

**To Issue a Firefly's Glow  
Wormhole Geographies and Positionality in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*  
Adnan Mahmutović**

**Abstract**

Hamid's novelistic project is a creative examination of the relationship between the micro movements of individuals and the macro processes of globalisation. The micro movements of individual human agents are related to their political being-in-the-world and their geographical location. Using Sheppard's notion of 'wormhole travel', I examine how geographical location affects political agency. In particular, I employ the notion of 'positionality' to say something meaningful about the way location and connectivity of cities, global conglomerates and populations affect the ability to develop individual political agency in a globalised world. Hamid's novel questions the popular notion that globalisation is an external factor, which affects everything from the way we conceive of planetary geography to national and global economies and social action as such. I argue that political agency in this novel involves an increase in ideologically-informed will to affect one's life as a citizen, or, to use Hamid's own metaphor, to an ability to create 'a firefly's glow bright enough to transcend the boundaries of continents and civilizations'.

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I understand Hamid's novelistic project as a creative examination of the relationship between the micro movements of individuals and the macro processes of globalisation. While the novel may not provide all the answers, it seems to show its value as a discourse that allows global populations to ask the important question about the character and possible impact of their political being-in-the-world. As a conclusion to his story, Changez, the narrator and protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, gives a bold statement to his American interlocutor: 'I had, in my own manner, issued a firefly's glow bright enough to transcend the boundaries of continents and civilizations.'<sup>1</sup> The complex ambiguity of the firefly metaphor, which reflects the overall ambiguity in the entire narrative, forces the reader to decide whether Changez can be trusted. More specifically, the one essential choice is whether to interpret this *glow* as inspiration to struggle for global social justice or as a call for terrorism, which no doubt also transcends geographical and political boundaries. To begin with, I choose to interpret Changez's words in terms of his emigration from Pakistan to the US and his global business travel.

Political agency has no doubt been a recurrent topic in research on Hamid's novel, especially in relation to post-9/11 global politics and fundamentalism.<sup>2</sup> Political agency in this

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<sup>1</sup> Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London: Penguin Books, 2007) 207. All subsequent references to, and citations of, the novel will appear in parentheses within the body of this article.

<sup>2</sup> One could practically quote most researchers: Esterino, Elia, Hartnell, Hawley, Kiran, Mehnaz, Morey, Munos, Neelam, Moore-Gilbert, Perner, Roy, Scanlan, Singh, Waterman, Wolff, Wilson, and others.

novel seems to involve an increase in ideologically-informed will (or desire) to affect one's life as a citizen. What is missing in Hamid scholarship, due to the fact that the novel is still read largely in terms of variegated postcolonial theories, is a deeper look at the way Hamid shows the effects of globalisation and geography on individual and communal agency. I will argue that Hamid's novel questions the popular notion that globalisation is an external factor, something out there, which affects everything from the way we conceive of planetary geography to national and global economies and social action as such. I will examine how different forms of travel shape Changez as a political agent and corroborate his claim that a singular political initiative, though seemingly as negligible as the glow of a firefly, has the potential to affect global political landscapes. While this seems obvious if we read the glow as the fire of terrorism, it requires more effort to show positive political impact in other spheres of social engagement such as education (Changez as teacher).

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez travels a great deal, first as a migrant and then as an employee of Underwood Samson, an American company with a global reach. This global reach has generally been read as symbolic of the global corporate power of the US. Changez's instantaneous relocations between America, Greece, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Chile resemble travel from popular James Bond movies, which Hamid mentions and which feature obligatory jumps between London, as the core geographical position, and exotic, commodified peripheries.<sup>3</sup> By relying upon a simplistic notion of a homogenous global space, Bond movies advertise the idea of a borderless world that is big enough for travel to be exciting and small enough for travel to be possible and fast, which is the effect of the supposedly easy flow of capital.<sup>4</sup>

Changez is very much aware of this type of movement. When arriving in the Philippines on his 'first Underwood Samson assignment', he says, 'I was, in my own eyes, a veritable James Bond' (72-73). In the way it depicts global travel, Hamid's novel dramatises what looks like the warping of space, which allows individuals and goods to travel between faraway places *as if* they are being transported instantaneously through some form of a wormhole. Of course, Hamid does not make travel truly instantaneous, but the cuts and jumps in the narrative initially support the idea that capital increases the pliability of global space. It is important to point out that as a literary novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also connects itself to the genre of science fiction (scifi), in which wormhole travel is often a matter of course. Hamid frequently prefers scifi and fantasy tropes over the more typical magical realism in postcolonial fiction. In other words, when we focus on the idea of travel as a form of reality in this story, we also get a sense of the future, or at least premonitions of the awful future in which such global movements may result: an increase in terrorism, world wars, global warming, and so on.

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<sup>3</sup> At this point I want to mention that Hamid has continued engaging with the space-warping travel in his latest novel *Exit West*, which had not been published at the time I wrote the article. Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*. London: Penguin Books, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> If there is anything that Mira Nair's cinematization of the novel has done right, it is her reproduction of the sense of the speed of relocation, that is, Changez's movement between distant global locations. This could, of course, be chalked up to the film medium as such, as well as the Hollywood-type thriller genre, but in my view the quick jumps between places around the globe are very much in line with the particularly cinematic narrative flow of the novel.

As the story develops, Changez seems to question the supposedly smooth travel of capital in a world where globalisation seems to have annihilated space (Harvey).<sup>5</sup> Instead of speaking about annihilation of space, at this point I want to draw attention to the importance of location, geographical positions, and the reshaping of space through wormhole-like travel, all of which Hamid uses to show the dynamic between individual agency and that of global corporations.

Global movement is central to the narrative from the very beginning when Changez establishes that he is positioned in Lahore and that his interlocutor has travelled a long way to meet him there. The first paragraph plants the idea that the narrator, being a bearded terrorist, is a potential enemy of America, and that the guest is possibly an American agent come to deal with this enemy. The way the two men are positioned in relation to one another, though in that moment they occupy the same space, resembles the positionality of two distant countries with strong political relations. Such narrative play with geographical location and political positioning is consistent throughout the novel. Almost immediately, Changez tells the American how he left Pakistan to chase his American dream in New York. Within the space of a few pages, a connection between two distant locations, Lahore and New York, is created through the travel of the two men. When Changez informs the American that he went to the US as a young man, he also creates a sense of history between the two places. Changez's travelling, which establishes a connection between an American metropolis and a large Pakistani city, appears to be as quick as the delivery of this information. What will be most important for my argument in the latter part of this essay is the way Hamid already here gives a sense that New York is a more desirable/elevated partner in this transnational relationship.

In fact, Changez's move to America needs no explanation. It is a matter of course. Moving in the opposite direction, the reluctant return needs to be justified and this justification is what constitutes Changez's story. The connectivity and the desirability of New York is effectively portrayed on one of the covers, which features a man watching New York from an oriental-looking (star?) gate<sup>6</sup> as if the two points in space were brought together and the distance is both great and negligible. A focus on the sense of warping of global space and fast travel, which I will call 'wormhole travel', using the geographer Eric Sheppard's metaphor (explained in more detail below), can help us see Hamid's discourse in a different light.<sup>7</sup>

Wormhole travel is thematised from an early scene in the novel when Changez has to demonstrate his skills in order to get a coveted job at Underwood Samson. His future boss, Jim, asks him to evaluate a fictional company: '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' (13-14). The purpose of this mock-

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<sup>5</sup> Following David Harvey's argument about time-space compression inherent in capitalist accumulation, Smethurst argues that the driving force of capitalism has set a goal, which is 'to overcome distance continually through speed, eroding spatial boundaries ... an attempt to "annihilate space through time"'. Paul Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000) 89.

<sup>6</sup> In the Hollywood movie *Stargate*, and the subsequent series, an oriental-looking machine called *stargate* produces wormholes between distant locations around the universe.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Sheppard. 'The Spaces and Times of Globalization: Place, Scale, Networks, and Positionality,' *Economic Geography* 78.3 (July 2002) 307-30.

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evaluation is not only to show Changez's potential to be a global agent of capitalism but to make him, and by implication the reader, start questioning whether one would/should risk this type of fast travel in order to maximise one's time/productivity. This doubt follows Changez on all his future business trips, during which he will constantly be disassembled and reassembled. In the beginning, he will not mind it at all, but eventually he will begin to notice how his post-travel reconstitution will always yield a slightly different self. In other words, this early moment is the seed to Changez's changing political agency, and his future resistance to corporate fundamentalism and economic globalisation. This resistance will begin with his outright refusal to work for a global capitalist enterprise, and then engage in the teaching of Pakistani youth at a university about the need to invent ways of resistance to global capitalism and American dominance. As a terrorist of sorts, and as such a wormhole traveller par excellence, his initial corporate mobility prepares him well for a different kind of, and perhaps more destructive, mobility. Terrorism, he will come to show, uses the already pliable spaces of capitalism to show its *glow*.

The pliable spaces of capitalism become apparent to him already in the beginning, during his Princeton years, when he joins his classmates on a trip to Greece: 'We assembled in Athens, having arrived on different flights ... and then we headed off with the group to the port city of Piraeus' (19). Of course, the characters did not travel between the three locations instantaneously, but the suggested ease and speed of their travel gives a sense of such futuristic travel. This type of movement, suggested through narrative jumps, shows not only that people would pay for it, but also that they are not properly considering the risks. These risks, it seems, are less about a person's physical health and more about things such as moral compass and ideology. Changez is annoyed by '[t]he ease with which they parted with money' and 'were in a *position* to conduct themselves in the world as though they were its ruling class' (23-24, emphasis added). This kind of behaviour, which is very much connected to the fast travel between strategically important locations, indicates the seemingly unimpeded flow of the capital. Later, when Changez starts working for Underwood Samson, he comes to terms with being positioned in this way: 'I could, if I desired, take my colleagues out for an after-work drink – an activity classified as 'new hire cultivation' – and with impunity spend in an hour more than my father earned in a day' (42). The access to capital creates a sense that the space itself can be folded and the characters simply move in no time between distant geographical locations. This is why Changez can say to the American, 'You have not been to Rhodes? You must go' (26). The implication is of course that the American has the means and time to do it. Later, he asks, 'Have you been to the East, sir? You have! Truly, you are well-traveled for an American – for a person of any country, for that matter' (73). The second remark shows the implied irony in the first. Changez brings attention to the fact that, despite an ever-increasing travel, most people have neither the means nor the leisure time to travel around the globe the way Changez himself has: 'Underwood Samson had the potential to transform my life ... making my concerns about money and status things of the distant past' (16).

A narrative such as Hamid's, which critically examines globalisation by playing with the notion of global space and logistical and geographical realism, works under the assumption that readers have some sense of both globalisation and global space. While this space may be understood differently in different discourses, for this analysis I rely on the notion of global

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space as explained by geographers like Sheppard and Henry Wai-chung Yeung.<sup>8</sup> For Sheppard, '[s]pace/time is a contingent outcome of societal and biophysical processes that create places and positionality. As with all dialectical processes, concrete places and spaces emerge whose persistence makes them seem immutable or natural.'<sup>9</sup> In addition, Yeung uses Lefebvre's notion of global space as 'the social foundation of a transformed everyday life open to myriad possibilities' to highlight 'the ease in which particular material processes and social practices can be constituted or reconstituted in relation to different configurations of geographic scales.'<sup>10</sup> For my reading of Hamid's novel, it is important to understand that geographic scales are 'contested through social struggles and political means', and how 'social actors who drive economic globalization ... "constitute scale through their social praxis"'.<sup>11</sup> For instance, in the novel the workings of Underwood Samson show that certain processes, such as the flow of capital, allow for greater global movement, greater scalar 'switchability'. In contrast, individual and even communal political engagement is far more restricted, especially if it stands in the way of the flow of capital.<sup>12</sup>

Sheppard's wormhole metaphor highlights the very quality of connection between people, places, corporations, states, and so on. In order to understand what Hamid is trying to show by dramatising wormhole-like travel, we can compare it to Sheppard's example of James Cook's nineteen-month voyage to Hawaii in the late 1770s. For Cook, modern travel by plane would appear as instantaneous as the beaming of a person à la Star Trek, or moving through a stargate. The point is not only the increase of the speed of travel, but the *kind of connectivity* that arises by the effective reduction of both travel-time and the experience of travel. Changez's first trip to Greece is not between any point-specific places but rather locations that have a high rate of connectivity. The point is not the actual distance, but access to wormhole travel. Thus, a flight from New York to Athens, is practically instantaneous in comparison to travel from the Swedish village, Mullsjö, and the village of Khewa in Afghanistan.

Changez's local movement, though related to global networks and scalar 'switchability', cannot be fully understood without a consideration of what Sheppard calls complex *positionalities* that connect people and places together. The notion of *positionality* captures what Sheppard calls the 'the shifting, asymmetric, and path-dependent ways in which the futures of places depend on their interdependence with other places' (308). The same logic applies to individual agents and companies which occupy certain geographical locations. Since positionality 'can be ascribed to agents at scales ranging from the body to the world region', even members within 'the same household typically are positioned differently with respect to

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Wai-chung Yeung. 'The Limits to Globalization Theory: A Geographic Perspective on Global Economic,' *Economic Geography* 78.3 (July 2002) 285-305.

<sup>9</sup> Sheppard 319. See also Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Soja.

<sup>10</sup> Yeung 290, 291. For a detailed explanation of the scalar theory, see Sheppard (313-17). Also see Brenner (1998, 1999 and 2001) and Amin (1997 and 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Yeung 291.

<sup>12</sup> To use Yeung's words again, it can be argued that Underwood Samson is very much dependent on the way 'globalization discourses mobilise *spatial metaphors* to legitimise and justify the intrusive nature of globalization' (292). An example of such a spatial metaphor is the 'borderless world' (293), which I mentioned earlier in relation to Bond movies.

one another' so that 'a working-class husband living in the north of England may experience privileged positionality as a result of his gender and nationality but marginalised positionality because of his class and regional location' (322). The emphasis on positionality as a resistance strategy within the global economy is crucial in understanding Changez's case because 'positionality involves power relations, both in the sense that some positions tend to be more influential than others and in the sense that emphasizing the situated nature of all knowledge challenges the power of those who claim objectivity' (313).

Positionality not only shows that local conditions are 'the key to holding down the global', but they are also 'central to building the transnational activist alliances that are necessary to match the transnational reach of globalization'. For Sheppard, this is because 'alliances cannot simply rely just on scale jumping, but require positional acts of identifying specific groups in particular places with whom common ground can be found' (326). Positionality 'stresses that the conditions of possibility in a place do not depend primarily on local initiative or on embedded relationships splayed across scales, but just as much on direct interactions with distant places' (319). Therefore, he argues, positionality also 'highlights the unequal power relations that stem from such asymmetries' (319). This was quite obvious from my earlier note on Changez's movement to New York, a global metropolis, which needed no justification, whereas his move back to Lahore required an entire narrative as justification.

As a short detour, at this point I want to highlight that the notion of 'intersectionality', which is most common in diverse feminist analyses, might overlap with positionality in that we are speaking about characters defined by complex relationships between class, gender, race, job, religion, and so on. This is partly correct. Indeed, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1994) introduced the metaphor of intersectionality to explain how different forms of oppression mix and affect individuals.<sup>13</sup> Following Crenshaw, a great many built upon or tweaked this notion for the purposes of their disciplines or to achieve a more accurate description of the issues they were dealing with. As Rita Kaur Dhamon shows, besides Deborah K. King's famous 'multiple jeopardy'<sup>14</sup> and Sherene Razack's 'interlocking', 'scholars have used such terms as multiple consciousness (Matsuda 1992; King 1988), and multiplicity (Wing 1990-1991), multiplex epistemologies (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, 187), translocational positionality (Anthias 2001), multi-dimensionality (Hutchinson 2001), interconnectivities (Valdes 1995), and synthesis (Ehrenreich 2002)'.<sup>15</sup>

Positionality works better for Hamid's novel because it draws particular attention to geographical location and globalisation. It applies to places as well as human agents, and the way a place affects the positionality of the agent. Also, while intersectionality implies that the

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<sup>13</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989. 139-67.

—, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour,' *The Public Nature of Private Violence*. Eds. M. A. Fineman and R. Mykitiul (New York: Routledge, 1994). 93-120.

<sup>14</sup> Deborah K. King, 'Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,' *Signs* 14.1 (1988). 42-72.

<sup>15</sup> Rita Kaur Dhamoon, 'Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality,' *Political Research Quarterly*, 64.1 (March 2011). 232.

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individual is mainly suffering consequences of various kinds of oppression, Hamid's character is not some poor subaltern who finally has a chance to speak. A focus on positionality shows a complexity of his situation so that he can be the oppressed in terms of race and politics but the oppressor in terms of class.

The importance of shifts in positionality is directly connected to the way Hamid depicts wormhole movement, which, to use Sheppard's words, qualitatively increases 'the connectivity between the two places' (307). For Sheppard, it goes without saying that wormholes are unevenly developed 'because the economic, political, and cultural forces that create and reinforce presence-at-a-distance are highly geographically selective' (324). The wormhole metaphor draws attention to the way the positionality of places and people is not defined and measured 'by the physical distance separating them, but by the intensity and nature of their interconnectedness' (324). While 'proximity in geographic space is generally thought to be symmetric, positionality is often an asymmetric relationship: core agents exert more influence over peripherally positioned agents' locations than vice versa' (323). This is why in Hamid's narrative faraway places seem to have a wormhole between them, while on a local scale people in close proximity seem to be light years apart. For instance, when Changez meets Juan-Bautista, to begin with, their positionality as social agents is completely different although they occupy the same locations. Later on, when Juan-Bautista lectures Changez on being a corporate janissary, their positionality is closer. Similarly, Changez and his lover Erica's positionalities keep changing throughout the narrative. At certain extreme points, as in the act of lovemaking when they are as close physically as two objects can possibly be, they could not be farther apart. Not only that, since her positionality is elevated in relation to his, Changez needs to pretend to have the kind of positionality her dead lover used to have in order to be intimate with her. Despite this, romance remains, at least in Changez's imagination, a connective tissue and an effective antidote to the stargates of destruction of his global reality. The affective connectivity Changez hangs onto even when separated from Erica (and America) is a sort of fiction which allows him to do more positive types of wormhole travel; that is, not entirely spoiled by the overwhelming concerns with global capitalism. The sense of fictionality infused into his dramatic monologue to the American seems to reinforce the notion of storytelling, and, by implication, literature such as this particular novel as the medium for wormhole travel, a medium for creation of connectivity.

In Hamid's novel positionality, as level of connectivity, is part and parcel of the processes of globalisation. What is more, although we can, for instance, argue that a whole city such as New York has a particular positionality on a global scale, it is not as simple as to say that people occupying the same geographic location of New York hold the same positionality. We can see this from the difference between Underwood Samson and Pak-Punjab Deli within the space of New York. Pak-Punjab Deli, although it belongs to the space of a metropolis, does not, quite symbolically, accept American Express. In each instance, when examining positionality, we need to consider the intensity and quality of connections between localities and agents. As Sheppard explains, while 'positionality can be mapped by depicting the relationships between different agents, in different places, and at different scales', (323) living in the same place does not imply a similar positionality. Indeed, a term such as 'British colonialism neglects the fact that the colonial project was implemented in elite male spaces of southern England ... the

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playing fields of Eton; the classrooms of Oxford and Cambridge; and the parliamentary spaces, boardrooms, and gentlemen's clubs of London' (322). As someone who can be seen as a postcolonial subject, whose team is shaping things the way male elites once shaped the colonial project, Changez seems painfully aware of the way positionality works.

It is interesting that Hamid stresses movement between cities and regions rather than countries, thus emphasising their connectedness within the global economy and avoiding nationalism. This is crucial for Changez's firefly-glow type of resistance mentioned in the beginning, which, in accordance with Arif Dirlik's argument, arises from place-based politics.<sup>16</sup> It is because of the negative experiences of inequality that are reproduced and developed due to different connectivity between places that such resistance can be effectuated. In contrast to the way Changez's boss and his company see the world as being purely shaped by economy, this serves to show that social and physical spaces always offer resistance. The Pak-Punjab Deli that does not take credit cards in the middle of New York is a case in point. Then we have the Anarkali market, which is both influenced by globalisation, here symbolised by the omnipresence of Coca-Cola, and resists it by being out of sync with the global economy. This market too, though not untouched by globalisation processes, produces a firefly's glow that resists, reworks and survives globalisation.

Besides the global-local dynamics of markets, the novel contrasts global travel with the movement within cities, which is never instantaneous. Wormholes seem to only connect larger, more distant, strategic locations. In contrast, it takes time to take the elevator to a penthouse. When Erica and Changez take 'a taxi down to Chelsea', he says, 'I could hear our driver chatting on his mobile in Punjabi and knew from his accent that he was Pakistani. Normally I would have said hello, but on that particular night I did not' (63-64). His refusal to acknowledge the familiarity with the driver suggests they do not have the same positionality as defined by money and status. Then, after some time in a gallery, where Changez 'was being ushered into an insider's world – the chic heart of this city – to which he would otherwise have had no access' (64), they go 'to a small music venue on the Lower East Side, a French restaurant in the meat-packing district, a loft party in TriBeCa' (66). Then, before he goes to the Philippines, they have 'a picnic lunch in Central Park' (67). The park itself is assumed to be a familiar place for Changez's American interlocutor, and therefore not described as such.<sup>17</sup> This fact, just as the earlier example of Changez's migration to New York, highlights the elevated global positionality of this metropolis. Instead of describing Central Park, Changez tells Erica about Lahore and picnics 'in the foothills of the Himalayas' (67). Such descriptions slow down the passage of time and create a different sense of local space in contrast to international travel. Going to a gallery within the same city appears to take much longer than flying to the Philippines: "'I've got a project coming up,'" Jim went on. "Music business. Philippines. Want to be on it?" "I certainly do," I said' (51). Next, he finds himself in a hotel room in Manila (69). The same is true during his trip to Chile, but then this trip takes place after Changez's change in

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<sup>16</sup> Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Potentially, though I have no space to elaborate on it here, one could compare Hamid's novel to other works that deal with this type of travel that reveal something about geography and city infrastructure. Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* comes to mind.

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positionality and he is very conscious of the way his position within the capitalist company is supposed to make him feel like he was engaged in futuristic travel: 'We again flew in the relative comfort of first class, but I was no longer excited by the luxuries of our cabin ... I turned down our flight attendant's many offers of champagne' (158). The flight seems to take longer because Changez again keeps witnessing inequalities.

While all scenes that depict local travel and encounters with people seem to show change in Changez's positionality, the same is true of wormhole travel, which causes profound changes in the agent. It is in Manila that he realises he ought to share 'a sort of Third World sensibility' (76) with one Filipino driver but that he is more similar to his colleagues: 'I felt enormously powerful on these outings, knowing my team was shaping the future' (76). Frequent wormhole travel is taking its toll. Changez's struggle to cope with the processes of globalisation is also due to the fact that he did not have much sense of it before he became a corporate janissary. He did not expect that making it big in the US meant being an agent of economic globalisation. To become American came to mean not being in America, but to travel around the globe. Also, people who live in America must necessarily be global, and this is highly contradictory and paradoxical.

The uneven and unequal positionality across different scales is constantly highlighted through comparisons between geographic locations and characters, which highlight significant differences in terms of distribution of both economic and cultural capital:

Come, relinquish your foreigner's sense of being watched. ... Soon they will shut to traffic the gates at either end of this market, transforming Old Anarkali into a pedestrian-only piazza. ... here, where we sit, and in the even older districts that lie between us and the River Ravi – the congested, mazelike heart of this city – Lahore is more democratically urban. ... Like Manhattan? Yes, precisely! And that was one of the reasons why for me moving to New York felt – so unexpectedly – like coming home. But there were other reasons as well: the fact that Urdu was spoken by taxicab drivers; the presence, only two blocks from my East Village apartment, of a samosa- and channa-serving establishment called the Pak-Punjab Deli; the coincidence of crossing Fifth Avenue during a parade and hearing, from loudspeakers mounted on the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Association float, a song to which I had danced at my cousin's wedding. (36-37)

Changez desperately wants to evoke a sense of similar positionality of Lahore and New York,<sup>18</sup> but references to cultural capital that tie the two places reveal a major difference in the unequal distribution of wealth and power:

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<sup>18</sup> According to Michael J. Greig, some familiarity is essential for the very act of communication, especially between globally distant social agents: 'The likelihood of two agents interacting is equal to their level of cultural similarity.' Michael J. Greig. 'The End of Geography?: Globalization, Communications, and Culture in the International System,' *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46.2 (April 2002) 226.

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Certainly, much of my early excitement about New York was wrapped up in my excitement about Underwood Samson. ... Their offices were perched on the forty-first and forty-second floors of a building in midtown – higher than any two structures here in Lahore would be if they were stacked one atop the other – and while I had previously flown in airplanes and visited the Himalayas, nothing had prepared me for the drama, the power of the view from their lobby. This, I realized, was another world from Pakistan; supporting my feet were the achievements of the most technologically advanced civilization our species had ever known. ... Often, during my stay in your country, such comparisons ... made me resentful. 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. (37-38)

This passage reveals Changez's stance towards the way the world has changed through globalisation, elevating the positionality of one place and lessening another. The reference to the fact that Lahore had a central position is related to 'archaic globalisation' (MacGillivray),<sup>19</sup> which was partly shaped by Muslim conquest. Observe the turn in this section where Changez relates his conversation with his future boss, Jim:

I said I was from Lahore, the second largest city of Pakistan, ancient capital of the Punjab, home to nearly as many people as New York, layered like a sedimentary plain with the accreted history of invaders from the Aryans to the Mongols to the British. He merely nodded. Then he said, "And are you on financial aid?" (8)

What Jim knows, and Changez is spending all his energy trying to hide, is that the positionality cannot be changed through nostalgia for a glorious past (11-12). The position of Princeton, as one of the specific places that metonymise the global social and cultural capital of America, is established when Changez tells the American that carefully selected

international students were sourced from around the globe ... given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of the meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. (4)

Changez would quickly become 'a young New Yorker with the city at [his] feet' (51).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alex MacGillivray, *A Brief History of Globalization* (London: Robinson, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting how cultural capital is for him supposed to go hand in hand with the flow of capital. This is why he is bothered by the artificially aged buildings of Princeton, which initially 'inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible' (3).

However, changes were imminent: ‘My world would be transformed, just as this market around us has been’ (51). Changez is now in Lahore, whose positionality is not even close to New York. This is why he keeps making comparisons between Lahore and New York, to increase a sense of familiarity, and thus also a false sense of co-positionality of the two places:

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. 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. (54-55)

Despite similarities, one cannot disregard the unequal positionalities of the two cities. The differences in positionality between places are further emphasised when Changez describes Manila:

Since you have been to the East, you do not need me to explain how prodigious are the changes taking place in that part of the globe. I expected to find a city like Lahore – or perhaps Karachi; what I found instead was a place of skyscrapers and superhighways. Yes, Manila had its slums ... like a poorer version of the 1950s America depicted in such films as *Grease*. But Manila’s glittering skyline and walled enclaves for the ultra-rich were unlike anything I had seen in Pakistan.

I tried not to dwell on the comparison; it was one thing to accept that New York was more wealthy than Lahore, but quite another to swallow the fact that Manila was as well. ... Perhaps it was for this reason that I did something in Manila I had never done before: I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an *American*. The Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues, accepting them almost instinctively as members of the officer class of global business – and I wanted my share of that respect as well. (73-74)

Changez’s vista in Manila undercuts the myth that globalisation creates a borderless world. As Sheppard explains, since wormholes have ‘a structural effect of the long historical geography of globalisation, reflective of how globalisation processes reshape space/time’, their existence has ‘highly asymmetric consequences for the places that are connected because of the properties of positionality developed earlier’. In fact, ‘[w]ormholes linking positionally advantaged with disadvantaged agents may well reinforce preexisting inequities’ (Sheppard 324). This is why a direct connection (wormhole) between New York and Lahore further elevates New York’s positionality and pushes Lahore’s down. It is therefore essential for the narrative that the attacks of 9/11 happen while Changez is in Manila because this will reveal that there is more than capital that affects travel. Also, one of the principal responses to 9/11 by the US military was to double down on attacks against Muslim fundamentalists in the southern Philippines. Indeed, 9/11 is emblematic of a crisis that is required, as Smethurst points out, to affect the warping of

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space through globalisation processes. Starting with the attacks on the World Trade Centre, global space and positionality of people begin to change. Changez tells the American, ‘I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*’ (83). It is practically as if the space bends so that the images of 9/11 become immediately accessible in Manila as in most places around the globe. Furthermore, most New Yorkers saw the destruction of the Twin Towers on the news at the same time as did people in Manila, Pakistan, Greece and so on. Watching New York from Manila is like seeing it through a wormhole, and although no physical travel is undertaken, this intensification of connectivity causes similar disassembling and reassembling of the political agent: ‘But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack ... no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees’ (83). Changez’s transformation in terms of positionality is extreme and involves political agency. Shortly before 9/11, he was an American agent in Manila with the right to ride on the waves of capital. Now he is a strong political agent who has started to resent his earlier James Bond persona.

Such a change in positionality has happened, not only in terms of his ideological stance, but also due to the fact that he ‘looks like a Muslim’. Travel becomes difficult. Changez is selected at airports, ‘escorted by armed guards’, separated from his team, ‘made to strip down’, and put into the queue for foreigners, rather than American citizens (85). Then there are other global changes, such as war-threats in Asia and consequent withdrawal of multinational corporations (201). Reshaping of the global space, while it generally allows more freedom of movement for members of the capitalist company, effectively kills the myth of a borderless world.<sup>21</sup> Now borders are drawn in spaces where there never were any borders, and connectivity between places, peoples, and corporations changes. Changez’s darker face becomes a border of sorts. Even the cosmopolitan space of New York becomes a space that proclaims ‘*We are America ... the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath*’ (90, emphasis in original). While he can witness firsthand how New York is changing, he can also follow how other places around the globe are being repositioned. Jim explains to Changez how shifts in the world economy, ‘from manufacturing to services’ (109), are making some places dwindle and others grow because people ‘try to resist change’, but instead of seizing power by ‘becoming change’ (110-11), Changez says, ‘I was uncomfortable with the idea that the place I came from was condemned to atrophy’ (111). Then he says, ‘I did, however, tell myself that I had overreacted, that there was nothing I could do, and that all these world events were playing out on a stage of no relevance to my personal life’ (114).

While Jim’s characterisation of change might seem to identify something like globalisation as an entity, Changez’s transformations show a number of different processes taking place at the same time on different scales, global and local. As a singular agent within a global company he has contributed to the changing of spaces, cultures and economies. The simple fact of his first-class travel to evaluate a company in Chile is shaping the world:

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<sup>21</sup> Changez notes ‘those rare cases of abuse that regrettably did transpire were unlikely ever to affect me because such things invariably happened, in America as in all countries, to the hapless poor, not to Princeton graduates earning eighty thousand dollars a year’ (107-8)

I too had traveled far that January, but the home of Neruda did not feel as removed from Lahore as it actually was; geographically, of course, it was perhaps as remote a place as could be found on the planet, but in spirit it seemed only an imaginary caravan ride away from my city, or a sail by night down the Ravi and Indus. (167)

This is a good example of how, as Sheppard argues, ‘places come to share a common positionality in the space of discourse’ (322). In the novel, the fact that ‘Valparaiso’s former aspirations to grandeur’ reminded Changez of Lahore (163) makes him closer to spaces which ‘function geographically and architecturally as a link between the ancient and contemporary parts of our city’ (193). It is true that most elements of Hamid’s novel carry a strong symbolic significance, most obvious cases being Underwood Samson (the US), Erica (America), Changez (Genghis Khan), and so on. It is no coincidence that New York is the centre stage (and not Washington), being both a global city with immense effects on the global economy and culture, a cosmopolitan place in an increasingly conservative country, a city that is both American and un-American, both representing what America is (constitutionally) and what it is not (politically). And the same is true for Pakistan. The cultural equivalent of New York is Lahore, not Karachi.<sup>22</sup>

Although the amount of detail about places other than Lahore and New York is sparse, the constant drawing of attention to specific localities is essential to the narrative. Since, as Sheppard explains, ‘essential productive activity in any capitalist space-economy is ensuring that commodities are delivered to spatially separated markets, to recoup investments, in the shortest time possible’, we can see why certain technologies ‘shape space/time and thereby positionality, making some places economically closer by reducing transaction costs between them’ (319). This seems to apply to both exchange of goods and services, which is why, for instance, modern global cities tend to be hubs of global services even though one would expect them to be able to be geographically situated anywhere in the world. Some places are simply more connected than others, which is clear in the novel from the greater ease of travel from the US to Athens than to Valparaiso, the latter involving more complex routes and transportation. Thus, the quality of connections between New York and Manila increases the privileged positionality of those places in contrast to Valparaiso. Both Lahore and Manila are far from New York, but in Changez’s view Manila is much closer positionally to New York. Changez’s agency consists largely of his constant attempts, to use Sheppard’s words, ‘to increase the positionality of resisters of globalization relative to that of its proponents’ (326). If the cases of wormhole-like international travel seem to confirm the world-views of corporate powers, cases which produce a sense of the absolute control of space through or by means of capital, the overwhelming focus on localities produces the opposite effect. It shows that social and physical spaces are not that easily shaped,

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<sup>22</sup> In the novel, Changez watches 9/11 from Manila and learns that he is a corporate janissary from a Chilean book-publisher in Pablo Neruda’s hometown. In contrast, in Nair’s film, he does that in Istanbul and his transformation takes place in a mosque. By choosing Istanbul, Nair positions Pakistan and Turkey along more stereotyped political and religious lines, which reintroduces the infamous clashes of civilisations. However, I do not want to dismiss Nair’s film completely because cinema is a wormhole medium in its own right, telescoping the literary narrative into the public sphere, certainly not without compromise.

which is what Changez becomes more aware of after 9/11. This is why positionality is an essential component in the analysis of the way this book deals with globalisation and political agency.

Finally, let us look at the way Changez's move back to Lahore sheds light on his (changing) positionality. Description is interspersed throughout the story, as if there were a constant need to interrupt the narrative flow to tell the American how this relation to particular places is tied to his new political agency:

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. (195)

In Lahore, he feels 'the Americanness of [his] own gaze,' which reveals the shabbiness of his old home: '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 lowliness' (140-41). While readers may be led to think he has come to re-occupy his old position, the truth is he did not really appreciate his home in the same way before he went to the US. It is those global travels, as well as his stay in the US, that convinced him that 'it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be' (197).

Changez's transformation as a political agent, that is, someone who begins to believe he has, and can come to realise, a certain ideology, makes him assume a different positionality that is directly related to his wormhole travel as 'a servant of the American empire' (173). Changez's firm belief 'that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power' now pushes him 'to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination' (177). This does not mean that America = globalisation, but rather that America's positionality in globalisation produces certain inequalities Changez is not ready to accept. It is true that there are many factors contributing to Changez's transformation, including 9/11, his harassment in the US by Islamophobes, and his growing recognition of the effects of his corporate work on the lives of workers around the world. These issues have been widely analysed in Hamid scholarship. The problem is that, generally, the types of analyses we find follow the most common patterns of analysis applied to postcolonial writers like Hamid; as I mentioned earlier, Hamid does not quite fit the profile, especially given his way of employing scifi tropes such as space-time. This is why I want to emphasise geographical location and social agents' positionality with respect to their geographical locations. If Jim instructed him to become change, Changez's new positionality in Lahore entails a resistance through a will to effect change, not just embrace it as if globalisation was something entirely independent of his agency. As mentioned earlier in this essay, similar to Yeung's analyses of globalisation, Hamid's novel questions the popularised notion that globalisation is an external factor, which affects everything from the way we conceive of planetary geography to national and global economies and social action as such.

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Like Yeung, Hamid identifies two things that are underrepresented in globalisation discourses: locality and social agency. Since for Yeung, globalisation is as much internal to 'localities as the localities are integral in the development and evolution of globalization processes' (293), we need to bring more 'attention to *social actors* who are not only constructing globalization in their various capacities, but experiencing significant transformations in their own everyday social lives' (302, emphasis in original). Furthermore, for Yeung, 'we have to pay attention to economic globalization as a living experience, which entails both transformations of social practices and resistance from social actors' (302). I find that such views correspond to the way Hamid dramatises Changez's notion of transcending continents and civilisations, which I have referred to as changes in positionality. The micro movements of Changez as an agent (a firefly's glow) are shown to have caused traction in global and local spaces. As a single agent with a firefly's glow, he seems insignificant, and yet his actions seem big enough to warrant a visit by the American.<sup>23</sup> This presumed CIA agent, perhaps suspecting Changez of instigating terrorism, sees this firefly's glow, however small, as potentially devastating for the global policies he represents in the novel.

In Hamid's world, inequalities are more than obvious, but the point is that the flow of capital that has made wormholes possible (and is in turn maintained by them) cannot be divorced from transformations of positionality of people and spaces. It has been crucial in my analysis to adopt the notion of positionality and not to rely on typical discourses on transformations of identity, politics, and capital, because the latter tend to be discussed as if geographical position is not important. Positionality entails the complex way of occupying both a space in a particular geographical location and different social spaces. While no metaphors, in particular those taken from a completely other discipline, should be taken as fixed analytical frameworks, I found that the metaphor of wormhole-like travel, being part and parcel of the novel itself, added an important dimension to positionality: that of relative distance/closeness. The image of a folding of space-time effectively suggests an intensity and quality of connection between places and people, which for instance began when New York and London were connected through the intercontinental telegraph and became much closer than places within their nearer proximity. As Sheppard has it, the attention to positionality makes 'a difference in how we think about globalization and in strategies for altering its trajectory' (325). The idea is, again, that globalisation is not something out there with an ontological status of a thing that is then put in relation to everything else. Rather, it is a series of processes affected by a great number of factors, including singular political agents, which Hamid so powerfully dramatises. Changez's politics are integral to globalisation processes. They are a direct result of his wormhole travel around the globe and not an isolated study of some ancient scripture. The very fact that the American has sought out Changez shows that Changez is affecting those global processes that have created him. In some way the American (agent) is trying to perform a corrective. In the end, even a firefly's glow, no matter how local, might cause a certain reshuffling of positionality of political agents around the world.

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<sup>23</sup> Changez sees himself as a simple teacher who fosters critical thinking, but, given that one of his students committed a crime, he is seen as a public agitator who pushes young people into terrorism.

I have argued that the firefly's glow is a metaphor for social agency, however insignificant it may seem, in a globalised world shaped by wormhole travel. The question is still, what kind of potential is there in this glow? The novel is vague on this point. Readers' desire to really know who Changez is – what he stands for, whether or not he is devious in his appeal to social values – in relation to the novel's ambiguity, shows that a potential for change can easily be both good and bad. The firefly's glow can be a desire for global social justice and freedom, but it is more easily interpreted as the fire of terrorism and war on/of terror conducted by both national and supranational agents. The glow could be that of the burning steel at Ground Zero, the flash of the WTC impact, which Changez watches on TV and might be said to inspire whatever glow he is planning to emanate himself. The rush of the planes towards the towers may be the ultimate vehicle of wormhole readjustment, the Third World beaming itself devastatingly into the heart of western civilisation. While I have been deliberately pushing for a more positive interpretation of the firefly's glow, which I deem necessary in a world where the Hollywood-like sensationalism of terrorism and devastating responses from nation states tend to dominate everyday lives and global politics, my endnote will be more depressing. Despite the overtly romanticised types of social engagement, Hamid's novel seems to insist that we acknowledge that terror itself is a form of wormhole travel. Or it is, at least, made possible by wormhole travel of political montage that has global impact. Terror is a radical form of re-positioning that can indeed start from the individual glow and set the entire world into motion.

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