London, in novels written after 9/11 whose plots refer to the events of that day. It places these texts within the context of the genre of the city novel, rooted in and deriving from the urban and industrial developments of modernity. In these novels fictional characters are positioned in a real life cosmos, the streets of which can be marked on

a map of the "real" city in question. The city in many of these texts is given a personality and can become the primary focus, itself the main character.[3] It focuses on the way 9/11 is perceived and "dealt with" in spatial terms, i.e., on how the event and its repercussions become inscribed into the urban reality that then has to be made walkable, live-able and readable again.

In some of the texts the metropolis is looked at from outside and in retrospective (Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*) and in others its perception is shaped by visiting other places and returning with new insights and additional, richer urban knowledge (Brussels in Teju Cole's *Open City*). Urban individuals and city dwellers in post–9/11 city novels change the city through the way they live, through their movements and actions, just like the metropolis co-shaped by other individuals, and observers becomes an inseparable part of their lives.

The specific relation between a literary protagonist and the injured, scared and defenceless city is marked by reciprocity. This also involves contact between individuals connected by the fact of living in and hence sharing the same urban space. In 1903 Georg Simmel wrote about the nature and characteristics of the "typical metropolitan resident." He characterized this specific urban being as one whose "relationships and concerns . . . are so manifold and complex that, especially as a result of the agglomeration of so many persons with such differentiated interests, their relationships and activities intertwine with one another into a many-membered organism."[4] This powerful metaphor of seeing cities as organic structures features prominently in post–9/11 fiction and has a long history of representation. How does an urban organism act and react in case of a major social crisis? Established and seemingly secure links, relations of power and hierarchy in such an urban body when it is being exposed to and attacked by the virus of fear and paranoia do not seem to function any more. The city in the analysed novels is often anthropomorphized, referred to as a living creature that can feel and become an object of emotional importance and attachment. Perceiving the city as a body also involves, as Antje Dallmann points

out, the motif and tendency of seeing processes taking place within it as evolutional or even "natural".[5] These processes include the changing character of particular areas, the general social and urban development, spreading out of city limits.

The multidimensional frame of spatial interventions, i.e., walking, strolling, moving through the city and writing it, all in the context of 9/11 in this paper is aimed at spatial and symbolic remapping of the post–9/11 reality. "In a powerful recent work, 'On Cosmopolitanism', Jacques Derrida envisages the city as a novel political form that operates outside of the logic of nations and national boundaries, and has as its raison d'être the Kantian ethic of 'hospitality' towards the persecuted and the displaced."[6] Novels written by H.M. Naqvi, *(Home Boy)* and Mohsin Hamid *(The Reluctant Fundamentalist)* explore the transforming dynamics of the city post-9/11. The fall of the Twin Towers redefines the city for them in myriad ways. The city which had once been a familiar haven mutates into an unfamiliar and hostile space, surprisingly elusive. They cannot live outside of representation since urban space requires a dialogue—it is mobile and alive; it becomes "filled with politics and ideology"[7] and cannot be experienced without mediation as the city is itself a "text that is partly composed of literary and artistic tropes."[8] The Kantian ethic of 'hospitality' is majorly recast in this altered socio-politico-cultural space after 9/11. There is hence a strong relation of interdependence between an individual and the city which influences the construction and identification of the "self." As Eveline Kilian puts it, "The self can be changed in its encounter with the city, just like the city is reshaped and reorganized in the mind during each excursion."[9]

PUBLIC/PRIVATE

New post–9/11 life cartographies emerged as they began to attach emotions, memories and feelings to a specific place/city and transform it into their unique personal space. New York and London after 9/11

become ultimate stages for storytelling; they are filled with stories told by different voices that are all rooted, inspired by and centred on one of the cities. Hence these cities can be "read" as literary texts especially as novels with their plurality of perspectives and possible multiple narrators. It also construes the new urban Other whose presence emerged after 9/11 and effected social changes in the metropolitan and literary environment.[10]

Home is no longer associated with separateness from the world outside or with privacy; characters of the modern urban novel often perceive the city as their home and feel most comfortable when immersed in it. Post 9/11 the border between private and public blurs and "home" itself becomes a subject of redefinition; it is "no longer a haven, no longer clearly demarcated"[11] and in the urban reality of home everybody is always exposed to the sight of a stranger; in other words, in a city everybody is somebody else's stranger.

Multiculturalism, and the presence of new "otherness" as well as a redefinition of public and private space characterize the postmodern metropolis and require new cultural responses and approaches. 9/11 led to a certain reconstruction of this postmodern otherness and again requires a redefinition of urban spaces and notions.[12]

REMAPPING

Remapping in the post–9/11 context is always a very personal process and involves reclaiming memories attached to places. It is also connected to storytelling which is an important feature of the therapeutic character of the process. After the Twin Towers fell, the city lost an important orientation and reference point. Before 9/11 the towers were visible from Lower and Midtown Manhattan and marked the geographic direction when looked at from a distance. The suddenly altered urban space made people feel disoriented; they lost their reference point and so, metaphorically, did the city. These complex processes are reflected in fiction which features many disoriented characters, geographically

and emotionally. Together with the general spatial and symbolic disorientation, the sense and meaning of "home" had been lost, as Judith Greenberg points out: "The attacks freshly complicated those terms—'home' and 'New York'—and proved anew that they signify not just location but also a relation to identity" and hence location (also the exact one within the city) produced a sense of vulnerability.[13] The farther away from downtown, the more distance in perceiving what happened was possible. As Thomas Pynchon puts it in *Bleeding Edge*, "the farther uptown, the more second hand the moment"[14] and the more controlled the narrative of the attacks. This applies on a different scale to the whole country: the more geographical distance from ground zero, the less "troubled the sense of home"[15] and hence the possibility of emotional remoteness.

THE CITY AND THE OTHER

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* belong to the category defined by Birgit Däwes as "ethnic responses",[16] many of which have gone largely unnoticed and been excluded from the post–9/11 literary canon. They present non-Caucasian American, non-Western, Muslim perspectives on the September 11 attacks. Both of the texts are strongly linked to New York City. The novels often use non-Western spatial and intertextual references and as such contribute an important perspective on perceiving, understanding, remapping and inhabiting the multicultural post–9/11 Western metropolis. Their experience of displacement gives these characters new insights to the city which post–9/11 fiction provides space for. According to Golimowska, "Both novels feature plots focused on the time in New York between arrival and departure—the experience of urban space is therefore limited by time, which in both cases is linked to the events of September 11. This triggers the need of storytelling, the need to preserve the memory of a space within a given time."[17]

She further elucidates how both Hamid's and Naqvi's novels feature other places and use the spatial dimension to address post–9/11 "othering" and the East-West dichotomy. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Hamid divides the tension between New York and Lahore, and in *Home Boy* Karachi constitutes the "other" place. These cities serve as synecdoches for the societies and cultures they are placed within and thereby relate to different levels of the dichotomous reality. The cities in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* provide unique lenses through which the political, social and cultural dynamics in the post–9/11 world are seen and addressed. New York and Lahore form a transnational axis in which the story is set and through which the narrator controls the narrative. Changez talks to his silent listener about his family and his hometown Lahore, using transnational references to make the spatial dimensions and meanings understandable for the American:

> Our situation is, perhaps, not so different from that of the old European aristocracy in the nineteenth century, confronted by the ascendance of the bourgeoisie. Except, of course, that we are part of a broader malaise afflicting not only the formerly rich but much of the formerly middle-class as well: a growing inability to purchase what we previously could.[18]

Lahore and New York—cities which represent two binary poles in the post–9/11 discourse of dichotomies, have, in Changez's description, a lot in common. This elevates them to an urban meta-level, beyond the notion of countries and nations. Both have parts that are walkable, i.e., pedestrian-friendly and those "degrading man on foot"—parts that favour people in cars. Changez refers in this context to "urban democracy" of places in the first category in which everybody can become a part of the crowd, and its lack in older parts of Lahore. Knowing both New York and Lahore gives him the potential not only to compare, but also to see each place through the lens of the other. Visiting New York for the first time, Changez realizes he had been

familiar with the metropolis even before his arrival. He has known it through cultural, mostly filmic representations.[19]

Seventy-Seventh Street, in the heart of the Upper East Side. This area—with its charming bistros, exclusive shops and attractive women in short skirts walking tiny dogs—felt surprisingly familiar, although I have never been there before; I realized later that I owed my sense of familiarity to the many films that have used it as a setting.[20]

Fictional, filmic or artistic depictions of New York not only reflect the city but also create its primary image, make it what it is, and preserve the memory of buildings, streets, squares, parks and other urban places which in reality keep changing. Changez is conscious of the unique character of the different urban spaces that surround him and lives the metropolitan life of a "successful urban dweller".[21] When the outdoor area of the Lahore restaurant empties, he reflects on the power of emptiness in big cities designed for the presence of crowds. Solitude in this context is literarily out of place, and becomes a disturbing factor: "The fact that we are all but alone despite being in the heart of a city."[22] The city does not only have a heart but it also has lungs with which it breathes. In Changez's story, New York becomes a beautiful body, pulsing with life and energy. It was one of those glorious late-July afternoons in New York when a stiff wind off the Atlantic makes the trees swell and the clouds race across the sky. You know them well? Yes, precisely: the humidity vanishes as the city fills its lungs with cooler, briny air.[23]

Chuck in *Home Boy* sees New York's wounds through the lens of his immigrant existence and the radically changing fearful attitude of his American co-urbanites. After 9/11 Chuck loses his job on Wall Street and after weeks of loneliness and depression he decides, like Chanu, the Bangladeshi character in Monica Ali's Brick Lane, to become a taxi driver. Enrolling in the Taxi Drivers Academy marks a beginning of a process of becoming a professional urban dweller, a certified city cartographer, a map connoisseur and a crucial and visible urban presence.

AM(ERICA)

It is a city of possibility filled with "magical vibrancy and sense of excitement."[24] Changez's perspective on New York evolves from a fascinated stranger to a New Yorker who, eventually, feeling betrayed and used, chooses to abandon the city. This progression is visible in the retrospective narrative. When Erica shows Changez parts of Manhattan, he refers to New York as Erica's city.[25] Erica lives in a fancy apartment on the Upper East Side, and her spacious bedroom is, according to Changez, "the socioeconomic equivalent of a spacious bedroom in a prestigious house in Gulberg" where he grew up.[26] When they lose contact, New York becomes Changez's only faithful companion. When he cannot sleep at nights it is the city that enters through his windows and joins him in his loneliness and sudden detachment.[27] When things fall apart with Erica, Changez seeks comfort in the city. During his walking hours he revisits the places attached to the memory of Erica, in order to be closer to her. The city has the extraordinary ability to preserve moments and memories when they are attached to particular places. These moments become a part of the city and shape the way it is perceived and understood by the narrator. As these emotionally loaded spaces vanish or are replaced with others, the memories too disappear.

> I wandered about the city revisiting places she [Erica] had taken me to, whether because I thought I might see her or because I thought I might see something of us, I am not now certain. A few of these places—such as the gallery in Chelsea we had visited on the night of our first date—I proved unable to find; they had vanished as though they had never existed. Others, like the spot in Central Park where we had gone on our picnic, were easy to locate but seemed to have altered. Perhaps this was the effect of a change in season; perhaps also it was in the city's nature to be inconstant.[28]

After 9/11 the city becomes a stage on which Changez manifests his feeling of otherness and displacement. He attempts provocation in order to generate a reaction, when in fact he is depressed and desperate. New York absorbs his anger. His walking is an aggressive movement that represents his rage against the outside world.

> [S]ometimes I would find myself walking the streets, flaunting my beard as a provocation, craving conflict with anyone foolhardy enough to antagonize me. Affronts were everywhere; the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment of history—not just from the government, but from the media and supposedly critical journalists as well—provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger.[29]

The process of finding new ways in the city without Erica and without the admiration for Underwood Samson is difficult. Wandering in search for traces of her in the city, Changez recalls "diving" into his New York life in the significant September of 2001, shortly after the attacks of 9/11. He and Erica walk through the streets of Manhattan on a warm sunny day and notice a firefly, lost between the monstrous skyscrapers, overwhelmed and disoriented:

> [A] tiny greenish glow visible up close but overwhelmed by the city's luminance when viewed from even a modest distance. We watched as it crossed Fourteenth Street, headed south.... "Do you think he made it?" she [Erica] asked me. "I have no idea," I said, "but I hope so."[30]

This tiny creature symbolizes the vulnerability of man surrounded by architectonic constructions he himself created. Especially in the light of 9/11 these buildings come to overwhelm and threaten. When "locked" in a skyscraper and dependent on technology, individual freedom of movement and decision-making become limited.

Throughout the novel Changez reflects on the nature of extremely tall buildings and construes them not only as a potential threat but also as aesthetic objects, artistic achievements. Skyscrapers reflect the sun, influence the wind and hence interfere with nature to become a part of the landscape. They evoke emotions and contribute to the city's extraordinariness:

> Think of the expressive beauty of the Empire State Building, illuminated green for St. Patrick's Day, or pale blue on the evening of Frank Sinatra's death. Surely, New York by night must be one of the greatest sights in the world.[31]

THE AMERICAN DREAM

With ruthlessness inscribed into its rules and tasks, Underwood Samson represents authority, superiority, and certain ignorance towards its clients and indirectly towards foreign countries whose economies it rates. Underwood Samson's employees are evaluated like the companies they rate, through highly competitive comparisons in the result of which individuals become exchangeable and replaceable. The entire mechanism is driven by money and the only person who softens it in this novel is Jim, Changez's supervisor and mentor who employs him. Jim likes Changez and claims to understand him because he believes to see in him a reflection of his young self: "I never let on that I felt like I didn't belong to this world. Just like you."[32] Jim is the exemplary personification of the American Dream in this novel; he is The Great Gatsby figure, faithful to his dreams. Jim has managed to work his way up the career ladder, thus proving, to others but most importantly to himself, that the transition from rags to riches is indeed possible in America. He talks openly about his poor background and shows off his wealth by inviting his team to a summer party at his house in the Hamptons. In the city he lives in a fancy apartment in Tribeca. Changez is struck by the attention paid to design and art, and a "not

insignificant number of male nudes".[33] Jim laughs at the question of whether he is married or has children. When at a bar in Manila he sits with his arm around the back of Changez's chair, it makes Changez feel literally like being taken "under his wing".[34]

The novel suggests a homoerotic element in the relationship between those two men. Their acquaintance is inscribed in the hierarchy of the company but clearly extends beyond the strictly professional. Jim—the patronizing mentor who calls Changez "a kid" when assigning him to a new project—recognizes himself in the young Pakistani and is at the same time intrigued and moved by his "otherness," which stands out in Underwood Samson's homogenous working environment. Changez shares his observations about Jim with the white, male American stranger in Lahore without comment, as if he was gradually revealing the insights of the acquaintance and there was more to come.

THE EAST AND THE WEST

The relationship between the young, ambitious Pakistani Princeton graduate and his American mentor can be construed as a metaphor for the illusory and never fully graspable love affair between the East and the West according to Golimowska. She further states: "It is marked by disappointments on both sides. Jim certainly is, next to Erica, the other figure who emotionally chains Changez to America. At the same time Jim 'belongs' to Underwood Samson and disappears from Changez's life after he stops working for the company. Sacrificing a part of the self's autonomy to the wild and ruthless capitalism embodied by Underwood Samson is requisite for the acquaintance. It cannot exist outside of the professional constellation of the mentor-protégée, which, on a global scale reflects the power relations inscribed in international (inter)dependencies."[35]

In the globalized everyday environment of Underwood Samson its employees even look alike; they conform to the same dress code

and have the same haircuts. After 9/11, when Changez returns from his visit in Lahore with a beard, it is considered a pointed political statement. The company employs only one other non-white analyst and from the beginning there is mutual understanding and sympathy between this character and Changez. They share a legacy of being the "colonized subjects" and they talk about cricket, a game that becomes a metonymy for their childhoods or is simply used as a metaphor in their everyday New York vocabulary. This brings these two characters close to Naqvi's Chuck, who also refers to cricket when recalling his childhood in Karachi. Once Wainwright asks Changez while they share a cab downtown:

> "Hey man, do you get cricket?" I asked him what he meant. "My dad's nuts about it. He's from Barbados. West Indies versus Pakistan . . . best damn test match I ever saw." "That must have been in the eighties," I said. "Neither team is quite so good now."[36]

Changez also uses a cricket metaphor to refer to his boss's open, friendly, and honest attitude, which for him seems to equal a confession, something far too intimate for a strictly professional conversation: "The confession that implicates its audience is—as we say in cricket—a devilishly difficult ball to play. Reject it and you slight the confessor; accept it and you admit your own guilt."[37] The postcolonial context is critical as Changez alludes to it as to an aspect that America and Pakistan have in common—the only reference made on a national and not a city level: "Like Pakistan, America is, after all, a former British colony, and it stands to reason, therefore, that an Anglicized accent may in your country continue to be associated with wealth and power, just as it is in mine."[38] Chuck, the main character of H M Naqvi's Home Boy, recalls playing cricket as a boy in Karachi. In Chuck's memory, his father's death is marked by moving into a new apartment and by the end of the cricket games in the garden. Symbolically, the absence of

cricket marks the end of careless childhood linked in Chuck's memory to an end of a space (the house and the garden).

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

The question of identity, linked to the city rather than to the country or a nation, contributes to the importance of the urban space in this novel. "I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker," claims Changez.[39] When after 9/11 the city is "invaded" by American flags, it strikes him as inappropriate—for Changez, being a New Yorker is very different from being an American. The city embodies for him values and phenomena that until 9/11 stayed on a post-national level. Its cosmopolitan character is unique and hence it cannot stand for or represent the entire country or nation.

Flying back to the U.S. shortly after 9/11 he is exposed to discrimination and humiliation by security controls at the airport. The New York he returns to is a different place with different social coding and norms. He observes radical changes in American democracy and questions its foundations: "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."[40] Changez is shocked by the mental state of the metropolis:

> 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. What your fellow countrymen longed for was unclear to me—a time of unquestioned dominance? of safety? of moral certainty? I did not know—but that they were scrambling to don the costumes of another era was apparent. I felt treacherous for wondering whether that era was fictitious,

> and whether—if it could indeed be animated—it contained a part written for someone like me.[41]

New York City becomes a strange and foreign place, dangerous and unfriendly, moody and aggressive. A "final catalyst" for Changez arrives as his encounter with Juan Bautista, a publisher whose Chilean company, based in Valparaiso, is being consulted by Underwood Samson.[42] Indirectly but forcibly, he compares Changez to the medieval janissaries in the Ottoman Empire who, taken from their families at a very young age, were schooled to fight against their own societies and nations. Changez, devoted to the US, his "adopted empire"[43] and disappointed by its radical shift after 9/11 feels like a modern janissary and his pride at being employed by Underwood Samson is rapidly replaced by embarrassment.

Space and place in both novels (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Boy*) are attached to ideology and politics. According to Golimowska,

> The cities are irreplaceable and unmovable, whereas characters claiming to carry parts of the cities in themselves can transport them and mediate between the ideologies and world-views. 9/11 changes the perception of space and the lens through which the characters are viewed and judged. In both novels the impact of 9/11 stretches much further than New York City or the US. Both Changez and Chuck are constantly in between of the cosmoses. 9/11 makes them abandon New York City, a change that creates a sense of displacement and presents a severe identity problem. The city remains emotionally close but at the same time is geographically and symbolically as remote as ever. It cannot be revisited without becoming a new space, incompatible with the memory of it. This discrepancy results in incompleteness, a missing cultural context, a broken link.[44]

Both novels use cities to address the multifaceted post–9/11 dichotomy

on different levels. The city acts as the key to understanding the complexity of the scope of that dichotomy and its consequences. The ambiguity of the Other is also addressed through place, as the process of "othering" is location-sensitive. In both novels the cities change with political tensions and post–9/11 sentiments. They reflect shifts in the lives of singular characters and as such cannot be revisited; in both novels they turn into memories and seismographs of moods, both individually and collectively. These different memories of places also deserve different names, as according to Italo Calvino:

> For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name.[45]

NOTES

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