At the Intersection of Politics and Science Fiction: Illuminating Concepts of Spatial Justice in Two Novels, *Alif the Unseen* and *Ajwan*

by

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Abstract

There is growing interest in genre science fiction in the Arab world, evident from the Middle East Film and Comic Con (MEFCC), and the increase in the number of Arab science fiction novels being published. However, scholars have paid little attention to this emerging literary field. This paper seeks to understand some of the politics in studying and writing about Arab science fiction in academia. This paper also provides an in-depth analysis of two Arab science fiction novels that can be read as forms of critical literature. These novels engage readers in the process of speculatively imagining how everyday spaces in society have the potential to act as foundations for resistance and emancipation. Using the metaphor of a spaceship to represent each text, this paper argues that there is a strong relationship between social justice and space in both novels, providing readers with a new understanding of spatial justice.
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Chapter 1: Overtures

1.1 Introduction

At least eighty years have passed since modern SF (science fiction) was identified as a distinct genre,\(^1\) one that has since evolved to become a world-wide cultural phenomenon with an impact on everything from entertainment industries (Hollywood), to NASA, and even U.S military policy.\(^2\) This cultural trend is by no means different in the Arab world. According to Arabic and SF literary blogs and forums, there is a growing Arab audience receptive and hungry for more SF, evident from the increase in events such as the Middle East Film and Comic Con (MEFCC), held in Dubai annually since 2012. In fact, Arab writers have published over forty modern SF works since the 1940s (moderately early in the global development of SF as a genre).\(^3\) Many of these SF works were written in Arabic, though a few works in recent years have been written in English, or translated from Arabic into English, reflecting the new transnational identities of Arab readers living around the world. Fittingly, in their SF texts, Arab writers have articulated how various sites have been influenced by political, economic, social, and cultural flows and border crossings that influence notions of identity and consciousness.

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\(^1\) SF was not considered a distinct genre until H.G Well’s novels in the 1890s, and did not acquire a name until Gernsbackian pulp in the 1920s. Hugo Gernsback was the founder of Amazing Stories, the first magazine that was devoted to SF, and that defined the SF genre.


\(^3\) I found these sources using online working bibliographies listing Arabic novels: see Working Bibliography of Arab SF/Fantasy on worldsfi.wordpress.com, or Achmed Khammas’ article “The Almost Complete Lack of the Element of ‘Futureness’ Science Fiction in Arabic Literature” in the online magazine Telepolis. The citation for the latter is included in the bibliography.
In multiple texts, we are presented with spatiality in a multi-scalar perspective unique to SF. For example, in SF there are often micro and macro sites that shape identity: the small spaces of individual thought, and local sites which include anything from small-scale rural or urban configurations, to larger regional sites that contain aspects of Arab culture; and macro sites such as the arena of the global that takes into account larger transnational and migratory flows. There is also a special grey ‘other’ area for sites yet to exist, which we can describe as space in flux. With this special ‘other’ category, we undergo an active imagining of future spaces - that which is possible, probable, imaginable, revolutionary, and sometimes, out of this world. The multi-scalar dynamic of SF necessitates us to adjust our spatial lens, allowing us to zoom-in and investigate the microscopically small spatial influences that shape identity, and also zoom-out and form a perspective on the larger, collective spaces that shape the lives of all living things on our planet, providing us with a sense of interconnectivity and belonging – a planetary consciousness. Two recently published science fiction works that I would like to examine through this spatial lens, are: Ajwan by Noura al-Noman (translated from Arabic to English) and Alif the Unseen by G. Willow Wilson (English). Both novels explore how unjust political and economic policies create oppressive living spaces for the negatively affected. In each novel, socio-economic and political policies influence the organization of space, producing zones of exclusion and inclusion, wherein living space is divided, controlled, and stratified by local, global, or inter-galactic political players. The protagonists in these novels protest oppressive

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4 SF deals with imaginative content and has standard settings (spaceships, imagined places on earth and other planets), motifs (time-travel, quests, war, futuristic technology), and characters (scientists, aliens). SF frequently engages with the consequences of scientific innovations and societal organization. SF can also be read within the category of speculative fiction that includes fantasy, alternate histories, utopian and dystopian writings. Some SF writers cross the border between S and fantasy, but ultimately SF differs from fantasy in that the former concerns things that may one day be possible or are at least realistic.
living spaces by crossing borders, re-envisioning boundaries, and reclaiming the spaces from which they have been excluded.

Using the metaphor of a spaceship to represent the multi-scalar dynamic of each text, I would like to examine these border crossings, which I argue reaffirm the relationship between social justice and space, providing us with a new planetary consciousness. This consciousness binds the different spatial scales - local, regional, planetary, and beyond, in an effort to form a sense of spatial justice to the earth and each other. These texts can be read as a form of critical, spatial praxis, engaging readers in the process of speculatively imagining how everyday spaces in society have the potential to act as foundations for resistance and emancipation.

In exploring these issues, I will first provide an explanation of how SF in general, and SF written by Arabs in this particular case, can be regarded as critical theory that broadens readers’ understanding of world politics. I will afterward explain how SF relates to spatial theory, and mainly use the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Edward Said, and Edward Soja to illuminate concepts of space, and of planetary consciousness in the novels.

1.2 SF: Critical Theory or Politics of the Popular?

In the last few decades, SF has become an immensely popular genre around the world. Several of the highest grossing films in recent years, from Avatar to The Dark Knight trilogy, have SF themes. Many of these SF works deal with concepts such as time travel, radical transformations of society, encounters with aliens, and advanced technologies. Given the fictional content of SF, it is easy to see why this genre is sometimes viewed as superficial, and thus undervalued as a source for learning about society. Tackling this issue, SF theorist Jutta
Weldes, writes of the relation between SF (as popular culture) and world politics, and follows the genre’s impact from policy to play. Weldes argues that though SF is precisely ‘fiction,’ it is also “rife with references to wars, empires, diplomatic intrigue, and so forth – the very stuff of politics” (Weldes 4). However, even as the stuff of politics, SF is still ‘popular culture,’ a form of popular politics or propaganda that can appeal to mass audiences. Many times SF culture, like most forms of media, replicates and sustains biases and stereotypes that are prevalent in society. For example, American SF culture frequently reproduces and reinforces American ideologies and values, and exports them to the rest of the world. SF theorist Martin-Albo warns that the fictional exploration of space in SF is not free from cultural bias, and that even the space federations produced in works from Star Trek to Star Wars to The Martian Chronicles reconceptualise universes from the vantage point of the United States, with outer space as the new “final frontier” of imperialistic conquest (Albo 102).

Not only are American ideologies present, but so are blatant cultural biases, where non-Americans are frequently forced to identify with the villains or aliens in many Hollywood SF films. For example, Arabs are frequently portrayed as villains in Hollywood SF, from classic films such as Back the Future (1985) where Libyan nationalists are depicted as terrorists, to the Dark Knight Rises (2012), where the supervillain is named Ra’s al Ghul, Arabic for “demon’s head.” Although many of Hollywood SF films are the product of creative and interpretative imagination, they do not exist in a void and (following Edward Said’s analysis) can in many ways be viewed as cultural artifacts coloured by the relationship between culture and empire (or nation-states). Regarding how perceptions and political attitudes are molded by the media, Said says:
In the West, representations of the Arab world ever since the 1967 War have been crude, reductionist, coarsely racist, as much critical literature in Europe and the United States have ascertained and verified. Yet films and television shows portraying Arabs as sleazy, “camel-jockeys,” terrorists, and offensively wealthy “sheikhs” pour forth anyway (Said 36).

SF narratives that vilify Arabs, or marginalized “others” of the world, can be especially dangerous because they mobilize people’s passions and enforce antagonistic and inaccurate stereotypes. As Benedict Anderson suggests in his *Imagined Communities*, narratives are at the heart of how people identify with their fellow citizens, most of whom they will never meet. These narratives help create a concept of one ‘nation,’ one that perceives people outside national borders as different linguistically and historically. Thus, when reading SF, it is important therefore to understand that the power to narrate is constantly contested. Several postcolonial SF writers and scholars have in fact started mapping the structures underlying representations of the “other” as they “strike back” at the empire by dismantling American / Eurocentric notions of SF literature.

1.3 SF as Revolutionary: The Intersection of Culture and Politics

As a genre capable of challenging current political systems and imagining new methods of organizing society, many literary theorists5 have advocated that SF can be read as critical theory, a stance this essay takes as well. Within academia, modern SF (which is relatively new and was only popularized shortly before the Cold War) began receiving serious academic attention in the late 1950s.6 By the 1970s, the academic study of literary SF became more popular, and since the 1980s has come to include SF cultural studies, film studies, television

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6 For more information see Mark Bould and China Miéville’s *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, page 2.
studies, game studies, postcolonial studies, Marxist theory, feminist studies, race studies, queer theory, and others. Politically engaged theorists and critics, such as Carl Freedman, China Miéville, and Mark Bould, have found in the genre “the radical potential for thinking differently about the world” (Bould 1). Freedman even advances the claim that SF and critical theory may be read as versions of one another, for SF:

…is determined by the dialectic between estrangement and cognition. The first term refers to the creation of an alternative fictional world that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for granted, implicitly or explicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of the latter. But the critical character of the interrogation is guaranteed by the operation of cognition, which enables the science fictional text to account rationally for its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world. (Freedman, 16-17)

According to Freedman, SF texts allow readers to rationally conjecture where the present is heading by opening up alternative spaces to interrogate world politics. As a result, many social SF works are futuristic or utopian in outlook. Utopia in the spatial sense exists not as some bourgeois notion of ‘progress’ but rather, with the future as “…the object of hope, of our deepest and most radical longings” (Freedman 64). A case in point is the subgenre of feminist utopias, in which artists re-situate political trends to better understand issues of governance, violence and war, public / private ownership, and the sustainability of the environment (Bould 3). SF can also be dystopian by drawing attention to frightening real-world trends, or events that could lead society to a cataclysmic disaster or decline. As a result, SF often has some relation to utopian / dystopian discourse, because the genre helps us to interrogate political trends and think critically about where society is headed. In many ways, by re-imagining political, social, and economic scenarios, SF illuminates and raises awareness of potential disasters, and provides us with the hope that we can avert disaster and perhaps create a better society.
1.4 Arab/Arabic SF

SF holds a unique position as a medium that can illuminate major conceptual trends in contemporary times, and help people imagine a better future. However, readers may ask, what is Arab/Arabic SF, is it any different from English SF, does it teach readers only about the Arab world, and why have I never heard of it? As of yet, no one has clearly defined the term “Arab SF” let alone determined the difference between “Arab” and “Arabic” SF. I will try to clarify and demarcate the two terms. First, Arab SF is any form (medium) of SF made by those who self-identify as Arab, either ethnically, or simply because they have some connection to the Arab world. As for Arabic SF, this is any medium of SF written/filmed in the Arabic language. Anyone, regardless of nationality, can write or film generic SF in Arabic, as long as they know Arabic. Quite clearly, the two definitions can overlap, causing confusion – since some Arabs write in English and others write in Arabic, or other languages. Throughout this essay I have simplified the definition and used the term “Arab SF” to include any self-identified Arab writer who writes in any language, and I will continue to do so. I would like to remark that I have read a few articles where authors have labelled Arab/Arabic/any SF originating from the Middle East as “Islamic SF,” a term used several times by Lydia Green, a journalist for the BBC in her article “Close Encounters of the Arab Kind” and by Charlie Jane Anders in an article, “The Islamic Roots of Science Fiction,” (to name a few). These authors are claiming works such as *1001 Nights* (a work that has Arabic, Persian, Indian, Egyptian and Mesopotamian roots) and other medieval works with elements of pre-modern SF, are “Islamic” when in truth, they do not concern the religion of Islam. Such terminology places us on a slippery slope that can only result in inaccurately depicting SF/fantasy literature from the Arab world as ‘religious.’ I would suggest that when using the term “Islamic SF” writers should only refer to works with purely
“Islamic” themes, and not general SF/fantasy works completely unrooted in Islamic traditions and teachings.

In any case, Arab SF by any other name, is an understudied field, with very little scholarship available in European languages, or in Arabic-language scholarship. Before attempting to understand why there is little research, let us first conduct a short review of existing research. Our first substantial work comes from Gary Boutz at Georgetown University, who recently published a dissertation covering generic cues and features in Arabic SF, and an overview of available academic scholarship written on the subject of Arabic SF (Boutz uses the term Arabic SF because his research focuses only on SF written in Arabic). Bout’s dissertation “Generic Cues and Generic Features in Arabic Science Fiction” (2011), argues that five of Lebanese author Kassem Kassem’s novels incorporate features of prototypical SF. Here we have a research paper attempting to prove Arabic SF is legitimate SF. Boutz is successful in establishing that Kassem’s novels are representative of other SF works by Arabs, meaning that Arab SF can be studied using English-language SF study tools, models and methods, and also, that science fiction by Arabs should be integrated into SF studies alongside mainstream science fiction. To establish this result, Boutz looks at several generic features in SF works:

Formal organization includes the use of deixis and pulpstyle features; thematic content addresses the iconography of science fiction, including the icons of the spaceship, the alien, the transformed human, and the robot; and rhetorical structure includes the four features of alternativity, plausibility, extrapolation, and a relationship to science. (Boutz iii).

These generic features are prevalent in many Arab SF works, validating the point that Arabs have indeed written modern SF novels. Basically, a Western scholar had to prove and validate that Arab SF is indeed, prototypical SF (this is a problematic issue, one I will mention later in the essay). Besides Boutz, and a handful of other scholars’ works providing brief descriptions of several novels, the only scholar to contribute to the field at length is Reuven Snir who has
published two articles, “The Emergence of science fiction in Arabic literature” (2002), and a paragraph in his “Modern Arabic literature: A functional dynamic model” (2001). Both Boutz and Snir question the peripheral status of Arab SF. Boutz clarifies that three main reasons for its underrepresentation are that most scholars studying SF reside in English departments of their universities and focus on works written in English (the international language of scholarship); SF is studied most in the Europe and North America, where scholars do not have reading knowledge of Arabic; and finally, most SF scholars consider SF to be an Anglo-American phenomenon and thus they do not concern themselves with works outside the English canon (Boutz 3). This situation is changing as more scholars examine SF written in languages other than English, and are demanding that SF be considered a world-wide creative venture.

Joining the debate on the origin of SF are literary scholars Bruce Fudge, Rebecca Hankins, Katie Trumpener, Rebecca Johnson, and Richard Maxwell, and several others, all of whom argue that the ‘Arab novel,’ and thus Arab SF, is not merely a late offshoot or imported U.S – UK genre, and that Arab writers of SF and fantasy have influenced literature historically, from the Middle Ages to the present day, across the world. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, notes that even Tales from One Thousand and One Nights, such as “The City of Brass” and “The Ebony Horse,” have many fantastical and technological elements and can even by regarded as proto-SF (49). Furthermore, the Arab world has a long history of utopian writings, from Ibn al-Nafis’s 13th century treatise Theologus Autodidactus, to Al Farabi’s 10th century Opinion of the Residents of a Splendid City, and al-Qazwini’s futuristic tale Awaj bin Awfaq. In addition, many modern Arabic SF works also have utopian and dystopian elements. Christian Szyska’s article, “On Utopian Writing in Nasserist Prison and Laicist Turkey” explores prison writings of incarcerated Egyptian Muslim and
Turkish authors, and their SF works such as *Fifth Dimension* and *Space Farmers*, both including characters on the quest for Islamic utopias. Literature then, should be seen as a transnational artifact, moving across borders as genre develops in distinct episodes of interaction between the East and West, which Fudge characterizes as:

Eighteenth-century work with formal innovations introduced by translations of Arabic tales into French (and, soon after, English); the late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century attempt to resituate that encounter within an imaginary contact zone, a fantasized version of Spain; and the late-nineteenth-century “Arab rediscovery of Europe,” characterized by self-conscious Arabic literary interaction with European literature and culture. (Fudge 244).

Modern Arab SF is a product of this East – West relationship, and has become popular in recent years. Currently there are many Arab SF short stories, novels, and plays, though, as scholar Yusuf Nuruddin in his article “Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology” says, most of the early works are unknown to the West because they have not been widely translated (Nuruddin 74). The first modern Arab SF novelist is generally acknowledged to be Mustafa Mahmud, who began to publish works in the 1960s.\(^7\) Since then SF has been written in practically all Arab countries, and several online blogs, such as Sindbad SF and The World SF Blog, have even begun compiling lists of Arab /Arabic SF works for interested readers, showing interest and intrigue is peaking for Arab SF among SF readers world-wide.

### 1.5 Problematic

Given that Arab SF has been around since the 1960s, why is it still generally underrepresented in the world literary SF canon, and why has there been so little interest in translating Arabic SF?

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\(^7\) Some scholars claim the first Arab SF writer was Tawfiq al-Hakim, though this claim has been contested because his works are not considered by some Arab critics to be genre SF.
works to English and other languages? The answer has something to do with the politics of studying literature, which has shaped which national works scholars study. On this note, literary theorist Gayarti Chakavorti Spivak says in her book, *Death of a Discipline*, “whatever our view of what we do, we are made by forces of people moving around the world” (Spivak 3). There is a complex politics surrounding the study of literature in North America and Western Europe. Historically, when European intellectuals arrived in North America during the Cold War, they secured Area Studies departments to focus on literature using a nation-based approach. Naturally, from the moment of its inception, the department of Comparative (World) Literature in North America, made its focus Western European – French, German, Italian, and Spanish literatures. Since the development of the department of Comparative Literature, there has been a sense of competition as scholars specialize in their own areas of ‘national’ expertise, creating a field of literary divisions. Non-English, non-Western European languages were relegated to departments corresponding with their ‘national’ disposition, and rather than being seen as what Spivak calls “active cultural media” (9), these works became objects of cultural study. Even when the department of Comparative Literature introduced the new idea of transnational literatures, the end result, “Global English” and postcolonial studies, rarely included Arabic literature courses. Researcher Mohammed Abdullah Hussein Muharram has claimed in a recent article that Arabic literature (both Arab fiction in English and English translations of Arabic fiction), has been marginalized in postcolonial and world English curriculums. This may be due to the fact that postcolonial literature has been defined narrowly as Commonwealth literature, excluding Arab writing. However, Arabs were directly affected by the imperial process of colonization, and many Arabs’ fictional works deal with the “impact of colonization on the minds, identities, and language of the Arab people” (Muharram 131). Muharram dares to ask the
question, is Arab fiction in English translation looked down on because of an orientalist assumption that Arab writing is not as worthy as English literature?

Muharram’s question leads us to consider how literature is subject to identity-politics. As Spivak says, the discipline is still saturated with politically correct multiculturalists who want the world’s others to be identitarians (Spivak 55), and for their texts to be read within confined nation-based or class-based frameworks. For example, critics such as Frederic Jameson have argued that Arab/Arabic and postcolonial literature (what he calls Third World Literature), has profound differences from Western First World literature, due to different rates of modern, economic development between the capitalist first world, the (what was once) socialist bloc of the second world, and all the third world countries that suffered from colonialism and imperialism. Jameson claims in “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” that nations which once suffered from colonialism are still stuck in outmoded forms of cultural development as they try to compete with “Western machineries of representation, such as the novel” (Jameson 69), a comment that bears what Edward Said says in Culture and Imperialism, is an “inflated sense of Western exclusivity in cultural accomplishment” (Said 37). In disagreement with Jameson is Aijaz Ahmed, who argues in “Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory,” that there is no such thing as Third-World Literature because “fundamental issues-of periodization, social and linguistic formations, political and ideological struggles within the field of literary production, and so on- cannot be resolved at this level of generality without an altogether positivist reductionism” (Ahmed 4). There is a multiplicity of significant difference among and within both the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialised formations (Asia, Africa, the Middle East, etc.).
The problem of grouping Arab SF precisely as Arab/Arabic/Islamic Fiction is that they are monolithic. Professor Emily Apter argues in Against World Literature, that these monolithic terms are “simplistic substitutions of Asiancentricity or Afrocentricity for Eurocentricity which rests on a caricatural logic of divided –world systems and cultural Othering” (Apter 60). Indeed, possessive collectivism\(^8\) points to an arena of translation theory that treats language and linguistic works as the cultural property of different communities (Apter 60). Accordingly, Apter argues that global literature can be likened to the global museum, where curators struggle over salvaging works by affirming their authenticity as national heritage objects, giving countries ownership of ancient and pre-modern cultural property found within their borders (Apter 325). Literary critics are responsible for conserving national literature and appraising its worth. Worth is appraised using European standards endorsed by the media, or as literary critic Peter Hitchcock argues:

> The world in world literature is studiously neutral and requires no further qualification: it is the twenty-first century ghost of nineteenth century aestheticism that at once announces the best that has been thought and said…world literature has the drab hierarchization of petty-bourgeois desire (Hitchcock 5).\(^9\)

The classics and canons, and even postcolonial literature are thus subject to being categorized by national origin, and furthermore, read based on European criteria. This explains why Arab SF has received little attention from Western critics who feel that analyzing these works is best left to people trained in Arabic, who understand Arab culture and history. Perhaps there is a conflict here, do we read Arab SF within the Arab context, or find a way to resituate it within the development of the genre in the Arab world and across the world? Although I am looking at Arab SF in a planetary context, I must stress that as scholars, we should not neglect the local and

\(^8\) As Apter defines, “acquiring artifacts from conquered territories and piling them up in national museum collections enhances the possessive collectivism of imperially aggrandized nation-states” (322).

\(^9\) Also found in Apter, page 327
regional influences Arab literature had on the development of Arab SF. I realize that Arab writers may be more influenced by Arab literature, non-Arab literature, or both. How do we read Arab literature as part of world literature, and yet still take into account global, national, regional and local differences in values and ideologies, and even, on a micro scale, the individualistic opinions of Arab writers? What we need then, is to find a new way of looking at literature, new translational approaches that take into account macro and micro pluralities of identity, and renegotiate the terms, concepts, methods used in analyzing literature.

1.6 The Importance of SF in the Arab World and Beyond

To demonstrate why I believe SF can help us dream of a better future, I will propose we seek a bigger scale, one that takes into account two important aspects of the SF genre: time and space. SF makes use of possible geographies through a) time: by plausibly extrapolating into past, present and future, and also, b) by opening up space: on different scales local, regional, national, planetary, the universe, the multiverse, etc. – where we can zoom out to see the larger affinities that make a world and then zoom-in to the micro relations that bind people together. The scales of distance (space), and extrapolation (time), help us re-position and re-evaluate social life and meaning. Marleen Barr in “Fantastic Language/ Political Reporting” writes of how SF utilizes space and time to give us greater perspective to navigate the political landscape and move toward a postnational discourse. She cites Earthrise as a visual example for the potential of SF. Earthrise refers to a photograph taken during the Apollo 8 Mission in 1968, when astronaut William Ganders turned his camera back toward the Earth and captured our political and

10 The planetary context is complex and can seem contradictory on some level, and it may seem as if I am neglecting the importance of Arab / historical context on Arab SF. I am actually trying to use the planetary method of reading literature to acknowledge both the local and regional Arab influences, and world-wide influences, that have helped shape Arab SF literature. Planetary thinking can address different scales of influence, from the micro to the macro.
geographic reality in a constructive way (Barr 205). Oliver Morton, news and features editor of Nature explains why Earthrise was so influential:

Earthrise showed us where we are, what we can do and what we share. It showed us who we are, together; the people of a tough, long lasting world, shot through with the light of a continuous creation. (Morton 205).

As one of the most influential photos ever taken, Earthrise captures the pivotal, paradigmatic experience of SF by providing a visual icon that people feel collective responsibility toward. Earthrise acts like a mirror, calling attention both away from, and back toward geopolitical issues and differences by forcing people to look at their own geographical reflection. The scale of SF is immense in this way, as it forces people to confront difference (of conflict and opinion on a local level) and accept their plurality, and at the same time, shows people the significance of the whole – whole earth, whole planets, whole solar systems etc. SF moves people to consider both their significance and insignificance, it is an awe-engageing, yet humbling experience. Carl Sagan’s reflection on the image of the earth as the Pale Blue Dot speaks to this experience:

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love…Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light…There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known. (Sagan 12-13).

SF can use perceptions of space and time to provide a grand scale of looking at Earth, at the universe, and everything beyond.

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11 Taken from Marleen Barr’s “Fantastic Language/ Political Reporting.” In The Postnational Fantasy: Essays on Postcolonialism, Cosmopolitics and Science Fiction.

12 The Pale Blue Dot is in reference to a photo of the Earth taken from the Voyager One space probe before it left the solar system.
Let us delve deeper into the many motifs of SF, and consider the quintessential icon of time and space: the spaceship. This vehicle transporting us to the stars, will act as a metaphor for how SF transports us to new sites of exploration that broadens our spatial consciousness. Let us imagine several passengers have come aboard the spaceship. These passengers are of different age, gender, nationality, and have varied beliefs and ideologies, etc. They fasten their safety gear before the spaceship lifts-off, quickly passing through the vertical extent of sovereign airspace. After reaching an altitude of 80 km above sea-level, the blue, red, or green passports lose their purpose. Everyone flying at this height is now considered an astronaut. By 100 km, the spaceship passes the Kármán line, a benchmark boundary between Earth’s atmosphere and outer space. The astronauts look out their windows and stare in awe at the stars. Circling these stars could be habitable planets where alien species have invented different systems for organizing life. With a bold leap of imagination, they start to wonder about alternative ways of living, being and organizing society on earth. In the emptiness of an uncolonized, neutral space, the astronauts’ roots are unraveling. The spaceship is forcing them to take a critical look back at a whole planet with various political realities and infinite possible futures. The spaceship is optimistic, critical, and realistic at the same time, it bridges on reality and fantasy, and converges on political and alternative reality. What I am proposing is that we use the spaceship as a metaphor for how SF allows humans to look at the grand scale of human relations, and helps us to re-imagine and re-work these affective dimensions of proximity and interconnection. From the spaceship we see the geographical areas and histories of the earth as intermixed and interacting along the sea shores and across vast networked bodies of water. Our consciousness as vastly different individuals from all walks of life, takes on a less possessive force. From way up high, we remember that the space of globe is political, and yet the earth itself belongs to no one, and
everyone. In every way, SF is this spaceship, allowing people from diverse backgrounds to meet at a neutral location (the SF text), a site of hope and radical thinking.

1.6.1 How to Read Arabic SF using a Planetary Model

Throughout the last few sections I have been gathering thoughts on how to approach re-situated the place of SF written by Arabs within the larger predominantly English SF canon. I would like to suggest at this point, that by using the icon of the spaceship which advocates a view of Earth as a heterogeneous ‘whole,’ we overwrite reading literature as ‘global/national’ and ‘mono/multicultural,’ and imagine ourselves as planetary. Why have I chosen this stance? I challenge the long-term vision of categorizing SF as national / postnational, and other ‘post-’ terms that straight away identifies and contextualizes a text based on the nationality and ethnicity of the author who wrote it, and their country of origin. There are too many border-crossings for an author’s work to be read as a ‘collective’ or representative work of an entire nation, especially when each member of these collectives have diverse historical experiences. The old postcolonial model, as Spivak says “will not serve as the master model for transnational to global cultural studies on the way to planetarity. We are dealing with heterogeneity on a different scale and related to imperialism on another model” (85). A planetary model of reading literature may be relevant to diverse populations in the world today, where people feel united in their sense of commitment and collective responsibility to the planet, regardless of national and ethnic/religious differences. We can imagine ourselves as planetary subjects or planetary creatures on a planet “on loan” to us (the Earth is not only ours, it belongs to all life forms, and is part of a wider spectrum). Planet-thought consists of taking into account the alterity of the planet, a determining experience of everyone living here. This framework asks people to re-evaluate the concept of globalization, whereby people are told the globe should be controlled to produce more
capital gains. The range and diversity of SF from around the world means there is no monolithic definition of the genre, it is open to shifting currents, trends and ideas. In terms of Arab SF, the writers may come from as diverse places as the U.A.E to the U.S.A, with different religious, political, and cultural persuasions. Among these writers, unifying ideologies may bind them, or not. Thus, I try to examine the writers’ works as “Arab SF” in their regional context of the Arab world, and also on a planetary scale, as world literature (SF). I have decided to look at how these writers conceive of the earth, a place where human connectivity and shared history is most obvious when looking at ideas of geography – space. As Edward Said says, “Empty and uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist” (Said 7) on this planet. All of human history is ‘rooted’ in the earth, and SF, set in and outside this earthly context, can provide people with a ‘route’ to clarifying new thoughts on how geography and territory relate to power and possession.

1.6.2 SF Written by Arabs: Importance Today

Arab SF, and of course the SF genre as a whole, can offer unique methods for reconceptualising the way we think and learn. This potential however, has nothing to do with progressivism, that is, the assertion that by creating SF, Arabs will open their minds to liberal, progressive, and rational thinking that will enable them to technologically and economically advance. This is (what I personally find) a problematic view of some advocates of Arab SF, such as computer engineer and gamer enthusiast, Yasser Bahjatt. In June 2012, Bhajatt presented a TED Talk arguing that the narrative genre of science fiction can help Arabs “dream a better future” by inspiring new forms of creative and revolutionary thinking and action.\textsuperscript{13} SF, Bahjatt

\textsuperscript{13} Bhajatt based his rationale on the strong correlation that contemporary nations advancing the sciences have a scientifically literate public immersed and even influenced by SF culture.
says, often figures as a precursor to scientific inventions, as SF writers’ dream of new inventions which are later made into a reality by scientists, such as SF writer H.G Wells who was the first to envision the atomic bomb, thirty years before Hiroshima, and ten years before scientists knew they could split an atom. Bhajatt claims there is also a strong correlation between SF culture and the number of scientific patents registered by each country, (though no relationship of cause-effect can be ascertained as to whether SF culture inspires scientists, or if scientists inspire SF writers).

Similar to Bhajatt, author Noura al-Noman of Ajwan, also says in an interview with Cristina Jurado Marcos, that one of the reasons she wrote an Arabic SF novel was to motivate the youth to take a greater interest in science. Noman comments that educational systems in the Arab world have failed to:

…make the youth interested in science as a study and as a career. Without science, there can be no science related writings and, of course, no readers either. And the tragic consequence of that is also the fact that the Arab world boasts little to zero scientific patents too. It is funny how people underestimate sci-fi, when it has the capacity to bring us back to the fore of scientific advancement. (Noura al-Noman).

Interestingly, although al-Noman shares the same perspective as Bhajatt on the importance of SF to technological progress, her writing is still critical of the futuristic and technology driven agenda of the Gulf, which SF author and artist Sophia al-Maria has termed “Gulf Futurism.” Al-Maria and artist Fatima al-Qadiri say that Gulf futurism is the Arabian Peninsula’s own brand of futurism, and is:

...a phenomena marked by a deranged optimism about the sustainability of both oil reserves and late capitalism. Similar to early 20th century Euro-Futurism and mid-century American kitch and retro-futurism, Gulf Futurism is evident in a dominant class concerned with master-planning and world-building, while the youth culture preoccupied with fast cars, fast tech and viddying a bit of ultra-violence.

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14 A 20th century movement originating in Italy, which celebrated technological advances, and glorified modernity.
The Arabian Gulf is a region that has been hyper-driven into a present made up of interior wastelands, municipal master plans and environmental collapse, thus making it a projection of our global future. From this statement, the themes and ideas of Gulf Futurism emerge: the isolation of individuals via technology, wealth and reactionary Islam, the corrosive elements of consumerism on the soul and industry on the earth, the erasure of history from our memories and our surroundings and finally, our dizzying collective arrival in a future no one was ready for. (Sophia Al-Maria and artist Fatima al-Qadiri).

This avant-garde cultural movement celebrating technology and modernity, may have influenced Noura al-Noman to write SF that would motivate Arab youth to be more engaged with science. Yet, as we will see later in this essay, al-Noman’s novel is critical of how spatially confined urban plans can isolate individuals from their environment, and negatively affect minority populations and the disadvantaged lower classes. Al-Noman’s main protagonist, Ajwan, struggles to enter society as a refugee and must find a way to integrate and adapt to the physical environment of a new planet, before re-entering society. Thus, al-Noman places importance on the idea of a free and open environment, rather than celebrating futurism’s obsession with urban plans, industrialization, and technologies that remove people from their earthly context.

In fact, modernity and technology play an important role in both novels, as protagonists find themselves detached from their environmental surroundings, in a world where living space has been quartered, allowing only some people freedom of movement and expression. Similar to Ajwan, the main protagonist in G. Willow Wilson’s novel is Alif, a young man struggling to find a safe haven away from the state authorities who want to imprison him for his political actions. Both al-Noman and G. Willow Wilson’s novels are tied to how protagonists such as Alif and Ajwan must find a space for themselves in societies that have modernized in a way that only privileged those in power. Perhaps, this is why science fiction in the Arab world is gaining greater popularity as well, for, alongside futurism comes the criticism of those who have been

15 Modernity as progress, through science and rationality, as advocated during the European Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in Europe.
left out of the gains of modernizing projects in the Arab world. This is plausible as literary development in most genres of the novel took place at different times throughout the Arab world. Scholars have categorized the Arabic novel as following several stages: from historical fiction, a romantic trend, realism, and later social realism, all of which mirror the political realities of the Middle East after the Second World War.\(^\text{16}\) In literary centres such as Cairo, optimism was experienced on a national scale following developments such as the 1952 Free Officers’ Revolution. However, after the Arab defeat in the Six Day War,\(^\text{17}\) a sense of despair was experienced through some of the regions of Arab World and great ideological projects began to lose their appeal. As regions of the Arab world underwent political and economic instability,\(^\text{18}\) crises of ideology and authority\(^\text{19}\) began to permeate Arab cultural thought and discourse. At present, Arab writers look at a range of issues, such as the political, military, economic, class and cultural dynamics at work in society. Arab writers’ works also voice dissent, and are critical of their society’s beliefs, cultures, governing, and economic systems. Arab SF adds to this current dynamic, criticizing social issues with a special focus on issues relating to SF such as time and space. In their own right, Arab SF writers must be seen as intellectuals – raising questions, deconstructing dogma and orthodoxy, and often go against their governments to speak to controversial issues that are suppressed or unaddressed by mainstream media.\(^\text{20}\) As intellectuals, writers articulate societal issues about the public, for the public.\(^\text{21}\) Thus, Arab SF writers, like all

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\(^\text{17}\) Also known as the June War, 1967 Arab-Israeli War.


SF writers, often critique, raise questions and seek answers that pertain to controversial matters in society.

SF can help us think rationally about technology and science – yes, but like al-Noman and Wilson’s works will show us, it can also do so much more by providing room to explore social, political, and historical issues. SF is extremely important because it allows people to conceive of radical politics, concentrating on theoretical, philosophical, and utopian discourse that allows us to critically imagine a better future for society. I would like to step outside of exclusivity and say Arab SF, when properly understood and analyzed with rigour, like all SF, can inspire everyone to dream a better future, and not simply in progressivist terms. Thus, this essay will focus exclusively on Arab SF using a nuanced and planetary model for understanding the local and global influences that create living spaces for human interaction and habitation. The importance, and why I have chosen to specifically look at SF written by Arabs, about Arabs, is to also illuminate how the marginalized Arab SF genre should not be neglected in academic studies because it can raise critical and strategic awareness of how we have collectively created and constructed social spaces influenced by networks of political and economic policies on all scales across the planet.

1.6.3 Spatial Theory: Framework and Key Concepts

Before moving on to an analysis of the Arab SF novels, I will explain the general spatial framework (its history and terminology) for clarification purposes. The spatial turn can be traced to the late 20th century, when scholars began interpreting and analyzing the spatiality of human life to better understand the human sciences from a critical perspective. Spatial theory has revised how people view history and society because it cuts across many disciplines, from literary studies to geography, urban planning, architecture, and others, to form new modes of
thinking. One of the core ideas behind spatial theory as praxis, is the possibility that many of the
turbulent crises experienced in the world today stem not only from events, but also political,
economic, and social restructurings in lived spaces. This interesting and radical perspective
allows us to deconstruct and critically restructure long-established, traditional modes of
knowledge and thinking about the world.

To understand spatial theory more fully, we will first turn to political geographer and
urban planner Edward Soja’s analysis of French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri
Lefebvre’s theories of space and politics. Soja looks at Firstspace (focused on the real, material
world), Secondspace (interpreting reality through imagined representations of spatiality), and
Thirdspace, that draws on the two other categories of space to restructure and open up alternative
strategies for producing knowledge. The concept of Thirdspace runs akin to Lefebvre’s concept
of ‘other’ space, both terms denote spaces that challenge conventional ways of thinking.

Thirdspaces are:

…filled with politics and ideology, with the real and imagined intertwined, and with capitalism,
racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of
production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection. They are “dominated
spaces,”…the margins and the marginalized “Third Worlds” that can be found at all scales, in the
corporeality of the body and mind, in sexuality and subjectivity, in individual and collective
identities from the most local to the most global. They are chosen spaces for struggle, liberation,
emancipation. (Soja 68).

From the margins, thirdsaces can become sites for resistance and liberation projects, and
counter-hegemonic struggles. For example, postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhaba, Spivak,
and Edward Said, use ‘other’ spaces, to reposition themselves and deconstruct the binaries of
colonizer-colonized, elite-subaltern, First World – Third World to create new pluralistic, and
hybrid forms of postcolonial analysis and cultural work on difference and identity.
Many recent spatial critiques, as well as some of those mentioned above, find their inspiration in Michel Foucault’s work *Of Other Spaces*, another pivotal work on spatial theory. In this brief lecture for architects, Foucault pointed to various ‘sites’ (institutions and other places) that interrupt ordinary life by injecting a sense of alterity into everyday spaces. These sites exist in relation to other sites, or the relations that produced them, “but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault 3). This concept of spatial thinking, called *heterotopology*, argues that sites are created by historical, political, and economic processes, and in turn, influence the very processes that created them. These sites:

are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (Foucault).

Examining heterotopic sites provides a glimpse of the social relations that produce space, and how space itself can represent or even be used to subvert and contest representations of power and knowledge. Since heterotopias take varied forms, there is a lot of overlap as to how we can define this concept. For my essay, I will be using Foucault’s fifth defining principle of a heterotopia, that is, heterotopias always include a system of opening and closing, or, for clarity we can say a system of inclusion-exclusion. For example, a heterotopic site may appear to have a simple opening, yet, exits and entrances are regulated through different methods such as ritual / purification (entrance into a temple or religious place of worship like the mosque), or qualities of human territoriality such as border policing and spatial regulation. The fifth concept of heterotopology will provide a useful model for analyzing the problematic relationship between space, power, and knowledge.
There are a few other concepts I will apply to help further our analysis of space, one being the concept of liminality, developed in the early 20th century by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and later by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner. Liminality involves opening closed spaces by reversing traditions, temporarily dissolving the social hierarchy, or completing certain rituals. I will use this concept to illustrate how characters in each novel (that have been outcast from society) pass through a ‘liminal’ space that involves the completion of certain training, missions and quests allowing them to re-integrate in traditional, in-flux, or newly created societies. Liminal spaces are neither here nor there, rather, they are in-between places such as camps, alleyways, and imaginary lands where characters find themselves stuck before they enter liminal spaces that allow them to re-enter society.

The last spatial concept I will be using comes from philosopher Giorgio Agamben, also heavily influenced by Foucault’s ideas of space and biopolitics. I will be using his term the “state of exception,” to describe the effects of the suspension of law in a state of emergency or over a prolonged amount of time, which deprives certain individuals of their right to citizenship and essential human rights. The concept of the state of exception is especially important in the context of Ajwan, which deals with the life of a refugee, (as we will see later in the essay). As with Soja, Foucault, and many others who I have only briefly mentioned here, Agamben also challenges people to critically examine how space is shaped by politics, ideologies, and other forces that move people to struggle over geography.

Paired with the multiscalar dynamic of SF as critical praxis, we can use the spatial theories of the aforementioned scholars to analyze the existing political trends of privilege and power explored in the Arab SF novels Ajwan and Alif the Unseen. Both novels explore how the political organization of space produces unjust societies, and how protagonists can only safely
and peacefully live in their respective societies after obtaining spatial justice. From this point, I will use the multiscalar approach of the spaceship to look at different heterotopic spaces in the novels. I will concentrate on spatial modes of organization (the representation of space) unique to each novel: the state of exception of refugees illustrated in Ajwan, and heterotopic places of inclusion and exclusion depicted in Alif the Unseen. For each SF novel, I will provide a brief context of the author, a plot summary, and then an exploration of the key forms of spatial justice carried out by the protagonists.

Chapter 2

2.1 The Author: Noura al-Noman

A popular SF novel published in Cario in 2012, is Ajwan, written by Noura al-Noman. Al-Noman studied English literature at the UAE University, and then obtained a Masters in Translation from the American University in Sharjah in 2004. After teaching and translating for many years, al-Noman decided to start writing children’s books and young adult SF novels in Arabic. Her interest in SF stems from her lifelong fascination for SF films and novels, such as the Star Wars film series, and novels by Arthur C. Clarke, Alan Dean Foster, Anne McCaffrey, Frank Herbert, C.J. Cherryh, and many others. After having read SF almost exclusively in English and realizing there were only a handful SF novels written by Arabs for teenagers, al-Noman decided to dedicate herself to the idea of providing more entertaining Arabic content for children and young adults. In an interview with computer scientist and writer M. Aurangzeb Ahmad, al-Noman explains why she choose to write in Arabic:

My kids, like me, fell in love with books, English books to be precise. And when I looked for Arabic YA [young adult] books, I found a handful, and none worth the effort of having to negotiate, bribe or intimidate my kids into reading. It was a lost cause. And I was left dejected by
the fact that my kids would not read Arabic. So I decided to write, and since my favorite books as a YA were sci fi, I wrote what I knew, and fervently hoped that it was enough to get YA interested in reading Arabic...

…You see them [young adults and teenagers] at movie theaters, hungry for the next sci fi flick – which always happens to be in English of course. So, they are interested in SF; but they don’t find it in books. Those who read English find it easy enough. I believe we can not only turn this around through creating interesting SF worlds in Arabic; but we can also turn it around for a more scientifically oriented generation interested in studying science and majoring in research and development to turn ideas/dreams/SF into reality. (Noura al-Noman).

Currently Arabic publishing ventures focus on books for adults, and also very young children under 12 years of age. Young adults are left to mainly read foreign books in English because Arab SF novels are geared toward older audiences. Al-Noman’s motivation to write entertaining popular fiction for younger generations is also driven by her belief that an interest in SF would lead to greater interest in scientific research and development in the Arab region, a thought shared by Arab SF writer for the youth, Yasser Bhaajat (as I noted earlier). As an Arab SF writer for the youth, al-Noman is breaking new ground by focusing on topics of interest to younger readers, and moving away from political and ideological issues unique to the Arab world. In an interview with Cairene freelance writer M. Lynx Qualey, al-Noman says:

“I also feel that we need to break away from the boundary of planet Earth and write about other planets, other life forms. I think that’s what will get the young generation to become interested in it. They are sick and tired of our age old issues which we never succeeded in conveying to them in a way that would make them hope for a better future. (Noura al-Noman).

Her novel therefore, is not situated in the Arab world, nor does it deal with fixing “Arab issues.” Instead, like many other SF writers, al-Noman created her own rich world full of possibilities and set in the distant future, where warp drive spaceships, underwater civilizations, and alien and human species with superpowers co-exist. She says:

If we are going to dream, why don’t we dream big? I am – hopefully – breaking away from Earth’s gravity, from our own solar system, from even our own species, and it has not been difficult for me.
I hope Ajwan contributes in encouraging others to dream bigger and go where no Arab wo/man had gone before. After all there are no rules in Sf, except for the ones you make for yourself – how much easier it is to write in that world than in our own limited world? (Noura al-Noman).

Al-Noman utilizes the underlying revolutionary component of the narrative genre of SF as a tool to imagine a future that is not confined to politics on earth. The novel also boldly oversteps conventional thinking that presupposes that Arab literature and “Arab SF” is in some way representative of Arab culture. In a grand way, al-Noman incorporates characters in her novel from different races, classes, ethnicities, and abilities. Old ethnic boundaries have been diluted in Ajwan, and the characters names can be traced to Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and many other languages, all removed from any contextualization to their earthly ‘roots.’ Rather than replicating the current political and ideological systems of thought and action in the Arab world today, al-Noman focuses on broad themes that will appeal to wider audiences, such as all-encompassing themes of attaining justice and peace in other galaxies. While the book is not political in nature, there is a definite examination of the politics of space. As we will see, throughout the novel, the spatial organization of society provides insight into the politics that affect and shape Ajwan’s identity and sense of belonging.

2.2 Synopsis

The novel follows two interwoven narratives, the main plot strand about Ajwan, and a sub-plot leading up to the event of a coup. The main plot strand follows Ajwan, a nineteen year old woman living on a planet partitioned by two species: the Okamo land-dwellers and the Havaiki water-breathers who live in underwater cities. Both species live in isolation from one another, and have different cultures and traditions. Stifled by the strict rules of the Havaiki, Ajwan accepts a job as a marine biologist in Okamo territory, where she falls in love with a man named Rakan. The two marry against Ajwan’s parent’s wishes, and before Ajwan can reconcile
everyone, a meteorite collides with the planet causing massive destruction and death. Ajwan is one of the 350 survivors lucky enough to board a spaceship before impact. She is safely escorted to al-Zafir, a military space station belonging to the Consociation of United Planets (a large council with representatives from every planet). At the station, Ajwan discovers none of her friends or family survived the catastrophe, and also, that she is pregnant. Consequently, Ajwan must confront her new reality alone, as a refugee on a strange space station.

Ajwan’s traumatic experience triggers within her a heightened sensitivity to other people’s emotions, giving her the powers of an empath. Her empath abilities help her befriend the top commander Rohani, who provides Ajwan with special privileges and a temporary permit to leave the station. Before leaving however, Ajwan’s newborn baby is kidnapped by unknown assailants. In an effort to find her son, Ajwan enters the Special Forces, an elite group of people with special abilities that protect the people of the United Planets. In a remote destination Ajwan trains to increase her telekinesis and empath powers, learning she has the capability to move objects with her mind, sense people’s feelings, and even manipulate their emotions. At the same time, the minor plot strand details a rebel movement orchestrated by at-Tarek, a behind the scenes mastermind striving to become supreme leader of the Planet Esplendore. At-Tarek’s guerilla forces kidnap Ajwan’s son and (others like him who possess special abilities), to create ultimate weapons for war. The novel ends as at-Tarek takes control of Esplendore, and Ajwan vows to continue strengthening her powers to find her son.

Throughout the course of the novel, various themes arise relating to concepts of inclusive/exclusive heterotopic spaces. These heterotopias are directly experienced by Ajwan who uses her abilities as an empath to liberate herself from oppressive spaces and regain a sense of belonging in society. There are three key spaces where Ajwan is forced to find a way to gain
spatial justice. Subsequent analysis will contribute to our understanding that SF provides a multiscalar perspective that enforces a collective vision that space should be more open and inclusive. This planetary consciousness will help us understand that identity and space are firmly linked together, as only through the latter can we experience a sense of belonging in society.

2.3 Home Planet: Segregation

The first site of analysis is Ajwan’s home planet which provides a glimpse into how different spatial scales influence identity (or a sense of belonging). On the home planet there are four main scales: the site of the individual (Ajwan’s personal thoughts and actions), the local (the underwater city Ajwan lives in), regional (the culture, species, and territories of the underwater people), and global (her home planet). On the macro scale of the global, the physical space of Ajwan’s planet is controlled and divided through an informal method of segregation enforced by the Havaiki and Okamo species. There is little to no interaction between the species, for both have completely disregarded the notion of collective, planetary space. Their system of segregation is dependent on behavioural and societal pressures to stay with one’s own kind. The social conscience, based on the opinion of others, is the most powerful force motivating and regulating their behavior. Both species are conditioned to live apart in land / water cities, and are cut-off from one another by the physical geography of the planet. This segregation damages the overall well-being and prosperity of their respective society. For example, ever since the two people separated, neither have advanced far in the sciences, to a perilous point, resulting in the destruction of the entire planet.

This brings us to the regional scale, where each society, bound and obsessed with their own spaces, fails to glance at the collective space of the planet they inhabit and should work
together to preserve. They do not perceive society from the metaphorical spaceship, they have neglected the planetary perspective, thereby suffering the consequences. At a regional and local level, through social and cultural regulation, each heterotopic city is closed off to outsiders. Ajwan is the only person who manages to escape this heterotopic system of exclusion-inclusion, entering into an ‘other’ space in an act of love and defiance. Her rebellious act interferes with the social code governing what the Havaiki and Okami can do with their bodies, and as punishment, she is temporarily shunned and treated as an outcast by society. Ajwan must in principle sacrifice her ‘place’ in society, in order to exercise freedom of choice and the right of movement – both physical movement from one society to another, and emotional movement of loving an outsider.

Ajwan says in a conversation with her parents,

I didn't come here to get some sort of license from you to marry the man I love. I just came to tell you, that's all. And stop looking at each other as if I am some lunatic! I am a grown woman and I have the right to choose my own life partner, even if he doesn't adhere to your strict standards as the ideal husband to your darling princess of a daughter (71).

The idea of having to obtain a license from one’s family to marry someone you love, clearly illustrates the powerful impact of the social codes regulating whether Ajwan can be accepted by her family (and in a larger sense Havaiki society). If Ajwan chooses to marry Rafan, she will be ostracized, and the heterotopic city will be closed to her.

In addition, without the sanctity of social opinion, Ajwan’s mere wish to marry an Okamo man makes her seem less human or ‘alien.’ Ajwan wonders if her parents “expect me to sprout wings like the flying silver fish and fly around the room?”(36). This Kafkaesque moment where Ajwan compares herself to an insect illuminates the experience of an individual functioning outside of society’s normative socio-spatial order. By physically crossing the border between two societies, Ajwan loses her identity as a member of Havaiki society. Identity and space are directly tied together in this instance because the two forge a reciprocal relationship.
People derive a sense of identity from their place in society. However, ‘belonging’ to society does not mean society belongs to the individual. Without the existence of mutually shared and accessible space, people acting in defiance of state order quickly lose their key to the city. The concept of the ostracized, exiled, or displaced ‘alien’ becomes more relevant in the next site of investigation: the refugee camp.

2.4 The Refugee Camp

More than one quarter of the 400 page novel is dedicated to Ajwan’s experience as a refugee deprived of political rights (and outside of normal juridical order) yet still living within the boundary of law set by the Consociation of United Planets on al-Zafir station. Ajwan’s situation as a refugee forces readers to look at a fictional universe that has been politically mapped and quartered, controlled and monitored, similarly to how we have politically organized earth with lines and borders. The space station is the key place where we glimpse how political players in the novel have carved out heterotopic spaces of exclusion-inclusion “creating lasting structures of unevenly distributed advantage and disadvantage” (Soja 20) throughout the universe. Ajwan’s universe is divided into four quadrants, each with up to one hundred chartered sectors. All the Consociation planets are spread out among these sectors patrolled by Consociation fleets that maintain peace, order and stability. Naturally, as Ajwan discovers, if one is not a citizen from among the Consociation of planets, she/he is undoubtedly excluded from all the protections and rights provided by governing powers. In the space station, Ajwan learns that the refugee camp quarters and those who live within, are extraterritorial to the law. The refugees are detained in this facility because they have no homeland to return to, and are not legally authorized to leave the camp. Moreover, Ajwan quickly realizes that refugees are treated with a “different set of measures” (47). Before leaving her planet where everyone was either Havaiki or
Okamo (and thereby had a place in society), the concept of a refugee was unknown to Ajwan, and she asks Major Rohani:

"What does refugee mean?"

No one had ever asked Rohani this simple question before. "A refugee is a person who leaves his country – or his planet – either by choice or through force, and then has to apply to legally live in another country or planet."

Ajwan nodded. "I see. And how long do I have to wait before I am taken to a planet?"

"To tell you the truth, I can't predict the time it will take. There are political issues involved and so it can be a long process...sometimes it can take up to a whole stellar year."

"A year?" squeaked Ajwan. "A whole year on board this station? It's like a prison! It's like my underwater city... I..." She checked herself and looked apologetically at Rohani. "I am sorry, I didn't mean to insult your hospitality. You've been so good to us."

_Am I a prisoner? Are we all prisoners? But we have done nothing, and we never chose to be here as refugees._ (49)

Other than being provided with the bare necessities of life such as food and shelter, Ajwan finds herself in a strange in-between state of exception, where she has no freedom of mobility. In the space of the camp, she learns how governing bodies have created heterotopic spaces in the universe that one can only access if they have the right paperwork, such as a visa or passport. There is only one way into society, via permission of the ruling authorities. Thus, the camp acts as a mirror that allows us to see how political space is represented and organized. Furthermore, al-Noman has turned the SF concept of the ‘alien’ around to mirror the current plight of refugees (people viewed as aliens because they do not have a home). Ajwan and the other refugees float within a spatial void and are treated as aliens because they are outside of the normative hegemonic political system that organizes space, power, and identity, (leaving Ajwan with an absence of all three). The refugee problem explored in _Ajwan_ corresponds to the refugee crisis experienced currently in the world. As a metaphorical spaceship, this novel keeps forcing us to re-examine some of the most problematic spaces in society and the forces that shape them.
Delving deeper into the problematic space of the camp, the novel provides us with a view of the modern spatial order that emerged in the 20th century. The modern spatial order was conceived of as a juxtaposition of homogenous territorial states. Refugees such as Ajwan, live between fractured territorial lines in a suspended space (a state of exception). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben argues the camp (refugee camp) is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet. The camp is the structure where the state of exception is realized; it is a void, or debilitating space for its inhabitants. The status of the refugee in the camp represents the problematic spatial organization of the modern nation-state by:

…breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis. Bringing to light the difference between birth and nation, the refugee causes the secret presupposition of the political domain – bare life – to appear for an instant within that domain. (Agamben 77).

Two phenomena have indicated the fragility of the birth-nation link, one: the immense increase in refugees and stateless persons, and two: the institution by which many world states have juridical measures that allow for denaturalization and denationalization of their populations. As such, removed from their places of birth and national origin, refugees experience a sort of identity-loss. Without travel permits, passports, and other legal documents, the refugees are not allowed to leave the space station. With nowhere to go, and no documents to identify her to authorities, Ajwan begins to lose a clear sense of selfhood. Displaced, the refugees are time-less, and history-less. Ajwan even loses track of reality itself:

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22 The term *homo sacer*, is Latin for a “sacred / accursed man [or woman]” who under Roman law could be banned, outcast and killed. Agamben has re-defined the ancient definition and applied it to refugees or internally displaced people living a ‘bare life’ (deprived of human rights).

23 Agamben says the first introduction of such took place in France in 1915 with respect to naturalized citizens of “enemy” origin; in 1922, Belgium followed the French example and revoked the naturalization of citizens who had committed “antinational” acts during the war; in 1926, the fascist regime issued, an analogous law with respect to citizens who had shown themselves to be “unworthy of Italian citizenship”…and etc... (77). Agamben provides many examples in his book, from the Nuremburg laws on citizenship in the Reich, and how the Jews in the “Final Solution” of the Holocaust were denationalized and sent to extermination camps.
Her eyes opened at the alarm’s incessant call. "It is 6:00 a.m. ... it is 6:00 a.m." Ajwan switched it off, but remained still. It was 6:00 a.m., but that was an abstract concept, not reality. If her room had had windows, they would have shown a black exterior, twenty-four hours a day. There was no morning and no night on board this station. As there was neither weather nor any natural phenomenon. It was just a metal canister filled with air and creatures, floating in black empty space. (83).

Outside of the normative spatio-political order, Ajwan begins to lose track of time and space, and therefore, identity. The floating ship in black empty space depresses Ajwan, and reminds her constantly of:

…the true meaning of terror, pain and near death experience. She saw people die, even though they had thought they’d already escaped death, and there she first smelled its sweet, cloying stench. From that day onwards, she could never look at a spaceship without reliving those terrible feelings. Even engine noises evoked the same memories of sounds, sensations and smells (83). Evidently, Ajwan feels as though the refugees (herself included) escaped physical death on their planet only to endure a state of identity-loss akin to death through the loss of a homeland, everyone they know and love, and finally the loss of their freedom. The novel’s focus on citizenship should move us to think critically about the modern spatial order, for clearly, states of exception diminish our collective, planetary vision. Though the novel is passively political, it demands we pay attention to how the modern spatial order creates an unfair system of who belongs in society and who does not, though in reality the earth truly belongs to everyone. In this case, the only way to regain a place for one’s self in society, is to reclaim space.

2.5 The Novel as a Metaphorical Spaceship

To encapsulate, the novel acts like a metaphorical spaceship, especially the space station which forms a mirror for readers to reflect (though Ajwan’s perspective) on the refugee experience, and realize how space and identity form a strong relationship. The station is a site where Ajwan’s strong emotional connection to the suffering of others allows her to clearly reflect on the society she has left behind, and the people who share a deep sense of longing for
their destroyed homeland. This emotional connection becomes a superpower, allowing Ajwan to intuitively perceive and project back other people’s emotions. Using her powers as an empath, Ajwan convinces Rohani she is not an alien in the figurative sense, but a ‘person’ in need of reclaiming space – spatial justice. Our metaphorical spaceship is starting to provide us with hope. Ajwan does not want to stay in the refugee camp, and will do everything in her power to leave.

However, simply leaving the refugee camp is not enough, Ajwan must find a way to re-integrate with society. In the end, Ajwan decides to join the Special Forces and try to integrate through some means into society. During her time spent with the forces she learns two important aspects about her ability: that she has telekinesis, and also, that she has the power to sense other people’s emotions and conceal her own to control and distance herself from pain and trauma. She is given special supervision and training by General Baz who notices Ajwan’s potential to succeed, provided that she can re-forge a sense of ‘belonging’ in society. General Baz says:

> If you don't stop thinking that everything which happens in your life is out of your control, if you continue to think that others control your life, if you don't change this impotent way of thinking, then others will keep manipulating your life and deprive you of the choice to shape your own destiny. Neither I nor an army of generals could ever be able to help you take control of your life. You are weak! You're always blaming fate or other people for what happens to you. That's why your misery will continue. (278).

General Baz is not scolding Ajwan for mourning the loss of her family and homeland, rather, as a new recruit and someone given the chance to excel, he asks her to move forward to reclaim control of her life.

During her the time spent at the Special Forces training camp, Ajwan crosses into a liminal space, a ‘threshold’ where she must prove to herself and others that she has abilities and the dedication to contribute positively to society. According to Victor Turner, liminal spaces and the liminal entities within them are in a phase of *rites de passage*:
Neither here nor there; they are betwist and between positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial…

…Liminal entities have no status, property, insignia… Their behaviour is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life. (Turner 95).

In the liminal space of the training camp Ajwan is given the same low rank as her novice comrades. Only after Ajwan proves herself a capable empath can she finally gain equal status in relation to the generals training her. She withstands harsh training, is broken down and built back up, gaining a new sense of self and identity, one still connected to her past but ready to survive long into the future as a member of General Baz’s elite fighting crew. From Ajwan’s experience, we can assert that a person’s identity is formed in relation to their place in society, she is now a part of the collective again, to society. After losing everything, her planet, her loved ones, and her sense of purpose, Ajwan is forced to reflect on her life and her strengths, building herself back up to re-integrate into society by joining the Special Forces. The liminal space is key to the rebuilding process for a better future. It functions as a space for re-entering society, but this time with a stronger vision of spatial justice – of the issues of injustice that permeate the political structuring of society.

2.6 Nature: The Space of Reintegration

We should note that this novel is passively political, in the sense that Ajwan does not actively reclaim space through revolutionary struggle, or radically alter the normative spatio-political system of society (as the protagonist does in Alif the Unseen). Instead, Ajwan restores her sense of identity and belongingness by re-integrating into the physical space of a new environment (by environment I mean the elements of nature or a natural habitat). Space is often portrayed in its natural, environmental (yet not politically environmental) sense throughout the
novel – from the Havaiki water city, to outer space, to the planets of land-dwelling species, Ajwan must re-learn how to survive in different natural settings. For example, in the beginning of the novel Ajwan is removed from her natural surroundings and placed in the cold, isolating and terrifying refugee camp in outer space. A direct connection can be established between the inhospitable refugee camp, and uninhabitable outer space, where neither the political nor environmental aspects of space can be tolerated for long. Moreover, there is an immediate contrast of outer space and the warm, oceanic environment of Ajwan’s home planet. Up in space, the air is dry, Ajwan’s skins cracks because she lacks the minerals provided by seawater; she is completely out of her element. She yearns to go back to “The sensation of delicious, warm golden sand between her toes…To connect with the sea, to go back to it and let it fill her lungs” (109). Interestingly, through the descriptions contrasting the sea and outer space environments, readers can experience Ajwan’s emotional and physical detachment from space and identity - for Ajwan, to connect to the sea is to connect to herself. Thus, readers come to the conclusion that Ajwan must find a balance in living space – both political and natural, in order to survive. To mention a few other examples, in the refugee camp Ajwan spends most of her time with the younger children in the daycare, they talk little and are learning how to adapt, live and survive in a new world. Every experience from this point is new to Ajwan, and she stumbles often as she tries to regain a sense of space and identity. At the boot camp Ajwan learns how to swim through dirty, muddy waters unlike the clear seawaters of her home planet, and she learns to climb huge trees and run vast distances, skills she never before possessed. Ajwan trains hard, until at last she learns to survive in a new environment. By drawing on space in its rawest, most natural form, al-Noman brings us to a passive politics of reclaiming ‘nature’ – our habitable, sharable living spaces. I would argue that Al-Noman is providing us with the view of ‘earth from above,
unmapped by the political and economic fictions that quarter space. Within the realm of natural space we learn to live again, to relocate ourselves within the planetary ‘earthly’ sense of space, and pursue a collective vision of inclusive space.

2.7 Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Ajwan is subject to harsh conditions and must learn to survive in a universe where hegemonic powers have created systems of inclusion-exclusion, making the camp the new biopolitical order that leaves people vulnerable and exposed to the inhumane conditions of bare life. Though Ajwan’s story raises awareness of the traumatic plight of refugees in today’s world, it also offers a semblance of hope. Even after her entire homeland is destroyed, and having experienced a brutal life as a refugee, Ajwan still finds strength enough to persevere against all odds, and enter a liminal space where she develops extraordinary superpowers that will help her re-claim a sense of purpose and control in life. As we follow Ajwan’s journey, we see that people displaced from their homes are also displaced from their identities. Readers are forced to reconsider the importance of taking a step back and reflecting on the representations of space around us, and the politics that have been imposed on free natural spaces. Most importantly, Ajwan manages to adapt to her natural surroundings, and in a passively political way, reclaim living space by inventing a new identity for herself. By broadening our scope of the collective, we can resituate, and relocate and construct a sense of identity within the planetary vision, and outside of the trappings of exclusionary spaces. We can unbuild walls, and construct new openings and closings that make sense within our current political situation. Thus, the novel acts as a metaphorical spaceship, a location of hope, providing a broader spatial scope and giving us greater clarity on the fragility of a planet, and the hope that we will recognize the importance of space to our identity, and our existence.
Chapter 3: *Alif the Unseen*

3.1 The Author: G. Willow Wilson

One of the most popular and beloved SF novels to be published in 2012 is G. Willow Wilson’s book *Alif the Unseen*. Wilson, an American Muslim convert living in Cairo, is the author of many well-known works such as her graphic novel *Cairo* (Vertigo 2007), *The Butterfly Mosque* (Grove Press 2010), a Miss Marvel comic series starring a 16 year old Muslim shape shifter named Kamala Khan, and many others. Although Wilson is not ethnically Arab, she identifies herself as an Arab author, having lived in Cairo since her early twenties. Immersed in Arabic literary history and culture, Wilson gathers a fantastic mix in her work of the region’s myths and legends from the *Tales of 1001 Nights*, to the supernatural jinns, beings made of smokeless and scorching fire that inhabit an unseen world in dimensions beyond the visible spectrum of the human eye, mentioned in Islamic and pre-Islamic texts. *Alif the Unseen* incorporates a blend of Arabian and Islamic myths and motifs, and is also heavily immersed in themes common to the SF genre, such as futuristic technology and mass surveillance systems. Inspired by the streets and stories she heard and saw in Cairo, the novel follows the adventures of a young Arab-Indian hacktivist known by his internet handle (alias) as Alif. He lives in an unnamed oil emirate and falls in love with an aristocratic girl studying old manuscripts. The manuscript *1001 Days*, (an inverse copy of *1001 Nights*), owned by the jinns, holds the key to unlocking the secrets behind quantum computing, a revolutionary technology so advanced it can theoretically hack into any server in the world. Alif must keep the state security apparatus known as The Hand, away from this innovation, lest it be used as a
tool of manipulation and control by the government. In an interview with Niall Alexander, Wilson mentions the social and cultural issues that drove her to writing this novel. She says,

I was tired of being forced into boxes. Pre-Arab Spring, people only seemed to want to hear about a handful of things when it came to the Middle East: terrorists, the exotic undeveloped Orient (which no longer exists), and The Crisis Of Muslim Women, about which most honest-to-God Muslim women are somewhat perplexed. Even for nonfiction, there was a script, a narrative one was supposed to follow. The fact that Arab youth were not only adopting cutting-edge technology, but using it in revolutionary ways, was not interesting to people. It didn’t fit the script. It didn’t involve camels or gender segregation. It was very, very frustrating. So I said screw it, I’m writing a novel. (G. Wilson).

Though Wilson could not predict the importance the digital underground youth movement would have in the Arab protests in 2011, the book heavily explores the issue of finding avenues for freer speech and action in a city governed by an authoritarian regime with a strong surveillance system. Of particular focus is the powerful potential of social media as an outlet for communication and free speech. In fact, Wilson was inspired to write the book after a hacker friend of hers, upon whom Alif is loosely based, disappeared from the internet. She says on her official website for the novel, control of the internet, to monitor, track, and spy on citizens, is a subject of contention in Western countries and one often neglected or not taken seriously, but in the Arab world, and in this case Egypt, the Mubarak regime was already aware of the internet as “a Petri dish for a seething new epidemic of social change… [and had] been in the business of arresting hacktivists for several years” (G. Wilson). Indeed, social media can play a major role in social transformation, and has been a major facilitator of the recent Arab revolutions. Activists used this form of communication to recruit and organize protests and movements in countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain. Though Wilson did not realize the huge potential for internet communication in the upcoming protests and revolutions, she was still aware of the strong connection between politics and social media, and how the latter enables freer communication for those living under oppressive
state security forces. On her official website for her debut novel, Wilson writes that the young adults reading her comics and organizing a signing for her at a bookstore (all through Twitter), were using the same social media outlets to communicate and organize protests and later, overthrow governments. She blogs:

…for good or ill, those kids were imagining a brave new world. *Alif the Unseen* is a story about the flow of information, about the power and danger of coded knowledge in a time when much of life is conducted from behind the anonymizing veil of a computer screen. (G. Wilson).

Acknowledged as one of the great technological shifts of our time, the Internet acts as a heterotopic space, open to some, closed to others, as the flow of information can be directed or controlled according to different laws around the globe. As we will see, Wilson carefully provides a nuanced view of the Internet as she explores how this global system linking billions of devices has increased connectivity, allowing people across the world to share their thoughts and organize social movements, either “for good or ill” imagining a new future.

Besides the issue of the power of the Internet in terms of connectivity, Wilson’s book illustrates connectivity on a larger scale, interconnectivity outside of her text. As an American, Arab-based writer, she writes in English, making her work reachable to an incredibly wide audience. The themes in *Alif the Unseen* are relatable across continents, and of interest to many lovers of the SF – fantasy genre, fitting with the current trend of magical realism. Her novel is also popular among the American Muslim community for at least two reasons: because many Muslim youth are engaged with SF and fantasy cultures, and also because the Muslim community at times can identify with marginalized characters such as superheroes. Superheroes and many SF characters often struggle to reconcile conflicting identities, which Wilson says in an interview with Rebecca Hankins, is:
…at the core of sci-fi and fantasy. You’ve got the kid who’s kind of on the outside, but he has super powers; he discovers he’s got this great destiny or you know, things really aren’t that bad after all, and I think that really appeals to Muslim, especially youth, Muslim youth in America. (G. Wilson).

I also suspect that Wilson’s work especially intrigues Muslim youth because they are finally being represented in comics and novels in a positive, realistic, diverse, and non-demeaning way. Marginalized minority communities, especially the Muslim community, are underrepresented and misrepresented in Hollywood SF and fantasy films. This novel not only creates a fairer representation of Muslims, but it also creates a feeling of connectedness between Muslim youth who will understand many of the religious phrases in Arabic, and also connects Arab Muslims, non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslims, introducing all of them to different perspectives of people from Arab, Indian, and American cultures, and a variety of socio-economic classes. In its plurality, the novel is ‘planetary’ in that it features characters from so many backgrounds trying to connect and establish a collective vision for greater fairness and control over living spaces.

3.2 Synopsis

The novel follows the adventures of a young computer programmer named Muhammad, who goes by the online handle (alias) “Alif.” Alif works as a gray hat, a term referring to people who work in various IT (information technology) areas. He is part of a global hacker community that works for regular people instead of companies. The ambiguous term “gray” signifies that the work of these hackers though sometimes illegal, is done in goodwill and not for personal gain. Gray hats usually warn other hackers in hacker communities of security threats and system vulnerabilities. Alif shields many clients – dissidents, Islamists, communists, feminists, and helps basically anybody “with a computer and a grudge” (229) against the police-state in The City.
When the aristocratic woman Alif loves, named Intisar, leaves him for a prince chosen by her parents, Alif creates a software program that allows him to track Intisar’s online presence and block her from contacting him. He names his software Tin Sari, rearranging the letters from Intisar’s name as inspiration. The software functions as a pattern recognition system that can recognize individuals based on typing patterns, keystrokes, syntax, grammar, word choice, and all the other apparent attributes that can be measured when using a computer. The software works almost too well, and can pinpoint every time Intisar uses the internet, regardless of whether she is operating under her own logon or social accounts. At the time, Alif does not realize his software may fall into the wrong hands, such as the state intelligence agency, which could potentially use this program to track any person, anywhere, if they use the Internet. While Alif is busy with his program, Intisar calls his friend Dina and asks her to deliver a book called *Alf Yeom wa Yeom*, or in English, *A Thousand and One Days*, the inverse story of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Before Alif has a chance to properly examine the book, Abbas al-Shehab, Intisar’s fiancé and head of the intelligence agency, discovers the software Alif has planted to keep track of Intisar. Abbas al-Shehab, is also known as the “The Hand,” the mastermind in control of the pervasive surveillance techniques used by the government to crackdown on any dissident behaviour by the populace. When The Hand breaches Alif’s computer and jeopardizes Alif’s identity and Dina’s safety, they are forced to leave their homes and go into hiding. Once in hiding, the two learn that The Hand is after the *Alf Yeom* because he believes it holds the secret to quantum computing, and subsequently more effective Internet surveillance. Labelled as a terrorist of the state, Alif is blacklisted and forced underground where he asks Vikram the Vampire, a notorious thug, in reality a jinn, for help. Vikram helps Alif, Dina, and an American convert (an expert on ancient manuscripts) escape with the *Alf Yeom* into the Immovable Alley, a
hidden place unseen by humans and inhabited by jinn. As the novel progresses, the group is joined by Imam of the City mosque, and a rich prince rebelling against the state. When The Hand, in his search for the *Alf Yeom*, crashes the utility grids of the whole city, a huge revolution breaks out as angry people demand freedom of speech and connectivity on the internet. In the mess of it all, Alif manages to stop The Hand from stealing the *Alf Yeom*. As the revolution sweeps over the City, The Hand is captured and hanged in the public square, and the governing regime is ousted from power. Now that the government has collapsed, Alif does not have to hide behind his alias and Dina calls him Muhammad in public without fearing for his safety. Though the outcome of the revolution is unclear, there is a breath of respite from the constant surveillance of the defunct government, and Alif is able to return home with Dina.

### 3.3 Heterotopic Space: The City

Alif takes readers on a journey through a city that has been quartered into heterotopic spaces of inclusion-exclusion, as he tries to escape The Hand. I will be taking a multiscalar approach as I focus on the spatial significance of several sites, and locate other/thirdspaces. I will focus on: the ambiguous, heterotopic sites of ‘The City,’ the places of exception (voids) such as alleyways, the prison, and the world of the jinn, and thirdspaces with potential for change and revolution: the mosque, The City’s public square, and the Internet. Lastly I will conclude with a brief overview of the text as a metaphorical spaceship and a location of hope that offers insight into the collective struggle of different peoples, for a society considerably more open to freedom of mobility and speech.

The first site I want to explore is The City. Is there a concept behind the ambiguous naming of The City? In my opinion, The City is left unnamed because it is a composite example
of a city in the Arab world. The City is all-encompassing, we could say it is Riyadh just as easily as we could say it is Cairo. For example, the general effects of the economic and social waves rippling throughout the world in the 19th and 20th century, such as the Industrial Revolution and the colonization of Arab countries, have made their mark on the political structuring and organization of space in The City. Each space has been produced by a long history and function until the social relations that have produced them end. To draw from the history mentioned in the novel, for many centuries the emirs protected The City and public spaces where merchants worked and traded goods and services with nomadic, and semi-nomadic peoples. The agriculture and trade based economy was drastically altered when vast oil wells were discovered in the region along the Persian Gulf. Once full-scale development of the oil fields was underway, the modern nation-state system demanded a city entering the world market needed a single, secular leader, and the emir was the closest thing the city had, and to him went all political power. Anyone who disagrees with the political system is thrown into jail (182-183). Professor Nasser Rabat writes of the spatio-historical changes in the Arab world, many of which Wilson has drawn on in her novel. When colonial powers implemented and influenced Arab states socially, economically, and culturally, many of the architectural structures changed, though differing in intensity throughout the region. Rabat says:

These transformations translated into alterations to the built environment that had hitherto evolved at a slower pace and with little foreign interference. Old historic cities—shortly thereafter to be dubbed Islamic cities—saw their layouts open to modern interventions that cut through their urban fabric and sat uneasily next to or on top of their traditional plans. Concurrently, new extensions branched out of the old cities’ cores and in many instances sapped their vitality by absorbing most of their upper class and wealthy inhabitants and most of their economic and social functions. Furthermore, some of these extra muros new districts were built exclusively for foreigners who were invited by local or colonial authorities to run the modernization process and to profit from it and who were thus accorded most of its amenities, such as modern houses, parks, boulevards, and public spaces. These districts, adjacent as they were to the old cities, were nonetheless entirely separated from them by spatial, legal, and behavioral barriers, although some seepage occurred both ways. The end result, however, was that cities like Algiers, Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, Aleppo, and many other smaller cities entered the twentieth century
with two poorly reconciled and heavily hybridized halves: a pseudomodern and a faux-traditional one. (Rabat 202).

The end result of these changes are ever so clear in the novel, where Wilson cleverly constructs an un-named City with a history that easily mirrors the spatial dynamics of several major cities in the Arab world, especially those along the Gulf. Most importantly, such a tactic creates a sense of ‘regionality.’ There is no mention of nationality, yet we have clear, distinct description of a spatial setting with which we can locate the ambiguous city.

For a closer look, one can see how political and economic changes have influenced spatial structure by consulting the map of the city provided by the Wilson at the beginning of the novel. Here we have an intense look at the local space of the City, which I will map out in writing. Each space is divided into little quarters, each with different facilities, residential neighbourhoods, institutions, and corporations. Each area has formed in direct relation to the historical, economic, and socio-political forces that shaped the city, and one can even sense the different architecture generated by different periods of time and political formations. The city houses several residential quarters. The New Quarter with its high-rises occupied by rich expats, is an obvious “new” residential, work, leisure, and living area for those people working in the oil field. This Quarter is also a safe haven for tourists who want to try “authentic” foods that are adapted to suit foreign tourists’ tastes, and visit “oriental” houses and mosques that correspond with the tourists’ imagination of how the “East” ought to look, with its stereotypical whirling dervishes and fat Ottoman doormen. With its tourist-friendly pastel oases almost mirroring beachy California, and the visible simulacrums of “authentic” Oriental experiences, this part of the City caters to those with new money. The middle space of the city (the second quarter), houses the working class. These crowded neighbourhoods are filled with cheaper houses owned by the urban poor, people without the skills (or the connections), and money to fit in with the
new socio-economic urban fabric of the city. Alif lives close to this area in a slightly cleaner, yet still shoddy neighbourhood, Baqara District. Though Alif’s Arab father has wealth from the recent oil boom, he shares little of his money with Alif’s mother, an Indian woman raising Alif as a single mother. Baqara District is home to foreign and cheap imported labour from India, the Philippines, and North Africa. This is a middle ground where residents flitter on the lower rungs of society, many sending part of their paycheque to families overseas. The last area of importance is The Old Quarter, a gated area home to rich aristocrats and nobility with “pure” Arab lineages, those with old money accumulated from before the industrial turn, and who have maintained their privileged position in society. The Old Quarter is grand, wealthy, and older than the rest of the city quarters. Everything from the stone-paved, tree lined streets, to the arched entranceways of townhouses and villas, are perfectly and beautifully cultivated against the dry desert air. As one can see, communities are organized according to lineage, class and economic standing. On the outskirts of The City one finds places that do not ‘fit’ or belong within the normal spatio-political order of the city, these are places of deviance, places that would interrupt the flow of everyday life if placed too close to civilian centres. One of these places on the unmarked roads is the Trans Atlas Co. Oil facility, obviously located just outside the city to avoid the limits of local jurisdiction, yet close enough to have a steady supply of low-paid migrant workers bused from nearby houses. By its name “Trans Atlas Co.” we can also suppose that the facility is built on international land that has been privatized and sold to a foreign corporation. In The City, everything has a place, even the trash, and to leave your given place and step into those of other classes is rarely allowed. By making The City ambiguous, by concentrating on its ‘regionality’ Wilson creates a landmark that is at once inclusive and exclusive – inclusive in the way that many people can say “I’m from that city!” because it can be
any city in the Arab world, and exclusive because it is also nobody’s city, because it has no real name. Thus we have a place that is entirely heterotopic, we enter the city by reading the book, and leave it by finishing the book. At the end of the reading, we will have gained some sense of what an Arab city is like, we may have connected to the characters and watched them change. As international readers across the planet, we will have gained a sense of connectivity with a certain region, and that is the power of Wilson’s unnamed city.

Within and outside of The City are areas of exception, such as dark alleyways, prisons, and the fantastical side-ways societies of supernatural beings. These are hostile places where people can easily ‘fall through the cracks’ and disappear. Moreover, these places are for people who do not belong in society, they have no purpose and the gate keepers of the heterotopic City will not let them in. The City is personified as a hostile woman who “hates her inhabitants and tries to suffocate them” (2), or at least those who do not belong. When Alif finds himself being tracked by state police, he is forced onto the city streets to find shelter. The intense hostility of the city causes Alif to feel disorientated, and he is feverously conscious of his absence of rootedness in the city, and his inability to find safe shelter. Even the white American convert Alif meets on his journey has greater access to the City, with her perfect English and blue passport. Interestingly, readers notice that once Alif is displaced from his bubble and open to scrutiny and suspicion by the state, he has no “right” to access the City, he is outside the flow of normal life, and exists outside of the notion of place.

As Alif looks for shelter, he quickly comes to realize the alleyways will not provide safety from the police, and he is forced into the black-market and underground socio-economic world, outside of the formal sense of place, where he is forced to seek refuge with criminals. Evidently in this novel, displacement makes one a deviant. The outcome of this scenario is that
everyone in the City has a specific place, and if they protest against the rigidity and totalitarian state of public order, they lose this place and are deemed as a threat to state security and the public. From our metaphorical spaceship, we understand that in cities such as Alif’s, the idea of a collective home has eclipsed, at least under the tight grip of those in charge of city space. The realization should subtly hit us, that if we do not collectively control space, we do not control our lives.

Consequently, Alif’s rebellious actions leave him stranded and profoundly displaced, and readers come to see space through The City for what it is: full of fictional sites that only make sense when contextualized within the historical relations that shape and enforce heterotopic spaces of exclusion-inclusion. The real landscape has been turned into a heterotopic grid, everything has been marked, quartered, and roped up for certain purposes by powerful behind the scenes political and corporate players. Unlike the planetary, this is the vision of the politicized globe covered in fictional borders, lines and checkpoints, there are no empty spaces. The few areas that seem empty are actually voids, they provide the appearance of space, but are completely isolated and uninhabitable, nobody can survive in a void for long. There are two sites or voids (states of exception), that Alif must find a way out of in the novel. One is the state security prison, housed on the outerim of the city, far from the citizenry and in a classified, top secret area to avoid any jurisdictional issues and completely overstep all legal rulings and boundaries protecting citizens from abuse and torture. We may ask, but why is the state security prison really situated so far from the populace, what is the spatial significance of this distance? The farther we remove people from them their habitations, the more they are removed from their identities (and by extension their human rights). As mentioned earlier in the essay, identity and space form a relationship. Once you are placed behind a cage, or suspended in a legal void, your
relationship to humanity is severed (you no longer ‘belong’ or are part of society), or so the
prison owners would have us believe. From outside, the prison looks like a dun-coloured
windowless office-building “surreal and alarmingly ordinary,” a “lightless hell” (281). Inside the
building, political prisoners, judged to be deviant because of their differing ideologies, or merely
because they simply looked at the wrong content on the Internet, are placed in narrow box-like
cells. Many prisoners are held in solitary confinement with unscheduled meals and constant
darkness. Some prisoners are subject to abuse and rape, others are simply left to die in their
holding cells. The prison is a timeless place tethered to society. There is an absence of light and
time: the very circadian rhythms that organize life. These organic elements ordering reality are
gone. The prison is a completely inorganic fiction, where prisoners such as Ali, who dare to
dream big and protect people who want freedom, are controlled in the interests of powerful rulers
who govern the whole city.

In addition, the prisons are allowed by the populace to function because some people do
not want the same sorts of freedom as Alif (such as the people who control the space of The
City). While in prison, the Hand says to Alif that people are afraid of freedom:

They want the hand of law to be brutal. They are so terrified of their own power that they will
vote to have it taken out of their hands. Look at America. Look at the sharia states. Freedom is a
dead philosophy. The world is returning to its natural state, to the rule of the weak by the strong.

(264).

In Alif’s society, people have become so afraid of their own power that they opt for special
protections and sacrifice their own freedom for social control and order. Yet this is not the
‘natural’ state, it is an artificial structuring of space that can be changed. By forbidding citizens
to actively and creatively organize space to their collective advantage, rulers such as The Hand,
have created a fiction that pretends to be reality, one that protects the interests of a few over the
interests of all.
3.4 The Empty Quarter

The second site Alif is stranded in is in the Empty Quarter, the uninhabitable desert where Alif sees space unfiltered by politics and history. In the deep space of the desert, he succumbs “to the silence of the place, a quiet so open and broad that it seemed almost to roar, as though it was not silence at all but music in some ancient inaudible key” (293-294). In the free, open space of the desert Alif finally has the chance to clearly view the physical world, and he wakes up from the simulacrum of his city. However, he cannot survive in the desert without food, shelter and water. This void may be beautiful, but it is also uninhabitable. Luckily, Alif meets a jinn who takes him to the mythical city of Irem (the city of the jinn). In an absurd world where ordinary people have little freedom of movement and expression, the uncharted and unrestricted space of Irem offers a welcomed release. To Alif and his friends, Irem seems “realer than high definition. This is realer than real life” (304). Yet, even Irem has its drawbacks, Alif and his friends are only safe deep in jinn territory. The borderlands between the human and jinn world are not safe for humans, and are not habitable for long. One jinn warns Alif and his friends not to fall asleep on the borderlands, and says:

You’re drowsy because your mind wants to return to the world you know. But it would never get there. The sleeping mind wanders between seen and unseen without settling in either. If you slept here you might never wake again, at least not in any fashion you could understand. You can sleep once we get to Irem. It’s so deep in our territory that you can’t wander far, even in dreams. (305).

There are two points worth making note of here, that Alif cannot live in a place of transience or a void, and he especially cannot live in borderlands between worlds – the real and supernatural, because the mind will forever wander aimlessly, looking for a long-term, permanent homeland. Only deep in Irem can Alif stay protected, yet, this is not a real world for Alif per se, it is the home of the jinn, not the home of people. To live in Irem would be to stay on the metaphorical spaceship and never get off. It would be to say goodbye to our planet, and forever wander in
deep space. Staying in Irem would also mean to turn away from the responsibility of coming up with an effective future vision to make the planet a better place. In Irem, Alif must decide between exile (and saying goodbye to his city and the people he knows and loves), or if he wants to return and confront the injustice faced by the friends and family he left behind.

3.5 Thirdspaces: Reclaiming Spatial Justice

To fulfill his obligation to his friends and family, Alif returns to the human world in search of a thirdspace, a foothold from where he can launch a plan that will lead to the downfall of the Hand. There are three thirdspaces: the mosque, the public square, and the Internet, and all of them have the potential to be launching pads for revolutionary change in society. The first site I want to examine is the digital province of the Internet. This is the initial ‘virtual’ site where Alif feels he has considerable freedom, and can establish a sense of connectivity with others. In this virtual world, Alif can escape the stifling political laws and social codes of The City. He can easily connect to people of all political persuasions and have open discussions with them. He can also engage in romantic relationships with people outside of his ethnicity and lineage, all the standards society uses to judge him. For example, Alif is half-Arab half-Indian, with no important lineage and too dark a skin colour to earn acceptance into aristocratic society, and too little wealth to enter the big leagues of the wealthy expats. His tech skills allow him to remain safely lodged in a lower-middle class neighbourhood, where he is lives in a duplex with his mother of Indian descent and Hindu birth, (though she later converts to Islam). Alif’s father is a “pure” Arab, and realizing his son would not be able to fit in with lighter-skin Gulf Arabs, left home and started a new family with an Arab wife. Alif is acutely aware his father abandoned them, and always has an odd sense of unrootedness in the city, as a man with “a whiff of Indian menial in your Arabic” (277). With no father to help integrate Alif into the corporate world, or a
high standing social class, Alif is left to his own devices. With his skills as a hacker, Alif finds a niche for himself on the internet, that realm operating under different names: the wireless web, the “rarefied ether” (50) the “dark web,” the “cloud” (103). When on his computer and connected to the grid Alif does not feel alone, he is connected to “millions of people in rooms like his, reaching toward each other in the same ways he did” (44). For people living in countries which are not subject to harsh surveillance or quartered so distinctly into specific neighbourhoods, it may seem hard to grasp the importance of the web and digital media in facilitating communication with others. For Alif, the web is his world, and he operates through code, enabling him to read the “electrical thoughts of isolated people” (136). Under his alias, Alif can associate with anyone without fear of persecution and repercussion from the state, as long as his identity remains hidden. The problem here, is that Alif’s identity does not remain hidden, he lives in a world always at risk of collapsing, he “lived in an invented space, easily violated. He lived in his own mind” (44). Here we expose a gaping issue in regards to the power of the Internet and social media, that is, unless we find a way to bring the freedom and safety felt online to the real, physical world, we will always live in fear. The Internet is a wonderful tool to transmit information, and to connect people, but can it be used to create open, freer spaces in The City?

When Alif’s identity is discovered by “The Hand” who controls the digital infrastructure of the City, he is torn out of his Internet bubble of a world, as are many coders and hackervists, and even normal civilians simply using social media as a means of interaction, but have come under the radar for their behaviour by the state police. Alif notes that Internet policing in the region increased, appearing at first in Egypt as some “bizarre singularity. It moves over the weblogs and forums of the disaffected like a fog, appearing sometimes as a code glitch or a
server malfunction, sometimes as a sudden drop in connection speeds” (9). The surveillance sweep is compared to the real-life Golden Shield Project, referred to as The Great Firewall of China, a censorship and surveillance program initialized in 1998, and operated by the Ministry of Public Security division of the government of China. The program monitors and filters all ideological content from entering Chinese networks, and systematically suppresses all defamatory content on the Chinese government, among many other issues, repressing internet users and effectively isolating Chinese society from interacting freely with the rest of the world.

In Alif’s world, especially during times of political turbulence and protest, such as the revolutions in Cairo, the digital sphere can become a warzone. Bloggers and geeks disappear without a trace, leaving Alif no choice but to unceremoniously dump his Egyptian clientele to save his own skin and that of his clientele from other countries. When the same policing techniques are used in Alif’s own city, he has no choice but to leave his home and enter what seems to be a dizzying, unsafe outside world. Evidently, there cannot be freedom in the virtual world if there is none in the physical world. In addition, although the Internet may be an easy way to connect, it is also a difficult place to form a collective vision, and to make that vision real and tangible. To really change and alter our fictions of space, we must confront the people who uphold these unequal systems.

To reclaim a place for himself in the City then, Alif must enter a physical, real-world battlefield to help liberate the people from the malicious plans of the Hand and in the process, regain civilian control over public space. There are two physical sites important to securing a foothold in the spatio-political fabric of society, and they are the mosque and the public square. Beginning with the mosque, Alif first flees to this site to attempt to regain safe shelter. The Great Mosque of Al-Basheera sits in the epicenter of the Old Quarter, and harkens back to the old days
when the emirs had to answer to the *ulema*, the religious leaders of the community. In pre-
industrial times, the mosque offered protection and also functioned like an *agora*, and provided a
place for people to pray, learn, and congregate. Nasser Rabat writes that in early narratives from
the formative period of Islam, there were many instances in the mosques where subjects would
threaten the rulers (caliphs) and governors with removal from their office (Rabat 200). The
political importance and space of the mosque has been apparent in many of the recent Arab
protests from 2011. While facilitated by social media, these protests take place in the real space
of the city, as they do in Wilson’s novel, and the mosque plays a symbolic role as a place of safe
gathering for protestors, some of whom are not necessarily Muslims. In the novel, Alif’s
subconscious decision to take shelter in the mosque is a move many people interpret as a
historically symbolic, revolutionary stand against tyranny. Alif’s friend comments, “…your
communist friends and your Islamist friends probably had tears in their eyes at the same time”
(288). Evidently, the mosque has a renewed importance in Wilson’s book as a place for people to
gather, publically debate opinions on ideology and politics, and even protest oppressive regimes.

The place of the mosque is also rivalled in importance by the place of the public square.
Once Alif restores the City’s electric grids, people use their smartphones and laptops like
“weapon[s]” (412) to connect to each other and organize crowds that will enter and take back
their city square. The significance of taking back the public square can be easily understood with
some historical context. Throughout the world, the public square is a new form of public space,
appearing in Arab cities in the late nineteenth century, “either as nuclei of urban developments *a` la franc,aise* or as leftover spaces, which were then turned into plazas” (Rabat 202). The new
squares had no local history and were not yet civic spaces, they remained for some time, spatial
figurations imported from Europe. These squares gained political importance with the early
nationalist movements for independence in Beirut, Damascus, Tripoli, and Algiers. After independence the squares were used to host national celebrations and parades, and also, political and social protests. However, due to civil violence and various wars, Rabat says:

This rather benign, though old-fashioned and paternalistic form of government was shattered after 1948. Thus the two potential public spaces of political expression in the city, the (remembered) mosque and the (imported) plaza, were denied their civic function for anywhere between thirty and fifty years of despotic rule across the Arab world depending on the country. (205).

The recent protests in the Arab world, figure as a new form of civil protest that conjoins the importance of the square and the mosque. Ownership of these thirdspaces is not simply symbolic, to take back public space we change how space is represented – on the map, and on the ground, it is a refashioning of our fictions. Why is public space more important than private space, you may ask? Private space represents the interests of the owner, and public space ought to represent the interests of all – it is the key underlying notion of planetary thinking, to have a space we can all call our own, and everyone’s. The mosque and the square belong in the category of collective space, small micro-versions of a wider planetary consciousness for spatial justice (to improve spaces and the relations that form them). In this case, taking back public space is not easy, it depends on removing the political and corporate actors who have shaped the economic, political, and social spaces of the city. As such, when a full blown protest erupts in the City, Alif remains unsure of the outcome. The old rulers are hanged and the new ones, Alif hopes, will speak and represent the people, and not the interests of foreign governments or the elite citizenry. Though Alif is uncertain of the future, he has at least temporarily freed his City and can return home to his mother.

3.6 The Text as a Metaphorical Spaceship: Locating Hope

After examining all of the places mentioned within the text, I would now like to zoom-in for a microscopic look at intertextuality within the novel, and then zoom-out for a grander view
of the text as the metaphorical spaceship, a location of hope. Zooming-in, there is plenty of reference to the classical work *1001 Nights*, and its fictional inverse the *Alf Yeom*. In the novel, the *Alf Yeom* is a narrative code representing secret knowledge. As a computer programmer, Alif has in theory, the potential to translate *Alf Yeom* as information (coded commands) on his computer to create a program that can track and predict people’s innermost thoughts, behavioural patterns, and movement. Although Alif tries at first, he ultimately fails to translate the book into code. Unlike The Hand, Alif comes to the conclusion that no amount of logic/math can predict an individual’s innermost thoughts. The *Alf Yeom* signifies innermost thought, and by declaring these thoughts untranslatable, Wilson leaves us with the optimistic message that there will always be freedom in thought. On the microscopic end of things, by drawing attention to issues of freedom regarding mental/thought space, Wilson demands we pay attention to the smallest spaces of the collective, that being the individual’s innermost, private space of the mind. The novel clearly concerns the notion that freedom of mobility and speech depend on creating considerably free spaces at all levels: the individual space of the mind; the local sites in the novel of the mosque and square; and a larger regional site (the ambiguous Arab society Wilson has created) that is representative of the Arab world at large). Lastly, Wilson leaves us a with a planetary vision filled with migrants, adventurers, and explorers who have crisscrossed throughout the world, (as does Alif through real and imaginary worlds), and have yet to gain a sense of belonging in a society that is not politically/culturally their own, but collectively, in an earthly sense, belongs equally to them as does any other person on this planet. In a grand way, this novel is very much our metaphorical spaceship that propels readers to look at different spatial scales and question the ways our politics have created systems of inclusion-exclusion, through systems that quarter, monitor, and police space in what is becoming a very paranoid
quest for control over mental and physical space. Wilson has provided readers with some hope that mental space cannot be controlled, and physical space can be made freer by creating collective sites for organising resistance against powerful political and economic players policing space and the people who live within these spaces.

3.7 Conclusion

Wilson’s novel brings an important focus on the heterotopic spaces of the city, the Arab region, and the entire planet, by advocating the importance of reclaiming public space for the populace. Her novel follows the trajectory of Alif as he tries to keep the Alf Yeom – a symbol for the sanctity of free thought, away from an oppressive state that will go to any length to ensure the survival of the regime and absolute control over the space of the populace. The novel raises awareness of how different socio-economic forces have shaped the City to benefit the ruling, hegemonic classes, and the foreign powers that provide aid and security to dictatorial regimes. The quartering of the City is a physical sectioning of space into areas of exclusion-inclusion that are monitored constantly, interfering with the day to day routines of civilians. The pervasive monitoring makes it difficult for people such as Alif to properly find a ‘place’ offline/online, in a city where rulers (and some citizens) have the potential, but are too frightened to encourage the active political participation of the populace. Once unrooted from his ‘place’ in society, Alif must engage in a liberation of space. Without the reconfiguration of the old spatio-political order, space will always be monitored and quartered by state authorities, and in their interest. Once the old regime collapses, there is temporary respite, and the characters can freely, yet perhaps chaotically, regain a place in their city. Though the outcome of the revolution in the novel is uncertain, readers can see the interplay of politics and space, and how only through spatial liberation can people such as Alif truly be free to engage in open conversation and action.
Chapter 4

4.1 Concluding Remarks

Having been analyzed through the spatial lens of a metaphorical spaceship, the SF texts under investigation have launched us through a whirlwind of sights and places, allowing us to better understand and reaffirm the relationship between social justice and space. Using a multi-scalar approach unique to SF, we have been introduced to several scales: individual thought-space, the arena of local cities and towns, regional spaces with several societies, and the macro, grand space of the planet. Within micro and macro sites we have a multiplicity of spaces that been mapped and quartered by political players, forming heterotopic places representative of the economic, political, social cultural flows that shape society and create systems of exclusion-inclusion. From households to space stations, we can see how structures unevenly distribute advantages and disadvantages across geographies, creating lasting injustices for the negatively affected. On closer analysis of these sites, we have found states of exception such as refugee camps and prisons, where individuals are denied freedom of movement and can be stripped of their citizenship and human rights. The protagonists in each novel find a liminal / thirdspace space through which they can re-enter society. Of these spaces we were introduced to the liminal site of the boot camp in Ajwan, and the thirdspaces of the mosque and public square in Alif the Unseen. Both these spaces provide Alif and Ajwan with a way to regain their sense of identity, and liberate space for themselves in their respective societies. Their actions provide readers with a glimpse of the larger forces bringing people together in an attempt to create more inclusive spaces in society. Furthermore, our journey with Alif and Ajwan through space, brings us to a
collective planetary vision of continuing the quest for spatial justice. This vision imagines space as constantly in-flux and teeming with possible futures.

Our metaphorical spaceships have provided us with a grand view indeed, a view of earth from space, of land masses connected by water inhibiting nothing and moving, cross-pollinating, and circulating languages and cultures. Earth from above, provides a more organic, shared view of history: a rhizomic network of resistances and power. The spaceship allows us to visualize the political, cultural, and socio-economic flows that are perpetuated across space and time. Above all, this planetary vision is a location of hope, that the future holds countless possibilities for how we can revolutionize and creatively organize living space to our mutual benefit.
Bibliography


