
Spatializing Crime in Omar Shahid Hamid's The Prisoner (2013): A Lefebvrian Analysis

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1210>

Abstract

This paper examines the spatial dynamics of urban crime in Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013) through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory of *The Production of Space*. The study argues that Karachi, far from being a passive backdrop, emerges in the novel as an active force that shapes and sustains criminality. Using Lefebvre's triadic model of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces, the analysis demonstrates how prisons, checkpoints, elite neighborhoods, and slums embody the contradictions of urban modernity. Perceived spaces reveal how physical geography such as checkpoints and prison walls enable corruption and violence rather than suppressing them. Conceived spaces expose how politicians, planners, and law enforcement institutions project illusions of order but reinforce dysfunction through patronage and collusion. Lived spaces highlight the psychological and symbolic dimensions of urban experience, showing how fear, alienation, and insecurity define everyday life in Karachi. The findings situate Hamid's narrative within the broader tradition of global urban crime fiction while also highlighting its uniquely Pakistani dimensions. Unlike the rational resolution of crime in *Sherlock Holmes*' London, the disillusionment of American noir, or the allegorical dystopia of Gotham City, Karachi in *The Prisoner* embodies ethnic fragmentation, terrorism, and systemic law enforcement collapse. These features position Pakistani crime fiction as a vital contribution to the genre, offering an insider's account of how urban space itself produces illegality. The paper contributes to literary studies by foregrounding the role of space in crime narratives, to urban sociology by illustrating the criminogenic nature of neglected environments, and to criminology by revealing how institutions perpetuate rather than resolve corruption. The study concludes by suggesting future avenues of research, including comparative work with other Karachi narratives, spatial mapping projects, and interdisciplinary collaborations between literary and social sciences.

Keywords: Karachi, Omar Shahid Hamid, crime fiction, urban space, Lefebvre, spatial triad, corruption, Pakistani literature

Introduction

Urbanization has become one of the most defining features of the modern era, fundamentally altering the ways in which societies function and individuals experience space. It involves the transformation of rural landscapes into densely populated metropolitan regions characterized by complex social structures (Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023), economic opportunities (Umar et al., 2024a, 2024b), and educational (Akram et al., 2021, 2022; Jalalzai et al., 2025) cultural dynamics (Ma et al., 2024). Warf

(2006) explains that urbanization creates spaces distinguished by population density, administrative sophistication, and “functional complexity,” which bring both opportunities and challenges. As cities grow, they turn out to be not only source of development but also beasts of inequality, marginality and crime (Ramzan & Khan, 2019, 2024). This dualistic aspect of urbanization has had far reaching influence on the production of literature (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021), especially the rise of the literature of the city, a discipline that explores how cities and urban life are written about (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025). A number of scholars have refuted the notion that the city is a simple backdrop and has instead asserted that the city is an active presence that has a bearing on plot development, narrative structure, and character development (Pike, 1981). In a comparable way, Ameer (2023) presents the idea of citiness as something that is truly a feature of the city and that permeates writing, thus defining the most significant aspects of language and narrative tone. Other critics extrapolate this way of thinking and propose that cities can be anthropomorphized; Thakur and Diwan (2021) state that cities should be seen as living and presenting agency, whereas Sarfraz (2023) claims that Pakistani urban spaces should be regarded as holistic organisms created by a vast combination of historic, socio-political, and economic influences.

The connection between literary text and urban space is particularly accentuated in crime fiction; as a genre, crime fiction depends upon the workings of the city. In accordance with Worthington (2011), crime is essentially an urban phenomena, and it is sustained by urban environments through anonymity, inequality, and inefficiency by institutions. Similarly, Knight (2011) observes that crime fiction hinges on the presence of urban environments since it is within cities that the opportunities to engage in deviance are created and in addition, pose demands on the law enforcement agencies. The physical planning of streets, neighbourhoods and institutions produces environments that influence how crime occurs as well as how it is policed. Creating a criminality steward space therefore indicates that space is never merely inert, but it is indeed actively involved in the construction of criminality and the portrayal of criminality. Pakistani crime fiction is also part of this international pattern. Early works such as Ibn-e-Safi’s *Imran Series* and Ishtiaq Ahmad’s *Inspector Jamshaid Series* created a popular readership through tales of mystery and investigation. In more recent years, Anglophone Pakistan writers have written socially engaged texts that blend the city with the politics and violence as well as law enforcement. Among these, Omar Shahid Hamid’s *The Prisoner* (2013) is particularly significant for its insider depiction of Karachi’s law and order landscape.

To examine these spatial dynamics, this research draws upon Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work *The Production of Space* (1991). Lefebvre questions the conventional understanding of space as being a neutral backdrop, and posits an idea of space as social product of power relations and historical processes. His operational triad of intensities--perceived space, conceived space and lived space provides a helpful tool in the analysis of urban fictions. Perceived space is taken to mean the material dimensions of the city, including infrastructure, checkpoints, and prison walls. Conceived space describes how cities are planned, how the state and law enforcers imagine and control spatial configurations, in a manner that favors the elites at the expense of other marginalized groups. Lived space is the emotional, experiential and psychological reality of a city dweller who must negotiate their way on a daily basis through aspects of inequality, fear and desire through interacting with their urban surroundings. It is through the lens of Lefebvre that Hamid is able to frame how the spatial relationships in Karachi are creators of criminality as well as the victims of criminality which helps in defining the identities and behaviors of the people that occupy them.

Despite the rich body of literature on Pakistani writing in general, very little has been written in spatial terms, on crime fiction in particular. It is possible that studies of criminality in Karachi which has been variously referred to as a microcosm of Pakistan with regards to the ethnic diversity, economic centrality and political bustle, may provide a useful case in order to understand the nature of the linkage between urban space and criminality. High rates of rapid and unregulated urbanization have given rise to structural inequalities, poor infrastructural development and manifold corruption in law enforcement, which, besides perpetuating crime, deforms the psyche of those exposed to it. Hamid’s

The Prisoner dramatizes these realities by presenting Karachi as an oppressive environment where space itself functions as an agent of criminality. This paper bridges the scholarly gap on the cross Roads of space theory, power, and crime through Pakistani Fiction by proposing Lefebvre triad as the theoretical framework within which I find the world of Pakistani Fiction.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the production and representation of urban spaces in Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013).
2. To examine how these spatial structures intersect with criminality in the novel.
3. To analyze the novel through Henri Lefebvre's theory of *The Production of Space*, highlighting the link between spatial injustice, power, and crime in Karachi.

Literature Review

The problem of the connection between literature and urban space has been of interest to critics in the age of modernity and urbanization which were changing the fabric of everyday life. Critics have always emphasized that the city in fiction is not a mere background or decoration, but a significant contributor to the course of the story. Worthington (2011) underlines that crime is a product of the city and results in the environment of anonymity, divisions, and spatial complexities. When looking at the significance of urban environments to crime fiction, Knight (2011) echoes the ideas of delivering devial opportunities and impediments to justice. The spatial organization of the streets, neighborhoods, and institutions can define not only the places where the crimes are committed but also how they are pursued and solved. Sandberg (2020) further builds upon this idea by indicating that the city turns into a maze of uncertainty, where danger, crime, and surveillance intersect to command both a character and a reader in the environment of constant tension. In this way, in crime fiction the space functions as an actor: it defines the potential of human actions as well as stipulates illegality and outlines the borders of morality and law.

The discursive approach to the use of crime fiction has been critical in highlighting that space can also be the mute accessory in crime. As suggested by McGregor (2022), the genre can serve as a tool of highlighting the examined issues as to reveal the existing (and, at that, frequently oppressed) power structure in society and how it marginalizes certain communities and tends to turn them into deviance actors. In this respect, crime fiction is a drama on the dialectic of crime-environmental relationship. Schmid (1995) goes further to relate the detective fiction to radical geography contending that in order to analyze a crime, one has to conceptualize the way cities are spatializing power. By reading it, the detective transforms not only into a fixer of riddles but a geographer of the urban landscape, who travels through the areas of corruption, violence, and oppression. These critical readings have a commonality in that they acknowledge that urban crime fiction is an act of spatial storytelling, a process through which the material and symbolic plane of the city spawns discourses of criminality.

The history of Pakistani crime fiction replicates these patterns but has its own regional influences based on sociopolitical realities. Digest literature in the mid-twentieth century, particularly Ibn-e-Safi's *Imran Series* and Ishtiaq Ahmad's *Inspector Jamshaid Series*, established the popular foundations of the genre. These works became a hit and took the detective fiction into the mainstream of the life of Pakistani readers. The fiction of Ibn-e-Safi, as an example, combined parts of suspense and satire with localized accounts of crime, coming together to form a unique document that appealed to readers trying to navigate the postcolonial uncertainties. The writings of Ishtiaq Ahmad were aimed more at younger readers but they also addressed some issues of morality, the law, and the dangers of life in a city. Collectively, these authors made crime fiction understood, by readers, as more than an entertainment and a way of addressing the predicaments of Pakistan society.

Pakistani Anglophone crime fiction has broadened the popularity of the genre by inscribing it into the city life of the largest metropolis of the country, with Karachi. Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013) provides a particularly significant example of this trend. Hamid uses his background as a police

officer to frame this seedy game of institutional corruption, political manipulation, and criminal surfs within the geography of Karachi. His depiction of prisons, police stations, and the enclaves of people in power can also be seen to encode power into the spaces of the city and how the spaces subsequently reproduce crime. In a similar fashion, *Karachi, You are Killing Me!* (2014) by Saba Imtiaz is a satirical book concerning crime and city life told through the experience of a young female journalist. Less heavy in tone than the short story, the novel still highlights the complexities of violence, insecurity and place in Karachi. Both Hamid and Imtiaz, in their fashion, emphasize the turbulent, contested nature of the city, which has a dramatic effect on the lives of those who live there. Their works denote the evolution in Pakistani crime fiction as moving beyond pulp fiction to become socially concerned narratives that interrogate the nature of the city.

One of the consistent patterns of the Pakistani crime fiction is the way in which the city becomes a character in itself. According to Sarfraz (2023), specifically to Karachi, it is necessary to recognize the city in the form of a living organism whose life is created by economics, social, and political influences. This anthropomorphic idea is close to the studies by Thakur and Diwan (2021), who also point out that cities are often personified in literature and develop destinies of people. Karachi in Pakistani writing carries contradictions: it is both a center of opportunity (Akram et al., 2020, 2021) and the scene of violence; a place of hope and a place of despair. Its wild development, infrastructure failures, and institutionalized disparities form the set of circumstances that further nurture crime, which writers like Hamid and Imtiaz vividly depict. The portrayal of Karachi in Pakistani crime fiction thus conforms to larger scholarly arguments that urban space is an operating entity in literature that influences both structure and content.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in Henri Lefebvre's influential work *The Production of Space* (1991), which reconceptualizes space as a dynamic and socially constructed entity rather than a neutral container. Lefebvre's argument dismantles the Cartesian view of space as static and universal, insisting instead that space is produced through social relations, politics, and cultural practices (Lefebvre, 1991). This perspective is particularly useful for analyzing crime fiction, where urban environments not only host events but actively shape the narrative's logic. By applying Lefebvre's framework to Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013), this study examines how the novel depicts the production of urban spaces and their entanglement with criminality, corruption, and power struggles.

At the heart of Lefebvre's theory lies the "spatial triad," a conceptual tool that organizes space into three interrelated dimensions: perceived, conceived, and lived. These dimensions are not isolated categories but overlapping modalities that together generate the complexity of urban experience.

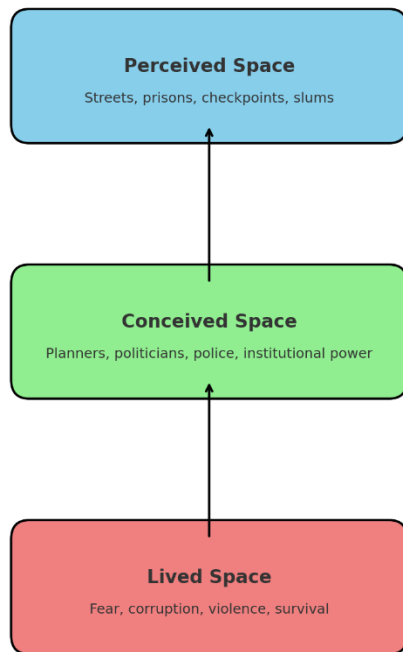


Figure 1: Lefebvre's Spatial Triad and Its Application to Crime Fiction

Source: Adapted from Lefebvre (1991), applied to Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013).

The first dimension, perceived space, refers to the material and physical aspects of the city as they are encountered in daily practice. This includes streets, checkpoints, government buildings, prisons, and slums. In *The Prisoner*, Karachi's physical geography is depicted as fragmented and unstable, marked by zones of privilege and zones of danger. For instance, fortified checkpoints and prison walls symbolize the presence of institutional authority, yet their ineffectiveness in curbing violence underscores the failures of state power. Such spaces exemplify what Schmid (1995) described as the "cartography of power" in urban fiction, where physical geography itself conditions the possibilities for crime and justice. The narrow alleys, slum settlements, and overcrowded prisons in the novel do not merely serve as backdrops; they are complicit in producing conditions where criminality flourishes.

The second aspect, conceived space, refers to the ways in which space is imagined, planned, and represented by those in positions of authority—politicians, police officials, and urban planners. These representations are often ideological, reflecting the hegemonic values of elites who attempt to impose order and control upon urban environments (Lefebvre, 1991). In *The Prisoner*, the vision of conceived space is embodied in institutional attempts to regulate Karachi through maps, zoning laws, and security apparatuses. Yet these visions are repeatedly undermined by political corruption and collusion with criminal networks. As Knight (2011) notes in his study of crime fiction, conceived spaces often expose the disjunction between the idealized order imagined by authorities and the chaotic realities of city life. Karachi's official narratives of "secure zones" and planned districts contrast sharply with the lived experiences of its citizens, who face insecurity, violence, and fear on a daily basis.

The third and most critical dimension is lived space, which represents the space of experience, imagination, and symbolism. Lived space encompasses the emotions, memories, and existential realities of those who inhabit the city (Lefebvre, 1991). In *The Prisoner*, lived space is revealed through the psychological toll endured by police officers, prisoners, and ordinary citizens navigating Karachi's dangerous terrain. The prison is an example of something that is used symbolically; other than a physical building it becomes a space of political oppression and human desolation. Likewise the urban backstreets are cloaked in fear and stratification, which according to Debord (1981), has a psychogeographic effect on the overall psychological makeup of an individual. In crime fiction, lived

space serves to symbolically emphasize the emotional contexts of urban experience, how fear, mistrust, and violence permeate through the daily life of characters.

Collectively, the three concepts of Lefebvre explain that space is not a natural given or produced; it is a social, relational product. The insights hold enormous implications on crime fiction as the material as well as the ideological and the experience facets of space can largely shape the course of the plot. We can observe a correlation between territorial governance and governance of the populations, as the power over the territory implies the power over the populations: such is the case with the district of polyface as it is the case with a slum, as it is the case with a prison, in Hamid novel. Other researchers like Sandberg (2020) have also highlighted the importance of urban crime narratives being able to outline contestations of authority with criminals, politicians and law enforcement groups all vying to become the top authority within a region. By exploring these dynamics as applied to Lefebvrian framework, it is apparent that the city itself aids crime since crime has become imbued in the spatial organization of the city.

The use of Lefebvre theory in terms of literature spills even the disciplinary boundaries. Criminological geography has shown that crimes are concentrated in particular territories of a city, the formation of which is subject to structural disparities, ineffective governance, and spatial disregard (Weisburd et al., 2012). Fictional depictions such as *The Prisoner* reinforce this empirical insight by dramatizing how marginalized neighborhoods and neglected urban infrastructures create fertile grounds for organized crime. A more comprehensive elaboration on this can be seen in Foucault (1986) concept of heterotopias which reveals that prisons, cemeteries and other heterotopias represent counter images of the failures of a society. When these theories are combined with Lefebvre, it becomes clear that crime is not the anomaly of the city but an aspect of its planning and construction.

In summary, Lefebvre has more to offer with his theory of production of space to situate the process of inquiry regarding the way the city is emulated in crime fiction and how the interaction between urban landscapes and criminality is linked to one another in crime fiction. The triadic model of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces, when applied to *The Prisoner*, highlights the interdependence of physical structures, institutional ideologies, and lived experiences in producing a city marked by violence, corruption, and insecurity. The theoretical angle therefore positions the novel within a broader discourse of criticism that is not limited to literature but also to urban sociology and criminology since the relationship between space, power and crime is mutually constitutive within both fictional and real urban settings.

Analysis and Discussion

Perceived Spaces of Power

In Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad, perceived space refers to the material and tangible dimensions of the city — streets, buildings, prisons, checkpoints, and neighborhoods — that shape everyday practices and directly influence social interactions. In Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013), Karachi's physical geography is repeatedly foregrounded as an active determinant of both criminality and law enforcement. Hamid's narrative, written from the perspective of a police officer deeply familiar with the city's terrain, vividly portrays checkpoints, prisons, and elite neighborhoods as perceived spaces where state power is asserted yet simultaneously undermined by corruption and violence. These material environments emerge not as neutral backdrops but as complicit agents in the production of crime.

The prison stands out as one of the most significant perceived spaces in the novel. While conventionally viewed as a site of state authority and correction, Hamid subverts this assumption by presenting it as a porous institution riddled with corruption. As the narrator observes, “*The front entrance of the prison where Constantine now stood, very much resembled a medieval castle, with a massive iron gate, set in a yellow brick façade with turrets overlooking it*” (Hamid, 2013, p. 4). Likewise, the description of visitors moving through multiple layers of security reinforces this: “*The first mulaqatis, the visitors, having cleared a couple of checkpoints, were slowly making their way*

towards the final checkpoint and waiting area on the right side of the prison entrance” (Hamid, 2013, p. 4). These depictions illustrate how the prison, ostensibly designed to discipline, instead becomes a contested and performative space where authority is fragile and permeable. Foucault’s (1977) argument that carceral institutions embody the logic of surveillance is inverted in Hamid’s account, where the prison’s material walls fail to contain illegality and instead facilitate the entrenchment of power by criminal actors. The prison as a perceived space exemplifies Lefebvre’s claim that the built environment is produced through social relations and is never free from ideological and economic distortions.

Similarly, the checkpoints scattered across Karachi are depicted as physical manifestations of state presence that ultimately reveal its fragility. Hamid notes, “*A bhishti—water carrier—threw water on the dusty ground. Slowly, the prison was coming alive. The first mulaqatis, the visitors, having cleared a couple of checkpoints, were slowly making their way towards the final checkpoint*” (Hamid, 2013, p. 4). Rather than functioning as neutral nodes of surveillance, these checkpoints are transformed into rent-seeking sites where law enforcement exploits its monopoly on violence for personal gain. The material geography of surveillance, therefore, becomes a geography of extortion. Knight (2011) has argued that in crime fiction, spaces of policing often embody contradictions, functioning simultaneously as sites of order and repression. Hamid’s portrayal confirms this by illustrating how the very infrastructure meant to curb crime fosters its proliferation. The checkpoint, as a perceived space, is revealed as complicit in sustaining Karachi’s cycles of illegality.

The contrast between elite neighborhoods and marginalized settlements further underscores the unequal distribution of power inscribed into Karachi’s material geography. Hamid juxtaposes spaces of privilege and deprivation with striking clarity: “*Things like this just didn’t happen in Zamzama... cocooned behind their high-walled mansions and legions of servants, watching satellite TV and dreaming of shopping excursions to Dubai*” (Hamid, 2013, p. 85). In contrast, areas such as Lyari are depicted as deteriorated and insecure, “*the crumbling, fetid lanes of Lyari*” (Hamid, 2013, p. 132). These descriptions not only reveal the stark physical contrasts between spaces of privilege and deprivation but also demonstrate how geography mirrors and reproduces socio-political hierarchies. Urban criminology confirms that crime is not evenly distributed but concentrated in marginalized spaces shaped by structural neglect (Weisburd et al., 2012). In *The Prisoner*, this concentration is dramatized through depictions of slums as fertile ground for gangs and mafias, while elite neighborhoods insulate themselves through architecture and private security. Yet Hamid destabilizes this binary by showing that walls are not impermeable; criminal networks infiltrate elite spaces, while elites themselves collude with gangs to consolidate power. Geography, therefore, is revealed as both protective and porous, a space where inequality and corruption intersect.

Hamid’s portrayal of the city’s materiality also captures the psychological dimension of perceived space, echoing Debord’s (1981) notion of psychogeography. In his description of Orangi, he observes, “*Orangi was a maze... entering it was like entering another world. Such misery and destitution bred all sorts of problems*” (Hamid, 2013, p. 214). Here, the geography of the city is not inert but actively shapes the affective states of its inhabitants, embedding anxiety into the everyday. Schmid (1995) has argued that detective fiction functions as a radical geography, mapping the emotional and social consequences of urban inequality. In Hamid’s narrative, the perceived spaces of Karachi serve precisely this role, dramatizing how the built environment conditions not only action but also emotion.

Conceived Spaces of Authority

In Lefebvre’s (1991) triadic model, conceived space refers to the representations of space produced by planners, politicians, and institutions. These are the abstract visions of order and authority that seek to impose meaning and structure upon the city. Conceived space is therefore ideological: it reflects the way dominant groups imagine urban life, producing maps, plans, and discourses that project control and stability. Yet, as Lefebvre warns, these representations often obscure or distort the realities of lived experience. In *The Prisoner* (2013), Omar Shahid Hamid illustrates how the city of Karachi is repeatedly reimagined by politicians, bureaucrats, and police officials, who claim to design its order

but ultimately reinforce cycles of corruption and violence. Conceived space in the novel becomes a domain of failed authority, where institutional power is undermined by vested interests.

Hamid exposes this contradiction early in the novel through depictions of the police hierarchy. Constantine, the protagonist, reflects on the supposed order of law enforcement: “*On one side of the station wall, there was a gaping hole with blast marks on the edges... To call it an office would be stretching imagination considerably, as it was little more than a shack walled with unplastered bricks*” (Hamid, 2013, p. 31). This observation illustrates the disjuncture between the conceived order of institutions — projected through bureaucratic documents, staffing charts, and organizational discourse — and the chaotic, compromised reality of policing on the ground. The representation of space as orderly and disciplined is an illusion, masking the corruption that pervades the institution. Lefebvre’s critique that conceived spaces serve hegemonic ideologies is borne out here, as the state insists on the existence of institutional authority even as its spaces are captured by criminal actors.

Politicians, too, play a central role in the manipulation of conceived space. In one telling passage, Hamid writes, “On one side of the table were stacked various awards, mementos, and a large framed picture of the Don. As if to further emphasize the point, a miniature UF party flag fluttered on the table next to a miniature national flag” (Hamid, 2013, p.149). This act of arbitrarily redefining administrative boundaries demonstrates how political elites design space not to ensure governance but to consolidate power. Conceived space, in this sense, is a tool of domination: through maps, redistricting, and planning, politicians assert control over territory and populations. Yet this control is superficial, for the very act of gerrymandering undermines the legitimacy of governance and intensifies urban fragmentation. Sandberg (2020) notes that urban crime narratives often highlight such manipulations of space, where conceived geographies are shaped less by justice than by the vested interests of elites. Hamid’s depiction affirms this, illustrating how the politics of space in Karachi is inseparable from the politics of corruption.

The nexus between police and political actors further demonstrates the corruption of conceived space. As Constantine reflects, “A policeman usually never leaves the police station before 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., and he is not inclined to be back on duty till at least midday. The faujis had fixed timings, clock in at 8:00 and out at 4:00. Unfortunately, the point they never understood was that crime doesn’t follow a timetable” (Hamid, 2013, p.2). This statement reveals how institutional representations of authority — the command structures of police stations, the appointment of officers, the physical presence of stations in neighborhoods — are undermined by clientelism. Police spaces, conceived as sites of law enforcement, are transformed into extensions of political patronage. Foucault’s (1986) conception of heterotopias, spaces that simultaneously mirror and subvert social order, helps explain this contradiction: police stations in Hamid’s Karachi are heterotopic, reflecting the state’s claim to authority while subverting it through corruption and collusion.

Hamid also highlights how conceived space is saturated with discourses of “law and order” that mask its dysfunctionality. “The place was crawling with informers and turncoats, and everyone was spying on everyone else, like some latter-day Pakistani version of East Berlin in miniature.” (Hamid, 2013, p.3). Here, conceived space is discursive as much as material: the state narrates Karachi as governable, deploying rhetoric of operations and strategy, even as those representations are hollow. Lefebvre (1991) insists that conceived spaces are ideological abstractions, and Hamid dramatizes this by showing how the language of governance conceals collusion with criminality.

The ideological function of conceived space in *The Prisoner* thus lies in its capacity to project order while simultaneously entrenching disorder. The imagined city of police charts, political maps, and bureaucratic discourse is repeatedly undermined by the realities of corruption, extortion, and violence. In this sense, Hamid’s Karachi confirms Lefebvre’s insight that space is always tied to power relations and that conceived space is a domain where hegemony operates most visibly. By depicting politicians and police officials who manipulate space to serve personal interests, Hamid critiques the very foundations of institutional authority in Pakistan’s largest city.

Lived Spaces of Dysfunction & Fear

If conceived space represents the ideological abstractions of politicians and planners, and perceived space marks the material geography of checkpoints, prisons, and neighborhoods, then lived space is the realm of human experience: the emotional, symbolic, and psychological dimensions of urban life (Lefebvre, 1991). It is here that the city is not only encountered but endured, interpreted, and internalized by its inhabitants. In Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013), Karachi emerges not as a passive backdrop but as a hostile, volatile force that saturates the lives of its characters with alienation, violence, and insecurity. The novel dramatizes the city as a lived space of dysfunction and fear, one that produces psychological stress, corrodes trust, and fosters deviant survival strategies.

On multiple occasions Hamid describes Karachi as a city where fear is part of daily life. The frailty of elite security is exposed in the kidnapping case in Zamzama: "*Things like this just didn't happen in Zamzama... cocooned behind their high-walled mansions and legions of servants, watching satellite TV and dreaming of shopping excursions to Dubai... So when the American was kidnapped from their midst, everyone here had gotten spooked. The restaurants and boutiques, usually overflowing with customers, had been deserted for the past few days*" (Hamid, 2013, p.85). The fear used here demonstrates the ability of urban geography to produce paranoia wherein violence becomes infused with even the most mundane activities. The streets and crossings which would usually be viewed as sources of freedom and interaction turn into a place of probable death. Here the idea of psychogeography suggested by Debord (1981) can be applied: the city territory does not only organize the stream of people and traffic; it creates the emotional topography of fear.

Once again, the prison, as a vivid locus of experiencing, proves to be an important symbolic site. Instead of being an objective place of fair justice, it turns into a symbol of punishment and imprisonment: "*But the jail has its own system of discipline, so the wardens don't usually have to intervene. Most of these men are harmless*" (Hamid, 2013, p.13). To the prisoners, physical imprisonment is not their only form of entrapment but a testimony to a larger engulfment in a dysfunctional city. The affective feel of this room, i.e., that of desperation, self-stagnation, sense of lack of purpose, is a way of showing that lived space also has symbolic meaning.

Violence is not only an aspect of the institutional but also domestic and social spaces, as it appears as blurring the distinction between the public and private spheres. The city is also fantasized as the red-light district: "*Every building on the street had a low-hanging balcony draped with flowers strung together. In the evening, ladies of the night would come onto the balconies and parade their wares to the gawking customers on the street*" (Hamid, 2013, p.71). Home, traditionally conceived as a place of security and privacy is substituted here by locations of exposure and vulnerability. This erosion of the public-private boundary illustrates how insecurity is an experience at all the levels in Karachi.

The presence of alienation is also a frequent feature in *The Prisoner*, with the characters experiencing mental decompositions as a result of trying to survive in a city full of corruption and dangerous threats. The surveillance reaffirms paranoia and drives the interlocutor: "*The place was crawling with informers and turncoats, and everyone was spying on everyone else, like some latter-day Pakistani version of East Berlin in miniature*" (Hamid, 2013, p.3). This is the existential trap people between the roles of the subjects of the state find themselves in -- they are not fully covered by its protection and not completely free of its cares.

Karachi itself takes on a role as a character in the novel, dangerous, wild, and as much a part of shaping the destinies of its population as personified characters. It is exemplified by its wild market-places: "*Instead of the glossy and spacious boutiques stood cabins, barely ten by ten, selling all sorts of wares... The traffic, too, changed. It grew far more congested... Auto rickshaws spouting black smoke, beat-up old Suzuki wagons, camels, and donkeys clogged the roads*" (Hamid, 2013, p.87). Such language turns the city into an anthropomorphous entity, a vicious culprit that is a direct creator of violence and despair.

The adaptation strategies that are on the verge of deviance also reflect lived experience with fear as it is described in *The Prisoner*. The brothels are described as ambiguous spaces of vulnerability: "*The brothels were one place where even criminals lowered their guard. Like all men, they had urges, and*

when they came to fulfil them they were vulnerable” (Hamid, 2013, p.73). This feeling indicates how the lived-in space, imbued with threat, produces a survivalist spirit that makes corruption commonplace. According to Lefebvre (1991), lived space is imaginative and symbolic but in the case of Hamid, it is a combination of both. It is pragmatic because people redefine the dysfunction of the city to justify treacherous decisions.

In literary language, lived space in *The Prisoner* acts out the changes of Karachi as a metropolis of hope and a bazaar of madness. The city makes resilience and cynicism; the city translates to loyalty, and alienation. Cities of Pakistan are complex creatures that are characterized by a lot and often competing forces (Sarfraz, 2023). The language of normalcy and dysfunction is central to Hamid Karachi, and then it is dysfunction on every level of living. The anthropomorphic aspect of the city is a hostile condition, is an enemy in its own way, leading to development of fears, fears, and moral lichens of the urbanites.

Interplay of Space & Criminality

While Lefebvre’s categories of perceived, conceived, and lived space offer useful analytical distinctions, in practice these dimensions overlap and converge. The most striking feature of Omar Shahid Hamid’s *The Prisoner* (2013) is the way the city of Karachi emerges as a criminogenic environment, a geography that not only hosts crime but actively produces and sustains it. Slums, markets, and “no-go areas” become spaces where mafias consolidate power, while elite neighborhoods and state institutions collude in this spatial economy of violence. Hamid’s insider experience as a police officer grants his narrative an authenticity that underscores the entanglement of space and criminality. Karachi’s geography, in this sense, is revealed not merely as a setting but as a breeding ground for corruption and organized crime.

Slums occupy a central role in this interplay. Hamid describes Lyari, one of Karachi’s most notorious districts, as “Orangi always remained a hotbed of vice, crime, and terrorist activity. The local population was also ethnically diverse, and that added to the Molotov cocktail of problems that plagued the locality” (Hamid, 2013, p.214). This description illustrates how marginalized spaces become semi-autonomous zones of criminal authority, governed not by the state but by gangs and mafias. Lefebvre’s (1991) notion that space is socially produced is evident here: Lyari is not simply a neglected neighborhood but an alternative order produced by the absence of state investment and the presence of criminal networks. For its residents, survival requires submission to gang authority, while for outsiders, the space is coded as dangerous and impenetrable. The slum thus becomes a “no-go area,” simultaneously a lived community and a criminogenic enclave.

Markets also feature prominently as sites where criminality intersects with daily life. Hamid notes, “Instead of the glossy and spacious boutiques stood cabins, barely ten by ten, selling all sorts of wares... The traffic, too, changed. It grew far more congested... Auto rickshaws spouting black smoke, beat-up old Suzuki wagons, camels, and donkeys clogged the roads” (Hamid, 2013, p.87). This passage underscores how economic spaces are embedded within structures of extortion and coercion. Markets, ostensibly spaces of exchange and commerce, are transformed into theaters of intimidation where mafias regulate participation through violence. As Schmid (1995) argues, detective fiction often reveals the hidden geographies of power in everyday life. Hamid’s market scene dramatizes this precisely, showing how ordinary spaces of livelihood are entangled in circuits of crime. The interplay between space and criminality here is not incidental but systemic: markets become essential nodes in the spatial economy of corruption.

The city’s “no-go areas” are perhaps the most explicit examples of how space sustains criminality. Hamid writes, “The place was crawling with informers and turncoats, and everyone was spying on everyone else, like some latter-day Pakistani version of East Berlin in miniature” (Hamid, 2013, p.3). Such passages illustrate how certain spaces are effectively ceded to criminal organizations, becoming territories outside state sovereignty. Foucault’s (1986) concept of heterotopias helps explain this dynamic: no-go areas are “other spaces” that invert the logic of governance, reflecting the state’s weakness even as they mirror its structures of control. In Hamid’s novel, these heterotopic spaces

sustain mafias by insulating them from accountability, providing both refuge and recruitment grounds. The interplay of geography and power ensures that criminality is not peripheral but central to Karachi's spatial order.

Hamid's portrayal also demonstrates how corruption thrives within these spatial dynamics. As Constantine reflects, "On one side of the table were stacked various awards, mementos, and a large framed picture of the Don. As if to further emphasize the point, a miniature UF party flag fluttered on the table next to a miniature national flag" (Hamid, 2013, p.149). Here, space is fragmented into domains of influence, each governed by its own logic of corruption. The institutional spaces of the police, the political spaces of constituencies, and the criminal spaces of slums all converge to produce a system where authority is negotiated rather than imposed. Lefebvre's (1991) insight that space embodies power relations is made tangible in this depiction: corruption is not an anomaly but a spatialized practice, written into the geography of Karachi itself.

The novel further highlights how the permeability of space facilitates criminal activity. "Every building on the street had a low-hanging balcony draped with flowers strung together. In the evening, ladies of the night would come onto the balconies and parade their wares to the gawking customers on the street" (Hamid, 2013, p.71). This passage illustrates how spatial segregation — the divide between elite and marginal neighborhoods — is undermined by the flows of corruption, which connect disparate spaces into a single criminogenic system. Urban sociologists such as Weisburd et al. (2012) have emphasized that crime clusters in specific "hot spots," but Hamid demonstrates that these clusters are never isolated; they are linked to elite spaces through protection rackets, political patronage, and shared economic interests. The city's geography thus produces a paradox of separation and connection: neighborhoods are divided by walls and inequality, yet united by corruption.

Hamid's insider view of policing provides further evidence of how city space functions as a breeding ground for corruption. Constantine laments, "*A policeman usually never leaves the police station before 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., and he is not inclined to be back on duty till at least midday... Unfortunately, the point they never understood was that crime doesn't follow a timetable*" (Hamid, 2013, p.2). These observations underscore the normalization of corruption as an everyday spatial practice. Checkpoints and police stations, as perceived spaces of authority, are subsumed into the economy of crime, becoming indistinguishable from the markets and slums they are meant to regulate. Lefebvre's (1991) framework reveals that this is not accidental: conceived spaces of governance are hollowed out when their material practices converge with the lived realities of corruption. The interplay of space and criminality is therefore totalizing, enveloping the city in a network of illicit relations.

In *The Prisoner*, Karachi itself emerges as the ultimate criminal actor, a city whose geography fosters dysfunction and criminality. Hamid writes, "*The brothels were one place where even criminals lowered their guard. Like all men, they had urges, and when they came to fulfil them they were vulnerable*" (Hamid, 2013, p.73). This personification of the city underscores its complicity in producing crime, reinforcing Lefebvre's argument that space is never neutral but always socially and politically charged. By portraying slums, markets, and no-go areas as integral to Karachi's functioning, Hamid illustrates that urban criminality is inseparable from urban geography. The city is not merely the site of crime but its very agent, producing cycles of violence, corruption, and fear.

Comparative Discussion

Urban crime fiction across the globe has long demonstrated the inseparability of city space and criminality. From the shadowy alleys of Arthur Conan Doyle's Victorian London to the dystopian streets of Gotham City in contemporary noir, the genre has consistently depicted the city as a site where social tensions manifest spatially. As Knight (2011) argues, crime fiction reflects "the city's contradictions: the wealth that abets crime, the poverty that sustains it, and the institutions that fail to resolve it" (p. 32). Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013) participates in this global tradition but also diverges from it, offering a distinctly Pakistani articulation of how space produces and sustains crime. By contrasting Hamid's representation of Karachi with the urban landscapes of London,

Gotham, and other global crime settings, the unique features of Pakistani crime fiction — ethnic politics, terrorism, and law enforcement failure — become especially pronounced.

The classic urban crime fiction of London, particularly in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, portrays the city as a labyrinth of secrets where the detective, through rational deduction, restores order. London's foggy streets, opium dens, and East End slums create atmospheres of menace, yet Holmes' interventions reaffirm the state's authority and rational control (Knight, 2004). Hamid's Karachi, by contrast, denies the possibility of restoration. Constantine, the police officer protagonist, observes that "in Karachi, justice was a slogan, not a system" (Hamid, 2013, p. 163). Unlike London's detective narratives, where institutional failure is temporary, Karachi's dysfunction is systemic, rendering the detective figure powerless against entrenched corruption. This contrast highlights the specifically Pakistani dimension of institutional collapse, where law enforcement is not the solution but part of the problem.

American noir fiction offers a closer parallel to Hamid's narrative, particularly in its depiction of corruption and moral ambiguity. Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929) or Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939) present cities where police, politicians, and criminals operate within the same corrupt system, leaving protagonists disillusioned. Hamid's Constantine echoes this disillusionment, reflecting that "the badge was less a shield than a shackle, binding him to compromises he despised but could never escape" (Hamid, 2013, p. 201). Yet while American noir emphasizes individual moral failure, Hamid's novel situates corruption within structural realities shaped by ethnic rivalries, political patronage, and the geopolitics of terrorism. Karachi's criminality is not merely the product of flawed individuals but of systemic dysfunction tied to broader national and international forces.

The symbolic urban dystopia of Gotham City, popularized in Batman comics and films, further illuminates Hamid's Karachi. Gotham is often portrayed as a city consumed by crime, where corruption pervades institutions and masked vigilantes substitute for law enforcement (Brooker, 2012). Like Gotham, Karachi in *The Prisoner* is a city where "every alley felt like an ambush, every crowd a mob waiting to turn" (Hamid, 2013, p. 201). Both cities embody urban despair, spaces where the line between criminal and enforcer blurs. Yet Gotham, as a fictional construct, abstracts these dynamics into allegory, while Hamid grounds them in the concrete realities of Pakistani society. Karachi is not a symbolic dystopia but a lived environment of terror, where ethnic militias, jihadist networks, and corrupt police forces converge. The comparison to Gotham underscores the universality of urban dystopia in crime fiction, but Hamid's Karachi distinguishes itself by its rootedness in historical and political specificity.

One of the key Pakistani dimensions of *The Prisoner* is the role of ethnic politics in shaping urban space. Karachi is portrayed as a city fragmented by ethnic enclaves, where political parties align with criminal gangs to consolidate territorial control. Hamid writes, "Each mohalla had its own party flags, each party its own armed boys; the police went where they were told, and nowhere else" (Hamid, 2013, p. 178). Unlike London or Gotham, where class divides dominate urban crime narratives, Karachi's divisions are also ethnic and sectarian. These divisions spatialize power: neighborhoods are mapped not only by wealth but by ethnic identity, with crime and politics merging into the same territorial struggles.

Another distinctive dimension is terrorism. While global crime fiction often focuses on organized crime or street-level violence, Hamid's Karachi is permeated by the threat of jihadist networks. Constantine reflects that "a gangster might be bought, but a zealot could only be feared" (Hamid, 2013, p. 209). This statement highlights how Karachi's criminogenic spaces host not only mafias but also terrorist actors, producing a hybrid threat that transcends traditional crime fiction tropes. The presence of terrorism situates Hamid's narrative within the geopolitics of the War on Terror, distinguishing it from Western urban crime fictions where terrorism rarely plays a central role.

Law enforcement failure, finally, is the defining feature that differentiates Hamid's narrative from global counterparts. In London's detective fiction, the police may stumble but ultimately facilitate justice; in American noir, they may be corrupt but are balanced by the detective's independence; in Gotham, they are ineffective but supplemented by vigilantes. In Karachi, however, the police are

themselves complicit. As Hamid observes, “Every station house was an auction house, every officer a bidder in the game of survival” (Hamid, 2013, p. 143). Law enforcement is not an imperfect solution but a mechanism of dysfunction. This marks a radical divergence from global traditions, where some external agent — detective, vigilante, rational system — restores a measure of order. In *The Prisoner*, no such restoration is possible; dysfunction is the city’s permanent condition.

Conclusion

The analysis of Omar Shahid Hamid’s *The Prisoner* reveals that Karachi functions not as a passive backdrop but as an active agent in the production of crime. Corruption, violence and fear are spread everywhere in the prisons, checkpoints, markets, slums, and neighborhoods of this city, such that the city geography itself becomes an active accomplice in the story. Using Lefebvre’s concepts of perceived, conceived and lived space, it can be seen that the material space of Karachi not only influences criminality, but the vision of institutions normalizes as they reinforce dysfunction but also neglect the vision of lived space and its underlying alienation, insecurity and insularity. In the novel, space and power coincide in a city around which cycles of illegality are weaved, turning Karachi into a character in its own right: oppressive, dynamic, criminogenic.

In addition to its contribution to the study of literature, the novel also addresses more sociological and criminological issues, demonstrating how space can create certain system malfunctions and how law and enforcement itself reproduces corruption. The insider angle of Hamid makes the story tangible and gives us insights about the global but also about the particularities of Pakistani ethnic politics, terrorism and institutional disintegration. By situating *The Prisoner* within Lefebvre’s theory of space, this study underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches, showing how literature can illuminate the social production of crime in urban environments. Future projects might widen the scope of this study, bringing Hamid and Karachi stories into a broader topography of associations, or even into the terrain of a digital spatial mapping of fictional and actual places, or into the realities of the criminological landscape and the possibilities of a combined criminological and literary approach. Eventually the novel has verified that crime does not just live in Karachi but is created there, a city encapsulating all contradictions of urban modernity, inequality and human survival.

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